The Masquerade of Social Selves in *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James

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Abstract

The paper discusses the Social Self represented in the novel What Maisie Knew (1897) by Henry James. Its representation is analysed under the lens of his brother's (W. James) psychological theory outlined in The Principles of Psychology (1890). The concept of the Social Self in What Maisie Knew may be seen as taking shape in the images of five adults: a father and a mother, a stepfather and a stepmother and a governess. All the adults fail to fulfil their social roles as parents, apparently because their material and spiritual Selves are stronger than the social one. The representation of the Social Self in the novel is achieved via fixed focalization; the Social Selves of the (step)parents are presented from a little child's innocent, subjective point of view. The child becomes the eyes and the ears of the novel, that is, the reflector character through which the novel is narrated. Henry James almost never crosses the boundary and the radii of Maisie's perspective which is strictly kept throughout the entire narrative. It seems that through his novel H. James indirectly blames the English society where unhealthy ethics prosper and in which the devaluation of morality and ideals occurs.

Keywords: *Social Self, English society, motherhood, perspective, experience*

The Social Self of a person is formed due to the recognition of his personality by other people. William James, the American psychologist and philosopher, emphasizes that a person, in general, has several Social Selves. He insists that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry the image of him in their mind" (James 2006: 295). Moreover, according to W. James, a person's "*fame*, good or bad, and his honour or dishonour, are names for one of his social selves" (195). In James's opinion, one's Social Self has to come above one's Material Self because the opinion of others matters for the integration in society and therefore it influences one's self-esteem and self-assurance. James views the

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Social Self as a set of masks that a person changes to fit different environments. At the same time, the psychologist does not doubt the need for a unique set of social skills, because it creates the order of social life, giving relationships between people a sense of reliability and predictability.

In literature, the representation of the Social Self is a very interesting and broad topic because the novelists have the freedom of building their characters based on many Social Selves: mother, daughter, sister, neighbour, politician, doctor, etc. Novelists can write about as many Social Selves as they want, for there is a wide choice of social 'masks' in the real world to choose from and insert at the level of the fictional one. In his novels, Henry James represents the Social Self through the point of view and centre of consciousness techniques; the reader is given the opportunity to discover a person from many perspectives (social opinions). Moreover, H. James accentuates the role of the Social Self in the formation of experience of his characters.

The concept of the Social Self in the novel *What Maisie Knew* may be seen as taking shape in the images of five adults: Ida Farange, a mother and wife; Beale Farange, a father and husband; Miss Overmore/ Mrs. Beale, a young governess and stepmother; Sir Claude, a rich gentleman and stepfather, and Mrs. Wix, an old governess. Their images are projected in the eyes of a little girl; she is their only judge and jury. The author sticks to his choice of focalisation and the innocence of the little child makes it difficult to decipher the Selves of these adults; it is hard to promptly understand who is right and who is wrong, who is good and who is bad. In Maisie's eyes the 'lovely' young governess is so cute and nice and loving that she even marries Maisie's father to be closer to the child. Her father is so handsome and gorgeous but because of his 'problems' has to depart for America for ever and to leave Maisie behind, with her "brute of a mother" (James 1996*:* 146). Her mother too, even if she treats Maisie awfully, always tells her how much she loves her; in the end she has to abandon her too, because of 'severe' health problems and she announces her stepfather as Maisie's protector and tutor. Maisie is fine with Sir Claude because she likes him enormously; and because she likes her stepmother, too, she 'brings them together' so the trio can live happily ever after. The fun is spoiled by the old governess, though, who has to remind them of the 'moral sense' and decent behaviour. Mrs. Wix, the old, ugly lady is the one

who in the end unties the shameful bond and 'saves' Maisie from the sinful peril. This is all that Maisie 'knows'; reality, however, is different.

One's life begins from one's family; the family is behind the formation of the person as a human and as a citizen. When one becomes a husband, a wife or a parent, one assumes certain responsibilities. The family is the source of love, respect, solidarity and affection; it is something any civilized society is built on, without which a person cannot happily exist. Creating a family is a great feat. The hardest task is, though, not to give birth, but rather to plant into the child's consciousness the concepts of love, freedom, faith, conscience, and responsibility.

What Maisie Knew is a novel that does not teach family values directly; they are concealed from the reader. It is more of a novel that shows the abominable consequences of when a family collapses because of the lack of moral and family virtues. The novel is narrated from the viewpoint of the child, Maisie Farange, who witnesses her parents' divorce and remarriage. Ida and Beale Farange form a couple who has failed in their social roles as husband and wife, and what is worse, as mother and father. The couple constantly argues, quarrels and disputes about almost everything. The divorce does not put an end to their discord, on the contrary, "[t]he mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said, 'so much as looking' at the child; the father's plea was that the mother's lightest touch was 'simply contamination'" (1996: 15). After their divorce, Maisie has been granted a new role, "she was the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them" (22). It seems that H. James blames the society where unhealthy ethics prosper and in which the devaluation of morality and ideals occurs:

> This was a society in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter, but the disunited couple had at last grounds for expecting a time of high activity. They girded their loins, they felt as if the quarrel had only begun. They felt indeed more married than ever, inasmuch as what marriage had mainly suggested to them was the unbroken opportunity to quarrel. There had been 'sides' before, and there were sides as much as ever […] The many friends of the Faranges drew together to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups and cigars. Everybody was always assuring everybody of something very shocking, and nobody would have been jolly if nobody had been outrageous (15).

Maisie has to learn how to survive in a world of preoccupied and oblivious adults. She learns from her mother the art of negligence and of producing "the impression of having mysteries in her life" (James 1996: 36). Ida's Social Self as mother has a very insignificant place in the hierarchy of her Selves; it is surpassed by her primitive bodily and material search. It is really painful to read the passages where Maisie acknowledges her mother's attitude towards herself. Every child wants to be the centre of the universe for his/her parents; Maisie does not want so much, she only desires everyone around her to be happy. But Ida punishes everybody when she is angry, her daughter included, and so, once Maisie returns home from her father's, her mother refuses to see the little girl; it takes her "three days during which Sir Claude [has] made hasty merry dashes into the schoolroom to smooth down the odd situation and to comfort the little girl by saying: 'She'll come around, you know'" (61). Her governess, Mrs. Wix has also tried to do her best by keeping the girl busy with school subjects and long conversations in order to not feel the absence of her mother. Such a behaviour was not unusual, Ida's "duty took at times the form of not seeing her child for days" (64) and unfortunately, it all ended with Maisie accepting with ease that "Mamma doesn't care for [her]" (73).

Her stepfather, Sir Claude, on the other hand, is carrying his social role with dignity and affection; he spends a lot of time with Maisie and offers her all his love and attention. Even the cruel words that Ida calls him (an awful fraud and an idle beast, and a sorry dunce) do not stick to Sir Claude's Social Self in Maisie's mind; besides he has "never said a word to her against her mother" (1996: 77). He could be called an exemplary stepfather if it was not for the interference of the stepmother and her former governess. Everything thus seems very complicated for the young girl, as she knows:

> that her stepmother had been making attempts to see her, that her mother had deeply resented it, that her stepfather had backed her stepmother up, that the latter had pretended to be acting as the representative of her father, and that her mother took the whole thing, in plain terms, very hard (67).

Mrs. Wix is the one who takes the situation in her hands and acts more like a mother and a father taken together. She is the only person who does not ask Maisie to 'bring anyone together' or to help to keep any secrets; the

governess just wants what is best for Maisie and the girl to become a good person (71).

The representation of her father's Social Self appears to be less favourable for his image, him being constantly slandered by Ida, his former wife. Beale Farange, in his turn, is working on spoiling hers, and even teaches the child to repeat his terrible messages to her mamma, which Maisie obediently transmits: "He said I was to tell you from him […] that you're a nasty horrid pig" (21). Moreover, he does not let Maisie keep the correspondence with her mother and welcomes a lot of male friends who negatively influence the consciousness of the little girl. These gentlemen smoke cigarettes in front of her face and some of them have even "made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees [have] violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs till she shrieked – her shriek [has been] much admired – and reproached them with being toothpicks" (19). He soon remarries and Maisie's first governess, Miss Overmore, turns into her stepmother (Mrs. Beale).

Maisie is fond of her new "little mother", who is very beautiful, elegant, clever and well-mannered (James 1996: 50). For the little girl, this woman is a paragon of beauty and perfection. But the reader sees that this is Miss Overmore, who influences Maisie's opinion about everything throughout the novel. It is Miss Overmore who has "sown the seeds of secrecy; sown them not by anything she said, but by a mere roll of those fine eyes which Maisie [has] already admired" (23). Moreover, it is Miss Overmore who is constantly lowering Maisie's self-esteem and detracting her mother, only she does so in such a manner that poor Maisie does not understand her real intentions. For example, when she abandons her place as a governess in Ida Farange's house and goes to work for Maisie's father, she explains this quite simply: she adores the little girl and does not want to give her up and this is why she decides to make this "sacrifice" and break "her vow to Mrs. Farange" (28). Miss Overmore's pretended generosity and affection do not match reality, and this contrast flows into the subsequent dramatic irony. Maisie thinks that she understands "what this martyr [has] gone through" and she realises that she likes her so much, "better than she like[s] papa"; moreover, in her eyes, "papa too like[s] Miss Overmore exactly as much" (28). Besides, Mrs. Beale obtrudes her opinion on Maisie, creating negative images about other people in Maisie's mind. She tells Maisie striking things about her mother: "She has other people

than poor little *you* to think about, and has gone abroad with them; so you needn't be in the least afraid she'll stickle this time for her rights" (40); or assures Maisie that the man who lives with her mother is "ignorant and bad" (41). Even if Maisie feels something odd about her stepmother, she does not care about Miss Overmore / Mrs. Beale's bad reputation, and when Mrs. Wix tries to convince the girl that Mrs. Beale cannot be trusted, Maisie's reply proves a childish behaviour: "She's beautiful and I love her! I love her and she's beautiful!" (212). Mrs. Beale's lovely Social Self is just a mask which she wears for as long as she needs it, but when Maisie chooses Mrs. Wix over her she lashes at Maisie and calls her all sorts of cruel names: "abominable little horror"; "hideous little hypocrite" (272).

The reality is that Ida Farange does indeed have spots on her Social Self, as Mrs. Beale claims, but it is not the best decision to tell her little daughter these things. As mentioned earlier, Ida falls short of what is expected of a lady and a wife. Her innumerable lovers are not a secret to anyone by the end of the novel. It is for one of them that she forsakes Maisie, and the girl remains with her stepfather and Mrs. Wix. It is obvious that Maisie is confused and somewhat afraid throughout. She is told that mamma and papa have problems because of her and she, therefore, does her best to keep up with her social role as a daughter; poor Maisie has "the sense of a double office and enlarged play for pacific powers" (196).

The Social Selves Maisie carries in her mind are so many; she feels that with every person separately she has to become somebody else and to act according to the situation in order to satisfy everybody. Only when she is alone on the first day of their arrival in France can one see how happy and free the little girl is because she does not have to pretend to be anyone now; Maisie feels redeemed "for all the years of her tendency to produce socially that impression of an excess of the queer something which had seemed to waver so widely between innocence and guilt" (180). It is the moment when the necessity in her Social Self vanishes and she can be herself without restrictions, she can feel herself "attuned to everything and [lay] her hand, right and left", she can talk, laugh, play, and enjoy the careless life of a child (180).

Apparently, the Social Selves represented in the novel *What Maisie Knew* are the images of that part of society which Henry James despised the most: the vulgar, the superficial English society. And in order not to spoil the innocent child, he offers her the possibility of choice. From all the adults

around her, Maisie picks the old Mrs. Wix, the old governess who has "no money, no clothes, no appearance, no anything" (203) but the one who regardless her unpleasant appearance has a kind heart and a moral consciousness. Through Maisie, Henry James teaches the lesson of real beauty, that which lies hidden within, not that on show, for everyone to see. In this manner, like his brother, W. James, he reinforces the notion that one's Social Self is situated somewhere above the Material and below the Spiritual one.

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