Literary Criticism
Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Henry James "The Art of Fiction"
Lecture 35

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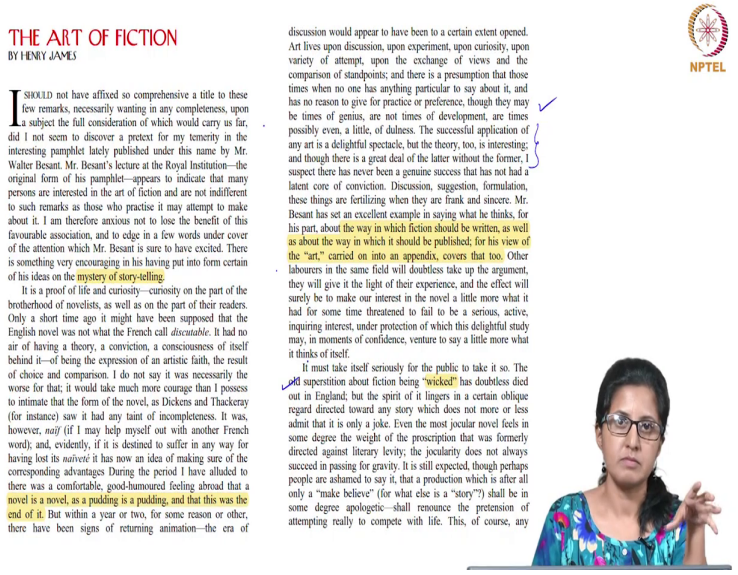

Hello everyone, today we begin with a new text, an essay by Henry James, "The Art of Fiction". This essay has been rightly pointed out as one of the adventures of immense importance to the novel's history. And this was written at a time, towards the end of the 19th century, 1884 precisely, when a novel as an art form, as a literary form was still struggling to find respectability, was still finding to receive critical attention in the way the other genres had been receiving.

This essay could be seen as a very pointed attempt to place novel within a proper literary framework with the yardsticks and with a lot of literary respectability, if one may say so. So this is seen as a rebuttal to Walters Besant's essay which has the same title. But this essay, as we can notice, begins with a congratulatory note towards Walter Besant. It also acknowledges the ways in which a certain kind of critical attention has been given to this genre, this field of novel and at some level, we can also find that there is a way in which Henry James is trying to articulate, trying to highlight that novel as an art form needs a more elusive, a more complex kind of theoretical framework than the one that Besant had been trying to put forward. There are two influential counter tendencies within which we need to contextualize

this work. One is more residual and the other is emergent. And the residual tenancy was a very conservative and traditional outlook which had puritanical approaches to all art forms which also had this tendency to see novel as an immoral kind of art form.

And as you might be knowing in the 19th century, when women were writing novels, when there was a greater visibility to this kind of readership, it was also seen as one of the immoral exercises that one would indulge in for purely one's pleasure. So, that was not really recommended as something that a man or woman of good upbringing would indulge in, in terms of writing as well as reading.

So we find that the other tendency which is more emergent in nature, is about this omnivorous vulgarization of everything that is modern, everything that is seen as a part of modern commodified culture. In that sense, this is a very modern essay as well which tries to look at the process of democratization and tries to look at the positive elements within this commodification.

It does not have an inherent moral component about it. This absence of the moral compass also makes this essay extremely interesting and refreshing in multiple ways. This essay, the title itself begins by a sort of defensive campaign—'The Art of Fiction', it is attributing a sense of artness to fiction right at the outset in the essay, in the title itself, which also sort of bails him out of this entire process of trying to argue that fiction also is an art to be reckoned with.

And by investing fiction with artistic qualities right at the outset, he is calling out for a more serious engagement with art in more objective terms as well. Not entirely to see art as a moral framework. Not entirely to see novel as a kind of art form into which morality is always already invested.

We also look at the kind of terms that he is using to talk about art. There is something very encouraging in his having put into form certain of his ideas on the mystery of storytelling, the use of the word mystery over here is extremely interesting. It is a way in which he is trying to bring in the medieval elements of art. He is also trying to tell us that fiction is perhaps the kind of art that we are talking about in this essay.

It is something which requires the perfect craft, which is a combination of long apprenticeship, like it is in the medieval times, along with the individual genius. So, we find that this appoint is being pursued, the individual nature of this art form is being pursued in very romantic medieval terms over here, by the use of the term mystery over here. We find that he further sort of romanticizes this before getting into the practical aspects of his discussion.

"It is a proof of life and curiosity, curiosity on the part of the brotherhood of novelists as well on the part of the reader". So this is a mystery. He is right at the outset telling us that here is an art form which receives a more elusive, a more mysterious and a more complex treatment than the one which was given to it by Mr. Walter Besant, in his essay with the same title—'The Art of Fiction'.

He also says that there is a way in which Mr. Besant and the others in their discussions, have made novel a more discussable kind of an object. There is something debatable about novel that they find it is worthy enough to be discussed within the critical circles, worthy enough to be taken up for serious discussion. Still, he says, "during the period I have alluded to, there was a comfortable, good humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel as a pudding is a pudding, and this was the end of it".

There was a time when novel was not really taken seriously up for any kind of discussion. Also these general notions about "Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints. And there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it and has no reason to give practice for or preference, though they may be times of genius, and not times of development, are times possibly even a little of dullness. The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too, is interesting. And although there is a great deal of the latter without the former, I suspect there has never been a genuine success that has not had a latent code of conviction". I read this to you again, "the successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too, is interesting".

He is vouching, he is pressing for a theory of art to emerge in the context of fiction, and that is the seminal quality and the seminal advantage of this essay as well. And he is again being

very congratulatory in a slightly backhanded way as well on Besant's views by saying that "Mr. Besant has set such an excellent example in saying what he thinks, for his part, about the way in which fiction should be written as well as about the way in which it should be published; for his view of the "art", carried on into an appendix, covers that too".

But he is also about to tell us very quickly how he departs from the views put forward by Besant. And now he is very directly coming on to this old superstition about fiction, it must take itself seriously for the public to take it so. "The old superstition about fiction being "wicked" has doubtless died out in England, but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story, which does not more or less, admit that it is only a joke".

This is the residual tendency that he is trying to counter over here. And fiction has always faced these counter tendencies within England-- about fiction being immoral, about fiction being wicked, and hence, not really compatible for people of good upbringing.

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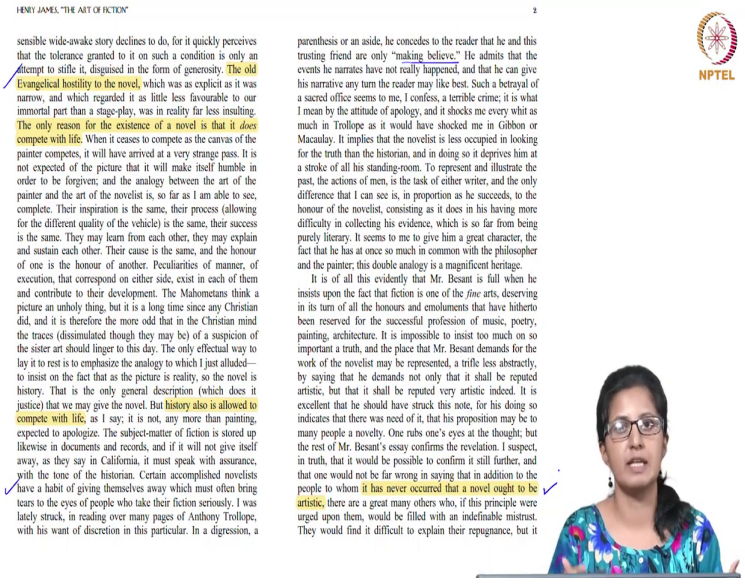
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sensible wide-awake story declines to do, for it quickly perceives that the tolerance granted to it on such a condition is only an attempt to stifle it, disguised in the form of generosity. The old Evangelical hostility to the novel, which was as explicit as it was narrow, and which regarded it as little less favourable to our immortal part than a stage-play, was in reality far less insulting. The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of the painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another. Peculiarities of manner, of execution, that correspond on either side, exist in each of them and contribute to their development. The Mahometans think a picture an unholy thing, but it is a long time since any Christian did, and it is therefore the more odd that in the Christian mind the traces (dissimulated though they may be) of a suspicion of the sister art should linger to this day. The only effectual way to lay it to rest is to emphasize the analogy to which I just alluded—to insist on the fact that as the picture is reality, so the novel is history. That is the only general description (which does it justice) that we may give the novel. But history also is allowed to compete with life, as I say; it is not, any more than painting, expected to apologize. The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away, as they say in California, it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian. Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only "making believe." He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime; it is what I mean by the attitude of apology, and it shocks me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon or Macaulay. It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honour of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence, which is so far from being purely literary. It seems to me to give him a great character, the fact that he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter; this double analogy is a magnificent heritage.

It is of all this evidently that Mr. Besant is full when he insists upon the fact that fiction is one of the *fine* arts, deserving in its turn of all the honours and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for the successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture. It is impossible to insist too much on so important a truth, and the place that Mr. Besant demands for the work of the novelist may be represented, a trifle less abstractly, by saying that he demands not only that it shall be reputed artistic, but that it shall be reputed very artistic indeed. It is excellent that he should have struck this note, for his doing so indicates that there was need of it, that his proposition may be to many people a novelty. One rubs one's eyes at the thought; but the rest of Mr. Besant's essay confirms the revelation. I suspect, in truth, that it would be possible to confirm it still further, and that one would not be far wrong in saying that in addition to the people to whom it has never occurred that a novel ought to be artistic, there are a great many others who, if this principle were urged upon them, would be filled with an indefinable mistrust. They would find it difficult to explain their repugnance, but it

"The old evangelical hostility to the novel, as he puts it, which was as explicit as it was narrow, and which regarded it as little less favorable to our immortal part than a stage play was in reality far less insulting. The only reason for the existence of a novel is that, it *does* compete with life". Here is a kind of theory being put forward to talk about realism, we would find the emergence of the earliest kinds of discussions about realist art, about realist fiction, in Henry James essay 'The Art of Fiction'.

So, this combination, this comparison with life makes this theory all the more interesting and as he says, mysterious and elusive too in multiple ways. And he says that there are various ways in which you could make different comparisons with fiction because “history also is allowed to compete with life. As I say, it is not any more than painting expected to apologize.”

So there is a way in which fiction stands apart compared to other art forms, or the disciplines or it is not history, it is not painting. So there is certainly a different purpose altogether that fiction sets out to achieve. And here he is talking mostly about realist fiction and we find that there is a way in which fiction, in spite of its fictitious quality, is being seen as closer to life, as close as competing with life, vis-à-vis, say, a painting or history, like he succinctly puts it.

“Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away, which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope with his want of discretion in this particular.” So he says, this aspect of “making believe” is also part of fictional writing, and still it is not history. It is something more complex, it is something more alluring and something more mysterious than that. And he is also countering this very popular observation this, almost like a superstition, one could say—“It has never occurred that a novel ought to be artistic”. This is the point that Henry James wants to take forward. He wants us to see the artistic element in fiction. He wants us to see fiction as an art form with techniques, with craft, with mystery. Of course, the combination that he wants to highlight with his use of the term mystery, is a combination of long apprenticeship, along with individual genius. It is hard work as well as individual genius at work.

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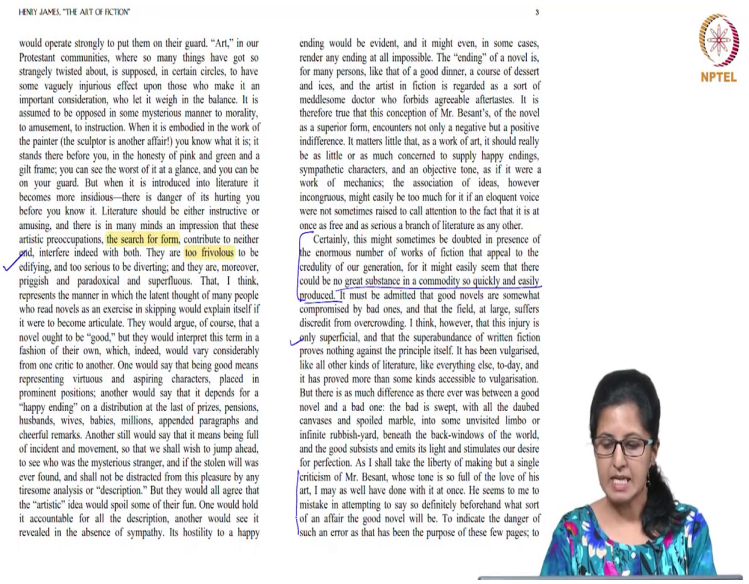
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would operate strongly to put them on their guard. "Art," in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed, in certain circles, to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction. When it is embodied in the work of the painter (the sculptor is another affair!) you know what it is; it stands there before you, in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame; you can see the worst of it at a glance, and you can be on your guard. But when it is introduced into literature it becomes more insidious—there is danger of its hurting you before you know it. Literature should be either instructive or amusing, and there is in many minds an impression that these artistic preoccupations, the search for form, contribute to neither and, interfere indeed with both. They are too frivolous to be edifying, and too serious to be diverting; and they are, moreover, priggish and paradoxical and superfluous. That, I think, represents the manner in which the latent thought of many people who read novels as an exercise in skipping would explain itself if it were to become articulate. They would argue, of course, that a novel ought to be "good," but they would interpret this term in a fashion of their own, which, indeed, would vary considerably from one critic to another. One would say that being good means representing virtuous and aspiring characters, placed in prominent positions; another would say that it depends for a "happy ending" on a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks. Another still would say that it means being full of incident and movement, so that we shall wish to jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found, and shall not be distracted from this pleasure by any tiresome analysis or "description." But they would all agree that the "artistic" idea would spoil some of their fun. One would hold it accountable for all the description, another would see it revealed in the absence of sympathy. Its hostility to a happy ending would be evident, and it might even, in some cases, render any ending at all impossible. The "ending" of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes. It is therefore true that this conception of Mr. Besant's, of the novel as a superior form, encounters not only a negative but a positive indifference. It matters little that, as a work of art, it should really be as little or as much concerned to supply happy endings, sympathetic characters, and an objective tone, as if it were a work of mechanics; the association of ideas, however incongruous, might easily be too much for it if an eloquent voice were not sometimes raised to call attention to the fact that it is at once as free and as serious a branch of literature as any other.

Certainly, this might sometimes be doubted in presence of the enormous number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation, for it might easily seem that there could be no great substance in a commodity so quickly and easily produced. It must be admitted that good novels are somewhat compromised by bad ones, and that the field, at large, suffers discredit from overcrowding. I think, however, that this injury is only superficial, and that the superabundance of written fiction proves nothing against the principle itself. It has been vulgarised, like all other kinds of literature, like everything else, to-day, and it has proved more than some kinds accessible to vulgarisation. But there is as much difference as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one: the bad is swept, with all the daubed canvases and spoiled marble, into some unvisited limbo or infinite rubbish-yard, beneath the back-windows of the world, and the good subsists and emits its light and stimulates our desire for perfection. As I shall take the liberty of making but a single criticism of Mr. Besant, whose tone is so full of the love of his art, I may as well have done with it at once. He seems to me to mistake in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be. To indicate the danger of such an error as that has been the purpose of these few pages; to

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And at the same time, he is also very much conscious of what to keep at bay, because he feels that like Besant if one gets too preoccupied with certain superficial aspects such as form, you are likely to lose the essence entirely. In his own words, "literature should be either instructive or amusing; and there is in many minds and impression that these artistic preoccupations, the search for form, contributed neither and interfere indeed, with both the true frivolous to be edifying and too serious to be diverting; and they are, moreover, priggish, and paradoxical and superfluous". That is what he wishes to counter as well-- that the importance should not be on these superficial elements such as form or structure, or even the moral compass that Besant seems to be concerned about. But there is something very lifelike about fiction that makes it a mystery, it is complex as he would continue to reiterate. He is also trying to counter some of the popular assumptions about novel.

"Certainly, this might sometimes be doubted in presence of the enormous number of fiction, a number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation, for it might easily seem that there could be no great substance in a commodity so quickly and easily produced." There is an ease which has always been accorded to the production of a novel in comparison to any other artistic form, any other genre like poetry or epic or drama.

This is ease has also been seen as the reason to look down upon novel because anything that could be commodified and produced with such ease, so quickly and easily, cannot have great

substance. So, that is also the emergent counter voice against the commodification of art and against the commodification of many things during that point of time.

Henry James is trying to make a case for novel, but also trying to bring out this modern perspective that commodification essentially need not be bad, and anything that is produced easily and quickly, need not be without substance either. "I think, however, that this injury is only superficial, that the super abundance of written fiction proves nothing against the principle itself, it has been vulgarized like all other kinds of literature like everything else today, and it has been proved more than some kinds accessible to vulgarization."

He makes a very direct rebuttal to Mr. Besant over here—"He seems to me to mistake in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be; to indicate the danger of such an error, as that has been the purpose of these few pages.

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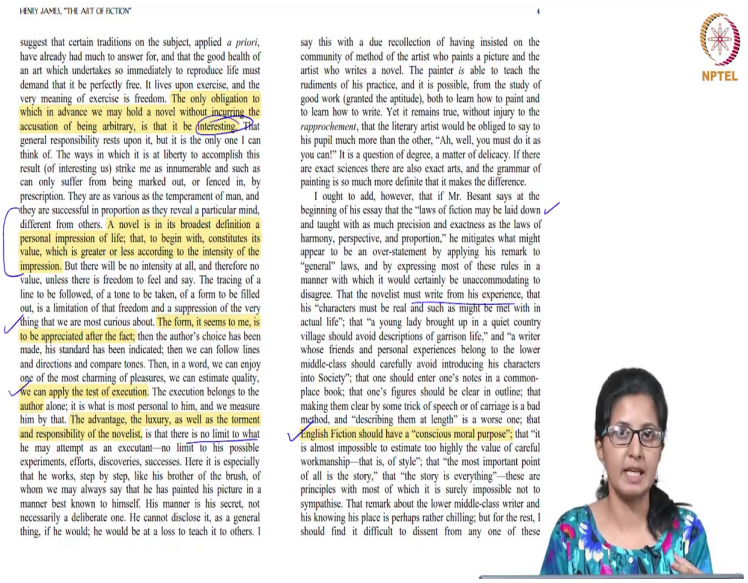

To suggest that certain traditions on the subject applied *a priori*, have already had much to answer for and in the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free". So the main disagreement that Henry James has against Mr. Besant is that Mr. Besant has in mind a set of laws, a certain kind of a framework within which he believes fiction should work. And that is not how it works, Henry James is trying to tell us because it is a mysterious art form, and it competes with life. You cannot

have a set of rules and regulations within which you can force mystery to work, within which you can force this art, which competes with life to work.

“The only obligation to which in advance, we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.” He sums up his argument over here. The only thing that one could expect out of a novel in terms of its form, in terms of its technique, in terms of its outcome, is that it be interesting. That could not be based on any kind of formula, that could not be based on any kind of rules, guidelines or set of regulations that one would set forward.

And then he gives this definition: “A novel is in its broadest definition, a personal impression of life that to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression”. There is something very fluid like about this judgment that Henry James wishes to make. That since this is about the impression of life, that too a personal impression of life, it is difficult for such an impression, such a process to work according to set rules and regulations.

He therefore says, Tthe form is to be appreciated after the fact, then in a word, we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution, the execution belongs to the author alone.” An outside agent like Mr. Besant cannot dictate the terms of this execution because this is based on personal impression, and the author of the work has the entire autonomy to decide on what basis he will execute this,

“The advantage, the luxury as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant, no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes” This sort of fluidity, this new structure is the greatest advantage of novel. In one of the later essays that we shall be taking a look at Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own”, there also she argues that what perhaps prompted more women to write novels in the 19th century, was this entire absence of literary tradition, was this entire absence of a set of rules or these rigid guidelines within which they were expected to work. And that helped them to break out of the patterns and experiment with different kinds of sequences and traditions. Coming back to Henry James, he is, in the next passage, trying to respond to some of the arguments that Besant had laid out. Besant says, at the

beginning of this essay, that laws of fiction may be laid out and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective and proportion. And that is clearly something that Henry James does not agree with.

Another one is that the novelist must write from his experience, that "his characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life". And the next one is that English fiction should have a conscious moral purpose and this moral compass is something that Henry James continues to disagree with, through and through.

He says that, whether it is about laying down laws of fiction, or about the insistence that the novelist should write from his experience, or about this need for a conscious moral purpose, none of this really fits in with the idea of the novel because essentially, novel is about a personal impression of life. And there needs to be a mystery about it, because it is competing with life, and it could not be seen within such superficial, rigorous and delimiting forms.

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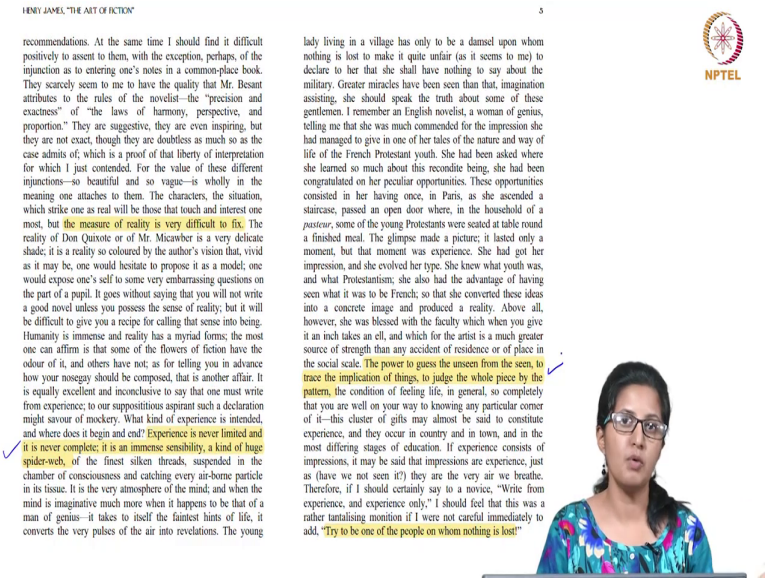

While one is talking about reality, he also makes this very pertinent point about experience—"Experience is never limited and it is never complete. It is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web". So he is using romantic as well as practical kinds of considerations to counter the many laws about experience, about form and about the kind of moral compass that Besant thinks, the art of fiction, fiction writing should have.

And the power of the artist, Henry James also believes, is "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it".

He also says, towards the end of that passage, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost". To impose laws on this sort of an art form, which as he pointed in the beginning, is a mystery, and that is also a word that he uses very tersely, and very calculatedly I feel. To impose laws on such an art form which is based on such complex lifelike terms would be ridiculous to say the least. And given that Henry James is giving this definition to novel as something that competes with life.

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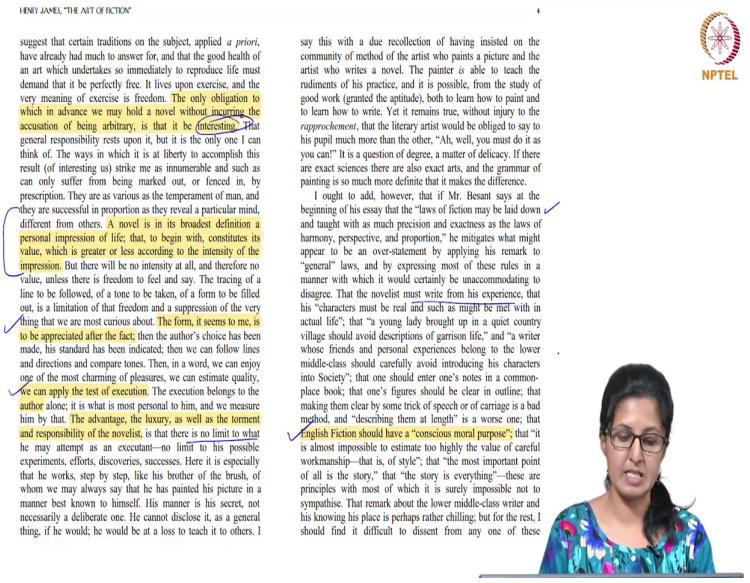

If we go back to the broadest definition to novel that he tried to give, "it is a personal impression of life, that to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression." Something very personal about it, something very subjective about it, which cannot be qualified, which cannot be understood or regulated within the frameworks that Mr. Besant is putting forward.

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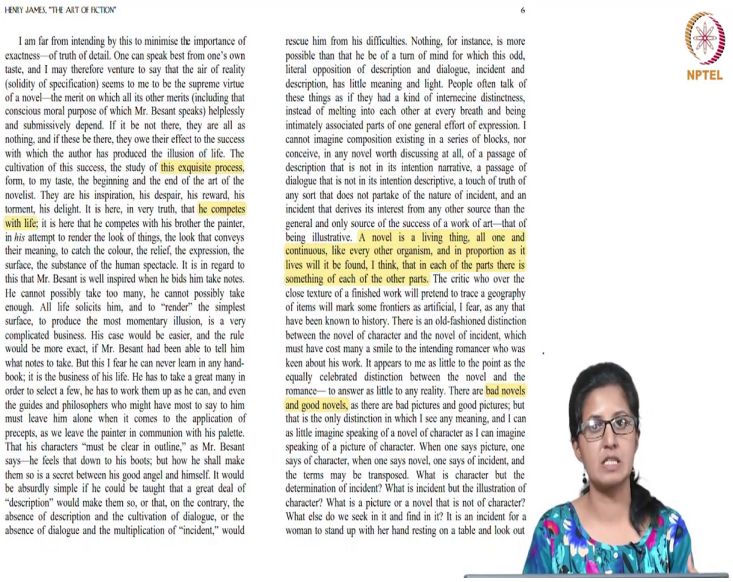

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I am far from intending by this to minimise the importance of exactness—of truth of detail. One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here, in very truth, that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter, in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. It is in regard to this that Mr. Besant is well inspired when he bids him take notes. He cannot possibly take too many, he cannot possibly take enough. All life solicits him, and to "render" the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business. His case would be easier, and the rule would be more exact, if Mr. Besant had been able to tell him what notes to take. But this I fear he can never learn in any hand-book; it is the business of his life. He has to take a great many in order to select a few, he has to work them up as he can, and even the guides and philosophers who might have most to say to him must leave him alone when it comes to the application of precepts, as we leave the painter in communion with his palette. That his characters "must be clear in outline," as Mr. Besant says—he feels that down to his boots; but how he shall make them so is a secret between his good angel and himself. It would be absurdly simple if he could be taught that a great deal of "description" would make them so, or that, on the contrary, the absence of description and the cultivation of dialogue, or the absence of dialogue and the multiplication of "incident," would rescue him from his difficulties. Nothing, for instance, is more possible than that he be of a turn of mind for which this odd, literal opposition of description and dialogue, incident and description, has little meaning and light. People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The critic who over the close texture of a finished work will pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. There is an old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident, which must have cost many a smile to the intending romancer who was keen about his work. It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance—to answer as little to any reality. There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture, one says of character, when one says novel, one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is a picture or a novel that is not of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out

In the next few pages, what Henry James is trying to do is to tell us what he thinks about this art of fiction, what he thinks constitutes the literariness or what he thinks contributes to the mystery of this new emergent form which needs to be seen outside of experience, which needs to be seen outside of any moral compass.

We wrap up with this, the first part of this discussion for today. I encourage you to continue reading through the remaining parts of the essay and which we shall come back to take a closer look at the second half, where Henry James also talks about his theory of fiction, which has become quite foundational in our understanding of the theoretical conditions pertaining to fiction. I thank you for your attention, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.