

عناصر السيرة الذاتية في قصة "السنوات الوسطى" لهنري جيمس

Biographical Elements in Henry James's "The Middle Years"

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الملخص

"السنوات الوسطى" هي قصة قصيرة للكاتب البريطاني الأمريكي المولد هنري جيمس (1843-1916). تصور القصة معاناة كاتب أثناء محاولته تحقيق حياته المهنية. نظراً لأن القصة تصور حياة الكاتب ومعاناتهم، فإنها تتطوي على بعض جوانب حياة هنري جيمس الخاصة. تفترض هذه الورقة البحثية بأن "السنوات الوسطى" لهنري جيمس لها جوانب سيرة ذاتية يمكن اكتشافها من خلال القراءة الدقيقة للقصة بمقارنتها بحياة الكاتب. يتم تقديم جيمس في القصة من خلال شخصية (دينكومب)، حيث توجد بعض أوجه التشابه بين الكاتب والشخصية الرئيسية في القصة. تجادل الورقة أيضاً بأن شخصية (دينكومب) تعكس هنري جيمس في العديد من الجوانب مثل مهنة الكتابة والشخصية والعمر والمخاوف والأمل والإنجاز والإحباط والموقف السلبي تجاه المرأة والتوجه الجنسي. بالتالي، فإن الورقة تبحث في جوانب السيرة الذاتية في هذه القصة وتحللها من خلال ربطها بالكاتب نفسه.

Abstract

“The Middle Years” is a short story for the American-born British writer Henry James (1843-1916). It depicts the suffering of a writer during his attempt to achieve his career. As it portrays the life and suffering of writers, so it involves some aspects of Henry James’s own life. The paper argues that Henry James’s “The Middle Years” has autobiographical aspects which can be discovered through a close reading of the story by comparing it with his own life. James is presented in the story through the character of Dencombe, as there are some parallels between the writer and the story’s main character. The paper also argues that the character of Dencombe mirrors Henry James in many aspects such as the writing career, personality, age, concerns, hope, achievement, frustration, negative attitude to woman and sexual orientation. Hence, the paper investigates and analyzes the autobiographical aspects in this story by connecting them to the writer himself.

Introduction

The Middle Years is a short story written in 1893 by the American-born British writer Henry James (1843-1916), it was published in Scribner's Magazine. It can be summarized in one sentence as *the story of a gifted writer and a fan*. It is about Dencombe, a writer in his middle years who is recovering in a health resort after a serious sickness. He is not assured yet of his achievement as a talented writer, but then after his accidental meeting with Doctor Hugh, one of his fans, he would be satisfied of his achievement and career after their long exchange. The story discusses some themes related to the writer's life and career just like quest for perfection, suffering, fans, frustration, success, ... etc. So, it is regarded as the best example of what he has written about writers.

Jackson Benson (1989) regards biographical criticism as a form of literary criticism which analyzes the biography of a writer to show the relationship between the writer's life and his work. While Jenna Copper (2021) defines it as "a literary theory that uses the author's life, experiences, race, gender, philosophy, etc. to interpret the work". This critical method clearly goes back to Samuel Johnson's *Lives of Poets* (1779-1781), where he depends on the biographies of poets to interpret their works.

The story has biographical aspects which can be discovered through a close reading of the story. It is clear that the writer himself is present in the story through the character of Dencombe, as there are some parallels between the writer and the story's main character. Johnson (2012) states that near the end of James's life, he tended to write works that discuss some topics like biography, critical reputation and depicting life of men of letters.

The paper argues that the character of Dencombe mirrors Henry James in many aspects just like the writing career, personality, age,

concerns, hope, achievement, frustration, negative attitude to woman and sexual orientation. Hence, we are going to investigate the biographical aspects in this story by connecting them to the writer himself. Instead of the unpopularity of this short story and scarcity of critical works about it, we will try to analyze it depending on the text itself, along with the writer's biography. In addition to that, we are going to depend on some critical essays about this story.

1. A Biographical Background of *The Middle Years*

There are two significant aspects synchronized the publication of *The Middle Years*, the first one is the death of some close people to the author. Alice, his sister died one year before the publication of the story, who was very close to him especially after their parents' death in 1884 when she moved to England and James became responsible for her care (Pridmore, 2015). This incident was preceded by the death of his friend Wolcott Balestier in 1891 (Wikipedia contributors, 2022).

On the other hand, his direction towards drama between 1890-1895 met a poor reception, the dramatization of *The American* in 1891 didn't achieve popularity, while the original play *Guy Domville* which was produced in 1895 failed bitterly when audience booed him at the end of its first performance. So, he was obliged to divorce drama and look for new directions in fiction writing (Edel, 2022). Then Pridmore (2015) comments on James's hard times at that time "Now she [his sister Alice] was gone, his work was meeting with rejection, and he was turning 50".

During these hard attempts in writing, *The Middle Years* was written in 1893. In the last ten years he tried for a new approach, so he used social realism in two of his novels, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, which were published in 1886, but this style was unsuited for his genius which was a complex one (Pridmore, 2015). Hollander & Bromwich (1996) comment on the biographical background of this story, which is written during his attempt to enter drama world:

In 1893 Henry James turned fifty. He was in the middle of a disastrous half-decade attempt to triumph as a playwright, and during the course of the year he published only one new piece of fiction, *The Middle Years*. Although he had already written eleven novels (As cited in: Story of the Week, 2014).

Just like Dencombe, Henry James was a passive observer, who used to be lonely and unsocial especially during his middle age as he is described by Edel (2022) “but, while he was an active observer and participant in society, he tended, until late middle age, to be ‘distant’ in his relations with people and was careful to avoid “involvement”.

Dencombe, was a passive observer too, as we see at the opening of the story, when he observes the three persons and tries to analyze and guess the relationship among them. Then the narrator comments on the pleasure that he gets while observation “Equally innocent and infinite are the pleasures of observation and the resources engendered by the trick of analysing life” (James, 2022, p. 3).

Dencombe is a tragic man. When Doctor Hugh wonders about his loneliness “You seem very much alone”. Dencombe attributes his loneliness to the nature of his age “That often happens at my age. I've outlived, I've lost by the way” (James, 2022, p. 6). Then he tells him about how he lost his family:

“Doctor Hugh faltered; then surmounting a soft scruple:

‘Whom have you lost?’

‘Every one’.

“I once had a wife--I once had a son. My wife died when my child was born, and my boy, at school, was carried off by typhoid” (James, 2022, p. 7).

There is a similarity here between Dencombe and Henry James. While Dencombe is a widower, James is a single man, who lost some close people at the same period of writing this story especially his close sister Alice.

Dencombe’s personality, preference of solitude and his tendency to calmness can be inferred from the narrator’s depiction of the scene of receiving the parcel from the postman, then he heads to a bench which is described as “a safe recess” in the cliff, which was protected from the rear side (James, 2022, p. 3).

2. Their Middle Ages and Britishness

Along the whole story, we can view many similarities between the story's main character, Dencombe and Henry James himself. Regarding age, just like Dencombe, Henry James was in his middle years when the story was written. Since he was born in 1843, so when he published *The Middle Years* in 1893, he was about fifty years. Hence, he parallels the story's main character, who is also in his middle years which is chosen as the title of the story.

One more aspect regarding the success of both Henry James and his main character in this story which is worth to be mentioned here is their successful career especially during their middle age. In late 1876, Henry James crossed to London from France, where he wrote the major works of his middle years. He achieved international fame in 1878 by the publication of *Daisy Miller* (Edel, 2022).

On the other hand, Henry James was born in America, but he spent a lot of years in Europe, where he settled in and died in England. He got the British citizenship in 1915, one year before his death. So, he is an American-born British writer. Especially as he preferred British values and life style on the American's materialism and way of life, "the materialism of American life deeply troubled James, and on his return to England he set to work to shore up his own writings, and his own career, against this ephemeral world" (Edel, 2022). *The Middle Years* is set in England too, precisely in Bournemouth. Hence, it is based on James's experience in one way or another. At the same time, Dencombe may represent James as both are writers who live in England.

3. Sexual Orientation and Representation of Woman

There are some debates, arguments and hypotheses about the sexual orientation of Henry James, especially after the appearance of some theories and approaches in literary criticism just like Feminism and Queer theories. Picano (2015) refers to the relationships of Henry James as homosocial. According to Meriam-Webster, homosocial is “relating to, or involving social relationships between persons of the same sex and especially between men” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While according to Tóibín’s⁽¹⁾ standpoint that Henry James is not a homosexual and does not have any other sexual relation (Picano, 2015).

In *The Middle Years*, we can notice an attraction between the Dencombe, the writer and his fan, Doctor Hugh, but it is rather a natural one rather than being a sexual attraction in any way. Doctor Hugh is infatuated by Dencobme and spends more time with him than with the Countess, his employer, or even her female companion Miss Vernham whom as Dencombe thinks, is interested in the Doctor and plans to get married with him after the Countess’s death, who is assumed to leave her wealth for him. Joyce Carol Oates believes that it was the unrealistic quality of this plot that allowed James to cast his "gently gay fantasy" of a young man who would give up everything to care for a lonely, depressed old man writer (As cited in Pridmore, 2015).

On the other hand, the representation of woman in this story is also worth to focus on. In this work, the female characters are portrayed negatively. Here we have four main characters, two men and two women. The two men are Dencome, the writer and his fan, Doctor

⁽¹⁾ Colm Tóibín is an Irish novelist and critic. He is the author of *The Master* a novel which was published in 2004 which depicts the life of Henry James.

Hugh. While the two women are the Countess and Miss Vernham. The Countess is a rich dowager who comes to Bournemouth with her paid companion, Miss Vernham and an accompanying physician (Doctor Hugh). It is expected that she will leave her wealth to Hugh. The Countess is described in the story as "an Englishwoman by birth and the daughter of a celebrated baritone, whose state, without his talent, she had inherited, was the widow of a French nobleman and mistress of all that remained of the handsome fortune, the fruit of her father's earnings, that had constituted her dower" (James, 2022, p. 5).

While Miss Vernham is a paid companion of the Countess, whom Dencombe concludes that she pays a special attention to the doctor and plans to marry him after the Countess's death. James describes her as "an odd creature but an accomplished pianist, was attached to her person at a salary" (James, 2022, p. 5).

Both women are depicted as passive and "silly" characters, Doctor Hugh's reply to Dencombe will give a reason behind his ignorance of the two women, "Well, don't quarrel with the Countess--she's a present help to you." "I don't quarrel," Doctor Hugh returned. "But I don't get on with silly women" (James, 2022, p. 6). The writer here deals with women inferiorly. They are depicted as shallow-minded women. Especially since they belong to a world away from the world of letters and books where Dencombe and Hugh are involved in. Only for those who read and read for a specific writer know his or her value. Unlike the Countess and Miss Vernham who don't read, only Hugh is the one who is able to value Dencombe. After meeting Dencombe, he has to choose between the Countess and his writer, but since he doesn't find shared interests with the two women. Hence, he is detached from them and subsequently joins Dencombe's companion, his favorite writer. McManus (2018) writes on the two women who do not try the pleasure of reading just like Hugh, and they are not seen reading or carrying a book in the story. So, it is normal that they would not be affected by Dencombe as Hugh.

4. Readership, Success and Perfection

Many writers, poets and artists became more popular and are well received after their death. Henry James's fame and reputation became widespread late after his death when he is recognized as a craftsman in novel. His popularity was limited during his life, but during 1940s and 1950s, he became famous and his works were translated into other languages (Edel, 2022).

Henry James didn't achieve a distinguished fame and popularity during his life time. Hence, the idea of success and popularity chased him continuously. Moreover, he was interested in the idea of his portrait in the eyes of his readers and. Johnson (2012) states "Like many other writers he kept a tight control over his own image in the public eye, and eventually burnt all his most private papers so that nothing untoward would slip through to damage his posthumous reputation".

Hollander & David (1996) state that James often was doubtful about his success, future chances and abilities. When he wrote *The Middle Years*, he didn't write his masterpieces yet such as *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* (As cited in Story of the Week, 2014).

In *The Middle Years*, it is of prime significance to explore this notion through Dencombe-Hugh relation. Dencombe is possessed by the idea of the reader's opinion. Hence, in his accidental encounter with Hugh near the hotel, he tries to lure Hugh to talk about the book, express his opinion and giving a real feedback. Not only for Dencombe or James, most of writers would behave in the same way, since this short story is not restricted to Henry James. It is the story of every writer as it clearly depicts the life and suffering of the writer. This claim can be approved in the story's famous quote "We work in the

dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art” (James, 2022, p. 11). Dencombe here doesn’t use the first-person pronoun ‘I’, otherwise, he uses the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ to refer to writers in general. He explains the writers’ suffering and hard effort that they make during the writing process, since writing is a career characterized by hardship and need of talent.

The role of Hugh is a crucial one, and Dencombe likes his companionship as he helps him in boosting his confidence which is described as a low one along the story. On the other hand, Dencombe is regarded as a god-like figure to Hugh, as he was amused by his powerful way of writing. But Dencombe is still unconfident about what he has already done. Just like many writers who are worry that what they have written is not worthy or not good enough. The reason behind his constant revisions of the book may refer to a kind of insecurity within Dencombe (McManus, 2018).

Just like Dencombe, James’s permeant obsession was to be sure of his career success. In *The Middle Years*, Just like any writer or artist, both of them are waiting to catch their big fish. Instead of the success that is achieved by Dencombe, but he still longs for more success, such as any writer who looks for perfection. McManus (2018) asserts the idea that every writer wishes that their next work will be better than the current one “It is as though he is unfinished with his writing which would naturally be the case for any writer. Always wanting their next publication to be better than their last. Dencombe is no exception”. Then he adds in his essay “He may be suggesting that the writer will never sit at ease on publication of a piece of writing. Whereas the reader will revel in the delights of what they are reading” (McManus, 2018).

Seeking perfection is a natural human phenomenon. So, many great writers and artists seek perfection, as they make hard effort and spend a lot of times in revising their works to look perfect. Since great works are not easy to accomplish. McManus (2018) writes “Chasing the impossible goal of perfection. Something that many writers aim for but may never achieve”. While Pridmore (2015) comments on the notion of perfection that Dencombe carries by comparing him to Henry James himself “Dencombe is a perfectionist, much like Henry James, who cannot resist continuously revising his own works, for whom nothing he writes is ever his final word”. James expresses this idea in the story to describe how Dencombe is obsessed by the notion of continuous revision. “He had done all he should ever do, and yet hadn't done what he wanted” (James, 2022, p. 2). The narrator describes Dencombe who is infatuated by proof reading and revision of his works “Dencombe was a passionate corrector, a fingerer of style; the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself” (James, 2022, p. 5).

As a result of Dencombe's looking for perfection and his careful writing, he produced little works “It had taken too much of his life to produce too little of his art” (James, 2022, p. 2). McManus (2018) comments figuratively on the concept of perfection that Dencombe is obsessed of “Like a painter Dencombe may not have painted the picture that he saw in his mind”.

Dencombe is just like James who was not well recognized by himself and readers. Towards the end of the story, Dencombe is rather sad, as he is not satisfied of what he has already achieved:

If anything there is a degree of sadness at the end of the story as Dencombe does not give himself the recognition he deserves. His continual goal of chasing perfection will be fruitless. As

perfection often is. Rather than enjoying what he has achieved (which he does briefly) Dencombe laments what he has not done. What he has not achieved'' (McManus, 2018).

5. Depiction of High Class

One of the themes which are presented in this short story is the representation of high class, especially through the character of the Countess. Before discussing this theme, it is better to go back to the writer's biography to explore this aspect in his life and then connecting it to the story.

Henry James's father was a famous theologian, while his grandfather was a banker and investor from Albany. His mother Mary Walsh, on the other hand is from a wealthy family in New York City (Wikipedia contributors, 2022). Travel was not popular at his time and requires a lot of money. His family financed a grand tour to Europe in 1869 to study (Poetry Foundation, n. d.). While he was in Europe and particularly in Britain, he started relationships with his time's elite. According to Charles (2004), it is referred to his art of portraying life, especially for the high class with a reference to his own experience:

Another aspect of James's realism was to portray life as it existed for the upper class. He portrayed life as it actually was, and not a romanticized version of what society thought it ought to be. James knew these "society" people, and he stayed faithful to his experiences.

In *The Middle Years*, the writer vividly sketches the aristocracy and the life of high class of late nineteenth century especially through the characters of the Countess and her companion Miss Vernham, that refers to a kind of a class distinction that was still existed. The Countess as she is described in the story was the daughter of a celebrated baritone and the widow of a French nobleman. Just like her father, she inherited wealth with no talent.

Conclusion

The Middle Years is one of Henry James's masterpieces, but it is not very popular just like his other works. Since this short story is about a gifted writer and a fan, so we can view a lot of similarities between the writer himself and his main character, Dencombe. For example, according to age, Dencombe was in his middle years. James, on his turn was in his middle years too when he wrote the story.

Moreover, both writers are struggling to achieve their success and catch their big fish. Regarding Henry James, he faced a kind of a failure in the last ten years before the publication of *The Middle Years*, on the other hand, his attempt in drama was fruitless and met poor acceptance. While Dencombe on his turn is struggling to assert his fame through his last work.

One more parallel between them is their grief and sadness as a result of their solitude and losing close people. James lost his close sister Alice in 1892, which means one year before the publication of this story, whom used to live with him and be under his patronage. Moreover, he lost some other dear people just like his friend Wolcott Balestier in 1891. While James was a single man, poor Dencobme was also a lonely man, but he was a widower as his wife died when she gave the birth of his boy. Even his boy is going to die later in typhoid.

Sexual orientation and negative attitude towards women are other significant aspects which can be compared here. Henry James didn't marry along his life, but there is no clear evident that he was a homosexual. However, recently after the appearance of some new critical theories just like queer and gay theories, there are some debates and hypotheses about his sexual orientation. He was described as a homosocial, as he used to befriend male people on female ones, which is clear evident in *The Middle Years*, as both male characters feel comfort in dealing with each other. Hugh leaves the Countess although

that he is responsible for her medical care and it is supposed that he will inherit her fortune soon after her death. Nevertheless, he decides to leave her and spend most of the time during their settlement at Bournemouth with the companionship of the writer. While the negative attitude towards the two ladies is also worth to be mentioned. Both women are depicted as silly and shallow women. They belong to a different world rather than the world of art and letters to which Dencombe and Hugh do belong.

Britishness can be regarded as another similarity between both of them. Although Henry James was an American-born writer, but he is regarded as a British one, since he spent a lot of years in Britain till getting the British Citizenship late in 1915, one year before his death. On the other hand, Dencombe looks like a British writer who shares with James a lot of similarities. Moreover, the story itself is set in Britain, precisely at Bournemouth, which is set in the southern coast of Britain.

One more thing, is the depiction of high-class people. As the story depicts vividly this class through the character of the Countess. Which is based on James's experience and biography, since he descended from a wealthy family. In addition to that, he was in contact with the elite and the high class during his life.

To conclude with the notion of perfection and success that both writers, and subsequently all writers tend to. Both Dencombe and James are infatuated by the idea of constant revision and proof reading of their works. The story opens while Dencombe is receiving his latest version of the book, on which he lasted many years of writing and revision.

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