

## A VAGUE SWEETNESS Accessory as the Intersection of Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Ambassadors*

Accessories are the dwellings of paradox. True, a handbag or a pair of pink shoes may seem terribly trivial, but any such ornament contains a considerable and complex ontological puzzle. Since it is common to walk around in wardrobes unadorned by accessories, it would appear that an accessory is an inessential extra added to an already complete ensemble. It is, however, just as common to hear one say that a silk tie or a pair of pearl earrings simply *makes* an outfit. This assertion suggests that an accessory is necessary in the production of a whole outfit. Ever a fan of the paradoxical, Henry James seizes upon this seemingly contradictory in his novel *The Ambassadors*. In the novel, James uses interpretation of the complex nature of the accessory as a



Diana Dewi (Collaboration with Jennifer Kittleson), *Blind Construction: Mixed Media*, buckrum, copper wire spray paint, fabric paint, novelty fabric, and chain, Spring 2004

point of contention illustrating the differences in European and American ethics. Using Paris as a representation of European sentiment and the small town of Woollett, Massachusetts as the indicator of American values, James outlines each nation's governing ethic. While the Woollett ethic of production necessitates a perception of the acces-

sory as a nonessential addition to an already completed whole, the Parisian ethic of enjoyment is interdependent with a notion of the accessory as an essential element in an on-going process of completion.

To understand this intersection of value structures and accessories, it is necessary to examine the guiding ethic of each of the societies examined. Woollett, to begin with, is governed by an ethic of efficient production. That is, society in the small town values economy and utility above all else and measures worth of an object on the basis of its practical use. James demonstrates this value system through an examination of the Newsome family who represent their society's notion of success. The Newsome family business enacts the Woollett assembly-line sensibility

quite literally: it is a structure whose sole purpose is to manufacture utilitarian products, and its worth is determined by its efficiency, as measured by financial profits. Furthermore, the driving force behind the plot's trajectory is Mrs. Newsome's desire to retrieve Chad from his non-productive life abroad and anchor him in the operation of

the family business. The matriarch's valuing of a lifestyle of industry above all else demonstrates her society's mindset that measures worth in terms of productivity.

The Woollett ethic of efficient production is made all the more perceptible when juxtaposed with the contrasting system of values that governs Parisian life. In Paris, society is organized around what one might call an ethic of enjoyment—the belief that pleasure (intellectual, physical, emotional, etc.) is of the utmost importance. Unlike the Newsomes of Woollett, whose identities are nearly inseparable from their industry, James's Parisian characters rarely if ever so much as mention vocations or indeed any sort of labor executed for a practical purpose. Instead, Parisians elect to engage in activities and experiences that are, in a practical sense, useless but that provide a great deal of pleasure. The great Parisian past-times of window shopping and smoking cigarettes, for example, produce no concrete object, and would doubtlessly be admonished in Woollett as disgracefully frivolous.

At the same time that James delineates the ethics that govern society in Paris and Woollett, he documents the way in which these ethics contribute to social perceptions of the accessory. Turning again to Woollett, an analysis of the town's production ethic reveals that there, an accessory can be nothing more than an inessential, fussy detail. Inherent in a value system based on the efficient production of objects is the assumption that an object can attain a state of completeness. Furthermore, in order to minimize the resources expended in the production process and thus maximize efficiency, an object is considered complete as soon as it fits the most basic requirements of existence, in the same way that a product is yanked from an assembly line as soon as it can realize its market value. Therefore, in the town's industrialized philosophical paradigm, production stops and completion is achieved when an object attains functionality. In such a system, the accessory—an element added to an independently functioning body—is rendered inessential, for it adds extravagantly to an already completed unit. Unable to contribute anything that would affect the essential nature of the object to which it is joined, an accessory is valued in Woollett only if they can serve a purpose independent of its context.

In Paris, however, the governing ethic of enjoyment is interdependent with a notion of the accessory as not only valuable but essential. As noted above, the Parisian ethic places value not on efficient production of objects but on the quality of pleasure an object or experience offers. Mere function cannot produce this sense of quality. Rather, something must be added to a base

functionality to render an object not just coherent but also enjoyable. Thus the Paris sensibility recognizes that an object can be complete as a thing of function and at the same time incomplete as a thing of interest. In this system, accessories—those elements that are added to already functional objects—are necessary for the completion of a certain type of whole, a whole unimaginable under Woollett's value system.

In a brief but finely-wrought scene, James gives readers an enactment of both the ethical dynamic of each city and its vision of the accessory. The scene is a description of the attire that Mrs. Newsome and Maria Gostrey wear to the opera in their respective cities. Mrs. Newsome's outfit exemplifies the Woollett ethic of efficient production. The outfit has a specific, practical function: to communicate its wearer's wealth and refinement. This is demonstrated in Strether's account of Mrs. Newsome's dress. It was "a black silk dress—very handsome, he knew that it was 'handsome'" (43). This statement includes two separate ideas: Strether's impulsive vision, and a more conscious revision in which he places *handsome* in quotation marks. By adding the marks, Strether announces that he was not the originator of the term he applied. That is, he realizes that his impression of the dress is not that it appealed to his sense of handsomeness, but that it conformed to some pre-constructed category that those around him have labeled "handsome." Hence, Mrs. Newsome's opera costume fulfills its function in projecting an image that her society will read as elegant affluence. Once her outfit attained its designed functionality, however, Mrs. Newsome considered the production process complete. This is apparent from the fact that aside from its purpose as a status symbol, the outfit has nothing to offer. The dress's black color lends it a sense of formal coldness and void. Not "cut down" (42), its style refrains from offering an impression of the sensuality of the body it cloaks. Finally, the hyper-conventional nature of a black silk dress—little short of a uniform for high society women—disallows the garment to stimulate any original impression. Also, ceding her choice of outfit to the doctrine of social norms, Mrs. Newsome demonstrates utter disregard for any aspect of the ensemble apart from its practical function as social statement.

To the product of her outfit, the lady adds an accessory, a *ruche*, but engages it not as an essential piece of the ensemble, but as a disconnected entity independently serving a purpose. The lady's frill seems to bear no relation to the rest of her outfit, as its description is completely distinct from that of her dress. In addition, Mrs. Newsome's devaluing of accessories is so apparent

that Strether cannot imagine that she would select the ruche or any other accessory so that it would “carry on and complicate... his vision [of her]” (42). Treated as incapable of adding significant meaning to the ensemble, the ruche becomes an isolated piece of finery, serving the purpose of displaying luxury independent of the rest of the outfit.

Mrs. Newsome’s Parisian counterpart in this scene is Maria Gostrey, whose opera attire epitomizes her city’s ethic of enjoyment and the necessity it assigns to accessories. Maria’s outfit (her object of production) is intended to stimulate interest and pleasure. The red color of her ribbon, which James stresses by mentioning no less than three times (42), is bright and warm, giving her ensemble a spark of vibrant visual appeal. In addition, the band is made of velvet (James reminds readers four times on 42), a material that suggests the sensual pleasure of touch. Finally, Maria’s dress is “cut down” (42) as Mrs. Newsome’s is not to reveal part of her shoulders and chest, a fashion that invites observers to take pleasure in the sexually appealing form of her body.

As mentioned, Maria adds to her outfit a red velvet ribbon with an antique jewel pendant, regarding the accessory as an essential component of an outfit designed to provide enjoyment. The way in which her necklace “added, in appearance, to the value of every other item—to that of her smile and of the way she carried her head, to that of her complexion, her lips, her teeth, her eyes, her hair” (42) demonstrates a sophisticated consideration of band’s relation to its context, as well as an appreciation for it as an element with something significant to offer. Furthermore, the antique character of the necklace renders it unique, outside the realm of modern fashions. This denotes that unlike Mrs. Newsome, Maria

did not abandon choice to demands of the social standard, but consciously selected her accessory. Again, this illustrates the fact that what is in Woollett perception an inessential “trinket” (42) is, in Parisian eyes, the central element, without which the whole would be lacking.

In this complex scene, James recognizes the accessory as a site where ethic blends into aesthetic, where the valuing of efficient production mingles inseparably with the insipid elegance of Mrs. Newsome’s ruche. As a practitioner of aesthetic, specifically an “artist of fiction,” James has great interest invested in this intersection where one can observe the ways in which art and social values

come to bear on each other. By demonstrating how such an interrelation operates, James can convince readers the importance of (his) art. In his essay “The Art of Fiction,” James asserts that art is “essentially selection” (in Wegelin & Wonham, 388) and can be thought of as theory that results in “delightful spectacle” (in Wegelin & Wonham, 376). James’s analysis of the perception of accessories demonstrates that these facets of art are exactly those elements that are valued under the Parisian ethic and that are viewed as worthless in the ethic of Woollett. Thus, James suggests to readers that an embrace of (his notion of) art corresponds to a Parisian world of enjoyment and interest, while a denial of art is indivisible from Woollett’s



Samantha Rose Gray, *Necklace*, sterling silver wire, 2004

realm of industrial function and efficiency. In this pairing, James encourages readers to evaluate the two responses to art/aesthetic. If we regard Paris highly, as we likely will, we must also recognize the value and importance of his art. However, if we choose Woollett, the author reminds us, there will be “no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness” (42), and no Jamesian art. ❖

All citations refer to:  
James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. New York, Norton Press: 1994 .