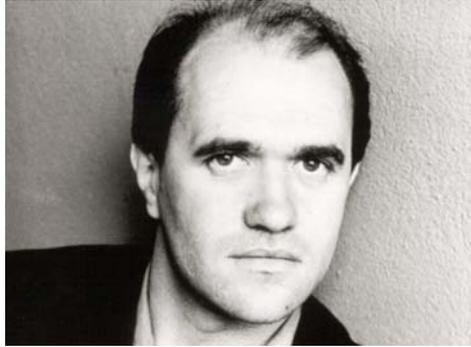


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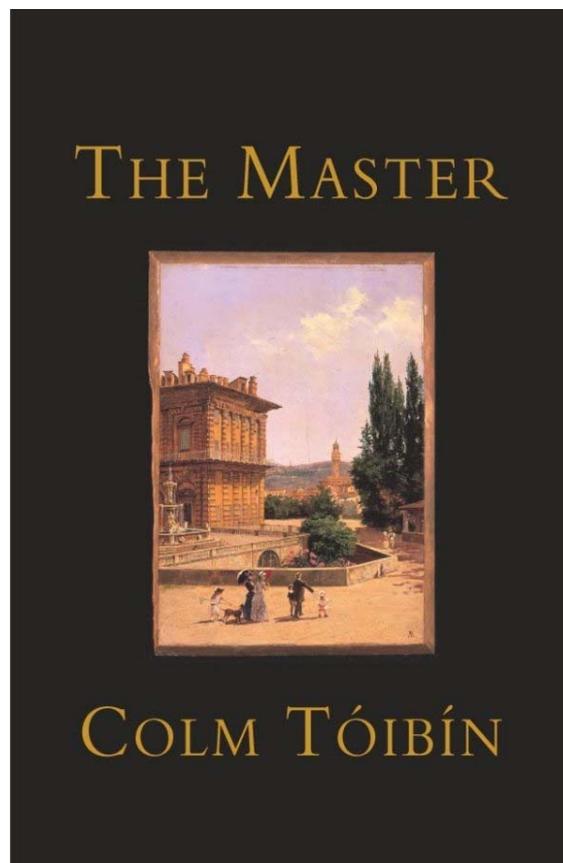
NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Colm Toibin

THE MASTER

Nominated for the 2004 Man Booker Prize



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- ∞ Thematic & Plot Summary
- ∞ Writing Style
- ∞ The Author
- ∞ Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC & PLOT SUMMARY

'It seemed strange, almost sad, to him that he had produced and published so much, rendered so much that was private, and yet the thing that he most needed to write would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone.' (p 9)

This is a stunning work of imaginative 'faction', for it's both a novel and a literary biography which investigates the mind of expatriate American writer, Henry James, who, although he was one of the most revered observers of his generation, whose works include some of the most acclaimed, classic works of the nineteenth century, appears nevertheless to have been a man whose inner life was tragically barren. But perhaps this is not the whole import of this narrative. Perhaps Tóibín wishes to also suggest that instead there is a possibility that James was happy with the emotional demands made on him by his writing – that this, in the master's life, was more than enough? By inference Tóibín is also investigating his own propensity to keep secret those things which both fuel his work and act as drivers in his emotional life as well. This novel is a meditation on the nature of art itself.

James's life is concertinaed into several pivotal years as Tóibín details his life in England from 1895 to 1899 beginning with the demoralizing flop of his play 'Guy Domville', his subsequent production of some of his greatest prose masterpieces, and ending with the visit to England of his elder brother William and his family. Each chapter includes an event which acts as a catalyst which provokes a recollection by James of a past incident. In this way Tóibín 'imagines' the life which has been very well-documented but still contains at its heart a mystery.

The novel suggests that several crucial aspects of his childhood left an indelible effect on James as a man and a writer. The household directed by his father is described as one *'where ideas were sacred, second only to good manners, where there was a pull between an ordered community who knew God and an idealism, a readiness to trust the spirit in all its flickering.'* (p 215) But this was tempered by *'the restlessness within the Jameses [which] had further unmoored Alice'* (p 215) and perhaps left James forever searching for contentment as well. Their father was a noted theologian who uprooted the family constantly and theirs was a life which did not encourage strong attachments outside this

close family unit of five children. But, as well, James was very early diagnosed by his mother as an invalid, a myth which suited his propensity to solitude and which may have also led to his later emotional detachedness. His sister Alice was also subject to hypochondria and her singular nature made forging relationships with men almost impossible for her.

Another aspect of James's character which is analysed here is the capacity to keep his desires hidden. *'He had never loved the intrigue. Yet he liked knowing secrets, because not to know was to miss almost everything. He himself learned never to disclose anything, ...The men and women in the salons of literary Paris moved like players in a game of knowing and not knowing, pretence and disguise. He had learned everything from them.'* (p 5) Surrounded by innuendo, and by people like Maud Elliott who *'came from a distinguished family of alluders ... The raised eyebrow and the pointed remark ran in their family'* (p 293), in one way the very private James was unsuited to the vibrant and gossipy social life of his era, but in another he was suited to it as well. For his observation of human communication was based (as his novels reveal) on how we keep secrets from each other carefully masked by polite conversation. In this work several 'obtuse' conversations are clearly redolent with underlying meanings.

The novel suggests that there were three pivotal women in Henry's life whose influence is clear in all his works – Alice, his sister, who died after prolonged hypochondria, in the care of a companion named Miss Loring; Minny Temple, his cousin and friend, who succumbed to a deposit on her lung whilst James was living in Europe; and the writer, Constance Fenimore Woolson (a grandniece of James Fenimore Cooper), who committed suicide provoked (some have suggested), by his failure to join her in Europe. Each are in a real sense metaphorically abandoned by James who is living in the 'sunnier' climes of his intellectual obsession with the works he is creating.

Henry's memories of the three women are contained in separate chapters, each of which build to a bathetic emotional climax, and yet contribute to the tremendous intellectual and creative climax of the work he wrote in the later years of his life . Each of them was an intellectual unsuited to the social climate in which they lived for none were destined to marry or to settle for the subservient role dictated by their society. James was a 'confidant' to each of them, but they also provided rich material for his work as well. **Alice**, his sister is described in Chapter Three (pp 50-66) as a woman for whom society was a strain. Henry's closeness to her, of his four siblings, stemmed from the fact that *'They had both recoiled from engagements, deep companionship, the warmth of love... He felt they had both been banished, sent into exile, left alone'* (p 66) and her memory stayed with him all his life. **Minny Temple**, his cousin, described in Chapter Five (pp 91- 114) dies young, and James concludes that *'her image would preside in his intellect as a sort of measure and standard of brightness and hope'* (p 111) for ever after. Her letter to John Gray in which she asks him to *'tell me something that you are sure is*

true' (p 110) stays with James as a form of creative inspiration. **Constance Woolson**, his would-be lover, described in Chapter Nine (p 228-252) dies tragically at her own hand. Lily Norton's strained and yet precise attempts to lay the blame for her death at James's door (pp 217-9) are muffled by the household dramas he was experiencing with the intoxicated Smiths, but he later recalls every detail of their meetings.

His characters were an amalgam of these women so that when he created Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* he used Constance but *'he had used that sense of her, attached it, as it were, to his other prior claimants, and written it sometimes on the very same day that he wandered in the city with his new American friend.'* (pp 228-9) Of their friendship *'he came to understand that his presence was powerful for her, and that everything he said and wrote was contemplated by her at length'* (p 233). The chilling manner in which he takes the news of her death (pp 252-3) is imagined by Tóibín as yet a further example of Henry's inability to feel deep emotion. *'He now had to face the idea that he, in turn, had sent her powerful signals of his need for her.'* (p 255) *'She had been caught, as it were, in a large misunderstanding, not only in the snare of his solitary, sedentary exile, but also in the idea that he was a man who did not, and would not ever, desire a wife.'* (p 255) His later memories of her seem to suggest a man capable of feeling only in recollection or repose. *'His relationship with Constance would be hard to explain; Andersen was perhaps too young to know how memory and regret can mingle, how much sorrow can be held within, and how nothing seems to have any shape or meaning until it is well past and lost ... only to return in the night as piercing pain.'* (p 287) Apart from these three, of course, his mother's influence looms over the work culminating in his sister-in-law Alice and brother William receiving a message from his dead mother asking Alice to look after Henry: *'The idea that she would not rest until he was at rest did not seem strange to him'* (p 349).

The plight of women in nineteenth century society is also suggested by these women, a subject James was extraordinarily aware of in the way he traced such lives in his fiction. As Constance curtly tells Henry *'I think it's difficult for all of us. The gap is so wide ... I mean between using our intelligence as women to the full and the social consequences of that'* (p 244-5) suggesting that such women had no choice but to retire from society and nurse their stifled spirits. James's relationship with women lacked fulfillment, just as the society he observed failed to enhance their actualization as individuals, but he offered them some recompense via the manner in which he explored the depths of their need in his multi-layered fiction.

How a writer mines the lives of those closest to him is another theme embedded in the influence of these women and that of all his associates, for James was an observer (or voyeur?) of other people's lives. *'We all liked you, and I suppose you liked us as well, but you were too busy gathering material to like anyone too much. You were charming of course, but you were like a young banker collecting our savings. Or a priest listening to*

our sins. I remember my aunt warning us not to tell you anything.' (p 282) Many incidents in the novel evoke the idea of James as a watcher from a window. His observation of the child Mona (pp 40-1) creates an entire fiction in his mind, which is highly suggestive of how his stories were created. The cover of this edition of the novel is both a painting and an image of a family at leisure which would have suggested to James all sorts of possibilities. For nostalgia and reminiscence of scenes and events are further thematic undercurrents in this work. *'He did not wish to be regarded as a fossil, but he also wanted to keep the past to himself, a prized and private possession.'* (pp 278-9) James used his memories to fuel his fiction, which is why so much of his fiction was about people long gone from his life, who assumed a greater power in their absence, than they ever did in reality.

American innocence versus European experience were themes in James's work, and in Tóibín's novel too. *'Lily had become Europeanized ... Lily began to beam, her face opened out, as if she had suddenly and impetuously decided she was an American, one who knew how to play her natural and her created selves against each other to her host's delight.'* (pp 213-4) Later he writes, *'The men could be easily distinguished as fellow Americans by the quality of their moustaches and the innocent and amicable expressions on their faces.'* (p 276) **The role of the expatriate is also cunningly examined as another form of play acting or artifice based on carefully constructed rituals.** Henry's friends the Waldo Storys and the Maud Howe Elliots who entertain him in Rome after the shock of Constance's death are described as *'neither Romans nor Americans, but their manners were perfect and their habits well formed ... bohemians in their studios, but in the company of their servants they knew how to give orders.'* (p 275-6) Still later he says that *'Once I wrote about youth and America and now I am left with exile and middle age and stories of disappointment which are unlikely to win me many readers on either side of the Atlantic.'* (p 355)

Sexuality must be considered in reading this work, despite the fact that it is almost entirely lacking any mention of physical desire, except for oblique and ambiguous references, and James's work did this as well. This novel documents, in particular, a sexually charged night he spent with Oliver Wendell Holmes (pp 96-101), and his meeting with Hendrik Anderson (p 277) which leaves him clearly unsettled in what sounds remarkably like infatuation. Before he arrives for a visit Andersen is *'in Henry's thoughts all day, that sometimes when he worked he would pause, wondering what the cause was of a strange glow of happiness or warm expectation which came over him, ... Rye.'* (p 297) He compares his feelings to those of his parents or his brother and sister-in-law (p 298) and refers to *'the impossibility of his imaginings.'* (p 298) And yet, when Hendrik arrives, although Henry anxiously hosts his visit (pp 299-312) which is regarded by those around him with salacious interest, their embrace in the cemetery (p 287) appears to be the only physical contact they make. Despite Henry's imagining his naked body (p 311) they remain physically aloof until their embrace at parting when *'he could not help watching his smile intensely, trying to hold it in his mind, knowing how much he would need to remember it*

when he returned to England.' (p 296) Throughout the novel there are also references to a Paul Joukowsky (pp 7-11) who he'd known twenty years earlier which '*haunted him now*' (p 299), and his attraction to Hammond, Lady Wolseley's man servant (pp 27-47 and p 331) is also clear.

This novel concludes that while ironically Henry was a deeply private man who '*had never discussed his parents or his ambitions with anyone*' (p 296), his circumspect nature also made his writing so redolent with emotion that one cannot read it without gasping at the penetrating insights he eludes to in such a painfully obtuse fashion. The magnificently suggestive closing paragraph of Tóibín's novel sums up Henry's approach to his life and work in a subtle and yet powerful fashion: '*Lamb House was his again ... captured and held.*' (p 359) Perhaps 'the master' had to be a mystery in order to create the gloriously ambiguous masterpieces which could only have been created by one who was unknown to himself or to others? Perhaps his life was a glorious metaphor for the nature of great art – it refuses to explain itself. It refuses to explain.

WRITING STYLE

1. This novel is also a **literary biography** which re-creates the life of the famed nineteenth century American-born writer **Henry James (1843-1916)** who lived most of his life as an exile amongst artists and aristocrats in London, Paris, Rome Venice and finally in Rye, Sussex. Tóibín analyses James's work by comparing it to his life. Read some of James's major works in conjunction with this discussion and also read about him on internet sites [eg Classicreader.com <http://www.classicreader.com/author.php/aut25> Accessed 5th October 2004] and in Leon Edel's masterful biography of James or other works referred to be Tóibín in the Acknowledgements. Tóibín has said that *'no one's life is very interesting unless you can find a shape for it, and no one can do that when they're alive. Maybe when you're dead you can get a good story out of it'*. ['Greatest Hits of an Exile', *Sydney Morning Herald* (April 10, 2004) <http://www.smh.com.au> Accessed 6th October 2004] With that comment in mind, assess this as a biography.

2. Read some of James's works in order to appraise the style in which Tóibín's work is written. Though it doesn't mirror James's style it does employ a mode which James is said to have pioneered, for it is said that *'James's technique of **dramatizing thought** profoundly altered the history of the novel.'*

[<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/RefArticle.aspx?refid=761572040> Accessed 5th October 2004] This influence is clear in how Tóibín has chosen to tell James's life story in a fiction which condenses the life into a few pivotal years (by dating the eleven chapters, beginning with January 1895 and ending in October 1899) containing within them 'flashbacks' which prompt Henry's supposed interior recollections. The narration uses a device pioneered by James to tell a story not by detailing incidents but rather a person's thoughts about, and reactions to them. Discuss.

3. This is a '**metafiction**' in that it not only purports to tell a fiction about a writer of fiction ... but uses techniques which suggest that life itself is a fictional world in which we constantly employ devices with which to explore ourselves. Henry observes Lily Norton and *'it occurred to him that the re-creation of herself, her deliberate broadening of her effect, could have atrophied other qualities more endearing to a potential suitor. Constance, he thought, might have written a very good novel about her.'* (p 221) Henry reflects on the aftermath of Constance's suicide which he spends with her sister and niece: *'This, he thought, was her last novel. They all played their assigned roles ... Constance would have been able to conjure up their stricken faces and would have known, too, that Henry James would have studied the women, observing them with cold sympathy...They were her characters; she had written the script for them. And she knew that Henry would recognize her art in these scenes.'* (p 259) Perhaps the most intriguing of these sequences is when Henry recognises in Hendrik Andersen a 'character' he had already invented years before in his novel *Roderick Hudson*. (p 290) Discuss.

4. The **descriptions of character** in this novel are devastatingly terse and understated. Read, for example, the conversation between James and his friend the novelist Mrs Florence Lett (pp 196-8) which gives an incisive view of the lady's nature. Which other characters were particularly vividly described?

5. This could also be described as **historical fiction**, a genre which Henry says '*is tainted by a fatal cheapness*' (p 336). What does he mean by this, do you think?

6. Henry describes his work to William, Alice, Peggy and Gosse: '*The moral is the most pragmatic we can imagine, that life is a mystery and that only sentences are beautiful, and that we must be ready for change, ... and that no one...who has known the sweetness of Paris can properly return to the sweetness of the United States.*' (p 355) Discuss.

THE AUTHOR

Colm Tóibín was born in Ireland in 1955 and lives in Dublin. He is the author of four novels, *The South*, *The Heather Blazing*, *The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, which was shortlisted for the 1999 Booker Prize. His non-fiction includes *Bad Blood*, *Homage to Barcelona*, *The Sign of the Cross* and *Love in a Dark Time*.

Further information is available from the official Colm Tóibín website.

<http://www.colmtoibin.com/> Accessed 6th October, 2004

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. One of James's central themes was to contrast American innocence with European experience in complex and intensely psychological works. Is Tóibín concerned with this theme as well? Compare for example, the lives of Oscar Wilde and Henry James.
2. James is portrayed as an enigmatic figure whose sexuality remained unresolved. What hints presented an inkling of James's secret desires? Read for example, the description of the night he spent with Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in 1865. (pp 97-101) Did his ambivalence stem from his relationship with his work or his family background? Tóibín's website contains an interesting New York Times book review by Daniel Mendelsohn (20/6/04) which relates this topic to Tóibín who concludes that James was '*a figure who, because of his self-repression, not only didn't have a "gay life", but had no life at all.*' His sister Alice also resisted attachments but her alternative sexuality is also suggested by the inference that Alice and her companion, Miss Loring, may have been lovers (p 326). Discuss.
3. The influence of a childhood on a writer is clear in the emphasis placed on the manner in which the James children were brought up. Can we escape our childhoods? Discuss.
4. The novel suggests that three female figures who died in their youth became recurring figures in James's fiction and that they provided the source material for his greatest characters. Discuss in relation to some of his novels.
5. James's search for a home is a theme which is common in many writers' works. He eventually settled in Rye, Sussex, away from the literary maelstrom in London. Is a home symbolic of inner peace? Is home a place or a state of mind? Discuss.
6. Exile is a theme (related to home), which underpins this narrative, and which often fuelled James's fiction. Did James deliberately exile himself in order to create a creative space in which to work unimpeded? What were the boundaries of this exile?
7. Literary biography is tackled here in a style which might be compared to that of Robert Dessaix's in *Twilight of Love*, his personal memoir and biography of Ivan Turgenev, or of A.S. Byatt's fictional literary biography *Possession*, or Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens*. Discuss.
8. The US Civil War in this work is presented as a tragic waste of young lives which resulted from the failure of a terribly misguided patriotism. Compare to other literary works on this theme such as *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier.

9. *'His attempt to be earnest, hesitant and polite had not fooled women like her who watched his full mouth and the glance of his eyes and instantly understood it all.'* (p 7) What does Tóibín imply that James means by this imaginary monologue?

10. *'Reading was as silent and solitary and private as writing. Now he would hear people in the audience hold their breath, cry out, fall silent.'* (p 11) James's venture into playwriting from the solitude of novels is terrifying and ultimately disastrous. The fiction writer confronts public comments too, in reviews of their works. How does the writer cope with such public reactions to their work? Read some reviews of *The Master* and discuss.

11. *'But these fancies can be entertained but briefly, I'm afraid. The rest is dull. It is called work and it makes demands.'* (p 219) The jacket of this novel describes it as *'a searching exploration of the hazards of putting the life of the mind before affairs of the heart.'* Is this the major theme of the work? Is Tóibín suggesting that James consistently failed those he loved most in favour of his greatest love, the writing of fiction? Or is he suggesting that James felt a guilt about their deaths which was not warranted?

12. *'To this world, from which the ocean had so politely withdrawn, he had moved, in his own gentle and polite way, creating space for his work to flourish and his sleep to come easy. He now had a household, much larger than any his parents had ever dreamed of, and the smooth running of his small empire was a matter of care and pride and worry and high expense.'* (p 200) James lived in a world of aristocrats and this colored his work and his living habits. Discuss.

13. James's prompt acquiescence to the request of help made by his servants, the hapless Smiths (pp 202-222) might be construed as kindness. But his subsequent response to their drunkenness in Rye reveals a man whose nature is more pragmatic than sentimental. Although this whole section is hilariously Dickensian - Burgess Noakes the quietly confident new servant (who could be compared to the parodic Dickensian character Sam Farrow in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) is juxtaposed against the dreadful retainers the Smiths who are found wanting - it is also gloomily gothic in its arid heart which reveals that James seems ultimately unable to feel anything for them, despite their years in his service. Discuss.

14. Victorian women were often subject to hypochondria (Alice), frail constitutions (Minnie) and melancholy (Constance). Although we tend today to put such conditions down to earlier repressive attitudes to women, they are equally prevalent today although they evince in conditions known as anorexia/bulimia and post-natal depression. Is western society fundamentally antagonistic to women's needs just as it was in the nineteenth century?

15. Subterfuge was a prized attribute in James's society. Has society become more open or do we use different techniques to camouflage our real feelings? Discuss.

16. When Constance writes to James of her suspicions that he has based his novels on people and places, he desires to '*remove the discussion of sources for his novels to the realm of the unspoken, where he and she normally wandered freely as treasured citizens.*' (p 235) Should writers be questioned about these matters? Are individual lives a fitting subject for fiction?

17. The plight of the artist is always to fear '*the possibility of failure and neglect and solitude.*' (p 292) How does Henry confront or deal with these feelings?

18. '*Henry wanted to turn to his friend to say that he should take as much from life as it would offer him.*' (p 296) Is this Henry's way of making up for the lack of emotion in his own life?

19. Can life be lived without emotional passion? Can art be enough?

THE MASTER
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