

*The Master* by Colm Tóibín (Picador) R190

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Henry James has always been a novelist's novelist. After some popular success with his early novelette *Daisy Miller*, and, later, *The Portrait of a Lady*, he rather left the vulgar public behind in his pursuit of an ever more rarefied art. When he died in 1916, he was more revered than read. Although he had a small and fiercely loyal following of friends and disciples, the great public was at best indifferent to his increasingly convoluted late style.

Since his death, James has been at the mercy of critical fashion. Interest in his work, which declined sharply after his death, revived only in the late 1940s, when he was welcomed as a member of the Great Tradition of the English Novel by the influential critic FR Leavis. As Leavis himself was shouldered aside by a new generation of critics, James, too, was in danger of being regarded as "canonical", that is, irrelevant, another dead white male.

And yet in the last decade or so, James has experienced yet again a revival of interest. Any number of his novels have been filmed – *Daisy Miller*, *The Bostonians*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, even his notoriously abstruse late works, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. Suddenly, aided by the allure of the likes of Nicole Kidman and Nick Nolte, James had more readers than he had in his lifetime. What WH Auden, in "At the Grave of Henry James", called "the resentful muttering Mass" had discovered Henry James.

And now the novelists have started writing novels about James. Last year Emma Tennant published *Felony*; due next year is a novel by David Lodge called *Author, Author*. And here we have Colm Tóibín's tribute, in this scrupulous, affectionate unsensational fictionalisation of part of the James's life.

Tóibín chooses to focus mainly on the years 1895 to 1899, just after James's disastrous attempt to write for the stage, – his play was hissed and booed on opening night, and was eventually taken off to make way for Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* – which play was again whipped off after Wilde's arrest and imprisonment. Soon hereafter James moved to Lamb House in Rye, where he lived till shortly before his death; and this novel is as much an account of James's relationship with his beloved Lamb House as anything else.

Tóibín gives more than a passing glance at James's sexual preferences – if preferences is not too strong a word for inclinations so little expressed. These mute longings have been the subject of some critical speculation, the standard assumption being that James was a non-practising homosexual. There were, especially late in life, romantic attachments to young men, all of which, as far as anybody knows, remained unconsummated.

Tóibín gives some space to one of these young men, the Norwegian-American sculptor Hendrik Andersen – a dashing attractive, ambitious, somewhat self-centred young man who enjoyed James's adulation but seemed not to have returned it. Tóibín recreates this unsatisfactory relationship vividly and concretely but unsensationally: its most erotic moment occurs when James, lying in his bedroom, listens to Andersen undressing in the guest room. In the same understated way, Tóibín, drawing on a somewhat controversial speculation of Sheldon Novick's, dramatises for us the young James's sharing a bed with

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, the future US judge and legal scholar. The incident, as described by Tóibín, is as pregnant with unuttered meanings and as unresolved as anything in James's own fiction: "He knew that this would never be mentioned between them, nor mentioned by either of them to anybody else ..."

Emma Tennant based her book, reviewed last year on this page, on James's relationship with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, who committed suicide in 1894. Drawing on *Lyndall Gordon's A Private Life of Henry James*, Tennant distorted its premises to produce an unattractive and inaccurate portrayal of James's human relations. Tóibín, using the same material, produces a far more scrupulous and nuanced version. He, too, ascribes to James guilt about his failure to reciprocate Woolson's affections, but, unlike Tennant, he can contextualise this as part of a complex emotional life, in which all human contact, however warmly returned, is ultimately subordinated to the demands of his art. Not that James, as imagined by Tóibín, is callous; he has merely opted for loneliness as the necessary condition of his sexuality and his art, "his memory working like grief, the past coming to him with its arm outstretched looking for comfort."

Tóibín writes unpretentiously, clearly and soberly. Perhaps wisely, he makes no attempt to reproduce the famously orotund style of James's conversations; indeed, his James is a reticent, almost taciturn man. This leads to a certain muffling of effect: we constantly wish that James would speak up, which he resolutely refuses to do, tending only to bow at people he finds particularly offensive. Since this is a novel rather than a biography, Tóibín is under no compulsion to preserve the received impression of James as social being; but it is difficult not to regret the loss of James's immense powers of articulation and his often comical self-parody. This, however, is a small loss, when set against the scrupulous fairness and lucid affection animating this recreation.

James's life was not eventful in the superficial sense. He avoided fighting in the Civil War, he had no passionate love affair, and he died in his bed of natural causes. But, as recreated by Tóibín, he had a life made rich by the quality of his mind and the resources of his imagination; to him, there was more 'story' in the loneliness of an unconsummated love than in the most lurid romance. Tóibín has succeeded in conveying to his readers something of that richness of the imagination, the sense of a life lived quietly but fully. For this withdrawal from and yet savouring of life, Lamb House offers the perfect image: out of the bustle and throng of London, but itself the quiet centre of contemplation and congenial company, of the pleasures of solitude and the consolations of art. In an essay in the *Daily Telegraph*, Tóibín called Lamb House "one of the most rich and haunting buildings in this country." His own novel goes some way towards justifying that claim.