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Separation in "The Figure in the Carpet"

by Timothy P. Lange

A theme of search emerges from Henry James's story "The Figure in the Carpet." The search involves three characters and their pursuit of a "secret" which is to be found in the writings of the novelist, Hugh Vereker. The narrator is one of the characters involved in the search. His story tells not only of his attempts to find the "secret," but also of his separation from the other characters and from Vereker's "secret."

The act of searching implies that a separation exists between the searcher and the object of the search. The idea of separation as an anti-theme becomes a major aspect of James's story. The separation aspect, though subtly presented, is unveiled through the narrator's telling of the story. It is through him that the idea of separation is manifested as a forceful element of the story.

In this analysis I will examine the differences which exist between the narrator and the other characters and how these underlie the separation of the narrator from the "secret." In association with this, I will attempt to show how the idea of separation influences the reader and the reading of the text.

From the beginning of the story the narrator is a man separated from others. His anonymous recollection begins with a limited description of his profession as a critic, his associate, George Corvick, and the situation in which they both become involved. The narrator imbues his comments with his opinions giving the reader insight into his character. Almost immediately we see that he and Corvick, though both critics, differ in intellectual ability and style.

Corvick's opening lines establish the difference between himself and the narrator. Cutting comments like, "I mean you won't be silly" and "Speak of him, you know, if you can, as I should have spoken of him" (281), present Corvick at least as perceiving himself as superior to the narrator. This difference is significant as Corvick's superiority will dominate in this and other areas. Not only is the narrator different from Corvick in terms of intellectual and professional talent, but also emotionally, in his personal relationships.

The narrator is a loner and his relationships with the other characters never become truly intimate. Though the narrator does use sexual innuendoes in his descriptions, these are suppressed and are never brought to

physical manifestation. Corvick is involved with Gwendolen and this relationship is, no doubt, an intimate one as eventually they marry. The narrator, on the other hand, never becomes involved with anyone. Even after Corvick's death when the thought of possibly marrying Gwendolen comes to his mind he, unlike Corvick, is unable or unwilling to "offer her this price" (306). This lack of intimacy separates him from the others. Emotionally he is incapable of intimate relations and it is the narrator alone who is the only major character in this story never to be married.¹

Another form in which separation between the narrator and the other characters can be seen is in their actions. Corvick, again, best represents this distinction as he is a man of action. The narrator is a man dependent on others. It is Corvick who undertakes the quest and goes to India in search of Vereker's "secret" and there it is revealed to him. The narrator stays in England and waits to get the news from Gwen. This results in an ever-increasing gap between them. Corvick now has possession of "Vereker's idea" or, as Gwendolen tells the narrator, "His general intention" (298) and the narrator is left with nothing. From this point on Corvick becomes more independent and the narrator more dependent. Corvick's separation from the narrator is completed through his marriage to Gwendolen and eventually by his death.

The separation between the narrator and Corvick is rooted in Corvick's superior qualities. A capable participant, Corvick is better suited to receive knowledge of the "secret." In comparison, the narrator is an inadequate participant. The narrator's separation from the other two characters, Gwendolen and Vereker, derives from two factors. They are sensitive people capable of intimate affections, and they are also novelists while he is a reviewer. The attitude with which they view literature differs from his.

Gwendolen is a doer; she is involved in creating literature. The narrator is a critic, dependent for his basic subject matter upon other writers and their work. Furthermore his dependence upon Gwen is due not to her knowledge of writing, but for the association she has with Corvick. When Corvick sends back word from his travels, the letter is for Gwendolen, not for the narrator. And Gwendolen doesn't share the contents with the narrator; rather she spoon-feeds him: "she repeated to me what it chiefly embodied" (301). She recognizes the separation between herself and the narrator, and she exerts strict control over how close she will let the narrator get.

Gwendolen comes into possession of the knowledge of the "secret" through her marriage to Corvick. She is shrewd. When the narrator gets too close, she utilizes her power to maintain the distance. Her ability to maintain separation may be seen when the narrator inquires about a con-

versation between Vereker and her late husband. Her reply is, "I heard everything, . . . and I mean to keep it to myself!" (305). And this she does even unto her death, her final separation from the narrator.

Gwendolen, like Corvick, is able to establish a position of superiority over the narrator. Her emotional qualities and artistic sensibility separate her from the narrator and qualify her to be a recipient of the "secret." Her efforts allow her to maintain it.

Vereker, however, presents a slightly different case as he is not in pursuit of the "secret." Vereker, of course, has knowledge of the "secret"; it is his secret. This, combined with the fact that he is a novelist greatly admired by the narrator, forms the gap of separation between them. The dichotomy of the older sage and the younger idolizing critic can be seen in their ages and writing abilities. Vereker emphasizes their age difference in a speech to the narrator. He calls the narrator "My dear young man" (285) and later refers to him as one of the "rising young men" (286). The age difference elevates Vereker. He is older; he is wiser. The narrator tells us that Vereker is "in a manner the fashion" and that he is "clever" (282). The narrator has found a clever old writer who is fashionable and the narrator desires to get close to him, to be his equal. When they meet, the narrator, as a text consumer, feels that he has "caught up with him" and "had found out at last how clever he was" (284). The consumer, however, never does equal the master creator.

Vereker underscores this separation between them when he comments innocently that the narrator's critical review of his work is "the usual twaddle" (284). When Vereker realizes that he has made such a blunt statement in front of the review's author, he sensitively softens the bite by discussing his statement with the narrator in private. It is during this conversation, when they are close together—"his hand on my shoulder" (285)—that, ironically, Vereker begins to increase the distance between them and hence continue the separation. The narrator is infected with the idea that he has missed Vereker's "little point" (286). From this point the narrator begins to concede that a separation exists between them. He views Vereker's comments to him as "fatherly advice" (289) and himself as lost:

There was something in the friendly reproach of this—jocosely exaggerated—that made me, as an ardent young seeker of truth, blush to the roots of my hair. I'm as much in the dark as ever, . . . (286)

Not only does the separation between the narrator and Vereker begin to widen at this point, but the search for and the separation from the "secret" also begins.

The separation of the narrator from Vereker's works may be gauged by looking at the context within which he operates. The narrator is a reviewer

and he has an assumed attitude of control over the literature he reviews. He sees literature as an object to be possessed. Peter W. Lock sees this as the “dominant nineteenth-century ideology of textual consumerism” (158). This assumed attitude of control is quickly changed to despair after the narrator meets with Vereker and is told, “You miss it [the essence] my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance” (286). The narrator is lost and “can only take refuge in simplistically traditional distinctions—style or thought, feeling or form” (Lock 161). The frame of reference in which the narrator operates is ineffective.

Following a conventional frame of reference as a critic, the narrator is unable to see the light. Vereker, the novelist, tells him, “it would be distinct if it should dawn on you at all” (286). Ironically, even when the narrator is with Vereker at “Bridges” (a telling name), learning that a secret exists, he is separated from Vereker’s works. “There wasn’t so far as I could discover, a line of his writing in the house,” the narrator notes (290). Yet he continues his search limited by his traditional frame of reference. Like an old prospector in a spent mine he pursues his dig for “the buried treasure” which “was all gold and gems” (301). Vereker attempts to assist the narrator but, as G.A. Finch points out, “Vereker feels no compunction, in the default of criticism, to do the critic’s work. And it is plain that this young man, in his simple obliquity, cannot cope with Vereker’s metaphors” (99). Vereker, in talking about the “secret,” makes the distinction yet the narrator cannot grasp the connection. Vereker tells him, “It is the very string, . . . that my pearls are strung on” (293). Vereker is a craftsman, a stringer.

The narrator is an observer. He is looking for an object and the “string,” the first half of Vereker’s metaphor is an object, something which, though hidden by narrative pearls, the narrator can still hope to see. In the second use, however, the “string” becomes “strung,” a verb, an action process which the narrator is incapable of performing. His traditional critical perspective immobilizes him, keeping him separated from the “secret.” Even when he suggests to Gwen that she change her perspective and become a critic she again echoes the distinction: “I don’t review,” she laughed. “I’m reviewed!” (308).

A final illustration of the separation between the narrator’s perspective and that of the other characters is in their trips to the continent. Corvick, a doer, goes in search of the knowledge; Gwen goes to celebrate and share in Corvick’s revelation, and the narrator stays behind. When he does go, he is “abruptly called to Germany” (302) and thus effectively detoured from pursuing the quest on his own. Thus even on the continent with the others, he is separated from them. He is in Germany (the home of the traditional critical orthodoxy) and Corvick and Gwen are in Paris (the

contemporary Mecca for art). This geographical separation represents the distinction between the old perspective and the new perspective, and Paris, the place where one can "turn for superior truth" (302) is off-limits to the narrator. He remains separated. Unequal to the others in intelligence, creative ability and effort, and paralyzed by his critical perspective, he remains a distant observer.

The idea of separation of the narrator from the meaning in Vereker's works leads one to consider the separation of the reader from the text. As it has been demonstrated through the narrator in James's story, the reader can be separated from the text by assuming a frame of reference that is ineffective. The failure to act on this recognition and attempt new views only increases the separation of the reader from the text. By limiting the perspective from which we view texts, we limit many potential considerations, associations, and interpretations.

In this story there seems to be an intentional effort by James to lead the reader astray. He accomplishes this in several ways. One is by his omitting from the narrator's speech pertinent information. When the narrator tells us that he wrote to Corvick saying "I put something instead of angel" (299), he creates a gap for the reader by not telling the reader what it was that he put in his letter. James uses another technique to separate the reader from the text. This is his use of abstract statements: "It was so great, yet it was so simple, was simple, yet so great, and the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart" (301). This type of statement doesn't create a gap so much as it defies concrete perception. There is no simple explanation given in the text to assist the reader in understanding this statement. The reader is left, like the narrator, to try to figure it out on his or her own.

Another separation of the reader from the text occurs from misreadings and/or incomplete readings of the text. Single readings can result in many unfilled gaps and distortions. By conscious re-readings of the text a reader can concentrate on the differences between what is in the text and what the reader has assumed to be in the text and hopefully clarify any misconceptions. In saying the reader may correct a misreading of the text I don't wish to imply that there exists a true reading of the text, but that there are many misreadings and incomplete readings upon which the reader must build. From the misreadings the reader can realize his or her own separation from the text.

Reading is a process in which we actively comment and create. Unlike the narrator who remains a detached observer desiring to possess and manipulate literature, we must become actively involved, conscious of the movement of the text, our reactions, and how our readings are effected. We must try to get as close as possible to "Paris." Not only must

we see the style and form, the "pearls" of literature, but we must also concentrate upon the motions which string the pearls together. We must be aware of the motion of the text and the moving effect it has upon us as readers.

Note

- ¹ Leo B. Levy, "A Reading of 'The Figure in the Carpet,'" *American Literature* 33 (January 1962): 459.

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