

Author Biography

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The “Wonderful Episodist”: Henry James and Serialization

by Rebecca Gates

Abstract

*In this essay, I argue that although the nineteenth-century writer Henry James disliked the popular format of serial publication, it actually served an unacknowledged purpose in his works: breaking up his novels into manageable chunks. This allowed readers a greater appreciation of his fresh stylistic ability and intricate descriptions. I first introduce the current scholarship on Henry James as well as serialization. Then, I provide context regarding this publication format and biographical details of the writer Henry James, and look at his literary importance. Next, I focus on one specific work called *The American*, evaluating the author’s motivations and viewpoint during the publication process. Finally, I turn to reviews of the novel in newspapers and magazines to ascertain the public reaction to and impression of this work specifically, as well as of his style in general.*

Lost in a reverie of nostalgia, Henry James recalled the sights and sounds he took in while overlooking the Rue de Luxembourg, a popular thoroughfare in Paris at the time. He recollected how difficult it was to tear his eyes away from the window view of the bustling yet harmonious streets below in order to compose his third novel: *The American*. As James continued to reflect on this experience in the preface to the New York Edition of this work, he recounted how the story of this novel’s composition did not remain stationary. James actually wrote the narrative “from month to month and from place to place.”¹ He bounced around France, writing in Etretat on the Normandy coast, the southern town of Bayonne, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and then Paris once again. The author did not disclose if he finished the novel in Paris or in London later on, declaring, “I strenuously felt the dishonor

1 Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. 2, *The American*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), x.

of piecemeal composition.”² This Jamesian dislike of fragmented writing carried over into his ideas on how a reader should engage with a story as well. In all things concerning novels, he valued the wholeness of the experience, trying to prevent “rather rude jolts” out of a story for himself and his readers.³

Although James was intent on creating a complete experience in his novels, the popular publication format at the time called serialization operated actively against James’s wish for an immersive experience in his novels. In his letters and writing, James demonstrated distaste for the popular trend of serialized novels—the publication of a work in sections over a series of months in popular periodical magazines. But, he continued using the form in order to publish out of economic necessity. This seemingly inconsistent relationship with his primary form of publication leads to a question: what effect did serialization have on James’s works? Additionally, what do the general critical responses to his fiction reveal about the effect of serialization on his novels? Based on a comparison between James’s own writing and reviews from both American newspapers and periodicals, I argue that although James disliked the form, serialization actually served the unacknowledged purpose of breaking up his novels into manageable chunks. The American public could read his highly detailed and often slow-moving narratives at an easily-sustained pace in an episodic form. This mode allowed for a greater appreciation of his fresh stylistic ability and intricate descriptions. The publication history and critical reaction surrounding one of James’s early novels titled *The American* will serve as a specific example to illustrate this general trend.

The American was just one of many novels readers found in the burgeoning periodical magazines of the time. Serialization in the nineteenth century

2 Ibid., xii.

3 Rachel Ihara, “‘Rather Rude Jolts’: Henry James, Serial Novels, and the Art of Fiction,” *The Henry James Review* 31, no. 2 (2010): 188-206. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

was an incredibly widespread method of publication for authors. Magazines such as *Harper's Monthly*, *The Galaxy*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Scribner's Magazine* were at the forefront of the periodical trend.⁴ The public saw this group as the “quality” magazines, where the best of emerging American literature from various genres and styles would appear.⁵ Among the poems, essays, and reviews, publishers would typically include a couple of chapters of a novel within their magazines. This common practice of publishing full-length novels in monthly installments gained traction in America partially as a result of popular serial writers across the Atlantic. Charles Dickens was arguably the first to launch this method with his novel *The Pickwick Papers*, published between 1836 and 1837.⁶ Before periodicals came to the states, the primary literary resource for American readers was British and other European magazines. The growth of American periodicals seems to correspond with a flourishing movement of authors. With both seasoned novelists and fresh writers, the slow release of a novel allowed American readers to return to their favorite stories month after month. Some of America's most beloved novelists who wrote between 1850 and 1900, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, first published their masterworks in sections in periodicals.⁷

It is no wonder then, that for American readers and writers of the middle to late nineteenth century, the monthly periodical magazine was at the pinnacle of literary interest. Columns in *The New York Times* devoted solely to these magazines demonstrated a public devotion to the format. The “New Publications” or “Current Literature” sections discussed each magazine in turn, weighing its merits and interest in comparison with the others.⁸ One assessment of *The Atlantic Monthly* in a “New Publications” column declared,

4 “Making of America,” *Cornell University Library*.

5 Lund, *America's Continuing Story*, 47.

6 Lund, *America's Continuing Story*, 16.

7 *Ibid.*, 14.

8 New Publications, *New York Times*, November 10, 1878, 10, accessed April 26, 2017.

“If the other magazines may be said to have caught the Atlantic napping... on the first of the year, the Atlantic has made a push for its old supremacy in the February number.”⁹ With impressive rosters of contributors, each periodical tried to keep the public’s attention each month. The magazine publishers sought to bring the best of the best to America’s reading public. A *New York Times* article commented, “It might almost be safely said that there is now no distinguished man who can write who does not write for the magazines.” The article also attested that the periodicals allowed writers to test their material on a vocal public audience. One writer called the format “the cradle, the nursery, and the training school of modern literature.”¹⁰ The staggering amount of American authors who published works in these periodicals clearly demonstrates the importance this mode of publication had on the literary atmosphere during the late nineteenth century.¹¹

Nineteenth-century American novels are inextricably tied with the publication method of serialization; however, most scholarship on novels published in this period leaves this piece of the puzzle missing, surprisingly. One of the few instances of a substantial overview on serialization comes in Michael Lund’s *America’s Continuing Story: An Introduction to Serial Fiction, 1850-1900*. Lund provides a compelling case on the importance of serialization. His book is divided into two sections: the first is an introduction that details all of the implications and noteworthy aspects of serialization during this time in America, and the second is a thorough catalog of works published serially from 1850 to 1900.¹² Another vital resource for the study of serialization and periodicals is Cornell University’s *Making of America* digital library.¹³ This public resource provides a wide array of electronic cop-

9 “The Atlantic,” *New York Times*, Jan 22, 1877, 3, accessed April 26, 2017.

10 “Periodical Writing,” *New York Times*, Feb 12, 1879, 7, accessed April 26, 2017.

11 Lund, *America’s Continuing Story*, 21-24.

12 Michael Lund, *America’s Continuing Story: An Introduction to Serial Fiction, 1850-1900*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

13 “Making of America”, *Cornell University Library*, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa/>.

ies of the original periodical magazines in which the novels appeared. The database lets modern readers explore the context in which some of the most iconic authors published their works, including James.

Before analyzing James's experiences with serialization, it is first necessary to survey the wide expanse of scholarship on the works and life of this writer. One piece of evidence that illustrates the breadth of Jamesian criticism is the *Henry James Review*, an academic journal focused solely on this author's body of work. In this journal, scholars analyze a variety of works by James, parsing through the literary output of this prolific author. Out of all the critical work surrounding this author, which could likely fill a whole library, one scholar stands out as an important figure: Leon Edel. He contributed greatly to the body of work surrounding James. Scholars often reference and utilize Edel's biographies and edited collections of James's letters and notebooks in a variety of articles and books. His multi-volume biography of James is thorough and useful, but for the purposes of this argument, I will be utilizing a concise pamphlet from the University of Minnesota's series on American writers for biographical information.¹⁴

Looking back at the landscape of authors in the late 1800s, most literary scholars now recognize James as an integral figure within the history of American literature. He exemplified what a Sacramento newspaper writer deemed the "New School of Fiction" that made its home in the periodicals of America during this time.¹⁵ Born and raised in America, James spent most of his adult life and writing career in Europe, eventually becoming a British citizen at the end of his life.¹⁶ Ironically however, as one review from the British standpoint put it, "Mr. Henry James, Jr., has betrayed no single purpose so clearly...as that of in some sense glorifying the Ameri-

14 Leon Edel, *University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers: Henry James* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960).

15 "The New School of Fiction," *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 18, 1882, 4, accessed May 7, 2016.

16 Edel, *Minnesota Pamphlet: Henry James*, 39.

can character.”¹⁷ His astute depictions of the relations between American and European individuals represented the larger themes of cultural difference between the old world and the new.¹⁸ Critics often praised James for his impressionistic style of writing that focuses on raising the quotidian aspects of life to epiphanic proportions. One of his most famous works, called *Daisy Miller: A Study*, is a short story that displayed the two aforementioned artistic hallmarks.¹⁹ James’s writing represented the emerging American literary voice that audiences so often found in the popular periodicals of the time.

In the specialized topic of the serialization of James’s early works, however, only a small pool of scholars touch on this subject. The two books *“Friction with the Market”: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* and *Henry James and the Mass Market* deal generally with James’s publication experiences. The authors of these two books, Michael Anesko and Marcia Ann Jacobson, attempt to demonstrate the relationship between James’s artistic side and his economically-motivated side, but mostly do not delve into specific consequences of serialization.²⁰ In his 1962 article “Henry James: Serialist Early and Late,” Manfred Mackenzie analyzes *The American*, as well as a later novel entitled *The Ambassadors*, in the context of serialization. However, his evaluation deals largely with James’s refined ability to split his novel into multiple parts over the course of his career.²¹ Rachel Ihara also

17 “The American Ideal of Character,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1879, 3, accessed April 26, 2017.

18 Edell, *Minnesota Pamphlet: Henry James*, 15.

19 *Ibid.*, 17.

20 Michael Anesko, *“Friction with the Market”: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Marcia Ann Jacobson, *Henry James and the Mass Market*, (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1986).

21 Manfred Mackenzie, “Henry James: Serialist Early and Late,” *Iowa City Philological Quarterly* 41.2. (Apr 1, 1962): 492-512, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/openview/9539faf3a0125f-965800541b705e6069/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1816494>

considers serialization in James's works in her article, "Rather Rude Jolts': Henry James, Serial Novels, and the Art of Fiction." She demonstrates what she calls a "critical oversight" of Jamesian scholarship on this topic. She attests, "It is clear that this fact of nineteenth-century publication constituted a significant part of his experience of authorship—something to work within, struggle against, and attempt to redefine."²² These two forays into analyzing James's works in terms of serialization are integral to understanding his relationship with the form. Yet, even in these articles, the authors spend little time exploring the American public's reaction to his work and what these reactions say about the form. By looking closely at the context of publication of and public reaction to *The American*, this critical oversight can be filled in to create a better understanding of how serialization affected James's writing.

The American was James's third full-length novel serialized in a periodical magazine. One of his earlier and less prominent works, James published the novel in twelve installments in *Atlantic Monthly* from June 1876 to May 1877.²³ *The American* focused on a man named Christopher Newman who, while exploring Europe for the first time, fell in love with the French beauty Claire de Cintré, and eventually got mixed up in the drama of her family.²⁴ Like Daisy Miller, the titular character from James's famous short story, Newman is a caricature of the typical American, while the Bellregarde family to which his love interest belongs represents the old world of Europe. The plot of the novel has themes of cultural division and insights into the relationship between Americans and Europeans that demonstrate characteristics of James's complexity. However, for this paper's purpose, I will utilize *The American* less for its literary value, and more for its unique publishing circumstances.

22 Ihara, "Rather Rude Jolts," 203.

23 Henry James, "The American," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (June 1876- May 1877): 651-73, 15-31, 155-70, 310-29, 461-74, 535-50, 641-57, 1-18, 161-76, 295-311, 412-26, 530-44. Accessed April 24, 2017, Making of America: Cornell University Library.

24 Ibid.

The serial publication of *The American* provides a unique case study of how the popular form of publication at the time impacted the writing career of Henry James. As with most writers, the necessity of marketability often complicated James's freedom to pursue his creative vision. Scholars often relegated James to the position of either a creative mastermind with an unhindered passion for the craft, or a working machine, churning out novel after novel for purely economic motives.²⁵ In the circumstances surrounding the composition and publication of *The American*, James's dual position of both writer and marketer of his works converged. This instance sheds light on his often begrudging but long-standing relationship with the form of serialization.

James capitalized on the economic benefit of publishing via serialized chapters, demonstrated through his experience publishing *The American*. Since the form was so popular at the time, it was the obvious method to distribute one's work to the public while simultaneously making a profit. A series of letters he sent while attempting to publish *The American* best illustrate James's economic motives. In one letter to his mother, James defended himself against her assertion that he was "living extravagantly" in Paris and promised that he would make a good sum of money by the end of the year.²⁶ This assurance comes directly before a letter James sent to William Dean Howells, a fellow author as well as editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In it, James apologized to Howells, because he had just sent the manuscript for *The American* to the editor of a rival periodical, *The Galaxy*. He explained, "It was the money question solely that had to determine me."²⁷ In the end, *The Galaxy* was not able to publish *The American* as quickly as James needed to earn his commission, so James handed over the novel to Howells for *The Atlantic* to publish.

25 Anesko, "Friction with the Market," 30.

26 Henry James, *Henry James Letters*, Ed. Leon Edel, vol 2. 1875-1883, (Cambridge: Belknap, 1975), 18-21.

27 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

These letters may seem to cast James in an impersonal light as a writer with only a desire to increase his wealth, but his reflections in the preface to the New York Edition of *The American* tell a different story. James attempted to illustrate a pure creative ambition in his early days that overshadowed the irksome trouble of this publication format. In one line, he glossed over any financial concerns when he declared that “a special Providence...watches over anxious novelists condemned to the economy of serialisation.”²⁸ For the rest of the preface, James gushed over his remembered artistic brilliance in the conception of this novel, and in the process dispelled any possible criticisms that he was only in it for the money. The economic need that pushed him toward the “villain” of serialization was an obstacle to overcome to produce his creative masterpiece.

The original serialized forms of his novels were nevertheless where his original audience first encountered and often judged his works. As stated earlier, periodicals were the primary source of literary content at the time, and the reviews of this initial publication in the case of *The American* showed an interesting mix of praise and criticism. One article published in the midst of the run of *The American* in the Atlantic monthly determined, “So far it bids fair to be the strongest novel he has yet published.”²⁹ Other articles made similar assertions, but the point of contention for the majority of reviewers was the plot of the novel. Even opinions coming from periodicals themselves contained this interesting mix of praise and criticism. Two reviewers from *The Galaxy* and *Scribner’s Monthly*, popular periodicals at the time, were generally pleased with the novel, but disappointed with its conclusion. The *Galaxy* reviewer commented, “Mr. James’s book...although somewhat disappointing at the end, will richly repay rereading,” while the Scribner’s reviewer included this seemingly paradoxical comment: “[The American] is

28 James, *Novels and Tales*, v.

29 “The Atlantic,” *New York Times*, Jan 22, 1877, accessed April 26, 2017.

so good that we regret very much that it is not better.”³⁰ Both reviewers lamented the ending of the novel when the central character Newman did not marry his love interest, but both found redeeming qualities in the novel’s realism, style, and characterization.

It was not only the reviewers in the periodicals that took issue with James’s plots: some reviewers of James’s works in *The New York Times* contested that his inability to provide a compelling plot with a satisfying ending was an impediment to crafting a worthy novel. One article observed, “Mr. James has achieved such success in the way of characterization that we are curious to know what he would accomplish if his story combined a good striking plot as well.”³¹ Another review found in *The New York Times* similarly criticized the lack of depth in the plotlines of James’s work: “They are very good books indeed, very noticeable for keen insight into character, and for refined subtilty [sic]. But refinement and subtilty are never enough alone to command wide suffrages.” The reviewer completed the picture with a metaphor for the perceived shallowness to James’s description-heavy narratives: “The mountain stream is clear, sparkling, and full of beauty, but it is the broad, deep sea that encompasses.”³² This article asserted that without a strong plotline that explored the truth of humanity and provided a compelling narrative for the reader, James’s sketch-like and detail-oriented stories would never reach recognition on the scale of successful British writers at the time. How is it then that, despite these criticisms, James reached such a high level of renown as an author?

30 Current Literature, *The Galaxy*, July 1877, 135-45, accessed April 28, 2017, Making of America: Cornell University Library; Culture and Progress, *Scribner’s Monthly*, July 1877, 406-413, accessed May 2, 2017, Making of America: Cornell University Library.

31 “The Latest Novel of Mr. Henry James, Jr.,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1880, 10, accessed April 26, 2017.

32 “American Fiction,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1879, 4, accessed April 26, 2017.

While some reviewers found fault in the overall lack of plotlines in James's work, many readers saw merit in his ability to create a compelling "sketch" through detail and characterization, which may have been a result of serialization. One reviewer remarked that James's plot points were "hardly strong enough to supply movement and snap to novels." But, when it seemed as though this review was on the verge of criticizing this apparent deficiency in James's work, it morphed into a compliment, saying that James "has not to rely upon his plots. Elaboration has become, with him, a fine art." The writer continued in this vein, supporting James's slow but descriptive stories: "The movement of his stories is more than leisurely. With another writer it would be stagnation. But he has the art of interesting us so well in details...that an appreciative and not too hurried reader does not ask for a more stirring action."³³ The last sentence hinted at the benefit of serialization for James. By parsing out the density of his lightly-plotted novels, readers could fully appreciate the beauty and astuteness of his depictions. The same article that placed James in "The New School of Fiction" supported this characteristic of his work as well: "There is no plot. There is no beginning or end. The object is to paint pictures, as elaborate as microscopic views, not only of persons, but of minds."³⁴

Whether readers fell in the camp of those who lamented James's lack of plot or praised it, the format of the initial reading of James's novels must have influenced their perception of his work. The serialized form broke up James's novels into easily consumable pieces without overwhelming the reader with his detailed prose. This is supported by the fact that many authors and editors for periodicals believed serialization was an opportunity for readers to pause at opportune moments in the text to analyze the novel's creative mastery fully.³⁵ Month by month, the reader experienced

33 "New Publications." *New York Times*, November 4, 1878, 3 accessed April 26, 2017.

34 "The New School of Fiction." *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 18, 1882, accessed May, 7 2017, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

35 Lund, *America's Continuing Story*, 83.

another “episode” of the unfolding narrative, which may have diminished a striking lack of strong plot points and magnified his encompassing style. In a particularly astute description of this characteristic of James’s work, one reviewer commented, “Mr. Henry James is not so much a novelist as an episodist, if such a term be allowable. But he is a wonderful episodist.”³⁶ Compounded with the previous reviews, this article clarified how James was—for better or for worse—attached to serialization by more than just the economic necessity. With a personal disposition so against the form, James failed to see how aptly his detailed stories suited serialization. He believed the form of serialization took away from the completeness of his work, just as his piecemeal composition so frustrated him. But, by publishing his works in periodicals, James not only gained his literary fame but inadvertently gave his audience an easier format for reading his works. Although James saw serialization as a necessary evil, this exploration of the public reaction to his works demonstrates how the fragmentation of his stories may have led to a greater appreciation for his intricate style.

Mountains of underappreciated stories and novels composed by eager writers may still hide in past editions of periodical magazines. What was it that launched Henry James out of obscurity and into his seat in the literary canon of America? The serialized format of most of his works provides a piece of the answer. How the public first encountered a story greatly affected the legacy of that author. Today, serialized works, from television shows to podcasts, surround us, even if we are not always aware of it. The periodicals of the nineteenth century were some of the first movements toward this episodic way of telling stories so familiar to us now. Even if he rejected his role as an episodist, James proved himself to be a wonderful one, solidifying not only his reputation but also his role in the history of serialization. Henry James saw periodical reading as a burden on his writing process, but the public’s reaction to this serialized form told a different story.

36 Henry James, Jr., As An “Episodist,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1879, 4, accessed May 10, 2017.

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