

HENRY JAMES

“THE ART OF FICTION”: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An answer key is provided at the end of this handout.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. Henry James (1843-1916) is one of America’s greatest novelists; his essay, “The Art of Fiction,” is one of the major statements about “the _____, a relatively recent _____” (358), Kaplan and Anderson write.

2. In the first paragraph on page 358, the editors lists some of the “various issues” which James comments about in this essay. Under what heading—Mimetic, Affective, Objective, Expressive—does each of these issues fall?

(1) The “relationship between fiction and life” - _____

(2) The “freedom and responsibilities of the novelist” - _____

(3) The “task of the critic” - _____

(4) The “relationship between plot and character” - _____

(5) The “importance of technique” - _____

(6) The “place of subject matter in fiction” - _____

(7) The “morality of fiction” - _____

(8) The “character of the novelist” - _____

3. MIMETIC THEORY:

(1) On pages 360-61, find three statements which show James discussing how the novel is like a history and the novelists is like a historian.

(2) On page 363, copy James definition of the novel. How does it begin mimetically, but end expressively?

(3) On page 365, stressing the mimetic function, James writes that “the air of _____” is “the supreme _____ of a novel” (365).

(4) On page 364, James writes, “It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality” (364). In a famous statement at the end of the essay (373), James elaborates, beginning “All life belongs . . .” and ending “. . . the colour of life itself” (373). Select two main points which James is making about the reality which is to be imitated in the novel.

4. OBJECTIVE THEORY:

(1) As the editors write, James “rejects *a priori* [established beforehand] prescriptions and _____ about how to write a novel” (358). Which rules of the novel—based on a list by the critic Walter Besant—does James mention on page 364? What is James’s attitude toward these rules (364-65)?

(2) James held that all parts of the novel must be seen together as an organic wholeness. Kaplan and Anderson write, “When James declares that the novel is ‘a _____ thing, all one and continuous like any other _____’ [366], the vary simile reminds us of _____” (358).

(3) James makes two famous statements about this organic unity which a novel must have:

On page 370, he held that “in proportion as [a novel] is successful,” the “idea [similar to theme] _____ and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every _____ and every _____-point contribute directly to the expression” of the idea or theme.

On page 366-67, addressing those who believed that aspects of the novel, such as description, dialogue, and action, could be separated, James asks rhetorically, “What is character but the determination of _____ [action]? What is incident [action] but the illustration of _____?”

(4) On page 358, the editors state that James believed that “critics and readers” can “judge a novelist [not by the subject matter of the novel, but] only by the ‘execution’ [367],’ the ‘treatment,’ the rendering of the raw multitudinous materials of life into a _____ word of art” (358):

James writes: “Of course it is of _____ that we are talking—that being the _____ point of a novel that is open to contention” (367).

Readers “must grant the [novelist] his _____, his _____, his *donnée* [that “given” or the premise of the novel]: our _____ is applied only to what he _____ of it” (367).

(5) According to Kaplan and Anderson, James also “rejects _____ concepts of _____” (358).

Read page 371 and summarize James’s critiques of a novel of action (Stevenson’s Treasure Island) and a French novel based on a psychological study of a child.

From what you know of James’s own novels, what is significant in his statement, “There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a _____ reason” (371)?

5. AFFECTIVE THEORY

(1) James stresses that modern society has an antipathy toward and suspicion of art, especially the novel: “_____,’ in our _____ communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, . . . is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to _____, to amusement, to instruction” (361).

(2) On page 362, list at least three of James’s comment on what some “people who read novels as an exercise in skipping” (362) feel make a “good” novel.

(3) Therefore, as Kaplan and Anderson note, “James denies that the novel must have a conscious _____ purpose. On the contrary, what is commonly thought of as morality he defines as timidity—that is, the avoidance of certain ‘_____’ but nevertheless _____ subjects” (359):

James writes that for some the purpose of the novel is “to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, _____ moulds” (369).

Instead of real life, “we are being put off with a _____, a compromise and _____” (369).

(4) The editors write that since James “rejects limitations on the artists’ _____ of choice in respect to _____ matter and technique” (358), the novelists’ prospective readers also have the freedom to choose not to read the novel: “Of course I may not care for your idea at all; I may think it _____, or stale, or _____; in which case I _____ my _____ of you altogether” (368).

6. EXPRESSIVE THEORY

(1) Kaplan and Anderson write, “Throughout the essay, James stresses the artist’s necessary _____ to experience and the transformation of that experience by the _____” (358).

(2) On page 365, James stresses this sensitivity and imagination of the novelist: The novelist has the “power to guess the unseen from the _____, to trace the _____ of things, to judge the whole piece by the _____ Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, ‘Write from experience and experience only,’ I should feel [the need] to add, ‘_____ to be _____ of the people on whom _____ is _____!’” (365).

(3) As mentioned, the novelist must be given artistic freedom:

“If we pretend to respect the artist at all, we must allow him his _____ of choice” (368), since “Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from _____ in the _____ of _____” (368).

(4) Concerning the novelist’s mind, James writes that, “No _____ novel will ever proceed from a _____ mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist of fiction, will cover all needful _____ ground” (373).

Answer Key

1. novel; genre.
2. (1) Mimetic.
 (2) Expressive.
 (3) Affective.
 (4) Objective.
 (5) Objective.
 (6) Mimetic.
 (7) Affective.
 (8) Expressive.
3. MIMETIC THEORY:
 - (1) The “novel is history” (360). It “must speak . . . with the tone of the historian” (361). The novelist is “looking for truth” just as “the historian” is (361).
 - (2) “A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life [MIMETIC]: that, to begin with, constitutes its value [AFFECTIVE], which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression [by the novelist][EXPRESSIVE]”(363).
 - (3) reality; virtue.
 - (4) a) Duel with all of reality: Do “not listen . . . to those who would shut you up into corners of it [All life] and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits.”(373)
 b) Do not listen “to those who would persuade you” to write about an ideal world, one “breathing a superfine air,” and would cause you to turn away “from the truth of things” (373).
 c) A novelist can record any “impression of life” and can use any “manner of seeing it or feeling it” which he or she wishes.
 d) Do not worry about being pessimistic or optimistic. Instead simply “catch the colour of life itself” (373).
4. OBJECTIVE THEORY:
 - (1) rules.
 - a) Write from experience. Use realistic characters. Keep a notebook. Do not describe a character at length. Have a “conscious moral purpose.” The story is all-important.
 - b) James says he has difficulty agreeing with any of these, except the notebook.
 - (2) living; organism; Aristotle.
 - (3) permeates; word; punctuation; incident; character.
 - (4) unified; execution; only; subject; idea; criticism; makes.
 - (5) traditional; plot; psychological.
 James says that Stevenson’s Treasure Island is full of incidents (murders,

mysteries, and so forth), but James says that in real life he has never “been on a quest for buried treasure” (371); therefore, he cannot judge how Stevenson has executed his purpose. However, since “I have been a child in face,” he can follow the psychological experiences of the child, “at successive steps . . . say[ing] Yes or No . . . to what the artist puts before me” (371).

In most of James’s own novels, what happens in the outside world (a series of events) is less important than what goes on in a character’s mind. Thus James is termed a psychological realist as a novelist.

5. AFFECTIVE THEORY:

- (1) Art; Protestant; morality.
- (2) (a) Presenting virtuous characters. (b) Happy ending. (c) Full of incident and movement with little or no analysis or description.
- (3) moral; improper; real; traditional; substitute; convention.
- (4) freedom; subject; silly; unclean; wash; hands.

6. EXPRESSIVE THEORY:

- (1) sensitivity; imagination.
- (2) seen; implication; pattern; Try; one; nothing; lost.
- (3) freedom; flying; face; presumptions.
- (4) good; superficial; moral.