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I arrived at Murray State University from the small community of Hawesville, Ky., with a passion for writing and teaching. Hence, I declared my major as English Education. When not engaged in writing or reading, I enjoy worshiping God, spending time with friends and family, cooking, skiing, camping and boating. After graduation, I plan to teach at the high school level and soon afterwards, I will pursue graduate school with an emphasis in administration. After graduate school, I will continue my education and earn a Ph.D. in English.

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ABSTRACT

From Childhood to Maturity in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*

From reading this essay, one gathers an understanding of how Henry James shows his female protagonist's progression from childhood to adolescence in the novel, *What Maisie Knew*. James clearly portrays Maisie's corrupt adult influences and demonstrates the three primary strategies that Maisie invokes as she transitions from childhood into maturity: selective ignorance, purposeful silence, and an active and verbal quest for knowledge. James identifies Maisie's shift from childhood to adolescence as Maisie ceases to merely observe and extrapolate meaning from the situations around her, but evolves into an active participant in the manipulation thereby assuming a more adult role in her environment. Essentially, James illustrates how Maisie's exposure to the crude adult world diminishes her childhood until it completely evaporates and forces her into pre-mature adolescence. By the end of the novel, Maisie asserts her independence and emerges as one capable of making her own decisions.

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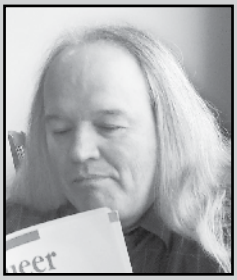

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From Childhood to Maturity in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*

Over the past ten years, criticism of Henry James's novel, *What Maisie Knew*, has focused on such issues as: its relationship to the social comedy of Ford Maddox Ford, technologies of vision, the novel's relationship to the trial of Oscar Wilde, social purity, racial phantasmagoria, the role of the governess, the oedipal family, and the novel's significance in the context of James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw*.[1] Surprisingly, much of the current criticism fails to address the female protagonist's growth from childhood to maturity in this novel. [2]

Through his complex narrative structure, however, Henry James explores Maisie's transition from childhood innocence into premature adolescence. James characterizes Maisie as a clever six-year-old girl oppressed by her parents' divorce and their subsequent decisions. Based on her circumstances, Maisie adopts three primary strategies: selective ignorance, purposeful silence, and an active and verbal quest for knowledge. After Maisie effectively employs these strategies, James demonstrates her ability to manipulate her environment in order to obtain knowledge, understanding, and unconditional love. Ultimately, James illustrates how Maisie's childhood evaporates because of her increased exposure to the corruption and selfishness of the adult world. He clearly shows how the young, innocent girl transforms into a mature, independently minded young woman. Thus, this novel illustrates the nature of life in which knowledge breeds power and truth.

From the beginning of the novel, James portrays Maisie as a victim of her environment with two parents that despise one another and engage in sexual promiscuity. James consistently conveys Ida and Beale Farange, Maisie's parents, as selfish, preoccupied, and neglectful. In the midst of these unfortunate circumstances, James depicts Maisie as an astutely perceptive child with a multitude of observations through which she constructs meaning. For example, Maisie perceives that she feels especially affectionate toward Mrs. Wix, the governess hired by her mother, because Mrs. Wix once had a daughter and thus displays a motherly nature. Maisie contrasts Mrs. Wix's motherly disposition to Miss Overmore, the governess employed by her father whom he later marries, and even Mamma because these female characters assume motherly roles, but do not exhibit maternal instincts. Based on Maisie's initial experiences with Mamma in particular, she surmises that "parents had come to be vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted" (59). After reaching this conclusion, Maisie approaches a pivotal moment in her life when she reflects on her newfound purpose. She notices that the objective in her parents' game of hatred shifts from her parents wanting to withhold her from one another to her parents viewing her as an inconvenient obligation.

Concerning Maisie's intelligence at the onset of the novel, Paul Theroux notes that when she interacts with the adults around her, she "is no more than parroting another character's words, but her detachment and her directness and her good sense give her a confident aura of independence" (13). Throughout the early chapters of the novel, the characters refer to Maisie as "poor little monkey," and in the preface, James comments on these childish references as the "epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood" (36). Although Maisie's six-year-old mentality limits her comprehension of the situations around her, she makes significant connections concerning her role in the events. When Maisie reflects on the alliances, for example, James reveals her cognitive ability to interpret situations and understand unspoken truths. She recognizes that she and Mrs. Wix favor Sir Claude, her mother's young husband, and that tensions exist between Mrs. Wix and Miss Overmore. Theroux contends that Maisie "is shrewder and more clear-sighted than the adults around her" (11). Thus, James not only depicts Maisie as exceptionally intelligent for her age, but he uses some of the adult characters around her to magnify her intellect.

After Maisie learns that her parents use her to torment one another, she adopts an efficient strategy of selective ignorance that the adults around her accept as "the theory of her stupidity" (43). Maisie realizes that her parents exploit her as a messenger of disgust when through her they transfer malicious messages to one another. This serves as a pivotal moment in Maisie's development because her vow of silence gives her an immense amount of power. Theroux comments on this tactic when he asserts that Maisie "often seems

like a grown up novelist rendered small and fitted into a frock and given a taste for chocolates and an ability to play dumb" (18). When Maisie employs this strategy, she gains the power to ask blunt and insightful questions, which society normally considers inappropriate. Nonetheless, Maisie obtains scandalous information from these questions because of the mask of selective ignorance. As Maisie perfects this technique of selective ignorance, she gathers knowledge and transitions from a passive child to a more independent thinker.

In addition to her selective ignorance, Maisie masters the art of purposeful silence that some of the adults assume to be ignorance and others see as unspoken understanding. When Maisie relies on strategic silence, the adults often accept her silence as fake stupidity and speak freely around her. For example, Mrs. Beale (formerly Miss Overmore) often criticizes Maisie's parents and Mrs. Wix despite Maisie's presence. At one point, Sir Claude confronts Mrs. Beale about her boldness and she retorts, "There's nothing [Maisie] hasn't heard. But it doesn't matter – it hasn't spoiled her" (74). Later, Mrs. Wix justifies her own open conversations with Maisie by explaining, "It isn't as if [Maisie] didn't already know everything … I can't make you worse than you *are*" (80).

Later in the novel, even Sir Claude reflects on his free speech when he says to Maisie: "I'm always talking to you in the most extraordinary way, ain't I? One would think you were about sixty" (247). Through her powerful strategy of purposeful silence, Maisie fools the adult characters into engaging in unreserved candor. Geoffrey D. Smith perceives this strategy as a means of "least resistance," one that corresponds to the popular depiction of Maisie as a peace-keeper. Smith explains that "silence eventually brings rewards, for while Maisie withdraws from socially active participation in the game, she observes and ascertains the rules that govern the adult players" (226). Drawing an analogy between the manipulation of the adult world and a game proves significant as Maisie's role in the game gradually changes throughout the course of the novel. As Maisie matures, she does not abandon entirely the strategy of purposeful silence. She employs purposeful silence, for example, when Sir Claude presses her for information about what Mrs. Wix communicated to her concerning Sir Claude's relationship with Mrs. Beale. Although Maisie knows a great deal about their affairs, she replies that she knows nothing. Through this scene, James illustrates that Maisie has learned that her weapon of silence bestows immense power.

As Maisie continues to mature, she often dismisses the strategy of purposeful silence and begins to verbalize her competence even when she does not clearly understand the situation. When the adults believe that she comprehends the information, they speak as freely to her as they did when she faked ignorance. As opposed to silence, Maisie begins to openly display an eagerness to learn and exhibit competence. James references Maisie's desperate quest for knowledge throughout the novel. For example, he states that Maisie "was to feel henceforth as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window-pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge" (120). In the article, "What Maisie Knows: A Study of Childhood and Adolescence," John C. McCloskey includes multiple references in which Maisie declares her competence of a particular situation even when she does not fully understand the events. McCloskey cites instances such as when Maisie declares, "Oh, I know more than you think" (496). In addition to explicitly commenting on her knowledge, James frequently reveals her mental process. She often observes events, reflects on them, and subsequently reconstructs the situations, makes comparisons, and develops theories about life. As Maisie practices her theories, she changes allegiances at her convenience. Maisie's allegiance begins with Miss Overmore, but shifts to Mrs. Wix after she bonds with Mrs. Wix because of her maternal intuition. However, Maisie's allegiance quickly shifts to Sir Claude, almost immediately upon his arrival, because of her instantaneous infatuation with him.

During her quest for knowledge and understanding, Maisie's perception intensifies and she learns how to use her perceptions to extrapolate meaning from the situations around her. In one significant scene between Maisie and Mrs. Wix, Maisie notes the change in Mrs. Wix as her governess exerts a new authority. Moreover, instead of Maisie merely making a mental note of this perception, she challenges Mrs. Wix's new authority and insults her confidant. In the midst of this scene, James explains changes in Maisie. He remarks about her childhood that she "began, the poor child, with scarcely knowing what [moral sense] was," as opposed to the point when she earnestly wants to learn and develop her own moral sense. At this time, James emphasizes Maisie's acquired knowledge when he observes,

> As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in fact as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything. She had not had governesses

> for nothing: what in the world had she ever done but learn and learn and learn? She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that she soon should have learnt All. (213)

James indicates by this passage not that Maisie already knows everything, but that she eagerly desires and has the mental capacity to learn anything. After bluntly explaining this to his audience, James proceeds to demonstrate Maisie's desire to learn in spite of her persistent childhood mentality. In the subsequent scene, Mrs. Wix explains to Maisie the biblical crime of Sir Claude's relationship with Mrs. Beale. Although at this point Maisie does not understand morality or the Bible, James notes that she "wanted to understand, and all her thoughts for a minute centered in the effort to come out with something which should be a disproof of her simplicity" (215). This scene demonstrates James' style as he does not rush through Maisie's development, but rather shows precisely how she evolves from a child to an adolescent. McCloskey notes that before Maisie assumes an active role in the adult world, she "sees clearly enough what is there, but she continues passive, still a recorder of impressions and now a drawer of inferences, an acute onlooker, but not yet an actor" (496). McCloskey's idea simply reinforces the theory that James intentionally focuses on Maisie's gradual progression rather than racing to the final result.

Based on her survival strategies and the knowledge she gains from her crude circumstances, Maisie learns to manipulate the adults and the situations around her. Rather than merely perceiving and comprehending the games of the adult world, Maisie begins to participate in the deceit. When Maisie spends time with her father at the Countess' house, for example, she savors her father's attention and explains that she "helps him pretend" that he knows her. As this significant scene unfolds, Maisie comments that Beale "was now looking at her…as if she had grown ever so much older." This observation not only shows Beale's insignificant role in his daughter's life, but that even someone as "out of tune" as Beale recognizes Maisie's process to maturity (152). James continues, in this scene, to demonstrate Maisie's ability to decipher situations and extrapolate meaning even after Beale invites Maisie to accompany him to America:

> the child was momentarily bewildered between her alternatives of agreeing with him about her wanting to get rid of him and displeasing him by pretending to stick to him ... She understood as well as if he had spoken it that what he wanted, hang it, was that she should let him off with all the honours – with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his side. (152-153)

As the first time that Maisie disagrees with an adult, this conversation serves as a landmark in Maisie's journey to maturity. Lastly, this scene reinforces the growth of Maisie's intelligence through her ability to make connections when she identifies the Countess as "Papa's Captain" (157). Clearly, Maisie understands that her parents engage in extramarital affairs, and that their current partners exist because of greed.

James reinforces Maisie's manipulative abilities in the scene between Maisie and the Captain. When, the Captain comments, "I've said too much to you," Maisie responds, "I'll never tell," a reply designed to gather more information. As much as this novel discusses what Maisie knows, James emphasizes Maisie's desire to learn what all of the other characters know and withhold. After Maisie realizes that the Captain will not disclose any additional information, she boldly instructs the Captain: "Then don't [love Mamma] only for just a little…like all the others" (133). With this statement, Maisie deceives the Captain by forcing him to contemplate his intentions with Ida and by warning him about her mother's past. Through this scene, James not only shows that Maisie thoroughly understands her environment, but assumes an active role in who enters her world. McCloskey argues that Maisie's ability to "maneuver others" (as she demonstrates with the Captain) marks the point in which she gains independence since this ability reveals the adolescent desire to please one's self rather than others (506). This idea identifies Maisie as an emerging adolescent, a perspective that James develops as Maisie's quest for knowledge and independence carries over into her journey to France.

Maisie's knowledge and interpretive abilities only increase as she travels abroad. As Maisie tours the temple with Mrs. Wix, Mrs. Wix expresses her regret of not converting to Catholicism earlier in life. James reveals Maisie's higher level thinking when she contemplates "what degree of lateness it was that shut the door against an escape from such an error" (204). James derives that "what [Maisie] had essentially done, these days, had been to read the unspoken into the spoken" (205). Moreover, James utilizes this scene to show Maisie's autonomy when she argues with Mrs. Wix about the morality or immorality of Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale living together since their declared freedom. Maisie affirms her independence and takes pride in her knowledge. As she tours the

cities in France with Mrs. Wix, she proudly informs her ignorant governess of the French sites. In contrast to her previous stance of selective ignorance or silence, Maisie now displays confidence and delight in her intellect.

During her time in France, Maisie exerts more and more power, as she had displayed when she insulted Mrs. Wix and argued with her father. Mrs. Wix perceives Maisie's boldness and comments, "You're coming out," and Maisie replies, "Why shouldn't I? You've come out. Mrs. Beale has come out" (230). James shows that Maisie no longer simply observes the situations around her like she did as a child, and does not simply observe and then attempt to interpret as she did during her second phase of childhood. At this point in time, James stresses the death of Maisie's childhood and highlights the changes in her demeanor as a young woman. Maisie takes the initiative, for example, to search for Sir Claude in the salon even after Mrs. Wix expresses her fear, and informs Maisie that the salon now only belongs to Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale.

Ultimately, James parades Maisie's independence through the final scenes of the novel in which Sir Claude offers Maisie a new beginning with her stepparents. When given the freedom to make this important decision on her own, Maisie grasps that she, like Sir Claude, fears her own identity and she asks Sir Claude for more time to consider her options. Subsequently, Maisie displays her new adolescent mentality by revealing her desire to take risks when she begs Sir Claude to act impulsively and purchase train tickets to whisk them away to Paris and abandon Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale. After this plan fails, Maisie engages in her greatest act of independence and adulthood when she gives Sir Claude an ultimatum: if he will leave Mrs. Beale, she will leave Mrs. Wix. This demand demonstrates Maisie's ability to negotiate (a vital skill in the adult world) and her refusal to sacrifice without gain. James explains at this point that Maisie "knew what she wanted. All her learning and learning had made her at last learn that" (262). As various characters comment throughout the novel, Maisie lacks a formal education, but learns life lessons that lead her to self-actualization.

Jeff Westover asserts that Maisie "finds herself" while in France because her role changes as she progresses into "the actor who extends searching hands in order to bless, claim, and possess the promising new world around her" (210). He claims that the end of the novel marks Maisie's "liberating revelation" when she takes an active role, and "recognizes that the world belongs to her as much as she belongs to the world…she has the power to act and thus to influence the world in which she participates" (211). Similarly, Smith contends that the end of the novel shows how Maisie "assumes control of her own fate" by choosing the path which offers the most independence (235). Maisie repetitively refers to Mrs. Wix as "nobody" in the final chapters of the novel, which insinuates that Maisie will continue to make her own decisions because she views her new guardian as nobody. Likewise, McCloskey finalizes his argument by stating that "one must recognize the evolution of [Maisie's] identity, of a sense of herself as an independent being capable of volition and aware of 'self' values, and of her ability to make comparative judgments which satisfy that self" (500). He asserts that "she achieves, at the end of her childhood, her psychic entity as an individual person and an independence of spirit" (500). Clearly, Maisie exerts her autonomy in the final scenes of the novel and journeys into adolescence.

Theroux defines Maisie as "a girl whom circumstances have forced to behave like a woman," and comments that she "can live perfectly well without her parents – perhaps too well" (9, 14). At varying points in the novel, James validates Maisie's personal growth and intelligence. He states in the middle of the novel, "It may indeed be said that these days brought on a high quickening of Maisie's direct perceptions, of her sense of freedom to make out things for herself," which foreshadows Maisie's boldness at the end of the novel (96). As she decides the path in life to follow, Maisie's fears subside and she transcends the innocence of childhood to emerge into the crude reality of adulthood. Smith, for example, explains Maisie's transition as a "graduate from the romantic idealism of childhood into the social realism of adulthood" (224). Essentially, Maisie's childhood disappears over the course of the novel, and by the end she proceeds into maturity and self-reliance. As the title of the novel suggests, "What Maisie Knew" slaughtered her childhood and forced her into adolescence.

End Notes

1 Examples of these approaches include the following: Britzolakis, Christina. "Technologies of Vision in Henry James's What Maisie Knew." *A Forum on Fiction.* 34 (2001): 369-390; Catanzaro, Michael R. "An Analogy between Henry James' What Maisie Knew and the Oscar Wilde Trial: Did James Really Know What Maisie Knew?" *The Image of Europe in Literature, Media, and Society*. 244 (2001): 135-143; Cornwell, Neil. "The Turn of the Screw and What Maisie Knew." *Casebooks*. 9 (1998): 252; Davenport, Tony. "From What Maisie Knew to the Simple Life Limited: James's Late Fiction and Ford's Social Comedy." *Ford Madox Ford: A Reappraisal*. 191 (2002): 7-30; DeVine, Christine. "Marginalized Maisie: Social Purity and What Maisie Knew." *Victorian Newsletter*. 99 (2001): 7-15; Johnson, Kendall. "The Scarlet Feather: Racial Phantasmagoria in What Maisie Knew." *Henry James Review*. 22 (2001): 128-146; and Miles, Kathryn. "What Maisie Knew and the Governess Muddled: Cognitive Development in James's Post-Dramatic Fiction." *Colby Library Quarterly*. 36 (2000): 193-208.

2 Two essays that discuss the role of childhood include: Honeyman, Susan E. "What Maisie Knew and the Impossible Representation of Childhood." *Henry James Review.* 22 (2001): 67-80; and Phillips, Lawrence. "What Maisie Knew and the Victorian Cult of the Little Girl." *Henry Street: A Graduate Review of Literary Studies*. 8 (1999): 37-58.

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