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The *Idol* in the Carpet

by David Powell

**Introduction**

The archetypal reading featured in Joseph Albrecht's article encouraged me to pursue the somewhat specialized reading I offer below. When I began my second reading of Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet," the notion of Vanity seemed to me to be very strong in the text. Midway through the first reading, I had suspected that no Figure would be given. Still, as a consequence of the standard a-priori assumption, I could not accept the frustration of closure. The construction I ultimately produced satisfied my own need for a "tight" reading. This result represents, I think, a dedicated attempt at a final assimilation of the text and also reflects a projection onto the text of some personalized schema, particularly those regarding man-made myths, their usefulness, and, above all, our obsession with them.

As a natural result of this effort, some elements of "The Figure in the Carpet" have been enhanced while others have been played down. The tension inherent in the story invites such constructive activity, and, with it, a degree of arbitrary and selective reading that has produced very different interpretations from the same text. The real intended coherence is ultimately that of the reader and those who may be persuaded by the reader. Therefore I make no apology for being too strong, for trying to find a self-authenticating Figure for the reader where—as some may insist—there is, in fact, none or, at least, not this one. But I do concede that perhaps the main contribution of this reading is more to be found in the example it offers than in the thesis it develops.

*Power, Vanity, and the Figure*

*This was above all what I wanted to know: had she seen the idol unveiled? Had there been a private ceremony for a palpitating audience of one: For what else but that ceremony had the nuptials taken place?* (305)

This excerpt from "The Figure in the Carpet," as well as any, shows the extent to which the literary cult that elevated the Figure to the position of
an idol held sway over the lives of its adherents. Whatever the attraction may have been at the start between Corvick and Gwendolen, that bond was permeated and supplanted by the search for the Figure. The Figure was Corvick's dowry, and its unveiling the consummation of the marriage. In her widowhood it became Gwendolen's life, just as it had been the life of Vereker and Corvick. It was, in a negative sense, equally as much the life of the narrator.

The Case for the Idol

The Figure's power in this story to give life or to take it, to free or imprison is undeniable. But the irony that must accompany this observation is that the Figure is utterly devoid or any intrinsic power. The cult that emerges around the Figure masquerades as an open system created by an independent source of power represented in the Figure. But, in fact, the system is a closed system. The Figure's power, in its totality, derives from and ministers to the vanity of the cult members—those who are the writers, reviewers and readers of literature. Furthermore, the vanity of one is ministered to at the expense of another. Yet all, even the abused, support the Figure by their compliance with this scheme. When the Figure's dominance is considered in light of its dependence (a fact its devotees are willingly ignorant of), we see why the Figure is appropriately referred to as an Idol and why terms like altar and sacrifice are associated with it.

If the Figure is indeed an Idol, then Vereker must be its craftsman and its prophet, who, though he himself has produced the Idol, insists that he merely discovered its independent existence and potency. We then see Corvick as the Idol's high priest and Gwendolen as an exalted yet human consort, intimate with the gods, but aloof from the uninitiated. The role of the narrator, of Drayton Deane, and any other would-be-initiates is the most important of all; they are the true source of the Idol's power. Without them the Idol could not have existed. Neither could it have offered the power it did to the others, for the illusion of the Figure's independent potency is just that, a vain (in the sense of empty) illusion made real by believers for believers.

The Idol motif is strengthened by the contradictory behavior of the worshippers. On the one hand they aver, as they must for the sake of the faith, the Figure's absolute objective existence and its independent power. Yet by their actions they repeatedly deny that it has any such existence or power apart from what its devotees impute to it. This denial is most conspicuously manifested in the refusal of the initiated to unveil the Figure for the uninitiated. (Corvick's revelation to Gwendolen is an exception.
It was in the terms of their marriage. Self-deception on the part of the leaders could be considered understandable in view of the fact that they had something to gain from the charade. But what would explain the narrator’s obsessive compliance with this scheme even at great personal cost? Apparently the pain and frustration of being shut out from the Figure’s blessing is to be preferred to the emptiness of living in a world without the Figure.

We may ask, “If this is the case, if the Figure is, indeed, merely an Idol, what keeps the narrator from simply creating and worshipping another more favorable Figure? This is the real mystery. I want to propose that the narrator et al realized on a subconsciousness level that such an action would threaten the very foundation of the literary cult and deprive it of the ability to confer power upon any of its idols (including an alternate Figure) in a convincing manner. The literary world that produced the Figure and gave form to the lives of its devotees would come to an abrupt end, and everyone would be confronted with nothing but a great void in its place. This may explain why the narrator, despite the grief it brought him, could not give up his obsession with the vain Idol that held him captive, the Figure in the carpet. A fuller case for finding the construct of idol-making in “The Figure in the Carpet” can be developed.

**The Narrator’s Vanity**

The little community surrounding the Figure can be taken as a microcosm of the literary community at large. The narrator represents a key element in that community, and vanity is one of his most conspicuous traits. From his opening statements to his last word concerning the Figure, he breathes the spirit of vanity. This is not to say that he is totally evil or unworthy of the reader’s sympathy, but vanity is the very atmosphere of the literary world in which he and the other characters of this story live. And, without exception, all of the characters live on it. It has already been noted that the Figure’s very existence depends on the cult members’ vanity. At times, every sense of the word is applicable including pride, emptiness, futility, and worthlessness.

The atmosphere of Vanity is established in the opening lines of the story. At the beginning we see that the narrator prides himself on being “finer than was perceived by the patronizing” (280). To restate this in a slightly amplified paraphrase: other reviewers were merely patronizing mercenaries. They were in the business simply to pay homage to the literary gods in exchange for their blessing, but the narrator imagines himself to be different. It is implied that he has principles, absolute
standards, objective values by which he measures the worth of a work. No servile lackey is he. He is his own man. He has discernment and integrity. However, it soon becomes apparent that the narrator is actually no different from the colleagues he disdains. Consider some details that present themselves early in the story.

The narrator’s appreciation for Corvick, though it rests on the same values that support his own pride, is somewhat mitigated by the observation that Corvick has missed key chances for “cleverness” i.e. opportunities for conspicuous achievements in their field (280). The narrator considers himself a junior priest in the cult of literary interpretation, a religion whose promise of assured meaning commands the reverence of all. (Consider Corvick’s promises to produce the “last word” 303.) The narrator and Corvick are meaning-brokers and Vereker is their source, but Corvick’s past failures to capitalize on a critic’s opportunity are held to reflect negatively on his status in the cult.

The periodical The Middle is referred to as the “organ of our lubrications.” This last word, which denotes “pretentious speech,” 2 is a good example of the same. This statement is a shameless admission that inflated impressions are their stock-in-trade. The narrator’s vanity emerges full bloom in the statement, “What explanation could be more to the point than my obvious fitness for the task” (280). Though he had not yet read Vereker’s latest volume and so did not know its value, the narrator did know what the opportunity to review the work would do for his own reputation. Obviously the intensity of his delight has nothing to do with the objective value of some figure that may possibly be waiting for release from the weavings of the text by a critic. The work could have had little actual value, but it would be reviewed in accordance with what the critic needed it to be.

Finally, Vereker himself is described as an author of reknown. As such he can provide the strokes that a budding critic seeks. But how does an author become reknowned except by favorable reviews? And how does he receive favorable reviews except through the cooperation of the critics? Supposedly they determine that an author is worthy of a favorable review on the basis of literary values. But (if the narrator is representative of the profession) the real criterion is the kind of public acclaim a particular review will bring to the critic. This in turn is directly related to the author’s reknown, and we have come full circle. This failure to touch base with some more objective criteria for determining literary value is vanity. This closed system is illustrated again in the fact that the narrator knew in general terms what he would have to say about Vereker’s “latest” even before he began to read it. It would be the “biggest of the lot” (281), with some reservations of course (i.e. complimentary enough to bring back
those precious strokes but reserved enough to show that we aren't just being patronizing.)

At the dinner party, the narrator was somewhat resentful of Vereker's light-heartedness because he wanted Vereker, by a more subdued tone, to register the impact of his criticism in the most recent issue of The Middle. The critic concluded that the author had not yet been exposed to his "peculiar justice," so he rearranged the magazine rack to put The Middle at eye level (282). This is vanity by anyone's account. The narrator also observed that Vereker showed no hint of a grudge against his critics—something this critic felt he was very keen at spotting (and capitalizing on, I suppose). He then noted that Vereker had lately become the fashion among the critics (282). These observations weave together if one concludes that the narrator wanted special recognition from Vereker for his own role in putting the author on his new and loftier pedestal. Such mutual backscratching is devoid of any relationship to the objective values that supposedly form the hidden foundation of the art. The pride and emptiness seen in this episode can be summed up in one word—vanity.

Ironically, even though the narrator does not see his own vanity, he is very keen to detect it in Vereker. He describes Vereker's front as "hard polished glass" enclosing the "bauble of his vanity" (284). This criticism of Vereker is probably not unfair. Certainly the narrator is not unique in his own vanity. All of the characters surrounding the Figure and the literary world that spawned it exhibit this quality. When Lady Jane learns who wrote the review she had been touting before Vereker, the narrator does not become worth more—the article, without changing, becomes worth less. Does the reputation of the author determine the value of the work? Would not these literary connoisseurs insist that the value of a review rests upon its own intrinsic merits and not on the reputation of the writer? The credibility of their art and trade requires that they say "yes," but their actions say they do not recognize objective literary value.

**The Narrator's Integrity**

Despite his vanity, the narrator is not altogether without integrity. If, indeed, he engages in self-deception, the nature of the deception is not really apparent to him. The narrator's integrity appears during his conference with Vereker and shows itself throughout the ill-fated quest that follows. "Ah yes, don't tell me for my honor and that of the craft," he says. Whether or not Vereker could have or would have given the narrator the Figure in the simple, concise, abstract language that was doubtless expected is debatable. (Vereker had insisted that it would fit into a letter.)
The point here is that the narrator refuses the easy solution for honor's sake. It would diminish the credibility of the craft and damage the reputation of his guild. But at the precise moment that these words gush from the lips of this true believer, the *Figure*—wherever or whatever it is—begins to throb with life. Faith in the craft give life and power to the *Idol*. That power was dependent on the attribution of an esoteric, but objective and independent, existence to the *Figure*. (Note that Vereker considered use of the descriptor "esoteric" to be "cheap journaileze").

The narrator also shows himself to be a man of some integrity as he continues his search for the *Figure*. He does not imagine that he has found the solution, nor does he depart from the principles of his trade during his search. When he has exhausted these, he seems to give up any hope of finding the *Figure* for himself and looks to Corvick, Corvick's associates, and their writings for help. To his credit, the narrator steadfastly resists the temptation to go to Vereker himself and knows instantly that Deane's skills as a critic are strictly pedestrian when he nonchalantly claims to have discovered the *Figure* (309). Though he is tempted to jettison the burden of his quest and deny the existence of a *Figure* altogether, the narrator is convinced by Vereker's tone and Gwendolen's transformed demeanor that the thing is really there (306). He remains steadfastly hooked even to the end, a victim of his own convictions and futile efforts. The narrator's state at the end is, by apparent standards, worse than at the beginning. He was on his way into the privileged class before he tangled with the *Figure*. At the end he has become a confirmed outsider who, worse yet, knows himself to be an outsider. His one twisted consolation is that he has introduced Drayton Deane to the same painful awareness (313). Curiously, in doing this, the narrator, trades on a commodity he does not possess and tastes something of the intoxicating power that the *Figure* afforded Vereker, Corvick and Gwendolen.

The *Figure's* Power and Emptiness

Vanity, as defined above, has been associated with *pride*, *futility* and *emptiness*. We have seen the *pride* of the narrator. We have also seen that his efforts proved *futile* (though he did not deem the object of his pursuit empty). There were others, however, who were richly rewarded by the *Figure*. The *Figure* conferred its power and "blessing" on them. Nevertheless, the suspicion of its *emptiness* still lingers. In this connection we must examine the development of Vereker, Corvick and Gwendolen in the story.
As has been said, if the Figure is indeed an Idol, then Vereker is its craftsman and its prophet, who insists that he simply discovered the Figure’s independent objective existence and potency. We see Corvick as the Idol’s high priest and Gwendolen as an exalted yet human consort (Madonna would not fit her; she is too merciless, and her record is tainted in that she was eager to sell out and go to Vereker for a clue.) These three who were initiated into the inner circle actually came to know the Figure in three different ways. Corvick discovered it through his quest. Gwendolen married into its revelation. (A total life-commitment seems like a truly appropriate price for admission to the blessed status.) Vereker, however, supposedly discovered it as he was crafting its form in his writing. In accord with this reading, I want to suggest that, by far, the most essential part of Vereker’s discovery was his critics’ lack of discovery. It would not be unfair to hypothesize that, while, at the beginning, there probably was something to Vereker’s “little point,” it was really no more than that until he perceived that his critics were not getting the point (286).

... it’s a secret in spite of itself—the amazing event made it one. I not only never took the smallest precaution to keep it so, but never dreamed of any such accident. If I had, I shouldn’t in advance have had the heart to go on. As it was, I only became aware little by little, and meanwhile I had done my work. (287)

Now Vereker “almost lives” to see if it is ever discovered. His “general intention,” his “little trick” has become the “loveliest thing in the world,” “a buried treasure,” “the organ of life.” Underlying these descriptions is the assumption that it ought to be so for his readers as well, and that if it is not, they have only their own lack of perception to blame. But I would suggest that if the Figure were indeed apprehended by the general audience, it would no longer have much significance at all for the author. It would have lost its power. This concept is supported by the author’s panic and concern that the narrator not let the cat out of the bag after their first meeting. (Vereker’s subsequent shift to a cavalier mood does not weaken these theses since his over-anxiety could also destroy the Idol.

The non-disclosure principle holds also for Corvick and Gwendolen, both of whom quickly became aloof and reluctant to reveal the Figure soon after they were introduced to it. Gwendolen even refrained from telling her second husband, though in the end he was judged by the narrator to be worthy of such revelation after all. Corvick and Gwendolen, like Vereker, realized that the Idol’s power to enrich the initiated was based directly on the exclusiveness of its knowledge.
Problems with the *Idol*

A reader may insist that the construction developed so far is undermined by the fact that Corvick was planning to publish the "last word" on the *Figure* when he met his untimely death. But would he have allowed himself, or been able, to do this in anything less than a discourse that was as cryptic and oblique in exposition as Vereker himself was in the narrative? To be sure, there must have been some objective content to the *Figure*, but I am suggesting that this objective content was a mere bauble—maybe a riddle—and insufficient to account for the powerful stature of the *Figure*. I am saying that its real power, its real substance, derived from its secrecy combined with the stuff of vanity. The *Figure* was actually an *Idol* composed largely of "hype."

But then, what about the accord that Corvick reached with Vereker in his meeting? Would this have occurred as it did if the *Figure* were only a puffed up bauble? This is probably the most serious sticking point of this construct, but it is not insurmountable. There is the possibility that the main part of the *Figure's* actual objective substance dealt with the very principle of secrecy that we are discussing here. Or—in case such a conspiracy overloads one's suspended disbelief—there also could be a theory of shared self-deception or even mistaken agreement combined with self-deception. The world of literary criticism can be a slippery one. (A Structuralist might find *deception* too exceptional a descriptor for such an everyday phenomenon.)

Whatever the explanation of Vereker's and Corvick's accord, and regardless of how real the *Figure's* substance actually was, the *Figure's* power was very real. That power was evident most in Gwendolen's transformation, a transformation that manifested itself not so much in her writing which deteriorated at the last (Perhaps lack of need led to lack of effort?) as it did in her social demeanor and in her air of conscious privilege. Her stature thrived on the *Figure's* secret. As long as it remained an *Idol* she remained elite.

But what would have happened if this elite priesthood had agreed to unveil the *Idol* publicly? I believe that if they truly attempted to state the *Figure* in terms that "a plain man knows things by" (287), Vereker, Corvick and Gwendolen all would have shrunk to the size of very ordinary novelists and critics. As for the narrator, he would have been freed from the spell of his obsession, but it is also true that he would have awakened to a very dull and empty literary world. This condition would have persisted until another *Figure* could be detected, and then a new version of the same plot would have begun. These are compulsive figure-
worshippers. If they don’t have a Figure, they discover one, proclaim its power (assuming a consensus can be achieved) and live on that power so long as the Idol remains exclusive and in vogue.

The Figure and the Idol

The Idol is like a masterpiece of sculpture carved by a blind sculptor from a substance that melts when exposed to direct light. A privileged few might peek under its thick veil without damaging it, but unveiling it to the eyes of all would destroy it. Therefore, for the protection of the masterpiece, the initiated keep the veil in place while they capitalize on the exclusiveness of their knowledge. The reading I have sought to develop implies that the literary society that forms the backdrop for this short story is like a breeder reactor: it generates more fuel than it consumes. This society thrives on and trafficks in its own “hype.” Personal recognition is the bottom line. Ostensibly recognition is a function of the writer or critic’s accord with objective literary value. But, in fact, value is determined only by one’s ability to gain recognition, a commodity best acquired by bluffing other members into revering one’s Idol. For all practical purposes, objective literary value is an irrelevant concept.

A disturbing question—one that is fundamental to one’s philosophy of literature—remains to be answered. If the author’s general intention is not generally perceived, can anyone insist that the author has not failed in his task? Could it be that the first expression, sincere or not, that Vereker uttered after he stepped onto the carpet touched the heart of the matter? “It’s quite with you rising young men . . . that I feel most a failure” (286). Is literature for riddles or for the communication of significant truths which, though deeply entwined in the carpet of specific personal experiences, can, nonetheless, be recognized and shared by many. A work may be lacking in that which a “plain man knows things by,” but if it is lacking in that which most “masters of subtility” (298) know things by, can it really be considered worthy to be called literature? Why publish if the text is no more than a transcript of the author talking to himself? And can we even insist that what an author may write purely for his own benefit does indeed have coherence and meaning if the text does not generate a sympathetic cord in more than one reader? Corvick’s accord with the author, in my judgment, does not free Vereker from the suspicion of failure. Perhaps they only thought they understood each other. There should be some confirmation of their accord from the literary community.

The novelist and the critic depend on each other for affirmation and refinement of meaning just as the abstract concept depends on the
concrete, and as exposition complements narrative (and vice versa of course). Is not this implied in Vereker's own words? "I do it in my way, go you and do it in yours" (289). If the accord of author and critic on a figure in the carpet is not more widely recognized than it was in this case, should the community of readers be deemed at fault? If they accept such fault, they have fallen for an immense bluff. Actually, the Figure should be as much theirs as it is the author's. (I do not mean to imply that the text is an orphan up for adoption, but mutual custody seems like a fitting analogy.) How can an author insist that his Figure is there if no one sees it, or that the Figure they do see is not real? If he thinks the readers fall short of his "general intention," perhaps the author needs to either take the blame or reexamine the real nature of his intention. (I wonder if Henry James would have been as difficult to satisfy as Hugh Vereker.)

A text may spawn a legitimate reading that seems remote to the author, but the community of readers, if not the author, should still be able to recognize a sense of significant general accord between the text and the reader. It is my thesis that this rule should hold unless one adopts one of two propositions: (1) That language is unreliable as a means of communication to the extent that the only non-hypocritical thing to do is to refrain from conversation and from the writing and reading of texts altogether; (2) That literature merely provides a means to create an exclusive little society that serves the vanity of the initiated at the expense of the uninitiated. If this second proposition is the case, the cult's appeal to standards of evaluation and its assertion of an objective but esoteric Figure was indeed a magnificent pose, a cruel hoax.

On the other hand, the first proposition (an idea for which the only honest defense is absolute silence) would suggest that the inherent limitations of language, rather than willful deception, accounted for the Figure's obscurity. Corvick's persistent delay in divulging the Figure may offer the best support for this alternate construction (which really requires another essay). One could suggest that as the time to divulge the Figure drew nearer, the task grew larger until it assumed impossible dimensions. This construct could be extrapolated to conclude that describing any Figure in plain language would be like studying a subatomic particle by isolating it and stopping it. Its distinctive properties would vanish. This view might compare the Figure to a wave—the ever-moving object ceases to exist at the onset of static descriptors. Consequently, what appeared to be a simple task at a distance (explaining the Figure) assumed insurmountable proportions when it was at hand.

Corvick's promise to do the impossible, to deliver the Figure, could have been deception—an interpretation that would bring us back to the second proposition and the thesis of this essay. Or, taking the first
proposition again, Corvick’s promise could have proceeded from pure naivete as innocent as that of the child who promises to show you the soap bubble he just caught in his hands as it was floating on the air. The elusive bubble was indeed real, but it ceased to exist with the attempt to control it in such a way that it could be transferred. One whose definition of reality has, as a sine qua non, the property of positive transferability would insist that neither the bubble, nor the Figure ever were real. But assume that Corvick and Vereker, as they stood face to face, knew the Figure was real. Assume that they did indeed have the same figure in mind at that moment. Even if they did (and there is no confirmation without language), a skeptic would still question what, precisely, Vereker’s texts had to do with the knowledge they shared.

The unreliability of language, however, is not the proposition underlying this essay. And even if a reading of “The Figure in the Carpet” was based on this proposition, one still might turn to the Vanity construct to explain why Corvick did not freely admit he was stumped on how to communicate the Figure even though he knew it. And so I conclude by focusing on the construction that insists that it was primarily vanity that withheld the Figure.

Within his literary cult the narrator is reduced to an unfortunate dupe. But until the point that he takes delight in Deane’s frustration, he is, in my opinion, more noble than any of his companions. He held fast to those principles that kept him from finding the Figure what it was—an empty Idol. Those same principles soon would have led him to the prize if it indeed had been of true value. But, tragically, his vanity made him a slave, a victim of the Idol’s power. This was possible only because the narrator never realized that the Idol’s power was drawn from him and his assumption that there must be a Figure and that the value of the Figure was directly proportional to the resistance it presented its pursuers.

The question remains: While it may be true that the value of a literary concept and the difficulty of its apprehension run side by side for a distance, does there not come a point beyond which the relationship is inverted? Perhaps a Figure that can scarcely be known is not really worth knowing—not, at least, in this carpet. But the question is rendered moot by the reader’s own compulsion. The reader will always find a Figure. Perhaps this was James’s “little point” all along. Now it is mine. Perhaps this point is like the Figure, and both are like a literary wave moving through the medium of authors and readers (who both generate waves and transfer them) converging with other waves as it goes. The medium assumes the wave’s shape as it passes it on, but the wave cannot exist and still belong permanently, solely, to a restricted portion of the medium. Real Figures are transferable. In fact, they exist in transfer and are
transformed as they are transferred. To imagine that one can capture and keep to oneself a Figure in the carpet is indeed vanity.

If Vereker's Figure really existed, withholding it, whether by default or design, killed it, or, at least, rendered it irrelevant. But the same action also created the cult that replaced it with the Idol. Conversely, communicating the Figure would have revived it and destroyed the Idol. The Idol was preferred. In this sense, the Idol was an Anti-Figure. It might seem as viable as the original Figure to some who would say, "If the community of readers responds to the text by creating an Idol, then that is what the text is about." But the Idol was not in the text in the same way that the Figure supposedly was. It is doubtful that the text, unassisted, would have generated the empty Idol. It emerged from the meeting of the narrator with Vereker and was imposed on the text by the community because it needed an Idol. Though it did inspire a text, the Idol was not to be found in the text. It never really was a Figure IN the carpet.

Notes

1 cf. Demetrius the Silver-Smith and idol maker of Acts 19:34 who, upon realizing that he was losing customers to Christianity, worked the Ephesians into a frenzied mob chanting "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." (Acts 19:24-34). King Jeroboam's creation and promotion of idol worship out of political concern (I Kings 12:25-33) provides another pertinent Biblical analogy.

2 Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1969 ed.

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