

FILM

The Bostonians (1886)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

adaptation by Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1984)

ANALYSIS

Henry James tried to write with such ironic detachment that a reader would not be able to determine his nationality. As a Realist, he tried above all to convey the truth. In *The Bostonians* he depicted what he saw as the decadence of New England culture in the late 19th century, epitomized by Boston in about 1875. Many men from the region had been killed in the Civil War, many more had left to go out West. The lack of eligible men resulted in single women creating a culture of their own, a subject of local colorists such as Mary Wilkins Freeman. At the beach resort in the movie, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population is female. James brings together two extremes of decadence, Basil Ransom of the South, a southern aristocrat 300 years behind the times, and Olive Chancellor of the North, the lesbian radical Feminist 100 years ahead of her time. They contend for Verena Tarrant the young idealist who represents young women in general choosing one side or the other. Lesbianism was not discussed openly in the Victorian culture of that time and genteel Bostonians were defensive and mightily offended by *The Bostonians*, especially by its satirical tone. The novel was a commercial flop and James never set another novel in America.

This is probably the only adaptation of *The Bostonians* that will ever be made. The best of Henry James cannot be filmed—his elegant prose style, tone, and wit. Most significantly, this novel is *very* politically incorrect. Feminists hate it. Fortunately, the screenwriter Ruth Praver Jhabvala loves it. She is one of the best adapters of literary classics, she is mostly faithful to James and her changes increase the pertinence of his novel today, with parallels to our present cultural decadence. The production is as good as the best British adaptations of literary classics, with authentic period settings, costuming and so on. All the acting is good. Vanessa Redgrave dominates the film with her pathos, her stark red face and her feverish eyes always glistening with tears in political ecstasy, terror, grief, or fanaticism. Christopher Reeve is known for his role as Superman. As Basil he is almost a head taller than everyone else in every scene. He is handsome, chivalrous, graceful, and dashing with a mustache, long wavy hair and a soft southern accent. On a physical basis alone, Olive has no chance. Basil's ridiculous outdated political opinions do not matter in the plot, they only contribute to the comedy and the theme of polarization.

The film opens with parchment colored old maps of Boston in the background, establishing the place, the historical context, and the time as 1875. The hands and feet of a man are shown playing "America the Beautiful" on a heavy organ—except for Basil, men are marginal in the movie as in Boston. This musical introduction is ironic. The rendition of "America" becomes discordant and no longer so beautiful, leading directly into a scene of Bostonians crowding a room to hear a speech on women's rights by Verena Tarrant, the inspired advocate. *Tarrant* conflates tar, rant, tirade, torrent. James conveys irony with his words, Jhabvala conveys it visually: (1) Verena is too young and too obviously innocent to know much about anything, especially men--she looks like a starry-eyed doll; (2) she claims that women are oppressed, yet the room is full of expensively dressed women who are clearly not oppressed in a material sense, they are privileged; (3) like some Feminists today, Verena claims that women are like "slaves," but there are few men around in part because so many died in the Civil War that freed the truly oppressed; (4) Verena speaking for all women is dividing and polarizing while claiming to improve relations between the sexes; (5) Verena is introduced by her father the spiritualist as having supernatural power and she plays the role of a new messiah and savior replacing Jesus Christ, embodying "the light." However, her dedication is to the "sacred cause" of women only—all men can go to hell.

(6) Dr. Prance the woman doctor contradicts the propaganda that women are absolutely excluded from the professions and she does not believe in the Feminist movement: “I know others like her” [Olive] “I’ve heard it all before”; (7) with his chivalric southern manners the conservative Basil gets along beautifully with all the women in the movie except Olive, including the ardent Feminists, and he is more sensitive to women than any of the northern men, even Verena’s “spiritualist” father, nearly all of whom are fakes out to make money off of Verena’s speeches; (8) in the movie Dr. Prance is played by a very sympathetic actress who is unusually short—looking half as tall as Basil—making the point that as a woman she got ahead despite a greater handicap than her gender; (9) the most liberated and independent woman in the movie, Dr. Prance, agrees with Basil’s condescending opinion of the women’s rights movement: “There is room for improvement in both sexes.” They become such pals they go out fishing together. In the novel, James is satirical rather than sympathetic and depicts Dr. Prance as without natural feelings, an indication of what some women become when they imitate men. In the movie, though she says, “I don’t cultivate the sentimental side,” she is warmhearted, outgoing and friendly—like a nice guy.

Verena is easily influenced, like a current undergraduate taking a women’s studies course. The actress playing her has long dark red ringlets that flop about like her feelings. Her gestures when lecturing are contrived rather than spontaneous, like those illustrated in the schoolbook *McGuffey’s Reader* of that day. Much of her speech consists of passages lifted from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller. However, Fuller was a transcendental feminist who believed in equality, not matriarchy. (10) The contradiction between what Verena and Olive advocate and what Fuller advocated is another irony. Like the Feminist professors of the late 20th century, Verena and Olive misrepresent Fuller. Verena also uses the metaphor of being in a “glass box,” which points ahead to the “bell jar” of Sylvia Plath.

Most of the movie dramatizes the lesbian relationship of Verena and Olive, with much embracing and some kissing but nothing gross. During the Victorian period, such relationships often went no farther. Mrs. Luna thinks Olive is “silly” and she correctly predicts early on that Verena will eventually disappoint Olive. There is little suspense about this. Basil is consistently a gentleman, Olive is rude. She turns away from him and will not even shake his hand. She is more controlling of Verena than Basil Ransom is ever likely to be. As a Feminist leader Olive is the successor to Miss Birdseye, who was modeled on the real life radical Elizabeth Peabody. Late in the movie, Olive is shown writing a letter to Miss Peabody. James makes Miss Birdseye a comic figure while Jhabvala makes her a kindly sweet old lady representing the best intentions of the original feminist movement. In the movie Miss Birdseye dies on the Fourth of July and will be greatly missed. Now we are stuck with Olives. When Miss Birdseye is kissed by Verena as the protégé of Olive, she exclaims, “How cold your lips are.” Olive Chancellor is a cold leftist ideologue when she declares, “The individual does not count.”

As Basil persists in his aggressive courtship, the norm of James is Nature: “It’s more natural to give yourself to a man rather than to a movement or to an old maid.” Verena responds, “If you don’t want me to perform in the Music Hall, you’re going to have to kidnap me.” So he does. Olive seems to have been merely holding Verena for Ransom, and he will pay later in marriage. The movie differs significantly from the novel at the end. Verena cooperates in her kidnapping and does not weep. In the novel she weeps and James’s last line reads: “It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed.” The *union* is a metaphor evoking the recent Civil War between North and South, which concluded with an unhappy union. And though Basil has prevailed, the metaphor of the union reminds us that in the end, the North won the war. Today, for example, the entire American education system is governed in effect by Olive the Chancellor. At the end of the novel Olive is left paralyzed in humiliation and defeat, unable to face the disappointed crowd, whereas in the movie, she bravely comes out and speaks for herself and is applauded.

Michael Hollister (2015)