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Raiding the Real:Written Resurrections and the Death of Desire in Colm Tóibín's *The Master*

In *The Master*, Colm Tóibín provides a fictional glimpse into the life of late nineteenth and early twentieth century writer Henry James. This unsettling historical novel invites the reader to travel between public knowledge and intimate secrecy, as Tóibín blends biographical fact with imaginative speculation. In an interview, Tóibín suggests that *The Master* "is a novel about a man, much more than it is a novel about a novelist" (qtd. in Davis, 187). As is often the case, there is significant ground on which to question the author's speculations on his own work here. *The Master* maintains a constant focus on the writing process, consistently alluding to Henry James' works and inviting connections between his empirical existence and his fictional creations. In fact, this novel rarely allows the reader to forget that Tóibín's Henry is, first and foremost, a writer.[1] The novel opens with a dream; Henry's mother and his aunt Kate beseech him in the narrow streets of an Italian city, while he remains unable to respond. Upon waking, Henry feels "an overwhelming urge to start

[1]Although the theoretical question of where fiction and reality begin and end surrounds this paper, for reasons of clarity I will maintain a terminological distinction. From here forward, "Henry" will refer to Tóibín's character Henry James in *The Master*. When discussing the empirical man Henry James, I will use the surname "James."

writing, anything to numb himself, distract himself, from the vision of these two women who were lost to him" (Tóibín, 2004: 3). The beginning of the novel thus exemplifies Henry's identity as a writer, as a man compelled by an urgent need to write, and as a man who writes to silence the haunting voices of the dead. Henry's writing crucially defines his sense of subjectivity: "each book he had written, each scene described or character created, had become an aspect of him, had entered into his driven spirit and lay there much as the years themselves had done" (Tóibín, 2004: 270). Henry the man becomes inextricable from Henry the writer in this work. Therefore, insofar as *The Master* is "a novel about a man," it is simultaneously "a novel about a novelist."

Henry's writing performs numerous psychological functions in this novel, all of which intertwine to form a crucial thread: privacy. Writing allows Henry to revert into the solitary world of his "hidden self" (Tóibín, 2004: 108), a space he cherishes with near-religious fervour. Henry desperately needs his departures from the external world: "the slow ease and the silence could . . . fill him with a happiness that nothing, no society nor the company of any individual, no glamour or glitter, could equal" (Tóibín, 2004: 45). His self-understanding hinges on a fundamental division between private and public life. In addition to his inner self as a writer, there is also another hidden Henry: his identity as a man who desires other men. Like his private need to write, his erotic desire remains concealed within the protected parameters of the intimate sphere. Henry's inner self as a writer significantly relates to his inner self as a sexual being. He often sublimates his erotic desire into his writing, drowning out his desires with an obsessive focus on his work. While his writing eventually enters the outer world, and thus embodies both a private and a public aspect, Henry never externalizes his sexual desires in this novel. He allows his desire for men to surface

neither in his writing nor in his physical and verbal actions. Henry's tragedy in *The Master* is that, despite all the scenes and characters he so eloquently expresses in the written word, he is able neither to live, nor to write, the story of his own passions. Henry's own narrative remains unwritten: "He lived, at times, he felt, as if his life belonged to someone else, a story that had not yet been written, a character who had not been fully imagined" (Tóibín, 2004: 111). He sublimates his desire for erotic and romantic coupling through writing, replacing his personal passion with a passionate pursuit of his fiction. Henry the novelist *overwrites* Henry the man, sacrificing his desire to the pursuit of literary greatness.

Laura Savu argues that for Henry "to achieve literary mastery, he had first to *master himself* by accepting, more or less consciously, the renunciations exacted by the creative life and substituting fantasy with work" (178). As Savu correctly notes, *The Master* implies that Henry's sacrifice is necessary; he must relinquish personal pleasure in order to achieve authorial prominence. Tóibín suggests that Henry's eschewal of personal pleasure in favour of artistic accomplishment demonstrates great nobility in his character. However, Henry's choice to prioritize his work is not without repercussions. A pronounced sadness permeates *The Master*, as both Henry and others around him suffer as a result of his relentless pursuit of privacy and isolation, and his prioritization of his writing over social bonds. Although Henry obsessively posits a dichotomy between his "concealed self" and the outside world (Tóibín, 2004: 212), Tóibín's narrative reveals that such a polarity cannot hold. This paper will demonstrate how Tóibín troubles and questions the distinctions between author and work, fiction and reality, public and private spaces, and internal and external selves in his multi-faceted fictionalization of the life of Henry James. While Tóibín demonstrates the nobility of Henry's sacrifice of passion in favour of literary

mastery, he also implodes Henry's perceived mono-perspectival relationship between his interior self and the external world. Ultimately, Tóibín interrogates the moral and ethical implications of Henry's habit of 'raiding the real,' suggesting that, despite the dignity of his pursuit of artistic mastery, Henry must still be held accountable for his actions in the real world.

Throughout *The Master*, Henry exhibits a near-fanatic urge to establish a boundary between the outside world and "the locked room of himself" (Tóibín, 2004: 240). Kerin Scherzinger argues that "In Tóibín's novel, the hazardous route from privacy to publicity takes the form of a delicate sketching of James's intimate world, of a life characterized by hesitancy and subterfuge" (189). Indeed, Tóibín carefully delineates Henry's meticulously organized interior realm in *The Master*. Furthermore, he foregrounds Henry's urgent need to protect the privacy of his enclosed internal sphere. Henry goes to great lengths to conceal his desires, and to maintain the sequestration of his inner sanctuary. James C. Davis describes Tóibín's "protagonist, whose own self-division into public and private personae is legendary and required a vigilance that is ultimately this novel's most compelling subject" (183). Henry lives a restrained and checked existence, always maintaining a stark division between the deeply personal interior self and the carefully presented "social mask" (Tóibín, 2004: 100). He takes pleasure in being a man who "kept passion firmly in check" (Tóibín, 2004: 273), and delights in his ability to conceal his inner self from the outside world: "Remaining invisible, becoming skilled in the art of self-effacement, even to someone whom he had known so long, gave him satisfaction" (Tóibín, 2004: 212). However, despite Henry's great skill in screening his secretive internal world, various characters penetrate his defenses throughout the novel.

The first person to do so, Princess Oblisky, enters the action early in the novel. She quickly demonstrates an ability to rupture Henry's psychological barricades:

> His attempts 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. They said, of course, nothing, just as she was saying nothing now, merely a name, an old name that rang in his ears. A name that, once, had meant everything to him. (Tóibín, 2004: 7)

This passage shows that Henry's 'hidden' self as a man who desires other men is not so hidden at all. Princess Oblisky clearly sees through Henry, knowing how much the name Paul Joukowsky means to him. Henry reacts to the Princess' remarks with calculated deliberation: "Henry was careful to try to speak immediately" (Tóibín, 2004: 7). Typically, he carefully maintains the façade of his "designed self" (Tóibín, 2004: 7), seeking to outwardly re-establish his psychological safeguards. However, Henry remains inwardly troubled by the Princess' reminder: "These thoughts preoccupied him" (Tóibín, 2004: 7). The Princess' invocation of this name has a profound emotional effect on Henry; by reminding him of the lost possibilities of love and desire she breaks through the defenses guarding his inner psyche.

Significantly, after the Princess' departure, an urgent need to write overcomes Henry. He imagines a story involving the princess, reflecting that "He must write it down as soon as she left" (Tóibín, 2004: 7-8). The Princess' exposure of his secret erotic desires sparks his need to travel into his other inner world, to retreat into the privacy of his prose. Here he seeks to re-establish the barrier between his inner self and the world around it. When he sits down at his desk, the story which emerges is not the one he had imagined. Rather than writing about the Princess, he writes about

his erotic yearning for Paul Joukowsky, and the unconsummated sexual potential between them. Thus the private writer and the hidden desirer momentarily come together. Yet Henry's two inner passengers can only travel so far together: "He wrote down the story of that night and thought then of the rest of the story which could never be written, no matter how secret the paper or how quickly it would be burned or destroyed" (Tóibín, 2004: 10). Henry allows himself neither to fantasize nor to write beyond a certain point. His desire for men must remain "the story which could never be written" (Tóibín, 2004: 10). Notably, what most distresses Henry about his missed opportunity with Paul is not the fact that he did not consummate his desire, but that he is now unable to write about it: "the thing that he most needed to write would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone" (Tóibín, 2004: 9). This leads the reader to wonder where life and fiction begin and end in this novel, as Henry ascribes more importance to the act of writing his *eros* than to the erotic act itself.

Henry's sexual drives strongly relate to his writing throughout the narrative. As both a writer and a sexual being, he is a master of self-control, of asceticism, and of inhibition. He lives a monastic lifestyle, both sexually celibate and piously devoted to his work. Henry's capacity for "ascetic self discipline" allows him both to restrain his sexual desire and to perform the meticulous work of his writing (Savu 178). Furthermore, as Savu points out, moments of "sexual excitement" often lead to "bursts of creativity" in this novel (186), as Henry sublimates his *eros* into the written word. His capacity for self-denial both nullifies his erotic possibilities and allows his writing to flourish. Although Henry never indulges his sexual needs in this novel, his erotic yearnings pervade the text. Close encounters with pleasure play a pivotal role in the plot of *The Master*. In "Henry James for Venice," Tóibín describes the role of

eroticism in this novel: “I was interested in placing a set of images throughout the book of what I should call sexual almostness” (198). Tóibín soundly diagnoses his own work here; moments of unfulfilled sexual tension and erotic near-misses abound throughout the novel. Savu argues that “In *The Master* . . . homoerotic desire figures as lack,” and that Tóibín leaves Henry “uneasily poised between desire and gratification” (177). Indeed, Henry spends much of the novel in this liminal space between the arousal and the consummation of his passions. Yet he always returns to the protected space of his internal sphere rather than acting on his desire for sexual, emotional, and romantic contact.

Henry’s capacity for sexual self-control and self-denial figures prominently during his stay at the Royal Hospital, where Lady Wolseley provides him with the manservant Hammond. Privately, she asks him whether Hammond is adequate, and Henry notes that “her face seemed to glow with insinuation” (Tóibín, 2004: 27). Lady Wolsely provides another example of a woman who sees into Henry’s ‘hidden’ self as a man who desires men, and she clearly pairs him with Hammond to provoke the development of sexual ‘almostness.’ Daniel K. Hannah describes “Hammond's silent gaze” as one “that repeatedly implies desire and the mannered understanding of a need to suppress such desire” (75). As Hannah rightly notes, the interactions between the writer and the servant exude stifled sexual possibility. Hammond repeatedly finds excuses to visit Henry’s room, and watches him “with an intensity which was almost unmannerly” (Tóibín, 2004: 33). Hammond seems to delight in his ability to arouse Henry, going so far as offering to check on him in the night (Tóibín, 2004: 37). The atmosphere of the erotic exchanges between Henry and Hammond reverberates with the same tension as the various stunted sexual possibilities throughout the novel. Hannah succinctly describes the function of male-male desire

in this work: “While scenes exposing James’s intense, unconsummated desire for men punctuate Tóibín’s novel, homoeroticism remains shrouded in an ambiguous silence of potentiality” (74). Henry repeatedly turns away from erotic contact, yet the spectre of what could have been haunts the narrative. After rejecting Hammond’s offer, Henry lies alone in bed, holding his breath. He allows his mind to linger on the romantic possibilities which he will never permit himself to pursue: “he longed, now more than ever before, in this strange house in this strange country, for someone to hold him, not speak or move even, but to embrace him, stay with him” (Tóibín, 2004: 38). Against his better wishes, Henry seeks to break through the barrier of his isolated existence, and to externalize his desire through human contact. However, as this wish becomes “more urgent,” it also becomes “more impossible” (Tóibín, 2004: 38), and Henry passes the night in the familiar company of his solitude.

On Henry’s last night at the Royal Hospital, Hammond appears in the ballroom and Henry’s eager gaze momentarily betrays his desire: “he knew that he had been examining him too closely, that he had, in one flash, given more away than he had done all week” (Tóibín, 2004: 42). Henry covets Hammond’s “extraordinarily handsome” appearance (Tóibín, 2004: 44), but Hammond remains merely a beautiful horizon, an unreachable and distant fantasy. Henry never considers erotic contact with Hammond as a real possibility, and, even while they remain in each other’s presence, he despairs of his impending loneliness:

> Already he missed the glow of pleasure which Hammond’s calm face had given him. Soon, it would be lost to him, and this made him feel that he was a great stranger, with nothing to match his own longings, a man away from his

> own country, observing the world as a mere watcher from a window. Abruptly, he left the hall and walked briskly back to his own quarters. (Tóibín, 2004: 44)

Henry's turn away from Hammond and back towards his private room symbolically indicates his reversion from the external world into himself. Henry repeatedly uses his inner self as a sanctuary, a place of privacy wherein he circumvents the possibilities of his desire. In a sense, he turns into the self in order to deny the self – retreating into isolation as a defence against the temptations which lie elsewhere. In the vacuous erotic (non)relationship between Henry and Hammond, Tóibín shows the uglier side of Henry's sacrifice. Here Tóibín compels the reader to pity the loveless Henry, the man who must deny his longing to be held in order to achieve literary preeminence. Henry's loneliness is both a curse and a blessing; it ultimately allows him to reach artistic prominence, but it also causes him to neglect his own need for love, affection, and romantic contact. As Eibhear Walshe suggests, "unfulfilled desire . . . enriches James's writing while impoverishing his erotic life" (135), and Tóibín asks his readers both to respect Henry's choice of literary greatness, and to lament the death of his desire.

Tóibín presents Oscar Wilde as a foil to Henry's introversion and sexual self-restraint. Wilde, who writes with success on the public stage of the theatre, starkly contrasts with Henry, who, after the failure of *Guy Domville*, limits his own work "to the silent art of fiction" (Tóibín, 2004: 65). In juxtaposition to Henry, Wilde represents pure exteriority in both his writing and his sexuality. Walshe suggests that "Wilde becomes James's nightmare counterpart, a dreaded anti-self, as he is publicly exposed and forced to defend his homosexuality in a courtroom" (135). As Walshe correctly points out, Wilde's presence in *The Master* shows the dangerous results of

exteriorized male-male desire. During Wilde's trial and the scandal that surrounds it, Henry becomes obsessed with Wilde's family, noting that their "very name was disgraced forever" (Tóibín, 2004: 73). Wilde not only damages his own reputation, others around him also suffer from his lack of discretion. Henry's decision not to act on his sexual urges is only too easily rationalized in the shadow of Wilde's indiscretions. While Henry's self-denial is a conservative gesture, it is also the responsible course of action. In late nineteenth-century England, where the penalties for such activity could be severe, Henry makes the pragmatic decision to protect himself and his loved ones. Although Wilde admirably and dangerously blazes the trial from the private to the public, he also shows that Henry's decision to keep his sexual inclinations secret is understandable and responsible.

Henry is neither a radical nor a revolutionary; rather, he is a model of self control, celibacy, and ascetic discipline. When Gosse insinuates that Henry might be in danger, he snaps at the suggestion: "'No.' Henry turned sharply. 'You do not wonder. There is nothing to wonder about'" (Tóibín, 2004: 72). The suggestion that Henry might have acted on his sexual inclinations fills him with indignation. Henry's sexuality is not so much repressed as restrained; he knows that he desires men, not women, but he chooses not to act on his urges. As Davis notes, Henry is "not exactly ashamed of" and "certainly well aware of" his sexuality (184). Henry does not bury his libidinal drives beneath his consciousness; rather, he simply refuses to indulge them. He does not repress his sexuality, but instead chooses to live a celibate life, devoting his energies to his labours. When Gosse suggests that he may have compromised this lifestyle with sexual activity, Henry becomes abject and defensive. Gosse has not only broken through the protective barrier surrounding Henry's inner self, he has also questioned Henry's moral principles as a celibate.

After “Wilde had been sentenced and the scandal surrounding London’s dark underworld had died down” (Tóibín, 2004: 73), Henry’s discussions with Gosse turn to another man who takes interest in “what he called a problem in Greek ethics, the love between two men” (Tóibín, 2004: 74). John Addington Symonds, like Wilde, outspokenly approves of erotic encounters between men: “Symonds wanted it brought to light, discussed openly” (Tóibín, 2004: 74). The possibility of such an approach to male-male romantic possibility intrigues Henry. He becomes so “fascinated by Symonds” that he writes a story about him (Tóibín, 2004: 74). When Gosse finds out about the story, he fears that “people would recognize the Symondses” (Tóibín, 2004: 76). He insists that “writing a story using factual material and real people was dishonest and strange and somehow underhanded” (Tóibín, 2004: 76). However, Gosse quickly forgets “his objections to *the art of fiction as a cheap raid on the real and the true*” (Tóibín, 2004: 76, my emphasis), and returns to his habit of gossiping openly and liberally with Henry. While Gosse quickly forgets his criticism, his comments invite reflection on *The Master* as a whole. The notion of ‘raiding the real,’ permeates this novel, as Henry consistently turns his life, and the lives of others around him, into material for his fiction. Henry constantly pillages the substance of the external world for use in his art. Furthermore, he derives a self-inflating sense of strength from his ability to fictionalize the world around him. He first realizes this capability as he writes a story about his brother Wilkie: “The feeling of power was new to him, this *raid on his own memories*, this parading of an object so close to him, so deeply part of his own personal store that no one might ever know where this moment in his story came from, made him believe that he had done something daring and original” (Tóibín, 2004: 183, my emphasis). Henry gleans satisfaction from his ability to make use of the exterior world for his own private

purposes. As he discovers his powers as a writer, he both develops his ability to pillage external reality, and finds his own most private self. His writing brings him into contact with his internal being: “As he wrote, Henry felt . . . what was closest to what concerned him in his waking life and most of his dreams” (Tóibín, 2004: 183). In a sense, Henry discovers himself through writing; his fictional creations allow him to delve into the depths of his inner psyche. Henry’s use of the matter around him thus becomes more than simply an appropriation of the real for his fiction; it also becomes a raid on the external world for his own sense of comfort, security, and power.

Henry is not the only author guilty of raiding the real in the context of this book. In her comparative discussion of *The Master* and David Lodge’s *Author, Author!*, Scherzinger suggests that “The gap between world and book acquires a new dimension in these biographical novels” because of “the gnawing presence of the absent author animating both texts” (183). Scherzinger is right to point out that *The Master* interrogates the relation between text and reality. Moreover, Tóibín further complicates this relationship insofar as he, like Henry, “is also in the business of recreating lives” (Savu 194). While Tóibín persistently reminds the reader of the relation between Henry as writer and the world he lives in, he simultaneously invites the reader to remember that he is likewise appropriating historical reality for the purposes of his fiction. Tóibín continually invites his readers to consider the relationship between author and subject matter and thus “foregrounds his own treacherous presence in the text of *The Master*” (Hannah 79). Notably, Tóibín’s ‘raid on the real’ becomes crucial for the message of *The Master*. The novel ends with Henry’s return to solitude after the departure of his brother William and his family:

> Lamb House was his again. He moved around it relishing the silence and the emptiness . . . He walked up and down the stairs, going into the rooms as though they, too, in how they yielded to him, belonged to an unrecoverable past, and would join the room with the tasselled tablecloths and the screens and the shadowed corners, and all the other rooms from whose windows he had observed the world. (Tóibín, 2004: 338).

The narrative closes with Henry, freed from the demands of public life and having circumvented the temptations of desire, ready to return to the private world of his work. Having confronted erotic possibility one last time in his final encounter with Hammond, and asserted his identity as a writer by giving Hammond books instead of caresses, Henry is ready to uninhibitedly pursue his life's work. The private, solitary space of Lamb House provides an ideal *locus* in which he can continue to live as a chaste ascetic, resisting his libidinal impulses and focussing his energy on his writing. Notably, unlike a work of pure fiction, this biographical fiction exists alongside the historical fact that James *did* go on to produce some of his most renowned writing after the time when this novel ends. Thus Tóibín's message, that Henry sacrifices desire for literary achievement, exists not only in the narrative but also beyond it. Savu argues that the novel ends with Henry "ready to produce the work that will truly justify the term 'Master'—i.e., the great work that will make him 'worth speaking of'" (205). *The Master* ends in January of 1900, and following this date James produced some of his most enduring works, including *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* (Edel 534, 400, 585). The relation between history and fiction therefore becomes crucial for the import of *The Master*, insofar as Tóibín invites his readers to surmise that Henry's disavowal of erotic relationships indeed contributes to his development as a writer.

While Tóibín's appropriation of historical material becomes an essential aspect of the moral behind *The Master*, his own 'raid on the real' is not free of ethical dubiousness. For, as Tóibín demonstrates in his fictional recreation of him, James was an intensely private man who exercised great control over what he allowed to surface in the public realm. He refused to "serve up his private life as public fodder" (Savu 182). As Lyndall Gordon points out, "James was a man of secrets" who "sought to protect his privacy" and "well knew the excitements and dangers of biographic power" (5). Thus, "To approach James at precisely the points he screened raises the issue of the biographer's right to know" (Gordon 5). While *The Master* is not a biography proper, Tóibín nonetheless enters James' life at precisely the places where James sought to deny such access. *The Master* thus raises, not the issue of "the biographer's right to know," but of what we might term 'the novelist's right to imagine.'

The lines between biography and fiction dissolve and converge in complex ways throughout *The Master*, leaving the reader with the unsettling experience of being unable to distinguish 'truth' from 'fiction.' While Tóibín indulges in the morally questionable undertaking of reaching into the recesses of James' private life, he is certainly well aware of the ethical issues involved in such a project. Although *The Master* takes a voyeuristic look into the depths of Henry's thoughts and feelings, there are certain areas which Tóibín refuses to explore. For example, although, as Russel J. Perkin notes, he presents a "clearly gay James" in a novel in which "male nakedness is a recurring motif" (121, 120), Tóibín does not invite the reader to share Henry's sexual fantasies. Throughout the novel, Henry meets a series of men who incite his desire, yet Tóibín tactfully shows only the signs and not the inner workings of Henry's desire. Perkin suggests that this novel "is haunted by reticence. *The*

Master is filled with imagery of silence and darkness, which forms part of Tóibín's strategy for representing a reticent life" (121). Perkin may be correct in arguing that Tóibín's stifled evocations of Henry's sexual desire serve to reinforce his presentation of Henry as a man who restrains his own erotic imagination. Tóibín's Henry indeed checks his own fantasies before they come to fruition: "He had never allowed himself to imagine beyond that point. It was the closest he had come, but he had not come close at all" (Tóibín, 2004: 10). While Tóibín employs restraint and reserve as narrative strategies with which to develop Henry's character, he also limits how far he allows himself to imagine. Tóibín explains his portrayal of Henry's sexuality thus: "James is my character and I wanted him haunted, uneasy but charming; I want his sexuality to be concealed, unspoken, with no private sexual moments shared with the reader, the reader must be like the wider world, kept at arm's length" (Tóibín, 2006: 195-96). While Tóibín provides a glimpse into the private sanctuary of Henry's inner life, he also establishes a barrier between reader and character. Tóibín's refusal to reveal certain "private sexual moments" implies that these moments exist. Thus the strategy of sexual withholding in *The Master* is not only a narrative device, but also a way for Tóibín to delineate the limits of his fictional recreation. Tóibín maintains certain barriers and jurisdictions around the sanctity of the 'real,' allowing his imagination to venture only so far into Henry's private psyche.

The ethical issues surrounding the relationship between fiction and reality not only frame a discussion of Tóibín's imaginative revival of James' life, such questions also permeate the plot of *The Master* itself. In his relation to the three major female characters in the novel, his sister Alice James, his intellectual companion Constance Fenimore Woolson, and his cousin Minny Temple, Henry allows his identity as a writer to stand in the way of his real-life relationships. Each of these three women

stays alive only insofar as they become material for Henry's fiction, after he passively allows each of them to die. Although Henry bears no direct responsibility for their deaths, the reader gets the sense that, without much resistance, he allows each of them to perish. Davis argues that, after a similar situation with Constance, "Here again, Henry is forced to interrogate his own role in hastening Alice's demise, if only by failing to forestall it through means he might have tried (185). As Davis rightly maintains, Henry is indirectly accountable for the deaths of both Alice and Constance. In Constance's case, Henry chooses not to join her in Venice the winter she commits suicide. Later, he comes to believe that "Had he gone to Venice that winter . . . she would not have killed herself" (Tóibín, 2004: 241). Henry "was the person who could have rescued her" (Tóibín, 2004: 242), but, rather than acting, he distances himself from Constance. Not wanting to send the wrong message, he stays in London where he can indulge "his inviolable need to make his own arrangements" (Tóibín, 2004: 236). Henry protects his privacy and his need for control rather than assisting a troubled and dear friend.

Tóibín does not present Henry as purely cold-hearted in his relationships with the women who exit his life. He loves these women dearly, and a pronounced note of sadness surrounds his implied complicity in their deaths: "[Constance's] death, like that of his sister Alice, lived with Henry day after day" (Tóibín, 2004: 186). Henry must confront not only the sorrow of his loss, but also his own sense of guilt for allowing these women to die. In Alice's case, Henry has conflicted feelings: he wants her alive, but he knows that she needs to die. At forty-three, she has spent her entire adult life as an invalid, and Henry believes she is ready for death: "He stayed by her body, knowing that lying peacefully in death was what she craved to do" (Tóibín, 2004: 62). Henry does not cause Alice's death, but he certainly does not do much to

stop it. Both Constance and Alice provide material for Henry's writing in their lives and after their deaths. Alice's life takes "the shape of a story which now puzzled and fascinated him" and Henry enjoys "placing [Constance] close to his other characters, the father and daughter from *The Portrait of a Lady*, to see what would happen" (Tóibín, 2004: 55, 222). Henry seems to 'raid the real' through both women, insofar as their influence on him helps him develop his "skill at displaying an American woman full of openness and curiosity and ideas of her own" (Tóibín, 2004: 215). *The Master* suggests that perhaps he should have made more of an effort to extend the real, instead of allowing these women to perish and remain alive only in the world of his fiction.

Tóibín most clearly foregrounds the ethical problems involved in 'raiding the real' through Henry's relationship with Minny Temple. Oliver Wendell Holmes draws attention to Henry's shared history with Minny, accusing him of not helping her when she was dying (Tóibín, 2004: 112). Holmes' indictments hurt Henry not only because he feels betrayed, but also because they make him unsure of himself. Henry "could not stop going over the conversation with Holmes in his mind" (Tóibín, 2004: 113), and he begins to doubt his own version of the past. He travels back to England to examine his correspondence with Minny, in the hopes that the mission will reaffirm his supposition that Holmes' "accusation was unfair and ungrounded" (Tóibín, 2004: 113). While he ultimately confirms that Minny "had accused him of nothing" (Tóibín, 2004: 113), his journey also uncovers some unflattering features of his own past. Henry discovers that, although she was "careful never to ask outright" (Tóibín, 2004: 114), Minny subtly requested his help. Henry, then living in Rome, was preoccupied with his own development as a writer, and "did not want his invalid cousin" there to burden him (Tóibín, 2004: 115). As Henry reflects on the past, he confronts a

shocking realization about himself: “finally, he turned back into the room, he felt a sharp and unbearable idea staring at him, like something alive and fierce and predatory in the air, whispering to him that he had preferred her dead rather than alive, that he had known what to do with her once life was taken from her, but he had denied her when she asked him gently for help” (Tóibín, 2004: 115). Here Tóibín foregrounds the ethical brutality of Henry’s appropriation of the raw material of life for his writing. Minny becomes a sacrificial victim for Henry’s pursuit of literary mastery. Tóibín exposes the notion of ‘raiding the real’ in all its ugliness, insofar as Henry’s focus on his writing requires him not only to relinquish his own desire, but also to passively let Minny die. Although Henry does not directly cause her death, he does nothing to prevent it, and he is much more comfortable writing her posthumous existence than attempting to extend her life.

After Minny’s death, Henry seeks to give her a literary resurrection. He recreates his dead cousin in the imaginary universe of his prose: “He had a great mission now to make Minny walk these streets, to allow the soft Tuscan light to shine on her soft face. But more than that, he sought to re-create her moral presence more finely and more dramatically than he had ever done before” (Tóibín, 2004: 107). Henry not only seeks to revive Minny in his writing, he seeks to improve her. Minny’s death allows him to recreate her in a more perfect form, and to place her into the meticulously constructed world of his fiction. While re-writing Minny as Isobel Archer, Henry finds the personal strength he gains only through writing: “He had never felt as powerful” (Tóibín, 2004 :107). His recreation of Minny’s life appears less as a benevolent gesture of tribute and more as a self-affirmation for Henry. He enjoys the fact that “He could control her destiny now that she was dead, offer her the experiences she would have wanted, and provide drama for a life so cruelly

shortened” (Tóibín, 2004: 105). Henry’s written resurrection of Minny becomes a selfish gesture, as he replaces her existence as an autonomous individual with his own fictional version of her.

Furthermore, as he recreates Minny in his writing, Henry’s conception of the distinction between fiction and reality begins to dissolve: “There were scenes he wrote in which, having imagined everything and set it down, he was, at moments, unsure whether it had genuinely happened or whether his imagined world had finally come to replace the real” (Tóibín, 2004: 107). As Henry develops his habit of ‘raiding the real,’ reality ceases to exist in significant distinction from his fiction. For Henry, Minny takes on a new reality in her role as a character in his writing: “Minny was real for him throughout the years, more real than any of the people he met and associated with. She belonged to the part of him he guarded most fiercely, his hidden self, which no one in England knew about or understood” (Tóibín, 2004: 108). Henry’s inner self as a writer becomes the sole stable grounding point for his sense of reality. In the private space of his imagination, he is free to manipulate and control reality, to present the intricacies of life how he wants to organize them. By ‘raiding the real,’ Henry re-presents reality in the way he wants it to look. However, Tóibín’s narrative suggests that such an undertaking has serious ethical repercussions, as Henry’s myopic focus on his writing causes him to neglect the suffering of others in the real world.

In the instances of Constance, Alice, and particularly Minny, Henry’s introversion into the private world of his writing, coupled with his inaction in the external world where these women live and die, reveals a morbid moral weakness in his character. Most likely, Henry’s actions could not have saved any of these women.

However, his choice not to act, not even to try to save the women he dearly loves, suggests a certain ethical culpability. Alice and Constance's fates are less morally definitive than Minny's. Alice is ready to die, and in fact seems suited to death. Thus Henry's inaction remains morally ambiguous in her case. While it is understandable that Henry does not want to lead Constance on, and cannot tell her why he does not desire her, he is ethically responsible for her death insofar as he chooses privacy and isolation when he could have saved her. In Minny's case the moral is clear; Henry lets her fade out of reality so that he can be at liberty to perfect her in her fictional reincarnation. While the deaths of Alice and Constance do not indict Henry as directly, he nonetheless puts his writing before the needs of both of these women. He passively accepts Alice's death, and indirectly causes Constance's autodefenestration. Furthermore, both of these women contribute significantly to his writing. Thus Constance and Alice, like Minny, also become sacrificial victims in Henry's pursuit of artistic mastery. Tóibín presents a clear ethical indictment of Henry in these instances, suggesting that he is wrong to neglect these women in favour of his own literary ambitions. While it might be a noble and necessary sacrifice for Henry to relinquish his own desires for his art, to passively accept, or indirectly cause, the death of others is a clear moral injustice. Thus, although Tóibín troubles the distinction between fiction and reality throughout *The Master*, ultimately there are certain definitive limitations to both realms. By depicting Henry's life in the way he does, Tóibín invites his readers to form certain fairly straightforward ethical judgements: instead of 'raiding the real' for his fiction, Henry should have sought to maintain the real as it was; he should have struggled to keep these women alive in the world of reality rather than in the world of his imagination. Despite the fact that certain sacrifices may have been necessary for Henry to become 'The Master' and

leave the world with the great works he produced after 1900, Tóibín presents the facts (and fictions) in such a way as to remind the reader that the end does not necessarily justify the means.

It seems, then, that the implications of Tóibín's novel apply as much to his own life and work as to the life and work of Henry James. In other words, while Tóibín uses James' life as his subject matter, *The Master* presents a more general message about the artistic practise as a whole. Tóibín's focus on the notion of 'raiding the real,' and the ethical culpability of such a practise, suggests

By way of conclusion, a brief discussion of a character that troubles Henry's mono-perspectival understanding of the artist's relationship to the world is necessary. While Henry acts, throughout the novel, as if he is at liberty to pillage the material of life for the purposes of his art, there are moments when the world turns back on him. Mona Gaynor is an unsettling example of a character who challenges Henry's established divide between the author as spectator and the world as material. One of the few children in the book, Mona appears as a haunting non-presence, a ten or eleven year-old girl who "managed to seem happy not to speak much or make any demands, merely to be charmingly present" (Tóibín, 2004: 32). Henry encounters Mona at the Royal Hospital several times, and Tóibín surrounds each moment with a shroud of macabre surreality. When Henry looks through a doorway and finds Mona sitting with Mr. Webster and Lady Wolseley, he reflects on the sinister air the episode exudes:

> He thought about the scene he had witnessed . . . as he read into the moments a deeply ambiguous meaning. He realized now that this was something he had described in his books over and over, figures seen from a

> window or a doorway, a small gesture standing for a much larger relationship, something hidden suddenly revealed. He had written it, but just now he had seen it come alive, and yet he was not sure what it meant. (Tóibín, 2004: 32-33)

As the world he has written recoils back on Henry, he loses control and becomes disoriented. What bothers Henry most is the scene's incomprehensibility, the fact that it is not how he would have written it, that Mona lingers "in a place where she should not be" (Tóibín, 2004: 32). Unable to manipulate external reality, Henry loses the sense of stability he gains in writing the world. As he confronts this scene, he becomes the reader rather than the representer, and he is unable to find his bearings in this new role.

Henry's final encounter with Mona is her most significant appearance in the novel. At Lady Wolseley's ball, she emerges from her space of concealment behind the ladies, "as the infant from Velázquez . . . playing perfectly the part of the princess too noble to survey her subjects" (Tóibín, 2004: 42). Henry reacts to Mona's presentation here with repulsion: "Henry was disturbed by her, the flaunting of her female self, and her own poised alertness to her allure" (Tóibín, 2004: 43). Mona consistently incites sentiments of unease and disgust in Henry, suggesting that she represents something which Henry cannot abide. Thus Tóibín's comparison of her with the infanta from DiegoVelázquez's "Las Meninas" takes on crucial significance. Considering Michel Foucault's classic commentary on "Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things*, this is not likely to be merely a passing allusion. Foucault uses this painting to deconstruct the notion of a central perspectival point of reference through which to understand an artwork. Through the play of light from the window, the reflection in

the mirror, the various focuses of the subjects' eyes, and the shifting points of reference, "Las Meninas" unsettles and disorients the viewer. As Foucault points out, there is no central locus through which to understand or view this painting (5). One's eyes continually oscillate between the Infanta Deña Margerita de Austria, and the mirror which reflects the painting's patron, King Phillip IV, and his wife. Thus this painting, within the context of *The Master*, exemplifies the dissolution of the distinction Henry imagines between his inner self and the world he observes. The first thing that strikes the viewer of this painting is the fact that one not only looks, but one is also being looked at. As Henry views the world, like the viewer of "Las Meninas," he does not escape unseen. The viewer of this painting is not only watched by the subjects in the painting, he is also forced to look into himself through the mirror. However, the mirror reflects the scene's viewer, King Phillip IV, who cannot be fully represented in the same frame as the painter. "Las Meninas" therefore shows, as Foucault points out, that "it is not possible for the pure felicity of the image ever to present in a full light both the master who is representing and the sovereign who is being represented" (16). Thus Foucault's interpretation of "Las Meninas" both reinforces and dissolves Henry's assumed distinction between the inner artist and the exterior world. "Las Meninas" shows a painter but not his canvas, suggesting that artist and artwork cannot coexist in the same space. Likewise, Henry cannot be both the artist and the subject of his own works of art. Therefore, Henry the novelist must overwrite Henry the man, as desire fades away as a sacrifice to literary achievement. While Henry can seek to write the world, he remains unable to write his own story. However, "Las Meninas" also suggests the implosion of Henry's perceived mono-perspectival understanding of the relationship between the artist and the world he seeks to depict. "Las Meninas" "renders forever unstable the play of

metamorphoses established in the centre between spectator and model" (Foucault 5). As Foucault's analysis suggests with respect to "Las Meninas," in *The Master* there is no one subject, one object, or one artist in the artistic project. Tóibín thus asserts that "no gaze is stable" and undercuts Henry's notion that (Foucault 5), as an artist, he can retreat into the private world of his writing and remain at a remove from the outside world. While Henry can 'raid the real' in order to create his art, he is also necessarily a part of the real, and he must be held accountable for his actions in the real world.

This paper has argued that, in *The Master*, Tóibín calls into question the dichotomies between internal and external self, artist and artwork, private and public, and fiction and reality. Henry makes it his prerogative to erect a rigid boundary between his internal self and the outside world, but throughout the narrative this barrier continually erodes. In his fictionalization of Henry's overwriting of his own passions and pursuit of literary greatness, Tóibín interrogates the moral and ethical implications of such a choice. Henry's two inner selves, first as a writer and second as a man who desires men, converge and bifurcate throughout the narrative. Henry exhibits an ascetic tendency in his writing, punishing himself through excesses of isolated work, in order to sublimate his passion and to alleviate his feelings of guilt and loss. While his choice of writing over desire is admirable and noble, it also causes pain for Henry and others. Tóibín presents Henry's choice of writing over love and romantic contact as a painful and saddening renunciation. Although, as Savu suggests, his disavowal of desire is necessary for Henry's artistic future, it is also in itself a tragedy. While Henry suffers the loss of his romantic possibilities through his introverted focus on writing, others in his life also pay a price. Henry's inward turn, away from the needs of others and into his private space, renders him

indirectly responsible for the deaths of Alice, Constance, and Minny. Henry's culpability is particularly explicit in the case of Minny, insofar as Henry prefers her dead so that he can give her a written resurrection. *The Master* confronts the ethical issues behind the motif, surrounding the text, of 'raiding the real.' Tóibín probes some of the moral implications of such an undertaking and reminds his readers that, while it is indeed a noble undertaking to sacrifice for the creation of art, the end does not always justify the means. Although reality bleeds freely into fiction in Henry's mind, and in fact he prefers it in the controlled and malleable space of his imagination, Tóibín ultimately establishes certain boundaries between fiction and reality. While a fictional resurrection is a noble tribute, it does not justify passively allowing someone to die. Finally, through a reference to "Las Meninas," Tóibín suggests undermines Henry's belief that he can remove himself from the external world. Ultimately, despite Henry's ceaseless positing of a barrier between his internal psyche and the outside world, such a distinction cannot hold. While Henry the writer may be able to control and manipulate the world of his fictional creations, Henry the man remains tied to the world in which he walks, and in which he allows his closest friends to die.

However, through the very act of writing, Tóibín problematizes his own ethical imperative. He himself performs a 'raid on the real' in this novel, and his appropriation of reality becomes essential for his fundamental message insofar as he invites the reader to learn that Henry James goes on to produce some of his best writing in the years after this novel ends. Of course, Tóibín's depiction of the potential moral dubiousness of "raiding the real" is a reflection on his own vocation. As a writer of fiction, and one who is quite clearly "raiding the real" himself, Tóibín cannot legitimately pass judgement on James for fictionalizing the world in which he

walks, lives, and writes. Thus, in the final analysis, Tóibín's critique of Henry's practise of "raiding the real" breaks down insofar as Tóibín himself is raiding the real. Ultimately, then, *The Master* explicates an idea which Tóibín has already hinted at through a reference to "Las Meninas." That is to say, Tóibín reveals the endless impossibility of a "pure" representation – an artwork free from the artist. He demonstrates that art must always exist within a tension between artist as artist and artist as empirical being; the artist who creates the work of art necessarily continues to exist within that artwork; just as the artist may try to "raid the real" to create art, so the work of art will remain inevitably imbued with the trappings of reality. Ultimately, there is no art without the artist, there is no freedom from the practise of "raiding the real," and the artist must remember that his work is not necessarily worth the real sufferings of the people around him.

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