

Literary Arts Series Adds Henry James

by John F. Dunn

The 31st stamp in the Literary Arts series honors Henry James (1843–1916). The words “THREE OUNCE” on this stamp indicate its usage value. Like a Forever stamp, it will always be valid for the rate printed on it.

This article is taken from a background story provided by the U.S. Postal Service.

Henry James was born in New York City on April 15, 1843. His four siblings included William James, who would become one of the most influential American psychologists and philosophers, and Alice James, who would be recognized posthumously as a perceptive diarist. Their father was a wealthy philosopher and mystic who insisted that his children be intellectually stimulated. He took the entire family to Europe for three years in 1855, when James was 12, and returned with them for a second yearlong trip from 1859 to 1860, an unconventional education that immersed them in galleries, museums, and theaters.

In 1861, James began to study law at Harvard, but he soon committed himself to a literary life. His first known published work, a theater review, appeared in a Boston newspaper in 1863, followed by his first short story in a monthly magazine in 1864. He was soon writing for such prominent national journals as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Nation*.

James settled permanently in London in 1876. By this point, he had begun to explore one of his major preoccupations, which came to be known as “the international theme”: the drama that results, both comic and tragic, when Americans encounter Europe—or, sometimes, when Europeans travel or live in America. His first major novel, *The American*, dramatized the experiences of an American businessman in Paris, whose ignorance and energy clash with the murky complexity of European aristocracy.

His 1878 story, *Daisy Miller*, is a study of the problems that occur when people confuse manners with morals. It tells the story of an American girl who rebels against local customs while traveling in Europe, with fatal consequences. By contrasting innocent American willfulness with the judgments of Europeans and American expatriates, James highlights the complex ways Americans and Europeans misunderstand each other. A Trans-atlantic sensation, *Daisy Miller* was controversial among Americans, some of whom questioned James’ patriotism and objected to the book for its portrayal of young American women.

As his career progressed, James explored a wide array of themes and subject matter. He was particularly interested in the relationships between fathers and daughters, and his 1880 novel *Washington Square*, remains a memorable account of a father and a daughter locked in an irresolvable battle of wills. James also used fiction to portray the women’s movement in the United States in *The Bostonians* and, in an unusual departure, to dramatize anarchist terrorism in working-class London in *The Princess Casamassima*.

During the 1890s, James explored the literary potential of ghost stories, portraying the supernatural with eerie, sinister subtlety. *The Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898, is the most memorable of his several supernatural tales. The novella is narrated by a governess who investigates two ghostly figures that seem particularly interested in the children in her care. Masterfully imbued with a sense of dread as well



as a deliberate ambiguity that has challenged and unnerved readers for more than a century, *The Turn of the Screw* still prompts debate about the nature of the unnamed evil the ghosts represent and the reliability of the narrator herself.

In the final phase of his career, James returned to the international theme, crafting several novels that showcase his writing and his intellect at their most mature—and their most demanding. Like his understanding of the cultural interplay between Americans and Europeans, the prose in these novels is often dauntingly complex, reflecting James’ attempt to observe human behavior closely and convey his characters’ inner lives in minute detail. In his 1903 masterpiece, *The Ambassadors*, a middle-aged American man travels to Europe at the behest of his fiancée, presumably to rescue her son from a woman she believes must be bad for him. After exploring a dizzying social world that challenges and changes him, the novel’s protagonist finds himself affirming the importance of living as fully as possible.

James’s last major novel, *The Golden Bowl*, focuses on a close-knit American father and daughter in Europe who both marry at the same time without knowing that their spouses have been lovers—and may still be.

All in all, James’s literary output was prodigious: 20 complete novels, more than 100 shorter pieces of fiction, several plays, and hundreds of shorter works and articles, including travel observations, literary criticism, and theater reviews.

His 1884 essay *The Art of Fiction* remains a particularly memorable touchstone in literary criticism that illuminates his own sense of purpose. In it, James insists that being faithful to reality is vital, and that writers and artists should work to understand life. He further argues that the novel is a legitimate art form to be judged by the standards the writer establishes. Protesting censorship and prudishness, he defends the right of women to write about serious subjects and insists that novelists should not feel restricted either in their choice of subject matter or in their approach to it; they should be judged only by the execution.

Frustrated by American neutrality as World War I raged, James expressed his support for England in July 1915 by becoming a British subject. In December 1915, he suffered a debilitating stroke. One month later, he received the Order of Merit from the King of England; it was delivered to him at his bedside. He died in London on February 28, 1916, shortly before his 73rd birthday.

James’ eye for human nature has stood the test of time; interest in his work surged in the 1930s and continues to this day. His novels and stories inspired numerous stage and radio adaptations, followed more recently by major television versions and Hollywood films.

To the great benefit of generations of writers and readers, he also inspired the adjective “Jamesian”—a word that sometimes refers to the work of his brother, psychologist and philosopher William James, but just as often describes the virtues of Henry James’s writing: the intricacy and delicacy of his language, the depth of his insights into human behavior, and his commitment to showing things as they are, in all their challenging complexity.