

## ANALYSIS

*The Golden Bowl* (1904)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“An early critic of this novel complained that except for the revelations made by one or two minor characters, it is difficult for a reader to follow the plot, since everyone is trying to conceal from everyone else the facts necessary to an understanding of the story. Maggie Verver, daughter of a millionaire, marries an Italian prince who previously has had a love affair with Maggie’s closest friend, Charlotte Stant. Charlotte visits the pair and continues her intimacy. Then she marries Maggie’s father. Everybody tries to keep it a secret from the rest that he or she ultimately knows all that has happened or is happening. The complications are more or less solved when Maggie’s father goes back to America with Charlotte. James depicts with his usual subtlety the cultural and moral involvements that follow upon international marriage and irregular sex relationships. Many admirers of James regard this as one of his best works. Elizabeth Stevenson sees in the novel another illustration of one of James’s favorite ideas, that goodness may provoke evil.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“Charlotte Stant, a daring, intelligent, but penniless American, has a brief affair in Rome with Prince Amerigo, an impoverished Italian aristocrat. They recognize that life together without money would be fatal to their love, and Charlotte returns to America. The Prince then falls in love with Maggie Verver, who, with her wealthy father, Adam, represents the best qualities of American culture: enthusiasm, moral fineness, the ability to assimilate new values, and a refreshing innocence and delicacy of outlook. Charlotte, a close friend of Maggie, returns to London, and while shopping one day with the Prince, considers as a possible gift for Maggie a certain gilded crystal bowl, perfect except for an invisible flaw. She is persuaded not to buy it, but the bowl becomes a symbol of the Prince’s character and the various flawed relationships in the narrative.

Maggie, after her marriage, realizes that she has ended the happy relationship with her father, who, when he finds her worried about him, marries Charlotte. In England Maggie is happy with her reunited father, husband, and friend, as well as in the care of her son, but gradually she becomes aware of the renewed liaison of Charlotte and her husband. But when by chance she buys the golden bowl as a birthday present for her father, Maggie learns something from the shopkeeper that makes her suspect the Prince’s infidelity. However, her friend Fanny Assingham declares that her theory is as cracked as the bowl, which she dramatically dashes to the floor. Maggie therefore proceeds cautiously, concealing her suspicions, and quietly works to restore the proper grouping of the couples.

The Prince senses that she knows the truth, and is touched by her generosity and delicacy. Adam too realizes that she has learned that his wife and son-in-law are lovers; with the same tact and self-sacrifice that she has exhibited, he takes Charlotte to America, never to return. The Prince understands that, by losing his mistress, he has gained a new depth of character and a wife whose value he has only begun to appreciate. The process of ‘conversion,’ which began with the smashing of the golden bowl, is thus completed.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Set against this great historical and geographical tradition, there is the strangely insulated, shut-off life of the actors. The two married couples, on this immense stage, in their admired and plausible surroundings, are yet living a life which is grotesquely at odds with their happy setting of envied appearance, and

unsuited to the standards of the tradition to which they are trying to conform. They are perpetually at the edge of something sordid: of the divorce court, the reported evidence of servants, and love letters printed in the news. The struggle of the Ververs is a struggle to make the picture fit the frame; they are constantly struggling to make their lives worthy of their dead surroundings.”

Stephen Spender  
quoted by F. W. Dupee  
*Henry James* (William Morrow 1974) 226

“*The Golden Bowl* was to be his last long novel, and in it he returned with all his energy to the familiar themes of love and survival in an international situation. We know from the notebooks that the novel originated, as usual, in what then--in 1892--seemed to be merely a good idea for a short tale. James had heard of a girl and her widower-father who, though greatly attached to one another, decided each to marry, and who were then dismayed to discover that their respective partners were having an affair. This remained the central situation of *The Golden Bowl* as it was finally written; but meanwhile James greatly complicated the story and brought to bear on it all the myth-making tendencies of his later mind...

How did he intend us to feel about the Ververs, father and daughter? Are they to be understood as sharing to some extent in the guilt of their partners? ‘The subject is really the pathetic simplicity and good faith of the father and daughter in their abandonment,’ James wrote in 1892... And we must conclude that the novelist in James collided with the moral idealist in him. He seems to have wanted to relieve Maggie of all original fault in order to enhance her triumph in the free exercise of love. But, as the situation was set up, he could not help observing her and her father on their weak and even their sinister side as well as on the side of their force and charm. But the Ververs, once they are relieved of their impossibly noble role, become very human and the book itself becomes extremely interesting—James’s chief chronicle of naked suffering. In novels, including many of his own, suffering is generally the privilege of poor or middling people. In *The Golden Bowl* people suffer and are rich, suffer in intimate consequence of being rich...

Not all the American barons of their time were robber barons, and this father and daughter embody the good faith of the best of them.... Maggie and her father doubtless exemplify his ideal program for the class. Their first concern is with the moral well-being of themselves and those close to them.... They huddle together, even at first shrinking from attendance at London parties. On their respective [spouses], the worldly sociable Prince and Charlotte, they impose a curious quadrille-like pattern of existence which consists in their regularly exchanging partners and now and then coming together, the four of them, over cards or dinner, with two trusted friends, Colonel and Mrs. Assingham, usually present as spectators....

Adam Verver is to Jim Pocock [in *The Ambassadors*] as the ‘tycoon’ to the smaller businessman. His refinement is far greater but his identity is no less in question, and he too is forever fondling a cigar. He is also--for James spares us nothing--sexually impotent or sterile; he and Charlotte cannot, as she tells the Prince, have a child. Whatever else this may imply, it seems irresistibly to be the penalty of his somewhat morbid intimacy with his daughter; and Maggie, while she promptly bears a child, lives in some dread of the Prince’s sexuality: it is the climax of her triumph when she can at last freely surrender to him, ‘touch him, taste him, smell him, kiss him, hold him’...

Like all James’s major characters, Charlotte shows a strong feeling for beautiful behavior; but a conscience she does not have. Nor, clever and charming though she is, does she have any insight into her own motives, not to mention those of other people. Her great fault lies in her prodigious egotistical unawareness. She has given up the Prince because they are too poor to marry; but as soon as he is engaged to her old friend she hastens overseas to be present at the wedding, tries to force on him mementos of their old intimacy, seeks a place near him by marrying Mr. Verver. All unconsciously, in short, she is resolved to break down his scruples and resume the affair. And one rainy day when she has come to keep him company in Maggie’s absence, she succeeds.

According to our reading of the novel, Maggie and her father are much at fault in all this: they are too fond of each other and leave the other pair too much together. Yet James cannot be said to have been of the devil’s party without knowing it. Maggie’s fault does not make Charlotte’s justification: it merely makes her opportunity. And it is as an unconscious opportunist that Charlotte is at once so appealing and so

appalling. She is much more that very pervasive type than she is the traditional 'adventuress' living by her wits and trying to improve her social position. It is not position or even money that she wants, for such desires would argue a certain stability in her. She wants possession of the Prince and the pleasure of dominating other people's lives.... Her place then is not with the highly practical Mme. Merle; nor, in her capacity for self-deception and her total incapacity for tragedy is it with Kate Croy; it is rather with the insatiable Princess Casamassima."

Amerigo, with his melancholy wisdom, seems to catch up the whole spirit of *The Golden Bowl* better than Maggie in her triumph, whatever James may have intended.... Nowhere in James is the scenic arrangement more powerful or the mind of the central observer--here partly the Prince but mainly Maggie--more effective in creating form. Yet what Glenway Wescott observed of James's novels in general is especially true of *The Golden Bowl*: 'The psychic content is too great for its container of elegantly forged happenings: it all overflows and slops about and is magnificently wasted'.... It is true, as Philip Rahv remarks, that 'there never was a writer so immersed in personal relations' as James was. And Maggie's final success with her marriage would seem to mean that solutions for the gravest problems may be found within the private life itself, without recourse to the courts or the church or even to any established morality.

It is significant that the Prince and the Ververs are Catholics, and a priest appears briefly at their table. Yet the point is distinctly made that Maggie consults him not at all but settles everything for herself in what seems a flagrantly Protestant spirit. As she is her own priest, so she coins her own ethic out of her particular needs. In her feeling for her husband's intrigue with Charlotte there is no conventional horror of adultery, there is very little of judgment. And presumably it is out of a dread of being tempted into judgment, quite as much as out of a desire to spare each other, that Maggie and her father never mention between them the dereliction of their [spouses]."

F. W. Dupee  
*Henry James*  
(William Morrow 1974) 224-26

"Adam Verver's fortune...has been made entirely by himself in the post Civil War west.... Like so many other robber barons, he has set his heart on becoming a great collector, and gold and jewel images color, in consequence, every relationship in the novel.... In Mr. Verver's view, the Prince himself is a collector's item... Maggie Verver becomes, to her father's eye, a lovely sculptured figure, though he is a bit vague as to whether she is a nymph or a nun. To a much greater extent than even James had previously sought for, entire scenes are centered around pictures and *objets d'art*. The culmination of this tendency is the treatment of the golden bowl.... The method of introducing and developing this symbol is the same as for the wings of the dove, though both extended and intensified. The scene in which the Prince and Charlotte Stant discover the bowl in an antique shop, while supposedly looking for a wedding present for Maggie, makes the ending of the first book. The two long chapters which lead up to and away from Mrs. Assingham's dashing the bowl to the floor form not only the climax to the fourth book, but also the most dramatic moment in the novel....

The first half centers around the Prince, the second half around the Princess. The division of each half into three books marks, in the first instance, necessary lapses of time. Between the first and second books a sufficient interval must have passed since the Prince's marriage to Maggie to make her feel that her father is too much alone and that he ought to marry again. Between the second and third books Mr. Verver's marriage with Charlotte has taken place, and Maggie has finally begun to awaken to the situation between Charlotte and the Prince. At this point the whole *donnee* is before us, as it was not in the slowly evolving two previous novels. Everything is now concentrated upon Maggie's effort to win back her husband. The pace is much swifter. There are no further lapses of time. The fourth book, which occupies over half of the second volume, takes us to the moment when Maggie confronts the Prince with her knowledge. By the end of the fifth book she has triumphed over Charlotte, and the sixth book is needed only for a brief conclusion, to dispatch Mr. Verver and Charlotte back to America.

James uses the bowl as a means of bringing to a focal point the varying and diverging complexities in such human relations. He gives no indication whether he was thinking of Blake's cryptic verses: 'Can

wisdom be kept in a silver rod, / Or love in a golden bowl?' But that latter question is insistent throughout. When the antique dealer shows the bowl to Charlotte, her first comment is: 'It may be cheap for what it is, but it will be dear, I'm afraid, for me.' We think at once of what has been too dear for her, of the fact that, despite her love for the Prince, their marriage had been out of the question because of their lack of means. The Prince is thus the golden bowl, the 'pure and perfect crystal' which Mr. Verver has been happy to pay a big price for. But the bowl itself is quickly seen to have a flaw, and so it becomes a symbol rather for the relationship between the Prince and Charlotte--significantly he detects at once the crack beneath the gilt surface, whereas she is blind to it. Such a gift will never do for Maggie, and so they drop their pursuit, each with a refusal also to accept from the other any memento of their now dead past. They are acting here in good faith, and when he tells her that she too must marry, she answers, in the concluding lines of the first book: 'Well, I would marry, I think, to have something from you in all freedom.'

By the time of the reintroduction of the theme of the bowl, these words have taken on irony. Charlotte is married to Mr. Verver, and the old absorbing intimacy of father and daughter has thrown the other two continually by themselves. The day in the country when they finally take full advantage of their freedom is figured by the Prince as 'a great gold cup that we must somehow drain together.' A similar sounding of the theme is made by Maggie when, waking to the loss of her husband, she speaks of 'the full cup' of her need of him. But the most brilliant demonstration in all James' work of what he could do with a symbol is in those two climactic scenes, between Maggie and Fanny Assingham, and then between Maggie and the Prince.

Maggie herself has now stumbled upon the bowl while looking for a remembrance for her father's birthday; and from certain details that the dealer unwittingly let fall, she has pieced together the earlier scene in his shop, and has seen the bowl as the sign of her husband's intimacy with Charlotte. She has placed it in the center of her mantel to confront him as soon as he comes in, but now that she feels her whole future to be weighted by the bowl, she has a foreboding that perhaps the Prince may never again enter her room. Mrs. Assingham, who has known about the others' relation, but has been determined to keep it from Maggie, tells her that her whole idea 'has a crack,' just as the bowl has. Insisting that nothing stands between Maggie and the Prince, she dramatically smashes the bowl on the polished floor. How thoroughly James' imagination was imbued with the devices of the fairy tale is attested by the fact that the Prince instantly appears, just as though he was a genie released by the breaking of an evil spell. Though that comparison is not made, such is the effect.

As Maggie gathers up the three pieces into which the bowl has split, the two halves of the cup itself and 'the solid detached foot,' the urgent question for her is what can be salvaged from the triangle in which she is involved. The bowl is now the token of her knowledge, of the fact that she hasn't been such an innocent fool as the Prince may have supposed. As she confronts him with this, the dawning possibility of his new need of her seems to flicker over the fragments. The dramatic 'thickness' of such scenes can obviously not be paraphrased, since their excitement depends on the ranging play of association that is in the air at every moment. The Prince and Maggie are talking about the actual bowl, but other meanings are more shiftingly alive: 'And what, pray, was the price?'....

That remains the crucial question for the rest of the novel, whether the Ververs have paid too much for their Prince. As Maggie says to Mrs. Assingham, she wants 'the golden bowl--as it was to have been.... The bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack.' By the end that is what she has gained. In the closing scene James again finds his own kind of use for a work of art. Maggie and her father are commenting on the fineness of 'the early Florentine sacred subject' that he had given her on her marriage; but as they look at the picture, they are really exchanging views on the resolution of the situation.... She knows now that she is going 'to be paid in full.' As the Prince turns to her for their final embrace, he 'might have been holding out the money bag for her to come and take it.'

The expertness with which James has brought out so many connotations latent in the bowl has kept that symbol from ever becoming frozen or schematized. He has thus unquestionably succeeded in making an *objet d'art* the cohesive center of his own intricate creation. But other questions are raised by those curiously mixed final images. When there is so much gold that it pervades even the vocabulary of love, is that a sign of life or of death? What sort of world is being portrayed, and how are we to judge it? In the

view of Colonel Assingham, the most detached observer here, life is largely 'a matter of pecuniary arrangement,' and Maggie Verver is 'more than anything else the young woman who has a million a year.' But the American world into which he is launched is far less simple for the Prince. He figures it, through his early memory of Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, as 'a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the colour of milk or of snow.' He has been used to curtains of black and doesn't know what to expect in Maggie's realm of moral innocence, where the very existence of evil seems to be lost in the shrouding 'white mist.' That Americans are 'incredibly romantic,' he avows to her at the start. 'Of course we are,' she answers. 'That's just what makes everything so nice for us.'

James has clearly bent his attention to showing how nice that can be. He has continued down the vistas that opened for him in *The Wings of the Dove*. The Ververs are far richer even than Milly Theale; and if she was a pretended princess, Maggie Verver's marriage has made her an actual one. More than that, her father is virtually a king: he is likened to Alexander 'furnished with the spoils of Darius.' The character most comparable to Adam Verver in James' earlier work is Christopher Newman, in *The American*, and that comparison is instructive for James' development. The first names of both men call attention to the quality that James was most concerned to endow them with: both are discoverers of new worlds, just as, in turn, Prince Amerigo's name symbolizes how he must be a re-discoverer of America, or of what may prove even harder, of Americans. What Newman and Mr. Verver also have in common is their newness: it would hardly seem accidental that both syllables of the latter's surname suggest spring. Both too have had their moments of vision in which the mere amassing of money came to seem futile....

The odd thing is that James seems to take Mr. Verver at his own estimate. Furthermore, though he posits for him an 'acquisitive power' that amounted to 'a special genius,' James deliberately invests him also with a paradisiacal innocence. He is simplicity incarnate. In contrast with the flamboyant architectural images for the Prince, his face suggests 'a small decent room, clean-swept.' Seated at the head of his table, he is 'like a little boy shyly entertaining in virtue of some imposed rank...quite as an infant king is the representative of a dynasty.' He seems at times even more youthful than the Principino, his grandson, and his daughter treats him as she used to treat her doll.

In drawing such a character James is at the farthest remove from Balzac, whose most brilliant moral studies are those of the transforming and corrupting power which wealth exercises upon its possessor. James was always ready to confess that he did not have the shadowiest notion of business; but by picking a character like Adam Verver he obligated himself to some knowledge of the type of men who were making the great American fortunes--if not Dreiser's knowledge in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, at least that which Edith Wharton could show in *The Custom of the Country*. Without such knowledge he laid himself wide open to the most serious charge that can be leveled against a great novelist, what Yvor Winters has instanced, in the case of *The Spoils of Poynton*, as the split between manners and morals, the lack of congruity between the environment which would have produced a character and the traits which the author has imputed to him. Mr. Verver's moral tone is far more like that of a benevolent Swedenborgian than it is like that of either John D. Rockefeller or Jay Gould....

Through [Maggie], as through Milly Theale, he wanted to give his last quintessential expression to a quality which had long haunted him, not the intense yearning for life, but another phase of the American character as he had known it, its baffled and baffling innocence in contrast with the experience of Europeans.... When Mrs. Assingham goes to the length of saying that Maggie 'wasn't born to know evil, she must never know it,' we are back in the world of Hawthorne, of Hilda and her doves in *The Marble Faun*.... James intended Maggie's 'goodness' which Colonel Assingham finds 'awfully quaint,' to have its own initiation into evil. But quaint or not, James believed in the moral fineness and sweetness of the old-time America, and believed, too, that even if Mr. Verver was a billionaire, he could still be colored by those qualities. From the point of view of Charlotte's sophistication, the continued intimacy between Maggie and her father is an astonishing 'make-believe'...

James made the Prince's adultery less reprehensible by having him break with his past in all honesty, only to find it catch up with him unexpectedly through Maggie's eagerness to have her father marry Charlotte.... He then went on to contrast the American girl with the American man...the growing cleavage between the two: the one 'with her comparative leisure, culture, grace, social instincts, artistic ambitions';

the other 'immersed in the ferocity of business with no time for any but the most sordid interests, purely commercial, professional, democratic and political'.... James's conclusion about the relation between the sexes was... 'This divorce is rapidly becoming a gulf--an abyss of inequality, the like of which has never before been seen under the sun'....

James regards this intimacy between father and daughter as 'perfectly natural,' exceptionally close, to be sure, and naively innocent, but without a trace of the pathological fixation that our novelists would now see in it. James occupies a curious borderline between the older psychologists like Hawthorne or George Eliot, whose concerns were primarily religious and ethical, and the post-Freudians....What it comes down to, again and again, is that James' characters tend to live, as has often been objected, merely off the tops of their minds. This is what amused a representative modern psychologist like Gide to conclude that James 'in himself is not interesting; he is only intelligent.' And what bothers Gide most in James' characters is the excessive functioning of their analytical powers, whereas 'all the weight of the flesh is absent, and all the shaggy, tangled undergrowth, all the wild darkness'....

Fanny is the champion player of that favorite Jamesian game of scrutinizing the motives of her friends. She has all the leisure necessary to develop her skill. Indeed, she says, at the time of the Prince's marriage, that she will give her life 'for the next year or two, if necessary' to finding a husband for Charlotte. Many readers have objected to her relentless over interpretation of the least detail as being typical of what is worst in James. But a point generally overlooked is that James has provided her with a husband who is himself the staunchest anti-Jacobite on record....The cynical Colonel is certainly not the author's spokesman, but he is a valuable facet of humor amid the too frequent solemnities of James' later style. What, however, should be just as clear is that Fanny's words are not to be treated as gospel either. She is perfectly willing to lie, and her sharp but barren lucidity is sufficient token that in James' scale of values there is a higher morality than that of 'high intelligence.'

What that morality consists in, James means to express through the final basis on which Maggie and the Prince are re-united. He views Amerigo sympathetically throughout.... The Prince is the extreme case of the man who is expected to be rather than to do, a shining exhibit of conspicuous waste. Colonel Assingham is right in asserting that the reason why Amerigo is tempted into his affair with Charlotte is that he has nothing whatever to occupy him. But the emptiness of his existence is even greater than James was aware. In concentrating so excessively on the personal relations of his quadrangle, he imagined for the Prince no further role than that of arranging his rare books and balloting once at his club. His height of 'sacrifice' is giving up on one occasion the opportunity of dressing for dinner. Despite the evidence of such details, James was not satirizing either the Prince or the Ververs. For he was capable of finding enough positive content in his heroine's drama to absorb him wholly, and to let him assert, just as he was finishing the book, that it was the best he had 'ever done.' It's dynamics are provided entirely by Maggie, who combines Milly Theale's capacity for devotion with Kate Croy's strength of will. James's values of the heart, in contrast to those of the mere intelligence, are realized in her to the full....

'I can bear anything... For love'.... James means to convey thus the rare inclusiveness of her generosity; but the reader's mind is likely to be crossed also by a less pleasant aspect, by something slightly sickening in this wide-open declaration of being in love with love, without discrimination between kinds.... The great scene...is that in the fifth book, wherein Maggie perceives all the implications of what she is trying to salvage. The frame is provided by a great lighted window of the card-room in which the others are playing bridge, while Maggie paces up and down the terrace, looking in at them. Such a projection enables James to condense in a single visual image all the essential aspects of his drama.... Breathless suspense is created by her sudden awareness that she might smash this harmony like the stroke of doom.... She knows the horror for the first time, 'the horror of finding evil seated all at its ease, where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously *behind*, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness.'

If Maggie is finally to have the golden bowl 'as it was to have been,' the decorum of appearances must be kept. She must defeat Charlotte without disturbing the peace, especially that of her father. But the scenes between Maggie and Charlotte are as charged with the energy of the unspoken as any that James ever wrote. As Maggie watches Charlotte leave the card-table, she has the sensation that a caged beast has

escaped and is coming after her. But in the final conflict between them, the aggressiveness is all Maggie's. James makes her American self-reliance the equivalent of a religion... She has no need of the Church... The Ververs are not faced with defeat or renunciation, but with the consequences of complete triumph....[James] was aware of the danger of making Maggie overweening in her victory; and so she allows Charlotte to preserve her pride by having the last word, and by making it appear as though she herself had chosen to take Mr. Verver back to America. In addition, Maggie feels the pathos in Charlotte's situation. In one extraordinary passage when Charlotte is showing some visitors the art-treasures of the house she becomes a tortured lecturer on herself as she recites her lesson... Unlike the Ververs, Charlotte, who has been brought up in Europe, is 'of a corrupt generation'....

James is clearly proud of Mr. Verver's share in the success.... Mr. Verver is happy to win back his rightful possession of his wife, and to take her along with his other museum-pieces as a benefaction to American City. His participation in the final action is symbolized by...an invisible silken halter or lasso around Charlotte's neck, to every twitch of which she must respond. This image is repeated on three occasions, and what James seems to want to keep uppermost through it is the unobtrusive smoothness of his 'dear man's' dealings. But James' neglect of the cruelty in such a cord, silken though it be, is nothing short of obscene.

James' treatment of Maggie, however, unlike his treatment of her father, is not incoherent. She has had her initiation into evil. She has won not only the Prince's respect for her forbearance, but also his deep love. As a result of what she has passed through, she can meet him now on the level of his mature wisdom... Through the very balanced manipulation of his denouement, James has shown the limitation with which Mark Ambient, one of his author-narrators, charged himself. He has 'arranged things too much...smoothed them down and rounded them off and tucked them in--done everything to them that life doesn't do.' In consequence, we can hardly escape feeling that Maggie, once more like Hilda, both has her cake and eats it too. She seems to get an unnatural knowledge of evil since she keeps her innocence intact.

Or perhaps the unsatisfactory nature of the positive values in this novel may be better described through the contrast between victory and defeat. In both *The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove* we are moved most deeply by the loss and suffering. But there is an intrusion of complacency when Maggie, imaged repeatedly as a dancing girl, is said to be having 'the time of her life' in her sustained act. One reason why James was less convincing in imagining success was that he was unable to conceive it in any heroic form. In this he was a sensitive register of a time when American success was so crassly materialistic that, as we have noted, nearly all the enduring writers from that time voiced their opposition. But here, in his detachment, James was trying to invest his triumphant Americans with qualities they could hardly possess.

Or we may put it technically, that he did not find the 'objective correlative' for his theme. In every case we have seen that James' values went deep into his own past, even when he translated them into so different a milieu as Milly Theale's was from Minny Temple's. But when such innocent affection, such close paternal and filial relationships as characterized the James family, are projected into a realm so unlike the one into which James had been born, we have reached the breaking point of credibility. Love is not enough to redeem a world like Maggie Verver's, as we can tell by a single glance ahead at the inevitably futile existence that any such Prince and Princess must continue to lead. A contrast with *The Scarlet Letter* recalls that the adultery there brought out a festering growth of hypocrisy and pride and vengefulness through which Hester Prynne has to struggle alone towards her redemption. And even if Hawthorne's narrative, like James', concentrated upon the personal relations of a very few characters, Hawthorne gave, through the depth of his moral perception, a sense of the larger society of which his characters were part. The inadequacy of *The Golden Bowl* in this respect makes it finally a decadent book, in the strict sense in which decadence was defined by Orage, as 'the substitution of the part for the whole.'

James himself felt the weakness of this book.... James knew...that the separation, in the name of a self-conscious Realism, between reality and romance, is false. He insists that 'the men of largest responding imagination before the human scene,' such as Balzac, commit themselves to both modes; that it would be impossible to have a more romantic temper than Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and yet nothing less resembles a romance than the record of her adventures.' But James did not blur the distinction: 'The real

represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another... The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.'

We can tell from such a passage that, despite the conventional classification, James was very little of a Realist. He held the test for the romance to be that whereas it deals with 'experience liberated,' with experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it... But, whereas it now appears that *The Wings of the Dove* is his superlative example--perhaps the superlative example in our literature--of what can be liberated 'through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge' of thought and desire, *The Golden Bowl* forces upon our attention too many flagrant lapses in the way things happen both in the personal and in the wider social sphere. With all its magnificence, it is almost as hollow of real life as the chateaux that had risen along Fifth Avenue and that had also crowded out the old Newport world that James remembered."

F. O. Matthiessen  
*Henry James: The Major Phase*  
(Oxford 1953) 81-104

"Some writers have made *The Golden Bowl* a Christian novel, in the sense that Eliot's poem is a Christian poem, and other writers have made it Swedenborgian. I would suppose that James's experience of the Swedenborgian father dictated nothing in his novel at all, and I do not suppose that his novel--this or any other by him--was any more Christian than he could help... In fact the novel is very much of the daily world; it deals with money and sex and marriage, like Balzac and Stendhal, but without their sense of career and without their issue in overt violence as a means of solution or termination. In James there is at the highest possible pitch the violence than does not come out, which is perhaps why the ends of his novels involve a surrender, a giving-up, a renunciation, and seem so ambiguous an arrest in the lives of their protagonists....

The impecunious Italian prince Amerigo, with missing steps in the staircase of his morals, marries Maggie Verver, the daughter of an American millionaire, with morals that shoot to the sky, but maintains his liaison with their common friend, Charlotte Stant. By an arrangement which Maggie thinks she makes, Charlotte is married to her father, the millionaire *proprio*, Adam Verver. Thus Amerigo's mistress becomes his mother-in-law. James makes sure that we know too much, so much that what we ignore--what everybody must ignore--becomes the most active part of our perception... He provides us with a pair of speculatively infatuated gossips, Colonel and Fanny Assingham; they discuss the arrangements between the other two pairs with the obscene delicacy of a traveling American Ladies' club in the front row of the *Folies Bergeres*... Their view of things makes the accompaniment for the burden of the story: the history of Maggie's discovery of the relation between her husband and her step-mother and the drama of what she did about it.... She makes everybody--Amerigo, Charlotte, her father, herself--do the wrong things for the right reasons.... What Maggie did...was done in the name of love....

It is in the evening, the Colonel is writing letters, and Maggie watches the other four playing bridge.... I suggest that the scene...(the second chapter of the fifth Book) explains the whole novel. What Maggie recognizes is that she can destroy them in a single sentence, and that every relation rests on her; instead she goes outside and paces the terrace, looking at their safety through the tall windows. There she completes her recognition: that she cannot and will not give them up, but must master them by her goodness, by love, but by a goodness and love which would nevertheless act as a retribution. I repeat, the scene comments on the whole novel and draws into it lines of force from everything that is meant by the cracked golden bowl and everything that is suggested by the pagoda image in the opening chapter of the fourth Book. It is the scene on the terrace that converts both the symbolic actions of the bowl and the image of the pagoda and the actions of love and marriage into actions of the Psyche....

So it is with Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*. Maggie goes further than Strether or Milly, but it is hardly more than one forced step further, so to speak.... She gives a fresh and novel instance of wanting to eat her cake and have it too.... She destroys all the values between the two pairs...and destroys...all that could make life tolerable and desirable between her husband and herself. There is no beauty in her daily



life; so, like Iago, she removes it from possibility--so far as they believe her--from the lives of her father, from Charlotte, and from her husband....

Think of Prince Amerigo, not of the Princess Maggie, as the hero of the tragedy. It is his life, not Maggie's, that seen in perspective is tragic and shows a tragic fault, that can be explained but not justified... He did not know that his Roman venality would become a destructive monster in the too-candid light of Maggie's American conscience.... The first half of the novel belongs to the Prince so that we see his preparations intimately, but in the second half we have Maggie's view of things, and our knowledge of the Prince is restricted by it. By the author's choice we are never engaged in the Prince's action, and feel of it only its pressing mass--sometimes breaking out in ambiguities and evasions which are crushing gestures."

R. P. Blackmur  
Introduction  
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Michael Hollister (2015)