

## From City of Culture to City of Consumption: Boston in Henry James's *The Bostonians*

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Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) distinguishes itself from his other works by its disturbing narrator<sup>1</sup> and its all-American setting, which amounts to a frank criticism of his home country. In fact some of the novel is so sarcastic that when first serialized in *The Century*, James had to defend himself even to his brother in his letters.<sup>2</sup> His intention can be seen in his Notebook as follows:

The relation of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England. The whole thing is as local, as American, as possible, and full of Boston; an attempt to show that I *can* write an American story. There must, indispensably, be a type of newspaper man—the man whose ideal is energetic reporter. I should like to *bafouer* [French: ridicule] the vulgarity and hideousness of this—the impudent invasion of privacy—the extinction of all conception of privacy, etc. . . . I wished to write a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently James's intention was to write "a very American tale" and to him it was about the friendship between women, journalism that invaded privacy, and the women's movement which seemed to him to diminish women's feminine nature. Then he picked Boston as the setting. Why would he choose

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Boston as a setting for his “very *American* tale?”

One possible answer to the question could be that, to James, what made “a very American tale” was a frenzied uproar over money in an American city. Indeed after the Civil War, the whole nation was heading towards commercialization, and the culture of consumption was replacing the high culture embodied by Boston. Boston itself went through modernization and also became a hub of commerce.

Another answer to the question could be that Boston did not seem to be capable of such excitement over money, for it was where the New England mind with its Puritan heritage and Transcendentalist philosophy was supposed to be still intact. As Shaun O’Connell writes, “Boston holds a high, though precarious, place in the American mind” because it is the site of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and because of that it came to represent “[the American] head, the national citadel of culture and moral purpose,”<sup>4</sup> though it also embodied “a darker side of the American character—a puritan streak. . . .”<sup>5</sup> Because of its original position as the city of New England heritage, its transition to a city of capitalism appears even more drastic. Boston at this time embodied both conflicting values, the New England mind and the culture of consumption. These could be the reasons why James chose Boston as his setting, and depicted how the city of culture became a new city of culture of consumption. The change meant the decline of Boston which, in Oliver Wendell Holmes’ words, had been “the thinking centre of the continent, and therefore of the planet.”<sup>6</sup>

This paper will discuss how Bostonians, represented by Olive Chancellor, a Boston elite and a feminist, and Verena Tarrant, a talented young speaker, face the transition of Boston from a city of culture to a city of capitalism. Olive resists the change but eventually assimilates to it, or it could be said that she is incorporated into the system, while Verena easily adjusts herself to the new environment without hesitation. The transition is encoded everywhere: streetcars running in the city jingling their bells, the newspaper boys’ hawking cry, bright shop-fronts, hotels showing off their interiors at night with glass windows and electric lights, busy theatres with posters of actresses, new residential areas, and churches receding to the background in the landscape. The change affected the city’s landscape as well as individuals and their lifestyles.

The novel starts with the visit of Basil Ransom, a New York lawyer from Mississippi, to his wealthy cousin, Olive Chancellor, a prestigious bourgeois, at her house on Charles Street. He encounters Boston, and the novel ends with him luring Verena away from her debut as a speaker for the women’s

movement at the Music Hall in Boston. Though many critics have discussed the novel in terms of gender or feminism, I would like to focus on its representation of the changes taking place in the city and the individual characters' reaction to those changes. In a sense it is the story of Basil's experience of Boston, yet James also presents Olive's and Verena's perspectives with episodes of their visits to New York and Marmion near Cape Cod. What the decline of Boston as a city of culture means is crucial in discussing what American society achieved and sacrificed in its transition into a culture of consumption.

### I. URBANIZATION AND THE LANDSCAPE OF BOSTON

The story is set over two years in the late 1870s, probably 1877 through 1879.<sup>7</sup> The characteristics of Boston are first presented through the eyes of Basil Ransom, an outsider to the city. His conversation with Olive's elder sister Mrs. Luna, provides the reader with the well-known characteristics of Boston: she says, "[n]obody tells fibs in Boston. I don't know what to make of them all" (35), and calls Boston "this unprevaricating city" (35), while Basil refers to Boston as "the city of reform" (38). Basil's comment is right, for in Boston reform movements, such as abolition before the Civil War and women's suffrage movement after it, were active. Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Henry Blackwell formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in Boston in November 1869. Suffrage was still a controversial issue in the US at the time of the novel's setting. Mrs. Luna, a New Yorker and a woman of the fashionable world, has no interest in suffrage and dislikes Boston, which is exclusive and does not offer many social occasions. Therefore most of her comments on Boston, closely related to Olive, are negative and impress upon the reader that Boston is still a city of Puritans. Her statement that "[t]here were people who wanted one to spend the winter in Boston" (39), however, implies that Boston attracted people for its cultural events and remained active in winter in spite of its severe climate.

Basil Ransom, from the South, apparently has some prejudice against Boston on two strokes: as a city of reform and a city of culture. By reform Basil means temperance and women's suffrage movement, which he dislikes because they intend to change his lifestyle. To him, the gathering at Miss Birdseye's to hear Mrs. Farrinder, a celebrated speaker for the emancipation of women, is "something very Bostonian" (49); his comment betrays his prejudice that reform movements exist only in Boston. The fact is not true, of course; the National Woman Suffrage Association was active in New York.

And yet, in the novel, Boston is marked as a city of reform, as people came to Boston for opportunities such as Mrs. Farrinder's lecture. Basil also had heard that Boston is "a city of culture" (46). He finds it in Olive's drawing room with "so much organized privacy or . . . so many objects that spoke of habits and tastes" (45) including German books, which he likes.

The view from Olive's drawing room presents Boston in more detail. The Back Bay view that Basil sees from there are of "wooden spires, the masts of lonely boats, the chimneys of dirty 'works'" (45). Robert Martin calls these three items in the landscape "central elements of Boston," for they are "the spires of the declining church, the masts of isolated self whose triumphant self-reliance has been transformed to isolation and loneliness, and the chimneys of the new industrial order."<sup>8</sup> The first two suggest that the old elements of Boston, religion and Transcendentalism, are declining in their influence, while the chimneys imply the advent of new industry. The invasion of the new industry introduces ugliness and unpleasantness in the landscape, which is emphasized in a different description. It is presented as Verena's vision:

the long, low bridge that crawled, on its staggering posts, across the Charles; the casual patches of ice and snow; the desolate suburban horizons, peeled and made bald by the rigour of the season; the general hard, cold void of the prospect; the extrusion, at Charlestown, at Cambridge, of a few chimneys and steeples, straight, sordid tubes of factories and engine-shops, or spare, heavenward finger of the New England meeting-house. There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railway-lines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horse-car, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles, and bare wooden backs of places. (185)

The crudeness, ugliness, poverty and squalor of the landscape are emphasized, and we can see that factories and churches are all muddled together in the same wintry view. This landscape of Charlestown and Cambridge contrasts with Beacon Hill, which is "a prestigious enclave" of Boston.<sup>9</sup> These suburban manufacturing and residential areas are set apart from the city of Boston only by the Charles River, which is not a long distance, as James used to walk over the bridge from his room in Beacon Hill to his father's to join him for dinner in Quincy St. in Cambridge during his stay in 1882<sup>10</sup>.

Another geographical element of Boston appears in the first description of the view of the unfilled part of the Back Bay: "A brackish expanse of anoma-

lous character, which is too big for a river and too small for a bay” (45). Mona Domosh points out that the filling of the Back Bay was completed only in the late 1870s,<sup>11</sup> the time period of *The Bostonians*. It is natural then that the row of houses Basil sees are “in their extreme modernness, which overlooked the same lagoon from a long embankment on the left, constructed of stones roughly piled” (45). Probably Basil finds “extreme modernness” in their newness and their Victorian brownstone facades. Commonwealth Avenue, where the first houses were sold in the Back Bay area, was regarded as “the architectural showpiece for the city and a symbol of the refined lifestyle of Boston’s elite classes.”<sup>12</sup> The planning of the Back Bay tripled the size of Boston’s original landmass by the 1880s,<sup>13</sup> and expanded the city, but its use was strictly controlled. It prohibited commercial land use, thereby allowing the area “to remain exclusive and residential”<sup>14</sup> and, at the same time, imposed limits on residential buildings. Consequently, no “shockers” like the Vanderbilt mansion in New York were permitted in the Back Bay. Instead, the result was a “homogeneous, discrete, and ornamental environment”<sup>15</sup> for a few elites. In Domosh’s words, the Back Bay was “a direct expression of the city’s stable and conservative elite class,”<sup>16</sup> an alternative to Beacon Hill and the “old” South End, another elite enclave, which were “being encroached upon by commercial interests, and invaded by lower-class housing”<sup>17</sup> as a result of economic growth and the increasing population of immigrants. Many of the bourgeoisie fled to the Back Bay from Beacon Hill and the South End, though they encountered “some new neighbors—prosperous merchants and self-made moguls newly rich from ventures in a burgeoning industrial economy.”<sup>18</sup> With the development of the Back Bay, these privileged few, the bourgeoisie, were able to secure their enclave in the changing city, affording a glimpse of class conflict in the physical urban landscape of Boston.

It is not only the Back Bay but also Cambridge that James presents: this new residential area exhibits an unpleasant bareness and homogeneity. When Basil visits Cambridge, James describes it as “a sightless, soundless, interspaced, embryonic region” (239). Its newness is emphasized, but not favorably: the silvered number on plates affixed on the door was what gave “the personal identity” to the otherwise similar houses (240). Unlike the ugly factories in Verena’s view above, the street is clean but vacant in the daytime. Thus as William J. Lloyd suggests, the depiction “bore little resemblances to the attractive cottages and abundant greenery of the much publicized suburban ideal.”<sup>19</sup> The problems caused by urbanization and the transitional nature of Boston can be seen in the descriptions of the landscapes seen from Olive’s drawing room and other new neighborhoods.

James also provides a detailed description of Boston as an increasingly modern city. Hoping to be interviewed, Verena's father, Selah Tarrant, an obscure but ambitious mesmeric healer, frequents the offices of newspapers and the vestibules of hotels which he regards as "national nerve-centres" (123). The "high glass plates" (123) of the vestibules of hotels impress the reader as convenient devices introduced for efficiency at the sacrifice of privacy. The place bustles with "the piled-up luggage, the convenient spittoons, the elbowing loungers, the disconsolate 'guests,' the truculent Irish porters, the rows of shaggy-backed men in strange hats, writing letters at a table inlaid with advertisements . . ." (123). Advertisements, which stimulate the desire of individuals, are indispensable features in a city that is in transition to the culture of consumption. Ian Bell points out that the view is distorted by Selah Tarrant's ambition,<sup>20</sup> but the Irish porters imply the presence of the immigrants that the observer can no longer disregard, while the elbowing of the loungers connotes competition in the crowded city. The picture is no longer that of a city of culture or of Transcendentalism.

Another description of a hotel is presented in Basil's walk just before Verena's debut at the Music Hall. The place is more thriving, active and attractive:

The shop-fronts glowed through frosty panes, the passers bustled on the pavement, the bells of the street-cars jangled in the cold air, the newsboys hawked the evening-papers, the vestibules of the theatres, illuminated and flanked with coloured posters and the photographs of actresses, exhibited seductively their swinging doors of red leather or baize, spotted with little brass nails. Behind great plates of glass the interior of the hotels became visible, with marble-paved lobbies, white with electric lamps, and columns, and Westerners on divans stretching their legs, while behind a counter, set apart and covered with an array of periodicals and novels in paper covers, little boys, with the faces of old men, showing plans of the play-houses and offering librettos, sold orchestra-chairs at a premium. (412–413)

The exterior of the hotel extends into the interior, for the hotel is transparent, exposing people in the lobby. It has become a site for publicity, though less so, according to Bell, than were department stores at the time of the writing of *The Bostonians*.<sup>21</sup> It is in *The American Scene* (1907) that James overtly criticizes the hotel as a site for publicity.

Advertising is another modern aspect of Boston. Posters and the photographs of the actresses that Basil sees here prove that Boston is in the Age of Advertising,<sup>22</sup> and that it is also a place that provides pleasure. As he meditates, Boston is "big and full of nocturnal life" (413) with little or no trace of

Puritan heritage. This is now a city immersed in the culture of consumption, for purchasing tickets is a transaction, an economic activity, a form of reproduction enabled by accumulation. James presents this scene almost at the end of the novel. This is where Basil arrives at the end of his encounter with Boston. Even to him, a New Yorker, Boston is a modern city of consumption.

James depicts another modern aspect of Boston: public transportation. Streetcars carry the pleasure-seekers and are indispensable, though the efficiency and convenience demanded the sacrifice of the passengers' individualism that New England virtue so valued. Unlike in a hackney-coach, riding in a streetcar meant sharing the same space with strangers, threatening one's individualism. William J. Lloyd writes that James was critical of the system, for his characters "'spent hours in jingling, aching, jostled journeys' as they moved throughout the expanded city in unending pursuit of their rather inconsequential goals."<sup>23</sup> Yet it gave convenience to those who could not afford a hackney-coach or other individual transportation. In fact, we learn that Olive, Verena and Miss Birdseye depend on streetcars for their mobility. Public transportation is a democratic device that gives mobility to almost everyone. Olive prefers to ride streetcars because the occasions allow her to mingle with the "people." Basil experiences riding a streetcar in Boston when he joins Miss Birdseye to collect the address of Verena's parents. On this trip, traditional civility is disrupted by the interruption of their conversation and the rudeness of the conductor to Miss Birdseye.<sup>24</sup> Thus, James depicts both the shortcomings and the attractiveness of urban life, which enable the activities of commerce and consumption. Boston is no longer a city of reform, but a city dominated by the culture of consumption and commercialism. Even Miss Birdseye, the surviving Transcendentalist, has to adjust to it and also benefits from it.

## II. "THE OLDEST BOURGEOISIE" IN THE NEW URBAN BOSTON: OLIVE CHANCELLOR'S ASSIMILATION

Olive represents Beacon Hill, that is, the old Boston elite. Even though her position in the Boston hierarchy was not the highest, her family belonged to "the *bourgeoisie*—the oldest and best" (61), though James writes that *she* purchased the house on Charles Street after her father's death (161). Her character is that of the New England Woman with the attributes of "a vestigial puritanism"<sup>25</sup> as her last name connotes: she has a strong sense of duty and justice. Such a nature demands that she be useful to others and discourages her from seeking pleasure; Olive devotes herself to the emancipation of

women, belonging to twenty associations and committees. Her simple dress contrasts with her elder sister Mrs. Luna, who busies herself in conspicuous consumption. From her sense of duty and romantic longings emerge an aspiration for martyrdom. Olive's sense of duty once drives her to befriend some shop-girls, who are underpaid and belong to "the people." Her attempt, however, ends as a failure because of their concern about a young man called Charlie and Olive's tendency to romanticize things: "she [Olive] took them [the shop girls] more tragically than they took themselves" (62).

Then how does Olive adjust to the urbanizing Boston turning into a city of culture of consumption? She enjoys the Back Bay view with Verena in the sunset, which suggests that she also romanticizes the view. Martin writes that Olive "shuts her curtains" to "a new urban reality"<sup>26</sup>, though not completely, I would say. She is aware of some new urban aspects of the city, such as the decline of Transcendentalism. She knows that "this frumpy little missionary [Miss Birdseye] was the last link in a tradition, and that when she could (sic) be called away the heroic age of New England life—the age of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort, of moral passion and noble experiment—would effectually be closed" (189).<sup>27</sup> It was the traditional spirit of New England that promoted social reformist tendencies such as Miss Birdseye's, but that spirit lost favor to the desire for money and pleasure. Olive's desire is for heroic deeds; to be a martyr is to fulfill her romantic longing. Olive adheres to the reformist cause, adding some romantic elements to it.

Olive's attitude towards the transition of Boston is contradictory and complicated. She is very exclusive. She dislikes Verena's parents in Cambridge for their vulgarity, even though she has a liking for what she calls "the people," that is the middle class and lower class. She is no different from the Boston elite who protected their enclave by building the Back Bay and were famous for their solidarity. Even though she cries, "I'm sick of the Back Bay" (90), she does not leave her social position. She represents it. The narrator sarcastically reveals her lifestyle: "as a typical Bostonian she could not fail to belong in some degree to a 'set'" (187) which consists of "select spirits" and what she calls "real people" (187), apparently intelligent and wealthy women who are allowed—in other words, are able to afford—to borrow books from Athenaeum, Boston's great private library that James used to visit. She avails herself of the city of culture where the opportunities for hearing good music are numerous and excellent, made possible by the convenient location of the Music Hall. Olive takes full advantage of the prosperity of the city and her position in the Boston social hierarchy.



Such enjoyment of comfort, however, brings about a sense of guilt for a New England mind with a puritan streak such as Olive's. Her involvement with some city missions, such as cleaning dirty children, could be seen as the atonement for the guilt she feels. Olive herself is aware of her contradiction. The experience of the city mission and Miss Birdseye's bare, vulgar room in the South End stand in contrast to her own luxurious home with flowers, good music, and a warm hearth with tea service. Olive is well aware that she cannot be another Miss Birdseye who has devoted herself to the weakest with no self-interest. Nor does she want to be like Matthias Pardon, a journalist, who represents "the vulgarity and hideousness . . . —the impudent invasion of privacy—the extinction of all conception of privacy"<sup>28</sup> that James deplored in his Notebook. Pardon proposes to Verena to organize and publicize her lecture tour to make money, that is, to fulfill his personal desire for gain. Olive is aware that her desire to possess Verena is not only for the cause but also for her personal affection, whether it be lesbian or not. The "union" she requests is in reality not a voluntary one but one purchased by offering checks to Verena's parents. As such it is tainted with vulgarity.

Olive is also aware of her narrowness. As a Bostonian she has a sense of antagonism against New Yorkers represented by the Burrages. Henry Burrage with his soft nature and musical talent is acceptable, but Mrs. Burrage, in spite of her intelligence and culture, is unacceptable to Olive, for Mrs. Burrage seems to say that she belongs to "a larger world than hers [Olive's]" (164–65). Indeed Mrs. Burrage's New York high society is larger than Boston's. Her attitude is comparatively free from any class consciousness, in quite a democratic spirit, seeming to imply that "every one present had some distinction and some talent, that they were all good company together" (165). Such an impression highlights Olive's sense of inferiority and insecurity. This is the way she, as a reformer, should feel, but she herself knows that she is actually exclusive rather than democratic.

Ironically, and of necessity, Olive, who controls Verena, becomes an entrepreneur in the marketing of Verena's lecture. She ends up assisting Mr. Filer in the lecture business, who sells the pamphlets of the sketches of Verena's life to advertise her and to earn more profits from their sale in the Boston Music Hall. It is analogous to selling Verena's privacy and not much different from Matthias Pardon's attempt to acquire from Verena "any personal items" to report in his newspaper. Though the novel does not tell how much Olive is going to share in the profits from the lecture, it is apparent that she assists in the business that profits from the sale of posters and photographs of Verena as well as price of admission. Even though Olive is not interested in making

money and detests vulgarity, she succumbs to the capitalistic venture. She is a part of the system of reproduction to satisfy the audience of consumers in Boston.

Irony is added by the fact that Mr. Filer controls Olive who controls Verena. Consequently, the cause is treated in the same class with the prima donnas and natural curiosities that Mr. Filer has handled. Thus, Olive, who hates vulgarity, is nonetheless completely submerged in the money-making system of the culture of consumption. Olive's strategy, however, is not new. Anna Dickinson whom Sara DeSaussure Davis identifies as Verena's model, contracted with agents, such as John G. North and T. B. Pugh in 1860s.<sup>29</sup> These agents took over the burdens from the star lecturers, such as "advertising, travel planning, and negotiation with local host."<sup>30</sup> Some reform movements had already been turned into entertainment in the postwar lecturing boom. Basil sees that Olive is "struggling and yielding, making sacrifice of taste for the sake of the largest hearing and conforming herself to a great popular system" (415). He adds, however, that "there was a catch-penny effect about the whole thing" (415). Thus, Olive degrades the women's movement by reducing it to an entertainment.

And Olive, who used to have a strong sense of justice, has learned the game of the money-making world and almost manipulates others for her own benefit, which is to keep Verena. I say "almost" because she does not carry out her plan, which is to make use of the Burrages' proposal: to let Henry Burrage marry Verena and financially support the movement. Olive once, though only for a moment, has a vision that she can use the Burrages to protect Verena from Basil and, later, to set aside the Burrages once the funds are safely invested in their movement. Such egotism distinguishes Olive from the heroic and disinterested Miss Birdseye.

And yet, it is Olive's sense of justice that brings her disaster: because of her sense of justice, Olive does not prohibit Verena from seeing Basil both in New York and Marmion, which allows Basil to persuade Verena to marry him. Olive is just in refusing Verena's pledge not to marry anyone. Later she regrets her own refusal, but also reconfirms that such a pledge would have spoiled their union. She tries not to blame Verena for giving up the cause; Olive tries to "be rigidly just" (395). James depicts this sense of justice as a peculiar trait of New Englanders also exemplified in Mrs. Daintry in "A New England Winter" (1884), who is particular about doing right.<sup>31</sup> This is what saves Olive from the immoral aggressive world of commerce that Basil represents. After all, Olive fails to truly assimilate herself to the culture of consumption. When she climbs onto the platform after Verena's flight from the

Music Hall, she is desperately clinging to her New England ideal. It might seem suicidal, but it will be fulfilling her wish for martyrdom. Her decision is to remain a Bostonian in the old sense. And whether it ends up as a disaster or her acquisition of a voice depends on the Bostonian audience: whether they are supporters of the cause or the consumers of the spectacular in the Music Hall, a mob who, in Basil's words, "howl and thump" (430).

### III. ANOTHER BOSTONIAN, VERENA

"The Bostonians" is the expression used by Basil to refer to Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant. Though Verena lives in Cambridge and her father is from Baltimore, she is a Bostonian in the sense that her mother is the daughter of a famous abolitionist and she herself had attended lectures since she was an infant. Her background and character contrast with Olive's. Her family is not wealthy at all; her father is a mesmeric healer of immoral character, and her mother clings to her father's fame while she longs for the fashionable world of Beacon Hill. Verena is noted for her red hair, but she also has a gift in her ability to attract the audience with her voice. She possesses what Olive lacks: Olive has bouts of shyness, for example, and cannot speak out in public, while Verena's voice is her gift. Verena is definitely one of the American Girls that James depicted so often in his works, such as *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).<sup>32</sup> She is endowed with the characteristics of the American Girl, though lacking substantial self; that is, she is simple, innocent, and good-natured, though not as intelligent as Olive. "Natural" is the adjective often used to characterize her. Her good nature and lack of substantial self makes her easy prey to a stronger will. First Olive and later Basil pressure her. Ian Bell analyses Basil's use of theatrical vocabulary as "a characteristic rhetoric in his appropriation of Verena" for example, he tells her that the successful speaker is not Verena herself but a "preposterous puppet" (330) concealing her.<sup>33</sup> What he means is that Verena does not at heart agree with the cause and that she is therefore unnatural on the platform. Verena believes him, and her attitude towards Olive changes. Verena protests against their leaving Marmion in order to escape from Basil, claiming that escaping demonstrates a lack of dignity. Olive regards Verena's attitude as "entirely unnatural and overdone" (370). Depending on the situation in the novel, she could be either natural or theatrical. "Natural" is related to Transcendentalism, while "theatrical" is related to the culture of consumption. Verena can belong to either world.

James depicted many American girls in his works, such as Daisy Miller in

*Daisy Miller* that won his fame, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and many more. He was not, however, the only writer who represented the American Girl or images of young American women. The American Girl is an icon of the country, “the visual and literary form to represent the values of the nation and codify the fears and desires of its citizens,”<sup>34</sup> though we should be reminded that these images of American women were “*created* as ideas, not *found* as facts.”<sup>35</sup> In Verena, James presents an example of the American woman encountering the culture of consumption. Verena easily adjusts herself to the culture of consumption and is in contrast with Olive’s complicated situation, which is why James needed to introduce her. Her lack of substantial self, which enables her to enjoy the culture of consumption, is what matters here, as a contrast to Olive who was in Basil’s opinion, “intensely, fearfully, a person” (114). Jennifer A. Wicke notes that Verena functions as a “free-floating currency as an advertisable image”<sup>36</sup> and writes that she becomes “an object to be produced, a blank whose aesthetic surface” allows “nearly any representation to be imprinted upon it.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed she is seen as an appropriate object to be imprinted on: Mrs. Luna sarcastically compares her to “a walking advertisement” (261) at the Burrages’ Wednesday Club. She is also interesting as a consumer who is easily incorporated into the city’s culture of consumption.

It is in New York that Verena looks most flourishing. In contrast to Olive who wears only simple dresses, Verena pays attention to what she wears, though she chooses a style that does not match Olive’s taste, as exemplified in a jacket with gilded buttons that she wears on her first visit to Charles Street. In New York, she appears at the Burrages’ on the Fifth Avenue in a white dress with flowers in her bosom. (If the flower were single, it would be in the typical style of a lecturer for the women’s movement, such as Victoria Woodhull.) Wearing it, she attracts members of high society with her lecture and impresses Basil as a success. Traveling about in a carriage, she enjoys receiving “new expressions of curiosity and sympathy, assurances that one was watched and followed” (291) with the consciousness of a celebrity. This is appropriate for an advertising girl. Then the narrator writes that “there was enough of the epicurean in Verena’s composition to make it easy for her in certain conditions to live only for the hour” (291). Such a tendency is indispensable for a culture of consumption in order to promote more consumption. Dinner at Delmonico’s, and an evening at the German Opera or Museum are all things that New York, the biggest city of the culture of consumption, offers as entertainment. To her New York is “the bright, amusing city, where the elements seemed so numerous, the animation so immense, the shops so

brilliant, the women so strikingly dressed" (289) which quickens her curiosity even in the midst of her depressed conversation with Olive about a letter from Basil, which she had kept secret from Olive until that morning. She is a *consumer*, easily adapting to the metropolis.

Verena's advantage is that she can enjoy New York even without money. While she enjoys fine food at a famous restaurant and opera with Henry Burrage, she can enjoy a walk in Central Park with Basil. She makes the most of Central Park with him, enjoying the "elevated," the Zoological Garden, its lake and the Maze. She is a perfect user of Central Park, for whose favor and pleasure Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed the park, aimed. Remaining in a carriage, she unintentionally displays Henry Burrage's status in the park, which, as Domosh writes, actually functioned as "a display ground for the city's elite."<sup>38</sup> But with Basil, she enjoys walking in the park and his plan is to share the noonday repast out of a French dish at a little table with napkins. The plan is never carried out, but it was what Olmsted aimed for, as Richard Godden explains: "Frederick Olmsted designed parks explicitly to offer, to the rising proletariat, a horticultural version of the 'softening and refining' 'tea table' of the middle class."<sup>39</sup>

It is not only Verena's adaptability to the metropolis but also her failure to see ugliness that helps her as a consumer. She chooses to see the positive, as exemplified earlier in her view of the Back Bay from Olive's drawing room. As Martin points out, Verena's perspective is at the moment of sunset that transforms the ugly picture into "a clear cold rosiness."<sup>40</sup> In spite of the presence of "something inexorable in the poverty of the scene" (185), owing to the effect of the sunset, Verena thinks the picture lovely. She, like Basil, fails to read the moral meaning of the landscape and is instead attracted to it. This limited view, however, helps her to survive in the city and enjoy what it offers her, even though it is somewhat like living in a fool's paradise. And yet it also symbolizes a failure to see humanity, the suffering and poverty beneath the picture. James presents such insensitivity when Basil faces the landscape viewed at the plaza in the south of Central Park and thinks that the day was still "in its youth" (332), which reflects his optimistic view, though unrealistic:

The bowers and boscajes stretched behind them, the artificial lakes and cockney-fied landscapes, making all the region bright with the sense of air and space, and raw natural tints, and vegetation too diminutive to overshadow. The chocolate-coloured houses, in tall, new rows, surverged the expanse. . . . and the beer-saloons, with exposed shoulders and sides, which in New York do a good deal to-

wards representing the picturesque, the “bit” appreciated by painters, announced themselves in signs of large lettering to the sky. Groups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, propped themselves against low, sunny wall of the Park; and on the other side the commercial vista of the Sixth Avenue stretched away with a remarkable absence of aerial perspective. (332)

This passage reveals that the city is new and the park’s version of nature is artificial. The business district is threatening, blocking the view. Immigrants, who were becoming a big issue in New York, at that time, are depicted as a part of landscape rather than as part of its humanity that he can sympathize with. Basil just observes the landscape, accepts it only with a feeling that the day is still young. Yoko Funasaka points out the ironic tone of the narrator in describing the beer-saloons as an indispensable element of the “picturesque” landscape in New York.<sup>41</sup> Thus is the New York landscape vulgar, though to Basil, beer-saloons are indispensable. James seems to imply that one needs insensitivity to live in this metropolis.

Verena’s perspective is not mentioned here. And yet it is clear that she is greatly affected by her conversation with Basil as they walked in the park, for she escapes from him by changing her plan and leaving New York. As she is frequently associated with the word “natural,” it seems fitting that she enjoys more of nature than culture. Even though she rejoices in the carriage ride with Henry Burrage in the park, she prefers walking through the park instead. And yet the park is artificial. As Martin points out, “Central Park is evoked as an example of the creation of a false pastoral.”<sup>42</sup> Verena, however, does not mind if the park is artificial. It is in Marmion in Cape Cod that she becomes converted to Basil’s side, behaving more as she pleases. From a performer on the platform is she changed to a woman in love coated with romantic illusions. In spite of Basil’s brutality, she finds him “the towering eminence in her mind” (375). And yet his cruelty is shown earlier in the story in their walk in Cambridge; though the walk was proposed by Verena’s kindness, Basil keeps on referring to her betrayal of Olive in keeping the walk as a secret and he enjoys her hesitation.

Marmion is pastoral as Basil imagines it, for its quiet and seclusion. There, he can woo Verena with no disturbance by any that would disadvantage him because of his lack of substantial fortune. The place, however, is full of images of decline, such as this description of “the apples in the little tough, dense orchards, which gave suggestion of sour fruition here and there” (339). Martin connects the image of decline with the impossibility of imagining that this final section of the novel will lead to fruitful union and David Howard

connects the waning of the ship-building industry at Marmion to the “superannuated reformer,” Miss Birdseye, who dies in this town.<sup>43</sup> It is not only Marmion that is declining, but also Provincetown that Basil visits for a few days where “the impression of fallen greatness was still stronger than at Marmion” (392). As Old Boston is declining, so is the whole of New England. Urbanization seems to be the only means to avoid such decline, though the price is high.

Verena, though she is capable of being a model of spectacle and a consumer of urban Boston, shrinks from the role and ends up in becoming a male chauvinist’s wife. And yet, her optimism shows in the final scene, when she says that “their [the Boston audience’s] nature is fine” (439). Her belief in Boston’s sense of justice, her pride in it as a city of culture, may be the one thing she can still cherish, in spite of the last sentence describing her exit from the Music Hall: “It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these [tears] were not the last she was destined to shed” (433). Ironically it is with “a long furred cloak” (430) that Basil covers Verena to conceal her identity. She will probably not be able to afford such a cloak, but it imprints her identity as a consumer. The image connotes her vulnerability in the culture of consumption. She has no bright prospect. Verena’s fate is not peculiar to Bostonians, though it is a typical fate for a Henry James American Girl.

#### IV. COSMOPOLITAN JAMES

*The Bostonians* begins with Basil’s encountering Boston and ends with his winning Verena away from Olive. It is often discussed as a male chauvinist’s triumph over a feminist, but it also symbolizes the defeat of Boston, that is, the Old Boston of the New England intellectuals. Basil is not a New Yorker in an exact sense, but he is endowed with cunning to exploit the weak, and vulgarity that is associated with the world of commerce, originating in New York. He is a lawyer but his ambition is for a public life to promote his ideas “to be embodied in national conduct” (198). He is not much different from Selah Tarrant in this sense. Olive’s defeat, then, symbolizes the failure of Boston to keep its traditional ideology intact against modernization.

It seems that James chose Boston for the setting of “a very *American* tale”<sup>44</sup> because Boston with its New England mindset had turned into a city of consumer culture, vulgar and immoral, where people seek profit and fulfillment of desire. The tale is tragic. James may seem to miss the traditional Boston, but not exactly. Indeed his caricature of Olive’s puritan streak, which

Basil describes as “morbid” (41), and of the traditional Miss Birdseye at the beginning of the novel are softened into sympathetic depictions as the story develops: Olive’s sense of justice is presented as superior to Basil’s brutality and egotism and Miss Birdseye’s death is depicted sympathetically. And yet the Old Boston is destined to be replaced by the culture of consumption, and New York is depicted as more attractive than modern Boston.

New York in this novel is represented partially by Basil, and more so by the Burrages. Their fashionable society indeed represents the top of the culture of consumption. They turn Verena’s lecture into highbrow entertainment. They are more generous and cosmopolitan and less exclusive than the Bostonians in the novel. In the presence of Mrs. Burrage, Olive is concerned about whether Mrs. Burrage regards her as “provincial.” Olive’s sense of inferiority implies her recognition of New York’s superiority. James has declared Boston a provincial city.

James was not originally from Boston. He spent his childhood in New York, Newport, and Europe. It was when he entered Harvard that he moved to Greater Boston. Owing to his father’s reputation, James was introduced to many of the literary figures in Boston, but he did not regard his home country as providing good material for writing, as he writes in *Hawthorne* that it had no cathedrals or abbeys or pictures or political society as can be found in Europe.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, he sought his career in Europe rather than in Boston or New York. With his experience abroad in childhood, James was a cosmopolitan, so Boston must have seemed “provincial” to him. After his visit to Boston in 1882, he writes that “Boston is absolutely nothing to me—I don’t even dislike it. I like it, on the contrary; I only dislike to live there”.<sup>46</sup> He was apparently homesick for England as he writes in a later entry:

Here I sit scribbling in my bedroom at a Boston hotel—on a marble-topped table!—and conscious of a ferocious homesickness—a homesickness which makes me think of the day when I shall next see the white cliffs of old England loom through their native fog, as one of the happiest of my life!<sup>47</sup>

James’ father’s education never restricted him to any particular religion, which was crucial in the shaping of an individual’s identity in nineteenth-century America. He writes in his autobiography that “the moral of all of which was that we need never fear not to be good enough if we were only social enough.”<sup>48</sup> By “social” he means “not provincial,” “not narrow,” cosmopolitan, in other words. Olive’s narrowness and exclusiveness is Back Bay’s. And to cosmopolitan James, America was “provincial,” however urbanized it was.



## V. CONCLUSION

*The Bostonians* is James' criticism of American society. He registers the transition Boston undergoes from a city of culture with a New England mindset, which valued justice and human goodness, to a city of consumer culture, a provincial version of New York. The New England concern for social good is replaced by a desire for publicity and money. The change affects individuals. In the change, Olive Chancellor clings to the women's movement, which is changed into an entertainment to generate profit. This is "a very *American* tale" of a triumph of money over morals.

When James left his home country for England in 1883, he did not return to it for about twenty years. What he observed on his return in 1904 is recorded in *The American Scene* (1906). What he depicts in it is, though in more vague and elaborate images and words, not much different from what he depicts in *The Bostonians*. He criticizes the lack of boundaries between the public and the private, the homogeneousness of the society, the want of manners, ugliness and vulgarity everywhere, and more. James, by this time over sixty years old, however, was overwhelmed with the changes in his home country. In Boston, he visited Ashburton Place, where he had resided for two years after the Civil War, and cherished "some echo of ghostly footsteps,"<sup>49</sup> but in his next visit a month later, he found the houses leveled and cleared to the corner. What was left was "a gaping void, the brutal effacement, at a stroke, of every related object, of the whole precious past."<sup>50</sup> Jeremy Tambling states that "[a]bsence, like the 'gaping void,' is a trope throughout *The American Scene*: America is full of things not there, or not there fully."<sup>51</sup> Such absence does not seem to exist in *The Bostonians*, for James feels absence after he was away from his country for about twenty years. And yet the "effacement" forced by the transition of the city, or vice versa, is what happens morally and not so overwhelmingly in *The Bostonians*. The New England intellectual is fading, not leaving much trace in the American Girl, the heiress of the age.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the function of the narrator, see Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 182–229.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James writes to his brother William James: "I am quite appalled by your note of the 2d, in which you assault me on the subject of my having painted a "portrait from life" of Miss Peabody! I was in some measure prepared for it by Lowell's (as I found the other day) taking for granted that she had been my model, and an allusion to the same effect in a note from Aunt Kate. Still, I didn't expect the charge to come from you . . . Miss Birdseye was evolved en-

tirely from my moral consciousness, like every person I have ever drawn, and originated in my desire to make a figure who should embody in a sympathetic, pathetic, picturesque, and at the same time grotesque way, the humanitarian and *ci-devant* transcendental tendencies which I thought it highly probable I should be accused of treating in a contemptuous manner in so far as they were otherwise represented in the tale.”

Henry James, “To William James,” 14 February 1885, *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 68–69.

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 19–20.

<sup>4</sup> Shaun O’Connell, *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Professor at the Breakfast-Table, The Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Honnotomosha, 1990), 83.

<sup>7</sup> In the novel James mentions only once the setting of the year as “the winter of 187-” which is when Verena starts living with Olive in Charles Street. Henry James, *The Bostonians* (the 1886 English edition), ed. Charles Anderson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 170. All further references to *The Bostonians* will appear within the text in parentheses with page number. See David Howard, “The Bostonians,” *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Robert K. Martin, “Picturesque Misperception in *The Bostonians*,” *The Henry James Review* 9 (Spring 1988): 78.

<sup>9</sup> Mona Domosh, *Invented Cities: The Creation of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century New York & Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>10</sup> James, *Notebooks*, 232.

<sup>11</sup> Domosh, *Invented*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth McNulty, *Boston: Then and Now* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Domosh, *Invented*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–110.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara W. Moore and Gail Weesner, *Back Bay: A Living Portrait* (Boston: Centry Hill Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>19</sup> William J. Lloyd, “Understanding Late Nineteenth-Century American Cities,” *Geographical Review*, 71 (1981): 466.

<sup>20</sup> Ian F. A. Bell, *Henry James & the Past* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 92–93.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–95.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1929), 265–266, writes: “Boston appears to have been good ground in which to grow advertising agents, for the more successful and longest-lived of the early agents came from the New England metropolis, including S.M. Pettengill, J. Wesley Barber and – George P. Rowell, the man who did perhaps more than any other man to develop advertising in the nineteenth century and bring it to the point from which the expansion of the last thirty years has taken place.”

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd, “Understanding,” 469. It is Verena who “spent hours in jingling, aching, jostled journeys” between Charles Street and her house in Cambridge. (James, *The Bostonians*, 179)

<sup>24</sup> James criticizes the speaking manner of the conductors in trains much later in his essay “The Speech of American Women,” *Harper’s Bazar* 41 (1907): 17–21.

<sup>25</sup> Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New

York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, "Misperception," 79.

<sup>27</sup> "[C]ould" in this quotation is changed to "should" by Richard Lansdown in his Penguin Classics edition. See Richard Lansdown ed., *The Bostonians* (the 1886 English edition) by Henry James (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), 139.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Notebooks*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Sara deSaussure Davis, "Feminist Sources in *The Bostonians*," *American Literature* 50 (1979): 570–87.

<sup>30</sup> J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>31</sup> See Henry James, "A New England Winter," *Henry James: Complete Stories 1884–1891* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 65–122.

<sup>32</sup> For Verena's good-nature and vulnerability, see Yuko Nakagawa, "Henry James no American Girl: *The Bostonians* no Verena no baai" ["Henry James's American Girl: Verena in *The Bostonians*"] *Helicon* (Gifu University, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Department of English) 3 (1994): 51–58.

<sup>33</sup> Bell, *Past*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Banta, *Imaging*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer A. Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 98–99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Domosh, *Invented*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Godden, *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18.

<sup>40</sup> Martin, "Misperception," 185.

<sup>41</sup> Yoko Funasaka, "*Bosuton no hitobito ni okeru Bosuton to Nyu Yohku*" ["Boston and New York in *The Bostonians*,"] *Eibeibungaku Ronsou [English Literature Review]* (The English Literary Society Kyoto Women's University) 43 (1999): 6.

<sup>42</sup> Martin, "Misperception," 81.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 82; and Howard, "The Bostonians," 61.

<sup>44</sup> James, *Notebooks*, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Henry James, *Hawthorne, Henry James: Literary Criticism; Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 351–52.

<sup>46</sup> James, *Notebooks*, 232.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>48</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others, Henry James: Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 124.

<sup>49</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 22.

<sup>50</sup> James, *Scene*, 229.

<sup>51</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Lost in the American City: Dickens, James, and Kafka* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 107.