

She was the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them. The evil they had the gift of thinking or pretending to think of each other they poured into her little gravely-gaging soul as into a boundless receptacle...

But one day Maisie found out that .

She had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so.

And she decided to change her behaviour:

Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing...

When her parents found out that she was no longer useful to them, and was only a financial burden, they began to call her "a little idiot" and lost any interest in her. Then each began to leave the girl with the other for periods much longer than the agreed six months, and they finished by completely giving her up. But she had a stepfather, Sir Claude, a stepmother, Mrs. Beale, and a governess, Mrs. Wix, to take care of her. Maisie's stepparents were really interested in her. But theirs was also a selfish interest because they were in love and Maisie was an excuse for them to meet each other. They repeated over and over again: "You

brought us together". But Sir Claude really loved Maisie in spite of all his weaknesses though Mrs. Beale loved her only because of him. That's why, at the end, Maisie asked Sir Claude to give up Mrs. Beale. But we know that he would give everything up for her, except her stepmother. Maisie knew that this woman had many things in common with her mother and was very different from her governess, Mrs. Wix. We can say that Henry James presented Mrs. Beale and Mrs. Wix as two opposed characters. How does he do this? He assigns to each adjectives with opposite meanings. When writing about Mrs. Beale he uses adjectives like: young, pretty, lovely, beautiful, charming, handsome and clever. But when he describes Mrs Wix the adjectives are: poor, old, ugly, dingy, melancholy, terrible, queer. When Maisie, speaking of Mrs. Beale, once said: "She's beautiful and I love her! I love her and she's beautiful!", Mrs Wix replied: "And I'm hideous and you hate me?" Mrs. Beale was much more educated than Mrs. Wix. She "could say lots of dates straight off, state the position of Malabar, play six pieces without notes and, in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts ." And these were things Mrs. Wix couldn't do. Another important difference between the two women was that Mrs. Wix's reactions were almost always related to silence while Mrs. Beale's were related to words. The first lines in chapter five are:

The second parting from Miss Overmore had been bad enough, but this first parting from Mrs Wix was much worse... It was dreadfully silent, as it

had been when her tooth was taken out; Mrs. Wix had on that occasion grabbed her hand and they had clung to each other with the frenzy of their determination not to scream.

And a little further:

Embedded in Mrs. Wix's nature as her tooth had been socketed in her gum, the operation of extracting her would really have been a case for chloroform. It was a hug that fortunately left nothing to say, for the poor woman's want of words at such an hour seemed to fall in with her want of everything.

Then Maisie, thinking of Miss Overmore (Mrs. Beale),

remembered the difference when, six months before, she had been torn from the breast of that more spiritual protectress. Miss Overmore... had been thoroughly audible and voluble; her protest had rung out bravely and she had declared that something - her pupil didn't know exactly what - was a regular wicked shame.

Mrs. Beale had repeated several times that she adored Maisie and would never give her up. But we know Sir Claude was the only person she would never give up. Mrs. Wix opened her mouth only once to say to Maisie: "I can promise you that, whatever I do, I shall never let you out of my sight." And this is the only promise in the novel which is entirely fulfilled. Even Sir Claude had repeated to Maisie several times that he wouldn't lose sight of her. But at the end he proved to be too weak to keep his promise.

In spite of all her faults Maisie knew that Mrs. Wix

had been, with passion and anguish, a mother, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less.

She also knew that

in her ugliness and poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than anyone in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one wouldn't rest with the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling.

Mrs. Wix was the only one who could be a mother. She had transferred all the love she had for Clara Matilda, her late daughter, to her pupil. Though being ugly, uneducated, and having a limited "moral sense," she was selfless and had no other interest but the child. When she lost Clara Matilda she lost everything because she "had had absolutely nothing else in all the world..." Nothing is said in the novel about her husband. His name appears only once, in the following passage: "... Mr. Wix, her husband, as to whom nothing was mentioned save that he had been dead for ages." The only man she loved was Sir Claude. But she loved him like a mother. She wanted to save him from the women he loved, especially from Mrs. Beale. Sir Claude, too, could have loved her only as a mother. Once, while speaking about her, he said to Maisie: "I don't love her, don't you see? I do her perfect justice," he pursued, "but I mean I don't love her as I do you, and I'm sure you wouldn't

seriously expect it. She's not my daughter — come, old chap! She's not even my mother, though I dare say it would have been better for me if she had been. I'll do for her what I'd do for my mother, but I won't do more." And he had really done something for her. He had supported her after she had been dismissed by Maisie's mother. He had been human with her as he had been human with Maisie. But when he refused to give Mrs. Beale up Maisie realized that he was not being human and that he was not free. This was what made her choose Mrs. Wix who was more free and more human.

It is interesting to note that throughout the novel the author makes us feel that Maisie and her governess are linked together by some mysterious lace. When Maisie met Mrs. Wix for the first time, at her mother's, she "took her and, Maisie felt the next day, would never let her go." Maisie knew this though Mrs. Wix didn't tell her. In Boulogne they had quarrelled because of Mrs. Beale, but

they rushed together again too soon for either to feel that either had kept it up, and though they went home in silence it was with a vivid perception for Maisie that her companion's hand had closed upon her. That hand had shown all - together, these twenty-four hours, a new capacity for closing, and one of the truths the child could least resist was that a certain greatness had now come to Mrs. Wix.

And a little further: "She still bore the mark of the tone in which her friend had shown out that threat of never

losing sight of her." When the two were together on the bench in the rampart we are told that "their hands remained linked in unutterable sign of their union." Then we have: "Their hands were so linked and their union so continued..." And also: "They had touched bottom and melted together..."

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Wiesenfarth, Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy (New York: Fordham University Press, 1963), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup>Henry James, What Maisie Knew (Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1975). All quotations from the novel were taken from this edition.