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A Clash of Perspectives in Henry James' "The Real Thing"

Sena Tulpur*

ÖZET

Kıtalararası bir yazın ustası olan Henry James'in (1843-1916) "The Real Thing", adlı öyküsündeki bireyler arası çatışmaları inceleyen bu çalışma, kişilerin yanlışları ve bakış açılarının açılımı sonucunda ortaya çıkan, düşünce farklılıklarının nedenleri üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Daha önce sözü geçen görüşlere ek olarak, estetik ve pazar kavramları arasında bulunan karşılıklı ilişkinin sonucu ortaya çıkan etkiler, çalışmanın kapsamında incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: gerçek, yanlış, düşünsel çatışma, estetik, pazar

ABSTRACT

This particular study examines the clash between individuals in the short story "The Real Thing", produced by the intercontinental master of letters, Henry James (1843-1916). It is focused on the reasons of diverse points of view that originate from fallacies and outlooks of characters. In addition to aforementioned views, the interdependence between aesthetics and the marketplace has also been examined with its consequential effects.

Keywords: real, fallacy, clash, aesthetics, marketplace

Henry James's succinct depiction of human behaviours and thoughts can hardly be excelled by his contemporaries. In his works, he not only penetrates into the characters' unfathomable thoughts but he also portrays some characters that are celebrated for their originality and uniqueness in both the English and American fields of literature.

H. James (1843-1916) is esteemed in both Europe and America as an intercontinental author whose literary works primarily deal with cultural, historical, economic and individual nuances that add a particular flavour to all his writings. Henry James delineates characters that are prone to become immediate victims due to being the products of an alien cultural background.

In the parabolical story entitled "The Real Thing" (1892), pathetic scenes occur because of diverse outlooks of the characters towards life. The main characters, Mr and Mrs Monarch are introduced as the representation of well-to-do classes. Normally, each character reflects the aura of an affluent background without having a particular intention of displaying this affluence openly. Their way of dressing and of behaving reveal who they are, actually. In fact, each of them tries hard to avoid any personal disclosure because their economic fortune has already diminished to a minimum, and the couple is suffering from a serious financial strait that is disturbing them inexpressibly. The economic bottleneck forces the two middle-aged individuals to plunge into a thoroughly alien

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environment where mercenary motives are placed for above the humanitarian values and principles. The couple believes in the fact that the only cleverly invested capital they possess is their unblemished physical appearances. Thus,

they decide to make good use of this particular well-preserved investment as models hired by an artist. In the essay entitled "Lesson 5: Henry James", the editor states his views on the story as follows:

With "The Real Thing", James gives us a tragicomedy of late Victorian manners, a parable of the perverse relationship between the real and the unreal, and an elaboration on one of his favorite themes -- the role of the artist in society and the relationship between the artist and his work. (1)

The miserable life of the couple appeals to the painter's sympathetic feelings and thoughts, and after a short while, he decides to hire them as models for his illustrations used generally as book-covers by publishers.

Mrs Monarch is excessively proud of having a beautiful figure while almost getting close to her early fifties. Everything seems to have progressed smoothly up to their being employed by the artist. In the process of drawing, the artist comes to the realization that Mrs Monarch's deeply-rooted inflexible facial expression, and stiff manners can hardly be transformed into something different. Her shapely body has been her primary asset but it does not guarantee the creation of illustrations. Mrs Monarch can sit for a princess or a queen only, the painter finds it quite a difficult process to play with colours in order to add expression to her facial features. That's to say, the artist's dilemma emerges when he fails to make Mrs Monarch's face look expressive up to a particular extent. On the other hand, it is observed that Mrs Monarch cannot understand the aesthetic concerns of the artist because she stills depends on her beautifully preserved body. These unpredictable failures lead both Mrs Monarch and the artist to a serious crisis where a reconciliation seems to be too difficult to reach.

The painter encounters an internal conflict, and it is deemed necessary to employ the Monarchs. When the painter's conscience tells him to make both Monarchs his models, he is well aware of the fact that his artistic qualities and good reputation might run great risks. It is witnessed here, the artist undergoes the clash occurring between his humanistic attitudes, and the responsibilities he holds as an artist both towards his family and to the other artists.

Mrs Monarch seems to be quite ambitious about fulfilling this particular task successfully due to her strong reliance on her having a beautifully preserved figure. As it is discerned, she fails to take into account the financial situation of the artist who hires them only out of his curiosity about the members of the aristocracy. Henry James makes use of an ironical situation where Mr and Mrs Monarchs realistic self evaluation capacities are put into a simple test. It is obvious that Mrs Monarch has not any hesitations or questions about whether she will be able to come up to the generally approved standards in the marketplace and in the estimation of the artist or not.

The reasons for Henry James's selecting his attractive characters from the upper social layers is explained by the editor of the article entitled "Lesson 5: Henry James", as follows:

From a wealthy intellectual family, James is very concerned about manners and decorum, and so writes about charming (and a few not so charming, but never really ugly) ladies and gentlemen.(2)

There is one salient point that Mrs Monarch neglects to take a notice of, she is already a middle-aged woman in her last forties and her beauty has been praised abundantly in the fashionable circles they have moved about so far. It has been stated that Mrs Monarch used to photograph well, but she has never thought of

getting involved in this illustration business up to now. For the reasons given above, Mrs Monarch is quite unfamiliar with the requirements and conditions of being a model, and she seems to hold the belief that this job is the only appropriate one both for herself and her husband. At first, even though she depends on

her shapely figure and on the artist's skillful strokes of brush, the results lead the Monarchs and the artist to an unexpected disappointment. Owing to Mrs Monarch's rather limited knowledge on life at large, Mrs Monarch cannot have an access to the realities involved in this

particular situation concerning both her and the artist. Her romantic outlooks encounter with the bitter facts of the competitive, mercenary considerations. Henry James introduces the Monarchs in the story as given below:

On the instant I saw that the figure was indeed their strong point. His 'naturally' didn't sound vain, but it lighted up the question 'She has got the best', he continued, nodding at his wife..... 'We thought that if you ever have to do people like us, we might be something like it. She, particularly for a lady in a book, you know.'
(³)

The Monarchs' simplistic way of thinking comes across the ruthless rivalry which occurs in every professional arena. It has been observed that Mrs Monarch is still in the expectation of keeping her old lofty manners and remarks unimpaired before she experiences a disappointment in the business-life. Now, the Monarchs have lost their former luxurious life-style, and they are supposed to make their living, but the point that looks both pathetic and degrading is the strong possibility of the couple's drifting from one job to another. One more significant idea should also be noted, the Monarchs are totally alien to the life of the working class and now, their impoverished state of affairs obliges them to interact with the members of the lover-class, as well. Most probably, such a disastrous financial loss could not have been dreamt of by the Monarchs, but presently they seem to be trying hard to adapt themselves to their rapidly deteriorating economic and social conditions. How are the Monarchs expected to comply with the

standards of the realistic life when each of them is not well equipped with the ethics and competitive of the outside world?

What surprises the artist is their stubborn enthusiasm in order to perform their responsibilities in a strictly disciplined regularity. They have moral standards that recommend them but they lack professional attitude toward art and life. The Monarchs, in the long run, learn the fact that amateurs cannot have the chance of choosing the job they want to do. Miss Churn's professionalism baffles Mrs Monarch owing to the fact that she cannot bring herself into believing in such a bad-mannered girl's being a qualified model. In addition, Mrs Monarch holds the idea that Miss Churn's physical appearance is not pleasant to look at. The illustrator is pleased with Miss Churn's being a flexible model that always has the chance of being transformed into somebody new:

'I think I could come about as near it as that' said Mrs. Monarch.

'Oh, you think she's shabby, but you must allow for the alchemy of art.'

.....

'Well, if she can sit I'll tyke to bookkeeping', said my model. (⁴)

Here, the writer reveals the reality about Mrs Monarch's judgements and values which are already decadent and irrelevant thoroughly. The appreciation of a work of art requires refinement, elegance and an experienced eye. The artist in the story is making his living by drawing illustrations which are supposed to be marketable. Keeping this idea in mind is quite necessary for the artist. For this reason, he experiences a moral conflict. The artist cannot

determine which solution might be more favourable; giving up hiring the artistically useless Monarchs or going on employing them in vain, as it has been stated that the artist should make a choice between the idea of going on being ironically charitable and of placing his own materialistic interests above all his humanistic values. It has been witnessed that the illustrator encounters with a dilemma consisting both of spiritual and materialistic facets, and he

knows definitely his charitable, humanistic act cannot last long because his kind assistance can only be extended as long as it is equally profitable. At first, the artist employs the Monarchs with charitable feelings unavoidably

mixed with human curiosity, but the harsh realities of life do not allow him the chance of offering the couple his utmost help. The editor(s) in the "Application of the Critical Theory" give definition of capitalism as follows:

a) An individual's financial success is determined by the individual, b) every individual has the freedom to choose their occupation, where to work and who they work for, c) production is geared for profit, d) society is divided into two classes: employers and employees. (⁵)

As it has been understood, both the artist and the Monarchs still maintain unsophisticated views, but the artist is warned against employing the couple whose sketches can possibly cause him to undergo an irreparable

loss of money and of reputation in the marketplace. The artist asks one of the famous art critic's views on his sketches of the Monarchs, the critic's reaction is surprisingly shocking:

'... so keep straight for me if you can't keep straight for yourself. There's a certain sort of thing you tried from the first- and a very good thing it is.'

.....

When I talked with Hawley later about 'Ruthland Ramsay' and its possible successors he declared that I must get back into my boat again or I would go to the bottom. (⁶)

The proud and still respectable Mrs Monarch does not fail to reach a certain state of understanding about the personal expectations of the artist in order to avoid the serious risk of dismissal. With the threatening fear of turning into beggars on the streets, she condescends to prepare the tea and wants to learn about the other responsibilities which she is allowed to assume with an indefinable modesty and enthusiasm. The artist does not have any

knowledge about the Monarchs' previous and present social status, but the couple's well-tailored clothes made of an expensive material serve as a valid evidence for their preceding significant roles among the members of well-to-do social groups. Henry James reveals the excitement of the inspired artist whose imagination seems to be freed upon the arrival of the Monarchs as follows:

Their friend liked them, but didn't like to support them. There was something about them that represented credit- their clothes, their manners, their type; but if credit is a large empty pocket in which an occasional chink reverberates, the chink must be audible.

What they wanted of me was to help to make it so. (⁷)

The act of remembering the good old days paves the way for the reader to make up the Monarch's story of the past which sounds and looks like a fairy-tale, and also it gives rise to a sense of mystery about the style of life this particular couple used to lead, once. It has not been mentioned whether the couple has a place to stay at nights, but it is apparent that the

husband and wife are trying their best to keep stiff their upper-lips. Henry James lifts up the hazy clouds that cover the miseries of a gentleman and his wife who once had the chance of enjoying a much better life both with their high social status and handsome income. The author draws realistic pictures of life by evoking some great numbers of images related

to the state of impoverished individuals. The members of poverty-stricken classes carry almost the similar characteristic features possessed by the Monarchs; financially unfortunate people are known to be eager to get any job they come across without giving much thought to whether they are qualified to do it or not. With the same mould of mentality, the Monarchs tend to perform the menial chores

given to their responsibilities without any complaints, as it is stated in the following idiomatic expression; "the beggars cannot be choosers."

Bruce Henricksen in his article entitled "The Real Thing" presents his criticism about the present conditions of the couple in quite an interesting way, as follows:

In fact, the Monarchs seem to undergo a real change, for in the final scene they offer to be "useful" in more practical ways -- they are willing to actually work. But the narrator, with his aesthetic commitments as weapons, becomes an instrument of society's revenge upon them. And this revenge is packaged in the bad-faith assumption that it is somehow inappropriate for people such as the Monarchs to clean rooms. (8)

After having been given some pieces of advice on the Monarchs immediate dismissal, the artist has undergone a moral conflict concerning what should be done to avoid being offensive to this well-mannered, genial couple. Mrs Monarch perceived that they are not welcome in the studio anymore. She cannot conceive the mercenary mechanism which is dominant in almost all fields of trading. The artist starts to feel bothered with the demands of the circles of art and about being obliged to dismiss the couple owing to the requirements of the materialistic world where individuals are generally exposed to the threats of starvation first, and of death eventually.

Henry James reveals the fact that bitter realities of life which are threatening human subsistence cannot permit sentimental attitudes to pervade human mentality. On the reverse side of the mirror, the author pictures the supposedly kind artist who provides the Monarchs with the necessities of life though this kindness lasts only for a temporary period of time, otherwise the artist himself might run the risk of being condemned to starvation. This particular equilibrium existing between marketable articles and the expectation of the consumers should be attended to carefully, or else commodities cease to attract customers, especially on the occasions when the demands of customers are overlooked. Actually, the artist's voice of conscience finds it necessary to host the Monarchs a little more in his studio, but the common materialistic notions of marketing business silence brutally the voice of his moral conscience.

As usual, the author gives the responsibility of interpreting his messages to the readers. At large, H. James's characterization and themes are concerned either with cultural or social differences in addition, James arranges his themes according to these unavoidable cultural and social discriminatory factors which are shown as well-known areas of controversies in James's fiction.

The fallacy of Mrs Monarch originates from her keeping herself within the familiar circles that represent a completely different standard of living. Presumably, she used to feel quite satisfied when she had the company of these well-to-do acquaintances. When the values she is faithfully attached to are examined , the reasons for her former immodest remarks on her being particular about putting on her own clothes only can easily be interpreted by the reader. Mrs Monarch seems to be more akin to the materialistically oriented mentality and once, she used to be a component of the machinery universally called capitalism. In her present situation, ironically she becomes a victim for the money-wise people whose movements are guided by mercenary purposes only, but Mrs Monarch can not conceive the dynamics that prevail in the world of trading. In the previous parts of her life, the fluctuations in the scope of economy had never affected her material prosperity and social prestige negatively. Opposing to their former wealth, at present she and her husband have incurred the misfortune of endeavouring to deserve a loaf of bread in the studio of an artist who seems to advocate the importance of humanistic views for his selfish advantages, only. Bruce Henricksen introduces his criticism about

James's selecting a narrator who holds back some of the relevant piece of information as

follows:

"The Real Thing" (1892) addresses the problem of the art/power relationship, but in the words of an ethically crippled narrator who is reluctant or unable to explore this theme in all its ramifications.(9)

The so-called humanistic attitude of the illustrator might defame his artistic personality in the marketplace because the genuineness of the Monarchs' physical appearances can only be imitated. This particular authenticity of the Monarchs does not allow itself to be transformed into something artificial. Ironically, Miss Churn and Oronte might be changed both into beggars or royal individuals successfully, whereas such a flexibility cannot be observed in the settled personality of the Monarchs, and eventually this particular inner stiffness is reflected on their external steady appearances. This very situation might dull the artist's sense of imagination, and put an end to his artistic

creativity. The examination of the story reveals that each party operates to the other's disadvantage without conceiving the ranges of their injuries on material and moral bases. It seems rather difficult to announce which side suffers losses in the process of the interaction between the artist and the Monarchs, that is to say neither the artist nor the Monarchs come out of this paradoxical situation with their expectations fulfilled. In an essay entitled "A Lesson in Reading: Henry James's, "The Real Thing" Sam Whitsitt explains the results of the artist's innocent contradiction to the principles he has devotedly attached to for years:

(.....) when the artist receives word from his publishers that illustrations he had submitted and for which he had used the Monarch as models, had been rejected. He is desperate when he hears this news since he faces losing a hefty contract. (10)

Henry James expresses his anxiety about artistically talented individuals' limits of freedom, and he also wants to know whether the artists are free enough to make use of their artistic creativity, or else their creative imagination is restricted according to the economic equilibrium in marketplaces, which is a rather harmful factor to the artistic independence. If the artists give priority to material success, such artists cannot evade being enslaved by the harsh dictations of trading and might face the risk of losing their creative energies gradually.

The representation of something which is authentic can result in a mimetic presentation only. The Monarchs look so real that the artist

pronounces the bankruptcy of his artistic creativity in the presence of the genuine aristocratic models.

Apparently the simple story leads the reader to a complicated conclusion where social, philosophical and current economic conditions give the narrative a surprising turn. Henry James makes use of the underlying story of the Monarchs to propagate his personal views on art by integrating the story of an illustrator with the episode of the ruthlessly competitive conditions at the marketplace. Sam Whitsitt in his article entitled "A Lesson in Reading: Henry James's "The Real Thing"" states Michael Swan's views on the story:

Given this simplicity, the story and its lesson can easily be given. Swan's paraphrase goes on as follows: "An artist discovers that he can draw his scenes of high life better with a servant girl and an ice-cream vendor as models than with Major and Mrs Monarch, who are the real thing. (11)

The only common point the Monarchs and the artist share is that each party craves for "a pot-boiler", but the uncertain external factors come in between the Monarchs' and the artist's benefits. The collapse of aristocracy causes the Monarchs to make use of their marketable well-preserved appearances. The artist hires them to find out what his prospective advantages might be in the immensely commercialized marketplace so both parties are ready to take some degree of risk to see what the future will offer to them, but the harsh realities operating under the influence of capitalism do not allow them any opportunity to be successful with the unchangeable capital they have in hand. For some reasons, the version of language used in the marketplace does not correspond to the

variety of language known both by the Monarchs and the artist, and this particular difference of outlooks causes the Monarch's dismissal and the artist's close escape from getting involved in further irremedial professional losses of credit.

The episode of The Monarchs has been inserted into the story with the purpose of reducing the weight of the philosophical, of esthetic, of psychological, and of financial views occurring all through the story. The author winds up his story after the Jamesian fashion by leaving the rest of his ideas spread in the narrative like seeds expecting to be flourished with the rays of light shed by the careful reader.

FOOT NOTES

(¹) Independent Study Editor(s). "Lesson 5: Henry James." p.2.

(²) *ibid.*, p.1.

(³) Henry James. "The Real Thing." p.709.

(⁴) *ibid.*, p.715.

(⁵) Editor(s). "Application of the Critical Theory." Terminology Page. p.5.

(⁶) Henry James. "The Real Thing." p.722.

(⁷) *ibid.*, p.712.

(⁸) Bruce Henricksen. "The Real Thing: Criticism and the ethical turn." p.7.

(⁹) *ibid.*, p.2.

(¹⁰) Sam Whitsitt. "A Lesson in Reading: Henry James's The Real Thing." p.7.

(¹¹) *ibid.*, p.1.

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