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**TRUE LOVE WAITS: A BARTHESIAN READING OF DESIRE AND DELAY IN
FLAUBERT AND JAMES**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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I.

“Am I in love? Yes, since I am waiting” (Barthes 39). With this line, Roland Barthes identifies the root of the inescapable suffering of love: waiting. He sees love as not only connected to but indeed defined by the condition of waiting, of inaction, of powerlessness. Such is the fate of the lover. Barthes articulated this definition in his 1977 text *A Lover's Discourse*, in which he gives a stylistically daring account of the amorous subject's experience in love through thematically organized “fragments.” Barthes defines his understanding of waiting in the section entitled “*attente*”; Waiting is a “tumult of anxiety provoked by waiting for the loved being, subject to trivial delays (rendezvous, letters, telephone calls, returns)” (37). For Barthes, waiting is painful. The amorous subject finds themselves at the mercy of “the loved being” and their whims. Though the definition sounds academic, the emotion of waiting for a phone call or letter from a loved object is universal and enduring.

The problem of amorous waiting, however, is not a 20th-century invention nor a Barthesian one; many 19th-century novelists address this same theme. Not only do plots of this era focus on the agony of waiting in love, but their structure is dictated by the waiting itself. Despite its ubiquity, scholars have often overlooked waiting as a hallmark of 19th-century literature. Henry James and Gustave Flaubert, both canonical heavyweights of the period, epitomize this interest in love-ridden, anxious waiting. Though many of their works explore the intersections of these themes, Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* and James' tales “The Beast in the Jungle” and *The Ambassadors* best demonstrate the authors' interest in the complicated dynamics at play in love relations.

In this essay, I will use Barthes' definition of amorous waiting as a tool with which to examine the waiting predicaments of Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary*, John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle,” and Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. This framework allows us to

grasp the significance of waiting in these texts that we might otherwise discount. Using Barthes' comparison of men's and women's waiting, I will identify and analyze different forms of gender-based waiting and their distinct consequences. For *Madame Bovary* and *The Ambassadors*, I will use the motif of reading and epistolary exchanges to underscore the complicated emotions and power dynamics involved in amorous waiting.

As useful as Barthes' account is for exposing the significance of waiting, each of these novels posits a more complex account of the condition. The definitions proposed by Barthes limit our discussion to a narrow structure of waiting which involves a clear subject, a single loved object, and a specific dynamic of power and desire between both players. The predicaments of the three texts do resemble this formation in one way or another, but they also defy it. A thorough analysis of amorous waiting requires that we move beyond the perspective offered by *A Lover's Discourse*. By using Barthes not simply as the final word but as a springboard for further inquiry, we find that these novels further complicate the relationship between amorous waiting, gender, and autonomy.

All three stories offer a unique perspective on waiting. Waiting in *Madame Bovary* exemplifies the limitations of agency for women in love relationships and the perils of romantic fantasy. Marcher's paralysis considers the inverse of a basic waiting structure and its distinct repercussions. Strether's peculiar proclivity toward waiting questions the assumed pain and anxiety of the middling state. Viewing *Madame Bovary* and "The Beast in the Jungle" as accounts of two opposing forms of waiting that produce similar fates, I will explain the curious pleasure and painlessness of Strether's wait in *The Ambassadors* which falls outside the boundaries of Barthes' definitions. By considering these novels and, more specifically, these

protagonists in conversation with one another, we can begin to see how amorous waiting involves much more than just desire for a loved being.

II.

Described by Michèle Roberts as “the first sex-and-shopping novel,” Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* sees anti-heroine Emma Bovary struggle through her provincial married life (Preface vii). Despite having a loving husband, a stable home, and, later on, a healthy child, Emma wants more. She spends much of her time waiting for something better to come along. In pursuit of a perfect life, she finds herself wrapped up in two affairs that fail to free her from her misery and drive her further into despair. The mystery of her unhappiness is never entirely solved, as she kills herself before the novel’s end. Waiting, though, seems to hold the key to that mystery. Emma’s delicate balance of action and inaction, of waiting and moving, illuminate her condition. While on the surface it seems that she waits for the love of a “real” man, one of status and charm, this is simply a cover for something less tangible.

Emma’s waiting does not begin with her marriage to Charles. The reader first gets a sense of this soon after meeting the protagonist, before she has become Madame Bovary. On his first visit to the farm of Emma’s father, Charles, having bid his patient farewell, returned to the parlor and “found [Emma] standing at the window, her forehead against the glass, looking out into the garden, where the bean-poles had been blown down by the wind” (Flaubert 16). Though subtle in its introduction of the theme, this is the first instance of Emma’s waiting. Broadly speaking, the image of a person looking out a window connotes waiting; a child looks through a window when they’re expecting a parent to return home, a man looks out the window while waiting for the rain to stop, etc. In a literary context, looking through a window symbolizes an acknowledgment of

something greater, of something more beyond the confines of the glass. Per Bjørnar Grande convincingly argues that Emma's "dreams of freedom are captured in the image of her sitting by an open window, immersed in feelings of hopelessness and melancholy, as she looks longingly at some open space and wishes that she was somewhere else" (77). Moreover, the garden onto which she looks is a site of growth and constant change. Emma is physically separated from the garden but looks onto it, indicating her desire for and lack of access to such personal development. There's also an Edenic undertone in the far-off garden, connecting Emma with the original woman, Eve. Emma, then, is associated with sin and forbidden knowledge. Of course, this demonizes her sexual interests and lack of purity, but it also highlights her desire for more. Emma's dissatisfaction with her life recalls Eve's inability to heed God's warning against eating the apple. Dacia Maraini notes Flaubert's construction of his protagonist as antithetical to religious purity, writing that "in Emma there is absolutely nothing heavenly to be found" (5). In attempting to fulfill her romantic fantasies, Emma embodies Eve's sin.

Emma, being a woman, dies for her biblical knowledge and the consummation of her desires. Flaubert underscores the gendered dimension of waiting, which he furthers through a brief comparison of Emma and Charles. Once Emma has heard Charles enter the parlor, she asks their guest: "Are you looking for something?" (Flaubert 16). This sentence should immediately pique the reader's interest given that the heroine speaks very little in the first third of the novel. Moreover, her question draws an important line between feminine waiting and masculine (non)waiting. While women sit and wait for their elusive something, men go looking for their something. Charles, for example, actively seeks Emma as a wife; he returns to the farm, looking for her father's approval to marry her. Emma, as we have seen time and time again, waits. Emma cannot "look" for her something—she must wait—because she needs a man to look for her.

Following this gendered introduction of Emma's waiting, we expect that Emma waits for the love of a man. A similar scene of window waiting towards the end of the novel appears to support this theory. During one of Emma's hotel room meetings with her lover, Léon, a neighbor interrupts and whisks her companion away. Léon tells Emma that he will return soon, and she is left waiting for him—as she has been many times before. Unable to handle this familiar state, “she rushed into his office, and, lost in various conjectures, accusing him of indifference and reproaching herself for her weakness, she spent the afternoon with her nose glued to the window” (Flaubert 260). By clearly connecting her anxiety-ridden amorous waiting with her looking through a window, Flaubert retroactively affirms that Emma was waiting for something in the moment at the farm. The similarities between these two scenes highlight the unchanging nature of Emma's waiting. More importantly, though, this description seems to demystify the wait of the previous window scene; here, longing for the garden transforms into a desire for a man. Read in conjunction, these scenes reveal that Emma's fantasy is the freedom that comes with masculine love and companionship. Put simply, it appears that Emma is waiting for a man.

Emma's fixation on romantic love begins with the books of her youth. As a young girl in the convent, Emma gained access to romance novels which set her expectations of a life made worthy by the love of a passionate and chivalric man. Of these stories, the narrator writes:

They were about love, lovers, loving, martyred maidens swooning in secluded lodges, postilions slain every other mile, horses ridden to death on every page, dark forests, aching hearts, promising, sobbing, kisses and tears, little boats by moonlight, nightingales in the grove, *gentlemen* brave as lions, tender as lambs, virtuous as a dream, always well dressed, and weeping pints. For six months, at the age of fifteen, Emma dabbled in the remains of old lending libraries. (Flaubert 35)

Here, we see the origin of Emma's tendency toward the dramatic—the novelesque. She constructs a vision of her future based on the ideals laid out by these unrealistic texts which, unbeknownst to her, can never be made real. This paragraph also grants the reader insight into Emma's understanding of gender. The description of “martyred maidens” conjures the image of a doomed, lone woman who requires someone—presumably male—to peel her off the floor of the lodge, to save her. The image of the ideal man is entirely ironic—he is “virtuous as a dream,” meaning that his virtue is not real or attainable. Taking this a step beyond mere virtue, we learn that “Emma's ideal lover is a fictional hero whom no real human being could hope to emulate” (Gans 33). Though the reference to “old lending libraries” might seem unimportant, it highlights the fact that this is not a problem specific to Emma. It is not as if she has sought these books out and is one of the first women to create such fantasies for herself. Instead, this knowledge is passed down—both by the old seamstress who first lets her borrow such a novel and by the lending libraries that provide public access. Women before Emma's time have engaged in the same reading and the same construction of romantic fantasy. A close reading of this paragraph foreshadows the fate of Emma's fantasy: “Because Emma's desires are merely picture-book images, they can never truly be incarnated in the real world” (Gans 32).

Roberts sums up Emma's quixotic beginnings, noting that “Emma is on her own, just like the heroine of a romance, and she has been brought up to require a male saviour” (Preface, viii). This observation picks up on an important thread; this is a learned behavior. Emma's obsession with amorous relationships starts while she is in a convent, surrounded by women. In a space where adult males are notably absent, Emma's fantasy of manhood and partnership could grow unhampered by the reality of man. Despite her lack of true interest in Charles, the possibility of their marriage excites her because it is an opportunity to live out this fantasy love. Of course,

conjugal life with Charles does not—and could not ever—meet her expectations, and she returns to her quixotic reading early in their relationship. Her reading catalyzes and, later, exemplifies her romantic fantasies and obsession with finding a passionate love affair.

The glaring issue with the idea that she searches for love, of course, is that Emma loves many men throughout the novel, but none of these relationships end her wait. Emma's romantic life is characterized by overlapping incidences of amorous waiting that give her extramarital affairs a nesting doll-like structure. First, Emma meets Léon Dupuis, a young clerk, soon after the Bovarys move to Yonville l'Abbaye. They quickly bond and develop feelings for one another. Because of social expectations, personal insecurity, and fear of consequences, neither Léon nor Emma—despite serious consideration—verbalizes their love for the other before he moves to Paris. Their affection, then, goes unconsummated. Following this, Emma begins her shortest—and arguably most painful—tryst with a wealthy local landowner, Rodolphe Boulanger. Emma spends much of their relationship waiting for Charles to fall asleep or leave so she can meet her lover. More abstractly, Rodolphe does not truly love Emma and uses her for sex, so she also unconsciously waits for the arrival of his affection. Towards the foreseeable end of their affair, Rodolphe promises Emma that they will run away together. Emma waits for him on the agreed-upon date of departure, but he never arrives to free her from her misery. Emma's relationship with Rodolphe, though, falls within the larger timeline of her affair with Léon, as she reunites with her first lover after Rodolphe has deserted her. In this relationship, Emma waits in multiple ways: for the actualization of their passion, for opportunities to sneak to Paris to see him after their reunion, and for him to return to her in the pivotal scene where he is called away from their shared hotel room.

These affairs with Rodolphe and Léon constitute Emma's actual adultery, but the specter of a third man quietly haunts her for much longer. Early in the novel, a marquis and a patient of Charles' invites the Bovarys to an extravagant ball at his chateau. At the event, the narrator describes a brief yet crucial moment between Emma and her dancing partner, a man known only as the Viscount: "Emma's heart beat faster when, her partner holding her with just his fingertips, she stepped into the line, and waited for the first note to sound. But soon the feeling left her; and, swaying to the rhythm of the orchestra, she glided away, nodding her head gently" (Flaubert 47). In only two sentences, Flaubert masterfully sets up a structure of waiting and introduces a new object of desire. This scene foreshadows Emma's typical response to the consummation of a waiting relationship. In the waiting stage, she is anxious and elated. She suffers from the desire of her expectations. However, once the "first note" has sounded, so to speak, her feelings change and, more specifically, wane. This moment also emphasizes the importance of her semi-anonymous partner, because it is the first instance of waiting in the novel that involves another person. In this sense, it is a proto-love meeting. Waiting for the music to begin, here, parallels her waiting for her partner—the leader in dancing because of his gender—to begin their movement. Therefore, this scene indicates the beginning of a waiting relationship like those with Léon and Rodolphe. Though this dancing scene is short, it primes Emma for a life of waiting for a man who is absent even in name.

The Viscount does reappear toward the end of Emma's life, proving that she is doomed to wait forever. After she parts with Léon for the last time, Emma claims to see a familiar figure passing by in a carriage: "But it was him, the Viscount! She turned her head: the street was empty. And she felt so crushed, so saddened, that she leaned up against a wall to keep herself on her feet" (Flaubert 279). This alleged sighting and her subsequent disappointment confirm

Emma's wait for the Viscount; In his long absence, she has kept up the fantasy that he might one day save her from her unhappy marriage and provincial life. More importantly, though, this sighting reveals that none of these men will end her wait. This scene comes after her associations with both Léon and Rodolphe have ended, and Emma is in a state of complete financial ruin. The Viscount, then, rides away with her last hopes of being saved. All three men left her in the same position they found her in.

Even when these relationships are realized, they do not satisfy Emma, nor do they pull her out of the condition of waiting as she expected them to. After waiting for Léon during one of their meetings, Emma has a moment of reflection: "She was not happy, had never been so. Where did it come from, this feeling of deprivation, this instantaneous decay of the things in which she put her trust?" (Flaubert 265). This musing confirms that nothing in Emma's life fulfills her; Despite her various affairs, she has always been unhappy. Applying the notion of "instantaneous decay of the things in which she put her trust," the reader sees that the consummation of these three relationships coincides with her loss of faith in them. During the waiting phase, Emma is sure that the realization of her alleged love for any of these men will mark the end of this uncomfortable waiting period. But, once the relationships become real, the instantaneous decay reveals that a lack of passion was not the source of her unhappiness.

Ultimately, a love relationship cannot satisfy Emma, making her state of waiting eternal.

Rather, Emma's waiting for and interest in Rodolphe, Léon, and the Viscount represent a larger, absent thing for which she waits. Maraini comes to this conclusion as well, writing that Emma "is incapable of being satisfied. Her nature, complicated by her training within a culture of systematic mystification, always leads her to desire something else, something distant, unreachable, fictitious" (26). The mystery of her three waiting relationships and their role in this

larger wait can be explained by Barthes' understanding of the concept. In "*attente*," the narrator writes that "there is a scenography of waiting: I organize it, manipulate it, cut out a portion of time in which I shall mime the loss of the loved object and provoke all the effects of a minor mourning. This is then acted out as a play." (Barthes 37). The reader can see Emma's repeated adultery, then, as the acting out of this "play." She is, in Barthesian terms, mimicking the loss of an unspoken loved being by creating situations in which she will instead lose an artificially constructed object—which takes the form of multiple men. While Barthes refers to a loved object, though, the thing that Emma ultimately waits for is not necessarily related to love. The analytical tool of the scenography can be used to move our interpretation past the facade of romantic love that is Emma's affairs. Barthes confirms the same theory a few pages later, writing that "the being I am waiting for is not real. Like the mother's breast for the infant, 'I create and re-create it over and over, starting from my capacity to love, starting from my need for it' ...And if the other does not come, I hallucinate the other: waiting is a delirium." (39). Notably, through the simile of mother and child, Barthes himself momentarily brings us out of the realm of romantic desire, validating our alternative use of his framework. In terms of the theoretical or subconscious realm, then, Emma is creating and re-creating an original scene of waiting in these supposedly amorous relationships. Whomever—or whatever—her true "other" is, it has not arrived, forcing her to hallucinate an other in the form of Léon, Rodolphe, and the Viscount. These reconstructed objects of waiting do not constitute actual love interests; they are simply reproducing the emotions of waiting for a loved object.

While Emma undoubtedly waits *for* men, Flaubert also implies that she is waiting to *be like* a man, too. More specifically, she yearns for the freedom naturally afforded to men. This

sense of gendered dissatisfaction pervades the novel, but Emma voices it most clearly in the late stages of her pregnancy. The narrator describes her musings on the gender of her child:

She wanted a son; he would be strong and dark, she would call him George; and this idea of having a male child was like an anticipated revenge for the powerlessness of her past. A man, at least, is free; he can explore each passion and every kingdom, conquer obstacles, feast upon the most exotic pleasures. But a woman is continually thwarted. Both inert and yielding, against her are ranged the weakness of the flesh and the inequity of the law. Her will, like the veil strung to her bonnet, flutters in every breeze; always there is the desire urging, always the convention restraining. (Flaubert 82)

Emma's thinking acknowledges several important points. First, she plans to name her son George. Earlier in the novel, Flaubert notes that Emma reads the novels of George Sand, leading the reader to wonder if the author is her unborn child's namesake. This once again illuminates how Emma's reading is a form of imagining a superior reality for herself. Additionally, because George Sand was a woman using a male nom de plume, this choice reflects Emma's desire for the privileges of manhood and her knowledge that any manliness she can assume would be false. The focus on her son's future as opposed to her own shows that Emma herself is at least somewhat aware that there might not be such a grand destiny awaiting her because of her gender; instead, she hopes for a son through whom she might be able to realize her fantasy. Second, she names her lack of power. In thinking of herself as powerless, she confirms her position of passivity and, therefore, her waiting. Third, she identifies the importance of desire. Though she waits, her desires push her to take action. The convention that she refers to is a gendered one; she cannot act on her desires because she is a woman. Her son, though, would be able to act on his

desires, exert his power, and be free. Of course, Emma does not have a son, and, when she births a girl, she faints.

Beauvoir offers an illuminating theoretical lens through which we might understand Emma's desire for proximity to men. Robyn Marasco summarizes Beauvoir succinctly, writing that "Woman loves as a creature who cannot *do* anything, for she is cut off from the possibilities of the transcendence she so desires. Woman loves, then, to attach herself to the active, dynamic subject she cannot be, to get as close to the light of transcendence as possible" (652). Again, while this refers specifically to women in love relationships, we can widen the scope to encompass Emma's more general circumstances. In this view, women are doomed to wait as the "creature who cannot *do* anything." To gain any kind of transcendence, the woman must attach herself to a man and essentially experience *his* freedom and individuality by proxy. Following this logic, Emma's interest in men is less about interpersonal feelings—whether they be alleged romantic feelings for men or feelings of hopefulness for her hypothetical son—and more about her own limitations. She waits for a transcendence that will never come to her, so she searches for the next best thing: the love of a man.

Here, a paradox becomes unavoidable: Emma waits, but she also seeks—like a man. The strength of her desires overrides her waiting at times; unlike many other literary heroines in her position, Emma acts. Despite waiting for Léon and Rodolphe, she engages in physical affairs with them and makes her intentions clear. She goes out and spends money on clothing and furniture. In the aforementioned scene of Léon's abrupt departure, Emma does not wait quietly. Instead, she shifts toward a more active form of waiting by going in search of him—by *looking* for him. Barthes takes note of this gendered difference in waiting, stating that any "man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized" (14). The converse of this

statement asserts that the woman who does not wait is masculinized. These rigid definitions pose a problem for the categorization of Madame Bovary. She waits and suffers from her waiting, but she also takes action to mitigate that suffering—whether or not she succeeds is beside the point.

Emma's relationships to reading and writing offer a persuasive framework through which we might further understand her gender-confused waiting. First, her interest in reading offers us insight into the feminine waiting she endures. In his discussion of absence in love relationships, Barthes outlines a gender distinction, noting that "it is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings" (14). This structure of waiting lines up with Emma's experience: she has no job and few responsibilities, leaving her ample time to dwell on the circumstances of her waiting. Instead of weaving or singing, though, Emma passes the time by reading. Though she reads constantly, Flaubert ensures that the reader draws a connection between reading and Emma's desire. Describing a typical meeting between Rodolphe and Emma, he writes:

To warn her, Rodolphe would throw a handful of gravel against the shutters. She jumped to her feet; but sometimes she had to wait, because Charles had a passion for chattering by the fire, and he did go on interminably. She was wild with impatience; if looks could have done it, hers would have hurled him out of the window. In the end, she began to undress for the night; she took up a book and went on reading quite serenely, as if she were engrossed in the story. (Flaubert 156)

This typical scene of waiting—made ongoing by the continuous past tense—exposes Emma's reading as a false hobby, a veil for her anxiety. Charles' "passion"—a telling word given the context of desire—forces Emma's wait. To fill the time, she pretends to read. Here, the connection between reading and womanliness throws Emma's femininity into question. If she

were truly waiting through reading, her reading would not be false. Though anxiety defines waiting for Barthes, the choice to have Emma use reading as a cover for waiting substantiates the claim that her reading is not genuine waiting. For Emma, feminine waiting through reading is not natural or realistic. Emma's sincere love of reading in her youth, though, problematizes this analysis. We can amend this argument by seeing Emma's affair with Rodolphe as a replacement for the quixotic reading of her past. Romance novels created and built upon Emma's fantasy of love, but now her relationship with Rodolphe supersedes fiction. By engaging in a romance with him, she attempts to realize her amorous fantasy and no longer requires novels to be the basis of her desire.

In addition to reading, though, Emma also writes as an expression of her more active, masculine waiting. Throughout their relationships, Emma writes countless love letters to Léon and Rodolphe. The process of letter exchange differs from reading in that it requires one to be both active and passive. Emma chooses to write these letters and imbues them with her own desires, thereby exerting a level of power through self-expression. Marasco summarizes this unique expression of waiting, arguing that "one reason why the epistolary form – and not the manifesto, the polemic, or even the poem – is best suited for the lover's discourse is that it presupposes a certain structure of waiting; for the time and repose to write one's love, for confirmation that the letter has been received, for some response from the addressee" (654). Letter exchange, then, is potentially a more representative form of waiting than reading in Emma's case. As previously discussed, Emma is unique in that she waits—as Woman does—but she is also somewhat anachronistic in her pursuit of her desires. While she knows that she is constrained by societal expectations of her gender, she often pushes those norms aside in pursuit of her desires.

The novel suggests that the issue with Emma's waiting is its dilution. She eschews a purely stagnant waiting—a feminine one—in favor of a mixed approach. The circumstances of her suicide most convincingly verify this claim. After many fruitless attempts to erase her debt—including a final visit to her wealthy former lover, Rodolphe—Madame Bovary takes a different approach. Pure waiting would see her do nothing until the consequences of her situation took their course. Instead, Emma chooses to end her life before she is forced to see the outcomes of her reckless spending. Flaubert inserts a nod to her impure waiting: when Emma notices that the pharmacist and his family are having dinner, she states “They’re having dinner. I’ll wait” (293). However, the next line sees her beckoning to Justin and going ahead with her plan; no waiting occurs. The act and method of her suicide also echo this duality. Emma exerts her agency in the most symbolic manner possible: by killing herself. She swallows arsenic, thereby ending the ubiquitous wait of every person's life—the wait for death. The irony, though, is that, unlike a gunshot wound, one has to wait for poison to take effect. Emma, then, has to wait for the death that she brought about. Flaubert emphasizes this final wait by drawing out the time between the consumption of arsenic and death. The images of Emma's suffering are long and detailed, while her final moment is heralded by a simple, unadorned phrase: “Her life had ended” (Flaubert 305).

III.

In his short story, “The Beast in the Jungle,” Henry James offers an account of the consequences of pure waiting. While Emma Bovary's fate resulted from her corrupted waiting, John Marcher ends up in a similar predicament despite the piety of his waiting. Marcher, a man who is plagued by the belief that something horrible will befall him, lives separate from the

outside world. His life is guided by the eponymous “beast” that he believes will jump out at him one day. Even his name suggests that he moves through life following the orders of someone else. He has all but rejected experience in favor of a quiet wait for this event to arrive. The only person who knows of his fear and who he invites into his life is May Bartram, a woman who provides platonic companionship but secretly loves her ailing friend. May understands Marcher’s true condition but fails to lead him to a realization. Once she dies, Marcher sees that the tragedy of his life was losing his true love by waiting for something that would not come.

The reader knows what Marcher waits for long before he does. The mystery for one in our position, then, is why his condition precludes him from being with May. The narrator gives insight into this decision—though the word “decision” cannot truthfully describe any of Marcher’s actions—writing that:

His conviction, his apprehension, his obsession, in short, was not a condition he could invite a woman to share; and that consequence of it was precisely what was the matter with him. Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching beast in the jungle. It signified little whether the crouching beast were destined to slay him or to be slain. The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn’t cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt. Such was the image under which he had ended by figuring his life. (“Beast” 313)

Here, the narrator lays out the terms of Marcher’s wait. We learn of the anxiety, “apprehension,” and “obsession” that come with his predicament. The Barthesian nature of this stress indicates to the reader that Marcher’s waiting is amorous in some way. He feels that, in light of the unpleasant emotional symptoms of his waiting, he cannot “invite a woman to share” in his life.

He also seems to think it improper to bring a woman specifically into the waiting because of its uncertainty and potential for violence. Of course, the irony here is that his wait is, in some sense, for May to join this metaphorical hunt. His reasoning is unconsciously circular: he is unwittingly waiting to realize his love for May, which causes him to feel an anxiety that forces him to push May away as he stands by for the signs of the imminent event. This construction inverts Barthes' waiting structure: instead of romance causing the subject to wait in agony, waiting displaces the possibility of romance. Waiting, then, is uncoupled from love—or at least deferred by it.

At first blush, Marcher seems to represent a conventional masculinity, especially compared to Madame Bovary and Strether. However, he too embodies both the feminine and masculine. Simply put, Marcher's ignorance of his love for May stems from his male agency. Unlike Emma, who, from a young age, understands the Beauvoirian notion that she needs a man to bring her closer to transcendence, Marcher lacks awareness of the sexual and romantic tension that exists between him and May—who *does* see their potential for love. In this way, his blindspot for amorous connection exemplifies his maleness. Though he waits, he has no understanding that his wait is romantic in nature until it is too late. Nevertheless, there are also aspects of Marcher's character that confuse the reading of his manhood as absolute. Once again, the Barthesian understanding of waiting sees it as a feminine state, making Marcher womanly. We can, though, see this rigid definition as a limitation of Barthes' argument. More convincing evidence for Marcher's femininity comes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer reading of the story, "The Beast in the Closet." In her essay, Sedgwick identifies Marcher as representative of "the bachelor" archetype—a single, adult man living in a city in 19th-century literature. Regarding the gendered confusion of such characters, she notes that "most obviously, in the increasingly stressed nineteenth-century bourgeois dichotomy between domestic female space

and extrafamilial, political and economic male space, the bachelor is at least partly feminized by his attention to and interest in domestic concerns” (189-190). Marcher spends the majority of the story in his own home or May’s because of his paralyzing wait. Though he indeed travels the world after her death, these excursions are not mentioned in detail; they do not constitute the setting of Marcher’s life as told by James. His inhabitation of the “domestic female space” challenges his manliness. His inability to enter the “extrafamilial, political and economic male space” is then a product of his waiting. As the quintessential bachelor, Marcher becomes feminized by his condition.

Through his attitude towards May and life more generally, Marcher displays a pure form of waiting. Barthes references the necessary inertia of waiting, saying: “All these diversions which solicit me are so many wasted moments for waiting, so many impurities of anxiety. For the anxiety of waiting, in its pure state, requires that I be sitting in a chair within reach of the telephone, without doing anything” (39). Marcher’s wait epitomizes this understanding of the condition. He rids himself of personal connections and experiences, preventing “diversions.” Unlike *Madame Bovary*, Marcher has no life outside of waiting, and the obvious anxiety of his wait does not entice him to take action. In this position, a figure like Emma might go in search of romantic connection for safety, or might simply try to understand the beast and its source. Marcher, though, remains stagnant. Ironically, the protagonist who best exemplifies Barthesian waiting has no sense that his waiting is amorous.

The reader must endure Marcher’s “decision” to sit and wait. In this torturous position—one that mirrors May’s before her death—we often wonder why he did not simply decide to marry his love while also waiting for the beast. We question his choice to engage in pure waiting, and we might prefer that he take a Bovaryian approach to his predicament. By

performing a Barthesian analysis, however, it becomes clear that Marcher does not make any such decision. Regarding inaction, Barthes observes that “waiting is an enchantment: I have received *orders not to move*. Waiting for a telephone call is thereby woven out of tiny unavowable interdictions *to infinity*” (38). Marcher is clearly enchanted in this way. He feels compelled to sit and wait, to avoid virtually all movement. The irony of this description and Marcher’s situation, though, is that there is no figure giving such “orders not to move.” The subject sits in amorous waiting for the loved being, but there is no indication that the loved being or any other power expects them to remain enchanted. Their own desire, then, is what creates the enchantment. Marcher truly believes that he must wait without taking any action whatsoever but, in reality, he has complete agency. He is enchanted by the imminent arrival of the beast, but he is ultimately issuing his own order to wait.

Sedgwick’s analysis of Marcher as “fail[ing] to desire at all” introduces the possibility that his waiting is pure because he has no *desire* to catalyze action (195). Madame Bovary acts on her fantastical desires, thereby diluting her waiting. Marcher, though, does not recognize a latent desire for May—or anything, for that matter. All he does is consider the lurking beast. Because his life is devoid of motive, he has no clear loved being, to use the Barthesian terminology. His waiting, then, is distinct in not only its purity but also in the absence of a clear loved object. Once May dies, he sees that she should have been a romantic partner, but because this realization is in the past, he cannot be desirous of her in the same way. While we will see a similarly murky motivation in Strether, Marcher is distinct in his *complete* lack of a love object. He has no sense that he is waiting for love until it becomes an impossibility.

Marcher's waiting ends in a kind of death. While Marcher does not die in the literal sense that Emma does, his belated realization and the death of his companion mimic the loss of life. He comes to this realization late in the story:

This horror of waking—*this* was knowledge, knowledge under the breath of which the very tears in his eyes seemed to freeze. Through them, none the less, he tried to fix it and hold it; he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain. That at least, belated and bitter, had something of the taste of life. But the bitterness suddenly sickened him, and it was as if, horribly, he saw, in the truth, in the cruelty of his image, what had been appointed and done. He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eye darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb. (“Beast” 339-340)

This macabre final image directly follows Marcher's moment of understanding. After he finally sees that his wait and the consequent loss of May was, in fact, “the lurking beast,” he throws himself into May's place of death. James chooses the artificial “tomb” instead of the more grounded and natural “grave,” evoking the false nature of the situation. May's demise may not have been caused by Marcher's condition, but, for Marcher, her death and her tomb embody the falsity of their separation. The death of the relationship that they could have had was man-made, much like the tomb. He finally focuses his attention on May and their shared love instead of ignoring it as an “impurity of anxiety” (Barthes 39). This, among other things, signals to the reader that his wait is truly over. Now, he is left to his artificial death.

IV.

One of James' famed late novels, *The Ambassadors* follows Lambert Strether after he is sent to Paris to bring his soon-to-be wife's wayward son, Chad, back to Woollett, Massachusetts. His task, simple as it may seem, proves more than difficult for Strether. While waiting for Chad to be ready to leave, Strether is pulled into an intoxicating Parisian social constellation. He develops complicated feelings for two women in his circle—Madame de Vionnet and Maria Gostrey—and becomes close friends with the rest of the crowd. After taking a great liking to this new lifestyle, he finds it difficult to leave and continues avoiding his partner's requests to return to Woollett.

Generally speaking, Strether's waiting closely follows those of Emma Bovary and John Marcher. Like Emma, Strether experiences shorter, consummated waiting timelines in the context of a larger, more mystifying wait. Like Marcher, Strether has an unrealized erotic relationship with a woman who appears to have a better grasp of his predicament than he does—though *The Ambassadors* employs multiple women in this role. Most simply, all three protagonists wait in the contexts of love and individual experience. James' American ambassador, though, seems to be the only one of the three who is not fated to a tragic end. Furthermore, Strether's waiting does not cause him anguish, while Marcher and Madame Bovary suffer greatly at the hands of their conditions. What distinguishes Strether's wait from those of his unlucky peers? Ultimately, his waiting does not cause his downfall, nor is it the central tragedy of his story—if there is one at all.

James sets up a complicated waiting structure that forces the reader to question which waiting scenario is at the center of Strether's development. Strether engages with waiting on three levels. First, he waits locally. Strether often waits for the arrival of his companions—at

breakfast, in the theater, etc. At the same time, he also waits romantically—both for communications from his contingent fiancée, Mrs. Newsome and, much less consciously, for the realization of his possible love for Maria Gostrey and Madame de Vionnet. But, of course, the entire novel claims to center around his wait for Chad. Strether waits both for Chad's initial appearance and for him to be ready to return to the United States. Through these smaller instances of waiting, though, Strether's relationship to the condition changes, and he begins to seek out the pleasure of deliberate delay.

The opening scene of the novel arms the reader with a revealing portrait of Strether's waiting:

Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted. A telegram from him bespeaking a room 'only if not noisy', reply paid, was produced for the enquirer at the office, so that the understanding they should meet at Chester rather than at Liverpool remained to that extent sound. The same secret principle, however, that had prompted Strether not absolutely to desire Waymarsh's presence at the dock, that had led him thus to postpone for a few hours his enjoyment of it, now operated to make him feel he could still wait without disappointment. They would dine together at the worst, and with all respect to dear old Waymarsh—if not even, for that matter, to himself—there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other. The principle I have just mentioned as operating had been, with the most newly disembarked of the two men, wholly instinctive—the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade's face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for this

countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first ‘note’ of Europe. Mixed with everything was the apprehension, already, on Strether’s part, that it would, at best, throughout, prove the note of Europe in quite a sufficient degree. (*Ambassadors* 1)

As noted by Ian Watt in his detailed explication of this paragraph, the first three words of the novel set Strether up as someone who asks questions (268). This being only his “first question,” the reader knows to expect more. In the context of this argument more specifically, the introduction of Strether as one who asks questions also shows him to be a person who waits. By asking a question, one must naturally wait for the answer. Furthermore, a question creates a power structure between asker and answerer; when Strether asks about his friend, he must wait for the hotel staff to bestow further knowledge on him. Then, we learn that this unexpected waiting does not bother Strether. Despite the last-minute change of plans, Strether is not “wholly disconcerted”—which is a clever way to say that he is not unsettled in the slightest. Instead, he seems content to wait and experiences no disappointment. The narrator also quickly establishes the importance of telegrams as a means of communication in the sphere of waiting. Later, Strether’s relationship with Mrs. Newsome will rely heavily on telegrams. As previously discussed in the context of *Madame Bovary*, the exchange of letters or telegrams is a system of waiting. More broadly, by opening the novel with a scene of his waiting, James implies that this is commonplace—that we find our protagonist in a familiar circumstance. Waymarsh’s postponement does not surprise or discompose our easygoing Strether. In fact, he seems glad of the delay and the extra time it affords him. It should be said that this lack of annoyance and anxiety is in part due to Strether’s dislike of his “friend” Waymarsh. One might say that he is not upset about waiting because Strether was not looking forward to the meeting in the first place. While this is of course true, it does not tell the entire story. The delay in and of itself would be

cause for anger for many people who are not accustomed to waiting, regardless of the context. Finally, this section exemplifies the temporal confusion of both the novel and Strether's prolonged waiting. Strether often seems to exist outside of linear time, and as the reader "we don't have any pressing sense of time and place: we feel ourselves to be spectators, rather specifically, of Strether's thought processes, which easily and imperceptibly range forwards and backwards both in time and space" (Watt 257). We can extend this thinking to the realm of Strether's waiting as well. Much of his dilemma in the coming pages is about a past wait that the protagonist has only become aware of in the present. He has been waiting—namely for experience—his whole life, but only realizes this once he steps foot in Paris and can consider his life as a whole. Here, Strether and Marcher find common ground, as both of James' (semi)bachelors fail to understand their waiting as it happens. Though Strether indeed comes into an awareness of his waiting in the second half of *The Ambassadors*, his lack of timely understanding at the beginning of the novel matches Marcher's, as evidenced by his early exchange with Little Bilham. In this way, the temporal confusion of this opening scene mirrors Strether's early, underdeveloped knowledge of his own waiting.

Notably, romantic love exists further under the surface in *The Ambassadors* than in the other two texts. In *Madame Bovary*, the narrator makes Emma's intentions—to find love—clear, and the ending of "The Beast in the Jungle" confirms that, though he was unaware of this, Marcher was waiting for love all along. There is no such clarity for the reader of James' novel. Strether's two potential love interests—Madame de Vionnet and Maria Gostrey—are friends as well as quasi-romantic companions, and we as readers only know of his potential feelings for both women through suggestion. Here, we see another limitation of the Barthesian waiting: there is no framework for understanding latent or understated love relationships. Because *A Lover's*

Discourse focuses on the agony of the cognizant lover, we must extend Barthes' thinking to account for Strether who does not, much like Marcher, appear to be aware of his own motives.

Strether's mode of waiting is a masculine one. Though it often lacks clear direction, his waiting is defined by movement—by a contented and curious wandering more specifically. He spends his days in Paris roaming the streets, both with various companions and by himself, without any concern for time. Barthes outlines this gendered distinction in his fragment on absence, observing that “Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises)” (13-14). Though Barthes speaks of two people in a relationship, his emphasis on male activity nonetheless resonates in terms of a basic definition of the difference between male and female waiting. For example, even in the moments where she takes action, Emma rarely moves. She goes to the ball and Paris, but she virtually never leaves the house on her own. She is sedentary without the guidance or motivation of a man. Strether, though, spends the majority of the novel “journeying,” marking him as a *man* in waiting. Early in the story, Strether exhibits his wandering tendencies in the smaller setting of his hotel:

There he enjoyed at once the first consequence of their reunion. A place was too small for him after it that had seemed large enough before. He had awaited it with something he would have been sorry, have been almost ashamed not to recognise as emotion, yet with a tacit assumption at the same time that emotion would in the event find itself relieved. The actual oddity was that he was only more excited; and his excitement—to which indeed he would have found it difficult instantly to give a name—brought him once more downstairs and caused him or some minutes vaguely to wander. He went once more to the garden; he looked into the public room, found Miss Gostrey writing letters and

backed out; he roamed, fidgeted and wasted time; but he was to have his more intimate session with his friend before the evening closed. (*Ambassadors* 15)

After dinner with Waymarsh and his new acquaintance, Maria Gostrey, Strether considers his hotel room insufficient for his energy. The tense of “had awaited” once again alerts the reader to the nature of Strether’s waiting as something that occurs in the past but that he only sees in the present. Only after the wait—in this case, for the hotel room—has ended can Strether fully understand his attitude towards the end of the waiting. This conclusion, though, only heightens the excitement of his previous waiting—so much so that he cannot stay put. He exercises his waiting—for an unspecified climax—by roving around the hotel. The word choice here—fidgeting, wasting time, vague wandering—hints at an anxiety that is consistent with Barthes’ definition of waiting. But what, then, is this waiting for? What is this anxiety in anticipation of? Though the last clause appears to answer these questions, it does so falsely. James’ syntax aims to confuse, but an obvious reading of the final line is to attribute Strether’s waiting to Waymarsh in some way. The word “but” creates an opposition between the “intimate session” between friends and the roaming, fidgeting, and wasting time. The upcoming reunion of the two men, in other words, quells the stress of waiting. Given Strether’s uneasiness about Waymarsh, though, this does not exactly fit with our understanding of his desires. This waiting, then, seems to be a part of his life’s larger wait. Most importantly, though, the wandering that our protagonist exhibits in this section identifies him with Barthes’ understanding of the man who journeys. Even in waiting, Strether takes action and expresses his agency.

Through the Barthesian lens, though, we stand at an analytical impasse regarding Strether’s gendered waiting. As previously noted, his waiting style is distinct from Madame Bovary’s in his movement. This construction of masculinity is in line with Barthes’ gendered

description of absence in a heterosexual relationship. As previously mentioned, though, Barthes claims that “in any man who utters the other’s absence *something feminine* is declared” (14). Following this notion, Strether’s waiting cannot be masculine because there is no waiting for men. By externalizing his condition, Strether is necessarily feminized. More broadly, though, James is known to play with gender identity in his novels. Once again we return to the figure of George Sand: James’ study of her work “compelled [him] to reexamine gender questions he had swallowed, digested, and assimilated—to bring to the surface of his discourse a complicated gender identity (Person 2). With this knowledge, it is wholly necessary to read Strether as a character with a complex relationship to gender, both generally and in the context of his waiting. His relationship with Maria Gostrey best exemplifies the perplexing nature of gendered waiting in the novel. In line with their sex, Maria is the first to wait in their budding friendship. Soon after meeting, the two plan to have breakfast together. Strether is late, so Maria “waited for him in the garden, the other party drawing on a pair of singularly fresh soft and elastic gloves and presenting herself with a superficial readiness” (*Ambassadors* 5). This description is classically Barthesian. Maria, the woman, engages in sedentary waiting. The superficiality of her readiness indicates a nervousness consistent with the original waiting definition. Channeling Madame Bovary, Maria sits and waits for her soon-to-be beloved to arrive and catalyze her agency. James does not let this dynamic last, however. While discussing Chad and Strether’s ever-imminent departure, Maria asks Strether to guess the answer to a question she has asked. Her apparent pity for him “brought a flush into his face; so for that moment, as they waited together, their difference was between them” (*Ambassadors* 119). The second and third clauses seem to contradict one another. First, the reader learns that they are waiting together. This reality complicates the previous understanding of Strether as a masculine figure because he is waiting in

the first place *and* because he waits together with a woman. In waiting together with Maria, he necessarily takes on her gender (as she does his). Following this, though, the narrator highlights a vague “difference” between them. The difference is up for interpretation, but in this context, we might take it to mean sexual difference. The strength of this difference is strong enough that both Maria and Strether become unusually aware of it; a distinction that is usually taken for granted in their relationship comes to the surface. While this can—and probably should—be read as a moment of sexual tension, this contrast also further confuses the gender of both characters. Maria and Strether are at once unified in their feminine waiting and separated by their respective genders in the waiting scenario.

Another peculiarity of Strether’s waiting is the pleasure he takes in it. Not only does waiting fail to arouse anxiety or fear in him as it does for Emma and Marcher, but the reader gets the sense that he actively enjoys the condition. We see this most clearly in Strether’s wandering—or journeying, as it is called in *A Lover’s Discourse*—but his proto-romantic connections with Maria Gostrey and Madame de Vionnet also underscore his enjoyment. Throughout the novel, Strether has numerous opportunities to progress his erotic relationships with both women, but he chooses not to. Instead, he decides to stay in this middle stage between the platonic and the romantic. Waiting in this particular context, then, refers to courtship or flirting. Given his interest in prolonging the courtship stage indefinitely, we know that, for Strether, flirting is so pleasurable that it trumps the potential joy of a true, consummated relationship. Again, the Barthesian structure fails to account for a positive form of waiting. By focusing his definition on waiting without agency, where the subject is at the mercy of their loved object, Barthes disallows for the possibility of a second type of amorous waiting: one

where the subject has control, but chooses to wait for the sheer pleasure of the proto-relationship stage.

Strether's relationship to epistolary exchange exemplifies his mode of waiting. In a novel told largely through implication, where characters rarely tell one another—or the reader—what they truly mean, the presence of the telegram or letter seems foreign at times. Mark Goble describes the novel's style of suggestion, observing that "James all but perfects a certain language of mediated experience in his later fiction, where experience itself is, by definition, circuitous and indirect" (399). He goes on to note the obvious contrast between this reading experience and the "minimally connotative, brutally referential" nature of a telegram (401). Crucially, telegrams make up the relationship between Strether and Mrs. Newsome, while he acts as her ambassador in Paris. Before she deploys the Pococks, Mrs. Newsome's telegrams are her primary method of control. In fact, they might constitute the only social law that Strether must adhere to or take heed of during his residence in Europe. The restricted, modest culture of Woollett, Massachusetts follows Strether to his Parisian fantasy space through these telegrams.

While Strether's relationship with telegrams looks remarkably similar to Emma Bovary's on the surface, his attitude toward these communications highlights a significant difference between the two.

Strether had meanwhile on his own side cabled; he had but delayed that act till after his visit to Miss Gostrey, an interview by which, as so often before, he felt his sense of things cleared up and settled. His message to Mrs. Newsome, in answer to her own, had consisted of the words: "Judge best to take another month, but with full appreciation of all re-enforcements." (*Ambassadors* 236-237)

Once again, the word “delay” as used in the first sentence epitomizes Strether’s attitude towards waiting. Despite the anxiety produced by waiting for Mrs. Newsome’s correspondences, Strether does not feel moved to respond quickly. He chooses to wait until he has discussed his position with his confidante, Maria Gostrey. Then, when he finally decides to respond, he tells Mrs. Newsome that he will wait longer to return home. Thus, this section involves two levels of delay, if the point of his chosen waiting was not already clear enough. The narrator then pivots to show Strether contemplating his relationship with writing more broadly. This once again sets him apart from Madame Bovary, who agonizes over waiting for love letters and responds immediately. Emma and Strether both receive instructions on how to proceed with their lives through writing; Rodolphe and Léon use letters to arrange meetings with Emma, and Mrs. Newsome uses telegrams to check in on and advise her husband-to-be. Their reactions, however, are quite different. When compared to Emma’s anxiety and quick replies, Strether’s double delay illuminates the control he has over himself and his situation. Despite Mrs. Newsome’s position of authority over him, Strether does not feel the need to respond to her immediately. He uses his agency—one which Madame Bovary lacks—to not only delay his response but also to push back against his partner’s authority. The reader gets the sense that Strether does not force a minor wait onto Mrs. Newsome as a power move of some kind. Instead, his delay is an expression of his security and contentment. He feels sure of his position and self, and he does not crave the end of the wait in the context of the letter exchange or in the broader circumstance of his time in Paris. Though some of the difference between this response and Madame Bovary’s can be attributed to Strether’s clear lack of amorous interest in Mrs. Newsome, his relative nonchalance still represents a mindset that is distinct from Flaubert’s heroine.

Strether's relationship to letters, among other things, shows that delay is what completely separates him from his ill-fated peers. Delaying and waiting sound similar enough; the outcome of both states is an inability to move forward. However minor the difference between their definitions is, though, it provides us with a framework through which to understand Strether's relative triumph over the condition of inaction. Waiting implies a lack of agency; one waits for something to come to them, or for a circumstance to change. The verb delay, on the other hand, requires agency. To delay is to force others to wait for you, or to push something off until a later time. While the opening scene shows him waiting, Strether quickly exerts control over time and begins delaying. Soon after his chance meeting with Maria Gostrey, he goes to meet her in the hotel garden. On his way across the lawn, "he stopped on the grass and went through the form of feeling for something, possibly forgotten, in the light overcoat he carried on his arm; yet the essence of the act was no more than the impulse to gain time" (James *Ambassadors* 5). In this short moment, the narrator reveals Strether's approach to time and waiting. No matter the context, Strether's instinct is to "gain time." Crucially, the word "impulse" highlights that this is not a strategic choice but rather a product of his nature. He has an innate drive to delay.

Early in the novel, Strether's search for Chad seems genuine. The reader gets the sense that Strether does not have hidden intentions to stay in Paris. Once Chad states that he feels ready to return to Woollett, though, it becomes clear that Strether's feelings have changed, and he has strayed from the path that Mrs. Newsome set out for him. We might attribute this change to the realizations he comes to once he is freed from the rigid culture of Woollett. Speaking to Miss Gostrey, Strether says that he "began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that's what has been taking place ever since. I never had the benefit at the proper time—which comes to saying that I never had the thing itself. I'm having the benefit

at this moment; I had it the other day when I said to Chad ‘Wait’ (James *Ambassadors* 240).

Here, the reader finds an example of Strether’s temporally confused waiting. He implies that his youth was spent—or rather wasted—waiting to “ha[ve] the benefit” of being young. Once in Paris, though, he was able to see the waste of those years and try to make up for that wait through action. His advice to Chad illuminates the change in Strether’s attitude toward waiting. When he commands the younger man to “wait,” he actually means to say “delay.” Strether hopes that Chad will take control of his life and slow down enough to experience and enjoy his youth as he himself did not.

Once Chad reveals that he is ready to return to his mother in Woollett, Strether comes to understand his own process as one of delay. When the young man asks what Strether is waiting for before leaving Paris, Strether states

I wasn’t waiting to see any one. I had only waited, till now, to make up my mind—in complete solitude; and, since I of course absolutely owe you the information, was on the point of going out with it quite made up. Have therefore a little more patience with me. Remember,’ Strether went on, ‘that that’s what you originally asked *me* to have. I’ve had it, you see, and you see what has come of it. Stay on with me. (*Ambassadors* 228)

Save for his final decision, this is the clearest demonstration of Strether’s newfound autonomy, though it is important to note that he always had agency but was less aware of it—and therefore not using it—earlier in the novel. He directly refutes the notion that he is waiting for anyone or anything before making a decision. The only thing he waits for is himself which, given the aforementioned distinction between waiting and delay, is not truly waiting because he has control over his own mind. He then says to his companion “stay on with me.” Crucially, this line is a command and not a question. If he had asked a question of Chad—something along the lines of

“would you stay with me?”—he would be embodying the waiting, questioning Strether that we meet in the first paragraph because he would be at the mercy of Chad’s decision-making. That man, though, no longer exists post-revelation. Instead, he *tells* Chad to stay and puts himself in a position of power by delaying their return to Woollett.

In the final scene of *The Ambassadors*, after Maria Gostrey has all but confessed her feelings for him and begged him to remain in Paris, Strether makes the baffling decision to return to Woollett, and the novel ends. The reader finds themselves dumbfounded by his choice after all of the joy and personal growth that Paris offered him. What’s more, he chooses to end his delay despite all of the pleasure he took in it. He also deprives himself of the happiness he knows he has in Paris not to journey to a new, exciting locale but to simply return to the oppressive, prudish culture of Woollett, Massachusetts. So what explains this decision? Robert Merrill persuasively argues that Strether’s new-found knowledge of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship is to blame. The realization of their affair causes “the undeceived recognition of his friends and the quality of life they really oppose to his defunct world of Woollett” (46). In other words, knowing that all of his companions were lying to him sullies his rose-tinted view of Parisian life. We can understand this argument through waiting by reevaluating Strether’s relationship with Madame de Vionnet post-realization. Once he learns of their romance, Strether can no longer continue his erotic waiting relationship with Madame de Vionnet. Because he now knows of her involvement with Chad, the illusion of agency that he had throughout the novel has been broken, and the courtship that he believed he could delay indefinitely must end. Because of this, the fantasy of Parisian delay loses its intrigue. In rejecting Maria Gostrey’s offer, Strether admits that, by losing his sense of agency, he cannot continue what he hoped to be a permanent waiting.

V.

Though each text sees its protagonist meet a unique fate, they all come to the conclusion that waiting must end. Emma, Marcher, and Strether, whether purposefully or not, must move from purgatory to a more finite state. In a purely Barthesian framework, this is positive; the amorous subject's pain cannot last. The loved being will appear again and end the anxiety in one way or another. In these specific cases, however, *A Lover's Discourse* can only partially explain the fates of these characters. *Madame Bovary* sees Emma killing herself which, in a way, is a demonstration of agency that she struggled to find in romance. Her suicide also reflects the melodrama of the stories of her youth, thereby fulfilling her fantasy in a very macabre fashion. In "The Beast in the Jungle," Marcher's delayed discovery of May's romantic potential signals the end of his waiting, but the beginning of his amorous agony, once again showing an inverse of the Barthesian structure that still resonates with the anxiety of the original. Though Strether's fate feels less acutely tragic than those of his peers, there is a quiet melancholy in his final decision. During the novel, he wields a sense of agency that Emma does not have and that Marcher does not access. By the final scene, though, the reality of change sets in, and he learns that he cannot live in the constellation of controlled amorous waiting that he has created forever. Strether's novel-ending decision crystallizes an idea that is nascent in all three texts: that waiting is a necessarily transient state and must come to an end. Barthes' definitions help us enter into the world of waiting in these texts, but further analysis of each novel's unique depiction of the state underscores that numerous confounding variables in amorous waiting are absent from *A Lover's Discourse*. David Bruce McWhirter's understanding of desire offers a useful extension of

Barthes' theories that helps us understand the fate of these characters: "Desire must by definition remain unfulfilled, for it only wants to perpetuate itself *as* desire (as wanting and therefore as lacking), and so perishes in the act of consummation, just as sexual desire "dies" in the discharge of satisfaction" (6). Ultimately, these characters can do no more than wait, because the end of waiting would, by this definition, kill their desire.

In a broader sense, the waiting states of Emma, Marcher, and Strether mirror the experience of the reader. Flaubert and James both create metatextual structures that suspend the agency of the reader and force us to wait in ways that are both pleasurable and agonizing, often simultaneously. If we consider ourselves to be the amorous subject, and the novels themselves our loved objects, the above argument illustrates our experience of waiting too. By virtue of their length, novels and longer short stories *must* make us wait, and they do so multiple times: we wait for the climax, for the resolution, for the consummation of the romantic arc, for the fall of the antagonist. Flaubert relies heavily on such plot-specific delays. For example, the overlapping affair narratives force us to wait for the completed romantic arc we have come to expect, and Emma's late introduction demands that we continue reading in anticipation of meeting our protagonist. While James also employs such narrative delays, he also constructs delays on a sentence level, creating an even more painstaking reading experience. The average sentence length in *The Ambassadors* is 35 words, which already signals a level of complexity beyond the typical novel (Watt 255). Within each sentence, James further delays our understanding with his signature Modernist mode: dizzying em dashes, neverending layers of subordinate clauses, and obfuscated subject-object relationships. For James, it is not enough to make us wait for plot points—we must also wait to understand each clause, each sentence, and each paragraph. The frustration experienced by readers of late James is a central topic of discussion among scholars

and leisure readers alike. So why do we choose to read these texts? Why do we submit ourselves to such tedious, all-encompassing waiting?

The question of agency is the defining difference between the waiting of characters and that of the reader. While *Madame Bovary*, *Marcher*, and *Strether* all grapple with complex and changing agency, we as the reader have virtually none. The only decisions we make are to pick up or put down a book, to start, to pause, to finish the story. The moment we open the book, though, we are at the mercy of our author. Yet somehow, our reading tends to be far more pleasurable than the waiting of characters. The satisfaction of this cycle of waiting and revelation must outweigh the anxiety it causes because we continue reading. The difference might simply be that they have been placed in a novel without their consent, while we have given ourselves over to chosen authors. But it also seems that our knowledge of the end of waiting changes our outlook. Emma and Marcher see no end to their painful purgatories. Strether feels joy before he realizes that he cannot prolong his amorous waiting forever, and becomes resigned to his old life after he comes to understand the impermanence of it all. We, however, know that the end is coming. Though we know that the author will never answer all of our questions, we know that the story will end in its own way. The wait for the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, and the novel will all end, despite the author's constant delays. The knowledge that our waiting must come to an end is liberatory.

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