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Social Alienation and Expatriate Fiction

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Professor Watts

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Social Alienation and Expatriate Fiction

“The Velvet Glove,” a short story written by Henry James, was first published in *The English Review* in March 1909. At this time, the editor of *The English Review* was Ford Madox Hueffer, whose purpose in running the periodical was to seek out and spotlight the finest writers of the era and to showcase literary excellence. Indeed, Hueffer saw much potential in James, as well as in other writers whose works appeared in *The English Review* throughout the years: D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, Katherine Mansfield, William Butler Yeats, E. M. Forster, and Ezra Pound. That James’s work would appear alongside that of such prolific writers speaks to his skill as a writer. Although some criticism of “The Velvet Glove” exists, it is fairly limited and seems to read the story as one about James’s friendship with female writers in general or else interpret the story to be about living and a failure to live.

However, my interpretation and analysis has led me to believe that “The Velvet Glove” is a semi-autobiographical work that reveals the alienation that James experienced as an expat. In light of the autobiographical nature of the story, it is helpful to contextualize it in terms of James’s life and experience. The two key elements from James’s life that helped me interpret “The Velvet Glove” were his expat status and his semiautobiographical experiences. James, born in New York City to Irish and Scottish immigrant parents, travelled extensively in Europe before settling in England. For James’s writing, one of the most important elements

was his status as an expatriate and outsider, which led to a rather ambiguous writing style.

Of this, he told his brother William,

“I aspire to write in such a way that it wd. [sic] be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am, at a given moment, an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries,) & so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.” (Matthew 711)

This style is clear in “The Velvet Glove” as Mr. Berridge and the other characters have ambiguous backgrounds, leaving the reader to question whether they are insiders or outsiders as the reader considers the impact the ambiguity has on the story.

James’s own personal experience also informed his short story. Edith Wharton, one of James’s close friends provides some context for James’s writing of this story. In her book, *A Backward Glance*, she recalls when James visited her in Paris and was so taken with the city that he decided it would be the setting of “The Velvet Glove.” Wharton says of James,

He and I had often talked over the subject of this story, which was suggested by the fact that a very beautiful young Englishwoman of great position, and unappeased literary ambitions, had once sought to beguile him into contributing an introduction to a novel she was writing. . . . She had sought from him, at any rate, a literary “boost” which all his admiration and liking for her could not, he thought, justify his giving; . . . The incident certainly gave him a theme “to his hand”; but it lay unused for lack of a setting, for he wanted to make of it . . . a little episode steeped in wistfulness and poetry. . . . Though I knew nothing of it till long afterward, “The Velvet Glove” took shape that night. (308-309)

Wharton's insight into the conception of "The Velvet Glove" reveals not only that the plot is somewhat autobiographical, but also that the setting was clearly influenced by his European travels. Thus, this quote from Wharton makes it unlikely that this story was based off of James's friendship with Wharton, as literary critic and author N. H. Reeve declares in his introduction to *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales, 1903-1910*. While the setting of the story certainly stemmed from one of their shared experiences, Wharton makes it clear that she and the woman who became the subject of the story were not the same person.

The knowledge that James was an accomplished and celebrated writer and was heavily influenced by his expat status and personal experiences contextualizes and informs the literary analysis of "The Velvet Glove." It is easy to draw connections between the personal experience that Wharton describes and the plot of "The Velvet Glove." The events of the story happen almost exactly the way Wharton describes James's own experience, down to the woman "beguile[ing]" Berridge (308). This is quite the perfect word to describe the relationship in "The Velvet Glove" between Berridge and the Princess. She engages Berridge's interest through deception, first sending another young man to secure Berridge's agreement. Although Berridge acquiesces, it is with the thought that "it was ten to one that this would be the last the distinguished author might hear of the volume" (James 629). However, once he sees "the most beautiful woman," his "missing connection," he is completely taken in by her beauty (James 630). This reaction on the part of Berridge leads him to immediately romanticize the woman. From the beginning, she is "charming," "dazzling," and finally, "supremely, divinely Olympian" (James 630). Berridge cannot help himself in elevating the Princess above everyone else.

As the Princess flatters Berridge's writing, telling him, "I've read everything, you know, and 'The Heart of Gold' three times," Berridge's romanticization of her continues (James 633). In a moment of free indirect discourse, readers join Berridge's in his consciousness as he considers,

If she was Olympian—as in her rich and regular young beauty, that of some divine Greek mask over-painted say by Titian, she more and more appeared to him—this offered air was that of the gods themselves: she might have been, with her long rustle across the room, Artemis decorated, hung with pearls, for her worshippers, yet disconcerting them by having, under an impulse just faintly fierce, snatched the cup of gold from Hebe.

(James 633)

The constant use of the word *princess* and *Olympian* to describe the woman are evidence that Berridge has romanticized her. He is a self-confessed romanticist, admitting that he liked to phrase things exotically (James 627). However, this all comes to a head near the end of the short story as the Princess finally reveals herself to write under the penname Amy Evans and asks Berridge for what she really wants, a preface for her story, *The Velvet Glove*, so that it will appeal to the American masses. Here, the rather ambiguous backgrounds of the characters are revealed: Berridge is American and the Princess is French. This again places James, an American author, in the biographical space; Berridge, the American, now in Paris, is positioned as the outsider.

Initially, the connection between the Princess being called "Olympian" and Berridge's reaction to being asked to write a preface is not noticeable. However, with the help of digital textual analysis tools, the connection becomes clear. Using the Trends tool on Voyant to analyze the terms *princess* and *Olympian* reveals that although *princess* is used

almost twice as much as *Olympian*, their curve looks almost identical; however, *Olympian* suddenly drops off the chart, accounting for the difference in frequency (See graph 1). This is an interesting discrepancy, as Berridge often uses the two terms interchangeably when referring to the woman. The other times that Berridge uses *Olympian* to refer to someone is in connection with the man who first asks Berridge to look at the manuscript of his friend. Significantly, this man is another person that Berridge has romanticized, calling him *Seigneurie*, which indicates the man's European status, contrasting Berridge's status as American. Thus, the term *Olympian* is used to indicate a romanticization of another individual, one who is not American like Berridge.

In trying to determine a reason for the sudden drop-off, I happened to pull up the graph of the word *preface*. Upon further investigation, the Trends chart comparing *Olympians* and *preface* reveals an inverted graph; the occurrences of *preface* only happen after the last mention of *Olympian* (See graph 2). This data correlates with the close reading of text: as the Princess beats around the bush with regards to her preface, Berridge gets noticeably more confused and agitated. The narrator relates Berridge's outburst:

'Where are we, where, in the name of all that's damnably, of all that's grotesquely delusive, are we?' he said, without a sign, to himself; which was the form of his really being quite at sea as to what she was talking about. That uncertainty indeed he could but frankly betray by taking her up, as he cast about him, on the particular ambiguity that his voice perhaps already showed him to find most irritating. 'Let it show? 'It,' dear Princess—?' (James 644-645)

Whereas moments before Berridge was content not to “follow or measure their course,” once he realizes that the Princess has other intentions for their relationship than he does, Berridge becomes disillusioned with her, no longer seeing her as an Olympian.

Realizing she hasn’t really been flirting with him the whole evening, but just wants him to write the preface to her book, James writes that Berridge,

Felt his eyes close, for amazement, despair and shame, and his head, which he had some time before, baring his brow to the mild night, eased of its crush-hat, sink to confounded rest on the upholstered back of the seat. The act, the ceasing to see, and if possible to hear, was for the moment a retreat, an escape from a state that he felt himself fairly flatter by thinking of it as “awkward”; the state of really wishing that his humiliation might end, and of wondering in fact if the most decent course open to him mightn’t be to ask her to stop the motor and let him down. (645)

This passage, more than any other supports the conclusion that Berridge no longer romanticizes the Princess. He instead begins to pity that “she failed to divine the bearing of his thoughts” and to feel “as if he were speaking to some miraculously humanized idol” (James 646, 648).

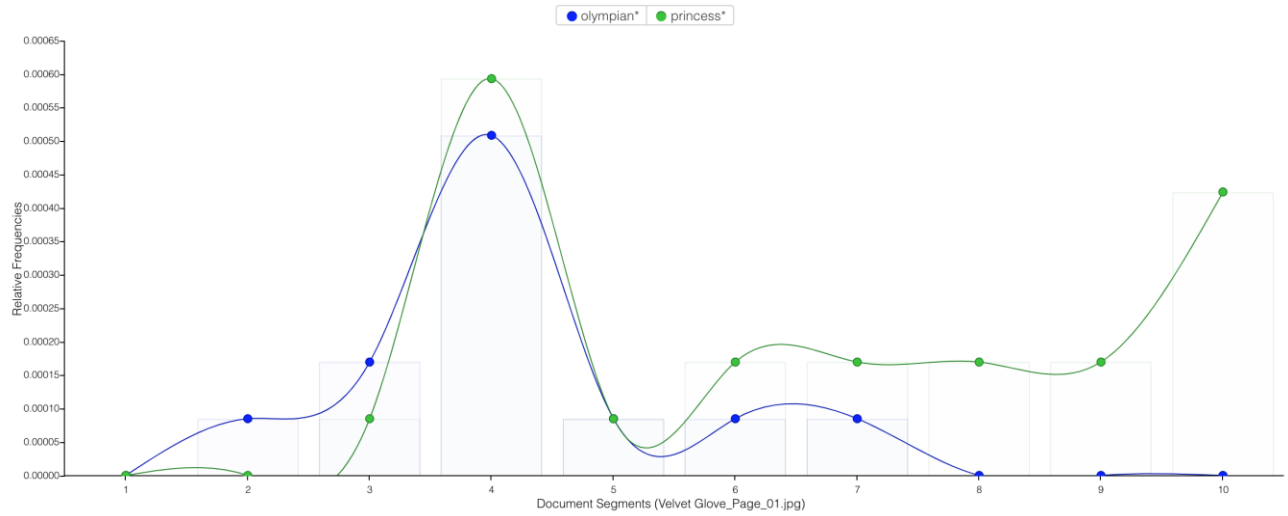
With Berridge firmly disillusioned of the Princess, Berridge then begins to worry that she will think wrongly of his decision not to write the preface: “She was capable of believing he had edged away, excusing himself and trumping up a factitious theory, because he hadn’t the wit, hadn’t the hand, to knock off the few pleasant pages she asked him for and that any proper Frenchman, master of the *métier*, would so easily and gallantly have promised” (James 649). Not wanting the Princess to believe this of him, he calls out to her, “You are Romance!” (James 649). This exclamation reveals both that Berridge does not want the Princess to have a poor opinion of

him, and that while he is disillusioned, he is not bitter or unforgiving of her. He sees value in the Princess even though he is unwilling to write her preface.

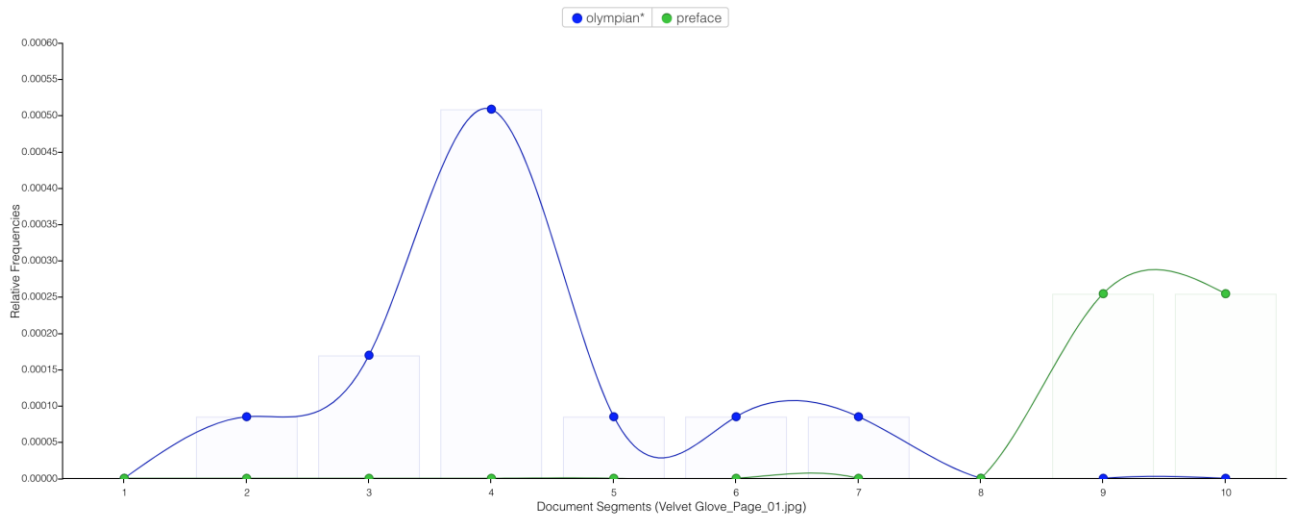
While one might read James's "The Velvet Glove" as an exposition of his relationship with female writers and his pity on them for wanting to use him as a stepping stone to fame, another plausible reading of this story is as a personal exploration of James's own experience as an outsider to a European culture that he longed to integrate into. The emphasis within the text on the Parisian setting and nationality of key characters lends itself to this reading. This is especially the tone that is felt as Berridge bids a longing farewell to the Princess after refusing to write her preface, something that certainly would have gained him more notoriety within the European society. Yet he chooses not to write the preface, not because he can't, but because he won't.

Berridge's refusal to write the preface is interesting because it is a self-inflicted social alienation from the society that Berridge clearly was interested in. This perhaps indicates that Berridge has an inability to fully assimilate to the European culture as an American. As a semi-autobiographical story, this social alienation and disappointment in social connections is likely one that Berridge and James shared. Reading "The Velvet Glove" in such a way is revealing of not only James's experience as an expat author, but also the greater alienation that modernist literature experienced as it broke from the traditions of literature in the Victorian or Edwardian eras.

Graph 1:



Graph 2:



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