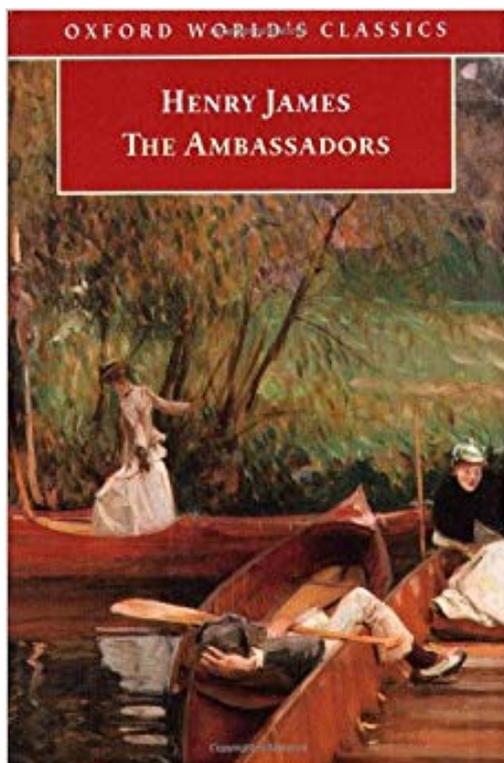


## The Ambassadors (Oxford World's Classics) by Christopher Butler, Henry James



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The second of James's three late masterpieces, was, in its author's opinion, "the best, all round, of my productions". Lambert Strether, a mild middle-aged American of no particular achievements, is dispatched to Paris from the manufacturing empire of Woollett, Massachusetts. The mission conferred on him by his august patron, Mrs. Newsome, is to discover what, or who, is keeping her son Chad in the notorious city of pleasure, and to bring him home. But Strether finds Chad transformed by the influence of a remarkable woman; and as the Parisian spring advances, he himself succumbs to the allure of the 'vast bright Babylon' and to the mysterious charm of Madame de Vionnet.



## Reviews of the **The Ambassadors (Oxford World's Classics)** by Christopher Butler, Henry James

Kulafyn

I have not had a chance to think about this great novel much since finishing my first reading of it. After a slightly slow start it struck me as moving along at a good pace, introducing new characters and having them interact with one another, often through extended conversations, all seen through the eyes of Lambert Strether, a reflective man who looks back on his long life with a sense of regret, while he attempts to carry out a mission imposed upon him by his equally long-lived fiancée, a significant presence in the novel though she never appears in person. Enough has been written about the novel by specialists and others for me to be reluctant to add my points but I'll mention just one thing that struck me particularly. Most of the action takes place in cities and towns, particularly in Paris. Apartments look out over busy boulevards, people congregate socially in enclosed spaces, and so on. One day Strether takes off for the country. This turns out to be a very important day from the point of view of his understanding of people who are important to him. What struck me most forcibly, however, was the author's ability to make the transition from city to country so palpable. As someone who loves the country, I felt an almost visceral relief at "leaving the city". I have yet to find out whether this transition, which seemed so positive to me, has struck others in the same way, and if so what one can make of its role in novel. A first guess would be that it represents something like the Sartrean thought that "hell is other people": leaving the city, Strether leaves that hell, at least as far as his significant relationships go, and finds a kind of freedom that, as most likely must happen, is soon taken from him.

Welen

Beware of the Kindle edition: I bought this Kindle version of the book instead of getting a free download because I thought the text would be better. I'm half-way through the book and have found numerous typos and missing words. In some places, entire sentences are missing. I expected something better from Oxford World Classics. I give the book 3 stars because the story is quite good, although you have to like late Henry James to appreciate it. At this point in his career, James's sentences had become very ornate.

EROROHALO

I highly recommend this printing by Oxford of this enduring American classic. The print is large enough to read comfortably, the binding is better than most paperbacks, and the gutter margin is ample. If you are going to buy the book, this is a splendid edition to choose.

Other comments have summarized the plot and described the characters of *The Ambassadors*. I won't duplicate them. But I would like to make a point or two about what I believe James was trying to do in *The Ambassadors* and why it doesn't quite work. This is not in any sense to disparage James, but to note that what he was attempting to do cannot be done well in the manner he chose -- and perhaps at all. There are limits, after all, to every art form.

Let me acknowledge first that Henry James was a superb craftsman, and his literary canon is unsurpassed by any American writer before or since. *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* are the three major novels of his later period, and *The Ambassadors* is the work he thought his masterpiece. In a sense, everything he wrote is a masterpiece, or near. But the novels of his late period differ markedly in style and narrative quality from his earlier works, in which he experimented with the novel as a literary form in a way that many readers do not find altogether successful. Some scholars refer to James in his late period as "the Great Pretender." I tend to side with them.

Specifically, his later style is overly elaborate, often deliberately obscure, so that the reader must

work with the protagonist to understand fully the significance of what is happening. Wading through successive dependent clauses of nuanced meaning, unclear references, elaborate metaphors, and inverted sentence structure (some simply will not parse) is not the casual reader's cup of tea. At the same time, the story or plot is stretched so thin it is almost rendered a nullity, since what happens to the various characters is secondary to what goes on inside the head of the hero, Lambert Strether. For James, that was the whole point. The meager plot is framework within which James examines the nuances of relationships and the discontinuities that arise when cultures clash (American values meets those of Europe, in this case.) Often, it is not altogether clear what has happened at the end of the book, although the ending of *The Ambassadors* is less cryptic than that of the other two novels mentioned above. In a word, the novel turns on fine gradations and distinctions that often seem much ado about nothing and leave many readers more puzzled than enlightened.

For that reason, I view the experiment with form as less than wholly successful. For the sake of comparison, the same can be said for the experimental novels of James Joyce and nearly all of Marcel Proust's massive novel (*Dans La Recherche du Temps Perdu*). James, Joyce, and Proust are as unlike as can be, but their separate and very different efforts to refine and reinvent the novel form seem, with the benefit of long hindsight, valiant, but misguided, efforts -- at least insofar as the point of writing is to communicate with reasonably educated readers. Like Finnegans Wake and *Guermantes Way*, only pedants read *The Ambassadors* with pleasure, and then only on the third or fourth reading. In that regard, the novels of James's middle period -- *The Portrait of A Lady* and *Washington Square* -- are still challenging, but far more successful.

Having described the warts, let me quickly add that James's literary reputation as a craftsman is deserved and justifies reading anything he wrote. He had the delightful knack of saying things in a way that no one else ever has, before or since, and there is an intellectual core to all of his works that few American writers ever attempt. No serious writer or reader can afford to ignore his legacy, even if it describes an avenue that most writers will choose not to follow. And with those caveats, I heartily recommend the book.

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