

Henry James, circa 1900 (photo from Corbis/Getty)



LIT 4329: Henry James

Spring 2026

Prof. Ashley Barnes

Meeting times: Tues. & Thurs. 11:30-12:15

Meeting place: FN 2.304

Office hours: Mon. & Thurs. 1:00-2:00, JO 5.110

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Course description:

“There are bad novels and good novels,” Henry James wrote, but he argued that it was silly to judge a novel as “moral or immoral”; “the only classification of the novel that I can understand is into the interesting and the uninteresting.” Yet James’s work has provoked longstanding debates about the morality of reading fiction: what it means to know someone else’s mind, and how much we ought to know.

James is known as one of the great modern writers in English, a master of psychological realism who can evoke mental states ranging from desire and envy to anguish and resentment to indecision and bafflement. He helped vault the novel from the status of a shallow pastime to the elevation of high art. This spring, as we read a few of James’s representative works, we will focus on James’s reputation as an author with strong ideas about virtue and as a practitioner of melodrama. Some big questions we’ll pursue:

- Does literature have an ethical payoff? Does reading fiction make us better somehow?
- What is the relation between style and substance? Isn’t melodrama a bad form? How, then, can a melodramatic novel have virtuous effects? (And is that what a novel should try to do?)
- How do we find standards of right and wrong in a modern world where it seems like there’s no longer any shared foundation to appeal to?

Our data set will be three big novels, one long story, and—to try to isolate what makes a James narrative specifically Jamesian—short comparison texts from a handful of very different writers. We’ll also be reading literary criticism that explores ethics and modern life and the purpose of art in general. One payoff for you, at the end of this endeavor, will be a greater understanding of James’s theory and practice of fiction, particularly how his work has shaped ideas about art and ethics across the twentieth century and up to the present. The payoffs will also include (I hope!) a renewed capacity to immerse yourself in fiction; to pay attention to the details of language and see how much power a single word can exert; to argue for your judgment of what a text means (especially, what its vision of the moral universe is), while taking care to weigh other people’s ideas; to describe the uniqueness of a creator’s style; and to give an account of what style you admire most and what substance you find in it.

Required texts:

Recommended editions are in parentheses. Whatever edition you get, please bring the book to class!

- *What Maisie Knew* (Penguin Classics ed., 9-780140-432480)
- *The Portrait of a Lady* (Norton Critical ed., 9-780393-966466)
- *The Wings of the Dove* (Penguin Classics ed., 9-780140-432633)

All other texts will be xeroxed and handed out in class.

Learning outcomes:

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- analyze James's values and his style by identifying what elements characterize his prose, and what are the effects of his choices;
- explain the pros and cons of assigning an ethical value to novels (or any art) and argue for James's position on that question;
- argue for the meaning of James's fiction through the steps of close reading, asking good questions, choosing smart evidence, and weighing other people's analyses (critics and peers alike);
- describe how James's style and substance make his work unique, by comparison to other artists' work, and explain their own values for the style and substance of fiction.

Course tasks:

Here are the ways students will practice & prepare for those learning outcomes:

- Write routine, informal responses to the assigned reading;
- Reflect on the ethical dimension of reading fiction, both in your own terms and in response to scholars;
- Respond to literary critics, applying and evaluating their ideas;
- Develop and research your own argument for the way James's fiction, in comparison to another artist's work, expresses a particular ethical vision through a particular style

Assessments:

Here's how students will demonstrate that they're achieving those learning outcomes:

- Informal writing (low-stakes tasks assigned in class or for homework) = 20%
- Two short essays = 35%
- Longer final essay (including proposal & informal presentation) = 35%
- Class participation and attendance = 10%

Informal writing = 20%

Informal writing helps you process the reading and prepares you for longer writing exercises. These tasks will usually be assigned for in-class completion and sometimes for homework. They may be collaborative (for ex., collectively annotating a given passage from a novel) or individual (for ex., responding to an idea from a literary critic we read). They may take the form of text analyses (asking you to notice imagery, narrative voice, etc.) or of creative responses (writing a parody or a sincere imitation). These low-stakes writing tasks will be assigned for every (or nearly every) class meeting. These will be marked simply as done or not done, and *I'll drop the two lowest grades* (meaning you can miss two with no penalty).

Short Essays 1 + 2 = 35%

Each of these two essays will be scaffolded through informal writing, and both are trial runs for the longer final essay. In each case, you will draw on the skills of close reading, considering other interpretations, and comparing James's writing to that of another author. These essays will be mostly written during class time.

Final essay (including proposal & informal presentation) = 35%

This essay will give you confidence in your ability to develop a live question about an author’s work, to identify a relevant literary-critical conversation, and to join that conversation by creating your own argument. The essay will develop in stages, including a facilitated peer workshop on the paper proposal and an informal sharing of work-in-progress. You’ll complete most of this writing during class time.

Class Attendance & Participation = 10%

In each class session, you will participate in class discussion, group work, and free writing. Your attentive and active participation is essential and constitutes a portion of your grade. See the rubric below for a description of attendance and participation standards. Note that your attendance also requires arriving on time for class, out of respect for the learning environment. The attendance and participation grade is meant to reward the habits that make your education more meaningful in any class: reading assigned materials, notetaking, writing and problem-solving in class, and joining in discussions. *All students may take two (2) free absences for any reason over the semester without penalty. Three (3) tardies or early departures of more than 5 minutes equal one (1) absence. Beyond that:*

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION RUBRIC

Attendance	In-class participation	
Present and on time, almost without exception (up to 3 total absences).	Always shows up with required materials; always works on in-class writing and shares ideas and questions with small groups and full class.	Excellent (A range)
Present and on time, with rare exceptions (4 to 6 total absences).	Almost always shows up with required materials; reliably works on in-class writing and shares ideas and questions with small groups and full class.	Good (B range)
Present and on time, with some exceptions (6 to 8 total absences).	Usually shows up with required materials; usually works on in-class writing and shares ideas and questions with small groups and full class.	Fair (C range)
Not reliably present or on time (> 8 total absences).	Frequently shows up without materials, doesn’t work on in-class writing, and is disengaged from small group and full class discussion. In short, the student is actively or passively disruptive of the learning environment.	Subpar (D or F range)

GENERAL POLICIES + RESOURCES

Policy against plagiarism and the use of generative AI

I am interested in *your* ideas, from inside your head—not the output of a large language model. Hand in your own work for all the tasks, big and small, that you accomplish in this class. It is a form of cheating—cheating yourself, above all—to outsource your own critical and creative thinking to a Microsoft (or whatever) product. Do not ask generative AI to outline for you, to brainstorm for you, to write for you, or to edit for you. These are all skills that it is worthwhile to develop in your own right. When you rely on a literary critic or other source, say so: avoid accidental plagiarism by **citing your sources**. Any citation format is fine with me, as long as you are consistent.

If you have any questions about citations, speak to me, or check out this online reference guide: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/avoiding_plagiarism/plagiarism_faq.html.

Academic Support Resources

I’m here to talk. Please email me (ashley.barnes@utdallas.edu) any time to ask questions or to set up a time to meet. I’m happy to talk about what we’re reading, what you’re thinking or writing about, or how things are going in class. If you’re looking for some academic or personal support, feeling lost, or want some friendly peer-to-peer guidance, UT Dallas has people to provide it. The [Student Success Center](#) is a good place to search out academic resources. Another is the [Graduation Help Desk](#), which offers a wide range of support, both academic and non-academic.

This course is accessible to all types of learners. I strongly encourage students with disabilities to notify me if it will help their learning experience in this course. Students who

may need an academic accommodation should initiate it through the [AccessAbility Resource Center \(ARC\)](#), located in the Administration Building, Suite 2.224. They can be reached by [email](#), calling 972-883-2098, or at their [website](#). To receive academic accommodations for this class, please register and request services by completing the Request for Services form with the proper documentation and meeting with the Director of ARC at the beginning of the semester.

Class Recordings

Students are expected to follow appropriate University policies and maintain the security of passwords used to access recorded lectures. Unless the Office of Student AccessAbility has approved the student to record the instruction, students are expressly prohibited from recording any part of this course. Recordings may not be published, reproduced, or shared with those not in the class, or uploaded to other online environments except to implement an approved Office of Student AccessAbility accommodation. Failure to comply with these University requirements is a violation of the Student Code of Conduct.

Social Media Use

The [Student Code of Conduct](#) includes behaviors conducted via any digital platform. Students may not use any digital platform to seek or provide unauthorized assistance for any assignment done for academic credit. Students may not use any digital platform to impersonate or represent any person other than themselves. Please consult with your instructor regarding authorized assistance.

UT Dallas Syllabus Policies and Procedures

The information contained in the following link constitutes the University's policies and procedures segment of the course syllabus. Please go to the [UTD policies and procedures](#) webpage for these policies.

The descriptions and timelines contained in this syllabus are subject to change at the discretion of the Professor.

Schedule for reading & major writing assignment

Tues. 1/20 introduction (feat. George Saunders on the virtues of literature)
Thurs. 1/22 James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" & "Interview" (xerox)

Tues. 1/27 Henry James, "The Beast in the Jungle" (xerox)
Thurs. 1/29 comp. text: Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil" (xerox)

Tues. 2/3 *What Maisie Knew*: James's Preface + chapters 1-11
Thurs. 2/5 *Maisie* chapters 12-17

Tues. 2/10 *Maisie* chapters 18-27
Thurs. 2/12 finish *Maisie* (chapters 28-31)

Tues. 2/17 comp. text: Edward P. Jones, "Adam Robinson Acquires Grandparents and a Little Sister" (xerox)
Thurs. 2/19 in-class writing workshop: *SHORT ESSAY 1 DUE IN CLASS*

Tues. 2/24 Melodrama: Peter Brooks, from *The Melodramatic Imagination* (xerox)
Thurs. 2/26 Morals: Robert Pippin, from *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (xerox)

Tues. 3/3 *The Portrait of a Lady*: James's preface + chapters 1-11
Thurs. 3/5 *Portrait* chapters 12-15

Tues. 3/10 *Portrait* chapters 16-25
Thurs. 3/12 *Portrait* chapters 26-34

SPRING BREAK

Tues. 3/24 *Portrait* chapters 35-47 (*read over the break!!!*)
Thurs. 3/26 finish *Portrait* (chapters 48-55)

Tues. 3/31 comp. text: Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" (xerox)
Thurs. 4/2 in-class writing workshop: *SHORT ESSAY 2 DUE IN CLASS*

Tues. 4/7 *The Wings of the Dove*: James's Preface + Book 1 - Book 2, ch. I
Thurs. 4/9 *Wings* Book 2 ch. II - Book 3

Tues. 4/14 *Wings* Book 4 + Book 5
Thurs. 4/16 in-class writing workshop: *FINAL ESSAY PROPOSALS DUE IN CLASS* (keep reading *Wings*: Book 6)

Tues. 4/21 *NO CLASS: SMALL GROUP PEER WORKSHOPS* (+ keep reading *Wings!*: Book 7 + Book 8)

Thurs. 4/23 *NO CLASS: SMALL GROUP PEER WORKSHOPS* (+ keep reading *Wings!*: Book 9)

Tues. 4/28 finish *Wings* (Book 10)

Thurs. 4/30 comp. text: Grace Paley, "A Conversation with My Father" (xerox)

Tues. 5/5 share work-in-progress

Thurs. 5/7 in-class writing workshop: *FINAL ESSAY DUE IN CLASS*