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The Real Thing in James's "The Real Thing"

KENNETH BERNARD

Henry James's "The Real Thing" has long been a standard anthology piece, and several interpretations of it have been written. The interpretation with most currency among readers is that expressed by Clifton Fadiman, among others, namely that the story demonstrates that ". . . art is a *transformation* of reality, not a mere reflection of the thing itself."¹ Attempting to copy a real lady and gentleman, the Monarchs, for his illustrations of ladies and gentlemen, the artist fails; transforming two subjects from the lower classes, Miss Churm, a cockney, and Oronte, an Italian immigrant, he succeeds. Although this reading has been considered "superficial,"² I think it is basically sound. However, it requires an application that has not been made. It has been generally assumed that the artist is finally successful in his project because he dismisses the Monarchs. This is true. *But his success is only the measure of his failure*, for he has been made aware of the difference between first and second-rate art, and the degree to which he is bound, perhaps forever, to the latter. It is this difference that is the point of James's story.

The artist finally dismisses the Monarchs because he finds them unsuitable for his illustrations. However, he has been deeply moved by their plight. As his friend and critic Hawley says, they did him "permanent harm." The artist, however, is "content to have paid the price—for the memory." Quite correctly, one critic points out that the artist is content to have his art suffer because his moral insight has been sharpened.

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¹"A Note on The Real Thing," *The Short Stories of Henry James* (New York, 1945), p. 217. See also, for example, Gorham Munson, "The Real Thing, A Parable for Fiction," *University of Kansas Review*, XVI, 4 (Summer, 1950), 261-4; Sean O'Faolain, *The Short Story* (New York, 1951), p. 182; and Seymour Lainoff, "A Note on Henry James' 'The Real Thing,'" *Modern Language Notes*, LXXI, 3 (March, 1956), 192-3.

²Earle Labor, "James' 'The Real Thing': Three Levels of Meaning," *College English*, XXIII, 5 (Feb., 1962), p. 376f. Mr. Labor's perceptive article includes a selected bibliography of differing interpretations.

"From his painful experience with the Monarchs James's narrator emerges with a finer understanding of the human situation and with a new awareness of what constitutes 'the real thing' in human relationships: compassion."³ The narrator has been unfeeling. The Monarchs have remedied this deficiency. But what of the narrator as artist? Is there not also a new awareness of what constitutes the real thing in art?

I think there is. One, in fact, leads to the other. The Monarchs are also the artist's means for discovering that he is a second-rate artist. In human terms the real thing in the story is the pathos of the Monarchs reduced to such expedients as hiring out, washing teacups, etc. Their clumsy dignity, their essential innocence, their odd misfortune—all affect the artist deeply. Their unsuitability for his illustrations has little point. What matters is the human situation. *They* are the raw material for art. *They* are real. The artist, however, does not, perhaps cannot, work with real life. He does not, for example, work with Miss Churm or Oronte in any real way. He makes them into something artificial, and then he paints them. There is no emotional commitment. There never has been. He succeeds well enough, but what he has done is not to transform reality into art but to transform artificiality, or unreality, into art. That is his flaw as an artist. The Monarchs have introduced him to a more profound feeling, they have made him see the possibility of true art. And it is this awareness that does him "permanent harm." He cannot go on happily creating false art once he is aware of what true art might be. But he is glad of knowing the truth, however painful. His awareness might even be the beginning of true art.

So one can agree with Fadiman that the point of the story is that the artist must *transform* reality into art—but with the understanding that the protagonist does not do this; he fails. In working with the artificial he is transforming unreality into art, and that can be only inferior art. But he has been made aware of the difference. The real thing artistically, the foundation of true art, must be compassion for humanity.

³*Ibid.*, p. 378.