

# The Homeless Child: *What Maisie Knew*

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In Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), Maisie's parents get divorced and she is forced to live with each parent by turns. The story addresses her lack of a proper home. This theme is reflected in the fact that there is no description of the interiors of the various houses where Maisie stays temporarily. In this essay, I will first analyze the reversal of public and private space, and then examine Maisie's search for her own family and permanent home, which are free from their traditional forms. Furthermore, I will argue that the novel's extensive allusions to the physical places of London reveal that Maisie is very much a product of the public, open space of the town, all the more that she has been denied a home.

## (1) The Reversal of Private/Public Space

If "home" provides the boundary between the private and the public, and the private is inside the home and the public outside, Maisie is brought up in a situation where that relationship is reversed. For, her parents' divorce proceedings, matters that derive from inside the home, become public and attract the people's interest. After the first and second trials, "a squabble scarcely less public and scarcely more decent than the original shock of battle" (35) occurs, where Beale and Ida Farange settle on keeping Maisie by turns. The long process is broadcast in newspapers and invites a "reverberation, amid a vociferous public" (36), who are curious about the fate of the famous child. The Faranges provide, outside the house, topics of conversation about their private matters, which have originated within it.

Beale and Ida are characterized in such a way that makes them suitable as procurers of attention. They have a "social attraction" (37), and it is "generally felt, to begin with, that they were awfully good-looking" (37). Their beauty makes them an object to be seen, as the narrator says of Ida: "She was a person who, when she was out—and she was always out—produced everywhere a sense of having been seen often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility" (38). The word "abuse" has two implications. In one sense, Ida is the object of abuse and the victim of too much visibility. In another sense, she is the subject of abuse and she exploits her visibility. We may assume that the abuse is subjective, and Ida enjoys being out and being seen. The narrator states that during the trials, Beale was "bespattered from head to foot" (35), and that concerning Ida, people thought that "the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots" (35). These expressions, too, employ bodily images and convey the idea that while Beale and Ida denounced each other in court, the audience was observing their faces and bodies. Therefore, the divorce proceedings have attracted the public's attention primarily because of the scandalous nature of

the dispute, but the physical beauty of Beale and Ida has also greatly contributed to the publicity.

It is probable that the dispute started not long after Maisie's birth, and thus she has never understood the idea of a home as private space. In the world that she is born into, there is no privacy in the house because her parents behave not as family but as enemies from outside camps. Outside the house, Maisie's privacy is even more undermined because her privacy is discussed in court and probed by the public. Maisie conceives of her parents as actors in a play: "Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre" (39). Maisie is thus surrounded by images of public space. If Maisie is born into public space, her desire is to attain a private space that might be found in the home. This is the search that she undertakes in the narrative.

After her parents' divorce, Maisie continues to find public space within the house. Her father invites people to his house who treat her violently: "They pulled and pinched, they teased and tickled her; some of them even, as they termed it, shied things at her" (57). This space is always full of the presence of others, as Maisie observes from upstairs: "[T]he staircase, for a little girl hanging over banisters, sent up the deepening rustle of more elaborate advances" (67). Maisie develops a habit of "hanging over banisters when the door-bell sounded. This was the great refuge of her impatience, but what she heard at such times was a clatter of gaiety downstairs the impression of which, from her earliest childhood, had built up in her the belief that the grown-up time was the time of real amusement and above all of real intimacy" (69). This repeated image of Maisie's "hanging over banisters" is significant. Maisie reveals that the habit relieves her "impatience" with her father's neglect of her, and it is as if she is trying to claim her presence through this act. The banisters divide downstairs, where the men and women enjoy intimate associations, and upstairs, from where Maisie gets glimpses of the goings-on. Maisie feels isolated the more the adults seem intimate among themselves. Although it is not the kind of intimacy that she wants to take part in, she cannot help being exposed to the atmosphere of their gatherings, and she clutches at the banisters as if to avoid being drawn toward them.

Maisie wants to stay upstairs, away from the adults: "Maisie in these days preferred none the less that domestic revels should be wafted to her from a distance: she felt sadly unsupported for facing the inquisition of the drawing-room" (69). The phrase "domestic revels" is somewhat oxymoronic. It seems to me to point to the paradox of having public space in the house, and always finding strangers partying in the domestic space.

The word "domestic" is again used in an ironic sense when Ida starts dating Mr. Perriam. Maisie recognizes that "Sir Claude wouldn't at all care for the visits of a millionaire who was in and out of the upper rooms" (93), and that she is in the midst of the changes in her mother's personal relations: "She was in the presence, she felt, of restless change: wasn't it restless enough that her mother and her stepfather should already be on different sides? That was the great thing that had domestically happened" (94). What has "domestically happened" is that her mother's lover, the person who is most unfit to be in the domestic space, is too often in the house. Consequently, husband and wife are, in Sir Claude's words, "not together—not a bit" (86). The presence of Mr. Perriam in the house is another factor that works to confuse Maisie about the idea of home as private space.

It is Sir Claude who shows the highest inclination toward domestic values. He often visits Maisie and Mrs. Wix in the schoolroom: “[H]e was always smoking, but always declaring that it was death to him not to lead a domestic life” (94). Sir Claude has spoken of his inclination to domestic values earlier, when he tells Maisie that he is a “family-man” (72), but “there are no family-women [...]. None of them want any children” (73). The irony of the novel is that Sir Claude’s domestic tendency and Maisie’s search for a private space do not bring them together at the end. Meanwhile, Sir Claude’s wish for such a life is projected on the schoolroom: “He led one after all in the schoolroom” (94), where he has long evening talks with Mrs. Wix. However, Mrs. Wix does not support Sir Claude’s orientation toward the domestic but tries to encourage him to go to Parliament. She tells Maisie that “[t]he life she wanted him to take right hold of was the public” (95) and says: “he can’t live like the lilies” (95). Mrs. Wix fails to recognize that Sir Claude does not aspire to go into the public sphere but wants to live a private life with a woman, and this failure prefigures their break-up.

We have seen that Maisie lives in a condition where the private and public are reversed. She has a public life in the house because strangers often invade her house, while her private life escapes out of the house because her privacy has been circulated by newspapers and observed by the people with interest. In fact, people follow her privacy even after the court proceedings. Maisie is told by Mrs. Beale, who is still Miss Overmore at this time, that if “Mr. Farange’s daughter would only show a really marked preference she would be backed up by ‘public opinion’ in holding on to him” (47). Maisie is too young to understand it, but this comment shows that the public keeps paying attention to her and holds “opinions” about her which her parents take account of and which influence her life. Furthermore, Miss Overmore tells Maisie that she cannot be sent to a school because as soon as her father “should delegate to others the housing of his little charge he hadn’t a leg to stand on before the law” (56). Beale must house Maisie in order to avoid appearing irresponsible before the law and the public. Therefore, Maisie’s privacy is not only exposed to the public, but it is also determined by public opinion, even after the legal proceedings have finished.

If Maisie is born into a situation where she does not have a house within which she can find private space, she eventually goes on a search of such a house. I will now examine this process.

## (2) Maisie’s Search for a Home

I shall start by quoting a passage that describes Maisie’s situation most clearly. This is the beginning of Chapter 10, before Maisie and Sir Claude start a conversation in the schoolroom:

He was smoking a cigarette and he stood before the fire and looked at the meagre appointments of the room in a way that made her rather ashamed of them. Then [...] he remarked that really mamma kept them rather low on the question of decorations. Mrs. Wix had put up a Japanese fan and two rather grim texts; she had wished they were gayer, but they were all she happened to have. Without Sir Claude’s photograph, however, the place would have been, as he said, as dull as a cold dinner. He had said as well that there were all sorts of things they ought to have; yet governess and pupil, it

had to be admitted, were still divided between discussing the places where any sort of thing would look best if any sort of thing should ever come and acknowledging that mutability in the child's career which was naturally unfavourable to accumulation. She stayed long enough only to miss things, not half long enough to deserve them. (82)

Maisie's nomadic lifestyle prevents her from having a room of her own. In order to live a free, productive life, she needs to stay in one place where she can base her actions and accumulate her possessions. Maisie is gravely deprived of that right, and the novel addresses this problem significantly. For, one's accumulation of things demonstrates one's history of life, and the lack of that basic right leads to the negation of one's life. The passage lets us know that Maisie has a desire for possession, but the only thing she keeps out of her own will is the photograph of Sir Claude. Her inability to possess is directly linked to the narrator's inability to describe. Because the things are not there, the narrator cannot describe the room in a way other than declaring it "dull" and "meagre." Paradoxically, the narrator's renunciation of description is itself a form of description; by the absence of words, the reader may be led to imagine an empty room.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, Maisie goes on a search of a permanent home. Because she is too young to live on her own, she looks for a guardian who will provide her a permanent home and live with her. At first, she considers Miss Overmore and Mrs. Wix as possible candidates, but after she meets Sir Claude, her ultimate goal becomes sharing a home with him. Numerous critics have claimed that Maisie develops an incestuous love for Sir Claude, but I believe Maisie's foremost feeling toward him is that she sees him as the ideal person to provide her the home and family that she has always craved.<sup>2</sup>

But first, let us review Maisie's relationship with Miss Overmore and Mrs. Wix. Her first instinct to rely on a governess for guardianship rather than her parents occurs early in the novel, when she grows attracted to Miss Overmore: "She had conceived her first passion, and the object of it was her governess. It hadn't been put to her, and she couldn't, or at any rate she didn't, put it to herself, that she liked Miss Overmore better than she liked papa [...]" (47-48). The keyword in Maisie's expectations from her governess is "safety," which is wholly linked to her desire of a permanent home. Maisie needs this sense of security because her parents have never given her the assurance to feel that she can be where she is. In the following instance, Maisie wants to be able to rely on Miss Overmore: "[S]he [Miss Overmore] repeated the free caress into which her colloquies with Maisie almost always broke and which made the child feel that *her* affection at least was a gage of safety. Parents had come to seem vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted" (59). Maisie's faith in Miss Overmore/Mrs. Beale does not cease until the ending, when she rejects her on moral grounds.

Maisie's relationship with Mrs. Wix is even more interesting, because it is tighter and more complex. It is significant that Maisie's first impression of Mrs. Wix includes a motherly image: "What Maisie felt was that she [Mrs. Wix] had been, with passion and anguish, a mother, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less" (48). It is also safety that Maisie wants from Mrs. Wix, and Mrs. Wix's degree of safety is augmented by this motherly image. Maisie feels that safety is Mrs. Wix's primal characteristic: "[S]omehow, in her ugliness and poverty, she [Mrs. Wix] was peculiarly and

soothingly safe; safer than anyone in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore [...]" (50). Here, Maisie brings up an important comparison between Mrs. Wix and a "banister." She says: "It was from something in Mrs. Wix's tone, [...] that Maisie, before her term with her mother was over, drew this sense of a support, like a breast-high banister in a place of 'drops,' that would never give way" (50). As we have seen, the banister has repeatedly been mentioned in the text as the barrier which Maisie leans on to observe the adults' gatherings downstairs and which she clutches in order not to fall, and not to descend to the world of dubious adult relations. Maisie's likening Mrs. Wix to a banister shows her view of Mrs. Wix as a strong support who will stand by her.

The motherly image of Mrs. Wix is something that Mrs. Wix intentionally produces. For, she is searching for a home as well, and wants to join Maisie's search. Mrs. Wix is actually as dependent on Maisie as Maisie is on herself, but she emphasizes her motherly image to Maisie so that the child will rely on her for pseudo-parental support. Mrs. Wix wins Maisie's sympathy by talking about her deceased daughter:

[S]he [Maisie] found herself as deeply absorbed in the image of the little dead Clara Matilda [...] as she had ever found herself in the family group made vivid by one of seven. "She's your little dead sister," Mrs. Wix ended by saying, and Maisie, all in a tremor of curiosity and compassion, addressed from that moment a particular piety to the small accepted acquisition. Somehow she wasn't a real sister, but that only made her the more romantic. (48-49)

This passage shows that Maisie imagines herself in other families in order to find a place to belong to. She identifies herself as Mrs. Wix's daughter and as one of Miss Overmore's sisters. Maisie's identification with Clara Matilda happens quickly because Maisie and Mrs. Wix have a mutual need to belong to each other. Although Maisie knows that Clara Matilda is not a "real" sister, she has a predilection to relieve herself of hard reality by escaping into fantasy.

It is most likely that Maisie, at this stage, is not conscious of her escapism. Maisie's relationship with reality and fantasy is an intricate one. The narrator has revealed that Maisie "was at the age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute, the present alone was vivid" (42). This quotation may appear contradictory, because the first part points out Maisie's tendency to believe all stories and beliefs true; that is, her inclination to fantasize, while the second sentence discusses her surrender to reality. The quotation is not contradictory if we realize that Maisie accepts the actual and the present as absolute, including the stories and fantasies that she has at that time. She confuses reality and fantasy because she accepts both when they are "immediate." The following comment by the narrator will help our understanding: "In that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child's mind the past, on each occasion, became for her as indistinct as the future: she surrendered herself to the actual with a good faith that might have been touching to either parent" (42). Maisie's disposition to leave her fate to the immediate derives from the discontinuous lifestyle forced on her by her parents. Because her lifestyle is intermittent, she cannot conceive

of the past, present and future as connected, and she can only deal with the present.<sup>3</sup> For her, reality and fantasy are not opposite ideas, but rather, the opposite of reality is the past and the future. Therefore, Maisie escapes into the fantasy of an imaginary sister to avoid facing the reality of not having a caring family, but her escapism is not intentional, because, for her at this early stage, fantasy and reality exist together in the common sphere of the present, and she is easily and involuntarily led to fantasize.

Mrs. Wix also has a complex relationship with reality and fantasy. She is “not nearly so ‘qualified’ as Miss Overmore” (50) as a governess, and fiction is the only subject that she is good at. The next passage reveals the complexity of what she teaches:

She [Mrs. Wix] took refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth. She knew swarms of stories, mostly those of the novels she had read; relating them with a memory that never faltered and a wealth of detail that was Maisie’s delight. They were all about love and beauty and countesses and wickedness. Her conversation was practically an endless narrative, a great garden of romance, with sudden vistas into her own life and gushing fountains of homeliness. These were the parts where they most lingered; she made the child take with her again every step of her long lame course and think it beyond magic or monsters. (51)

Fiction is a safer ground than the other, more practical subjects for Mrs. Wix, and she lectures about the “truth” in fiction. However, in her lessons, fiction is connected to her real-life story, and eventually her life story comes to precede fiction in importance. Despite her interest in fiction or fantasy, Mrs. Wix believes that one’s personal narrative is more important, because it is real and more earnest. The “truth” in fiction may help her morally, but it does not directly save her from poverty and her housing problem. Therefore, the anxiety of homelessness has influenced Mrs. Wix’s view of the relationship between reality and fantasy. She reflects this view in her lessons with Maisie, as if to teach the child that she also must learn to distinguish reality from fantasy, and to prepare her for her real search of a home.

Mrs. Wix fights a fierce battle with Miss Overmore over Maisie, but Maisie herself is not so interested in determining who is her more favourite governess or surrogate mother. For, Maisie is indifferent about who prevails in this rivalry as long as she can secure Sir Claude as her guardian. When Maisie meets him for the first time in the drawing-room of her father’s house, she immediately sees him as the one who will save her from her “fallen state” (70). She happily believes that they belong together: “It was as if he had told her on the spot that he belonged to her [...]. No, nothing else that was most beautiful ever belonging to her could kindle that particular joy—not Mrs. Beale at that very moment, not papa when he was gay, nor mamma when she was dressed, nor Lisette when she was new” (70). Maisie’s “fallen state” refers to her state of lacking caring parents and of having to move from place to place. Maisie’s idea of Sir Claude as belonging to her reflects her desire that he will finally *stay* with her for a long time as a guardian. This desire naturally leads to her repeated requests that he *live* with her. Thus, Maisie’s goal becomes living with Sir Claude. Living is staying in one place for a long time and accumulating possessions, something that she has never done before. Maisie first makes this

request to Sir Claude in Chapter 10, when she says: “Then we’ll live together?” (86) after he mentions the chance of his breaking up with Ida. But Sir Claude evades Maisie’s request, as he continues to do throughout the narrative.

Maisie is anxious about her own housing problem, but she realizes that Mrs. Wix has a similar, yet even graver problem:

She [Maisie] therefore recognized the hour that in troubled glimpses she had long foreseen, the hour when [...] with two fathers, two mothers and two homes, six protections in all, she shouldn’t know “wherever” to go. Such apprehension as she felt on this score was not diminished by the fact that Mrs. Wix herself was suddenly white with terror: a circumstance leading Maisie to the further knowledge that this lady was still more scared on her own behalf than on that of her pupil. A governess who had only one frock was not likely to have either two fathers or two mothers: accordingly if even with these resources Maisie was to be in the streets, where in the name of all that was dreadful was poor Mrs. Wix to be? (96)

This quotation expresses the strong fear of homelessness felt by Maisie and Mrs. Wix. The “six protections” are unreliable because they are only temporary. It is interesting to note that “homes” are placed in the same rank as “parents.” “Homes” are personified and “parents” are commodified in effect. Maisie’s condition reveals the dilemma that while one protection may be absolute and reliable, six are as uncertain as none.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Wix’s condition is even more severe, because she has been told by Ida to leave the house. As Maisie notices, Mrs. Wix is keener on receiving protection than providing it to Maisie. She needs to be with Maisie because it gives her the reason to stay in the house, and because she can search for a home with the child. She thus says that “it would take another turn of the screw to make her desert her darling” (97). We must note here that Mrs. Wix gives the title of the novel that James would write the following year. The similarity between that novel and this one is that both have a governess who is looking for a place to be. In *The Turn of the Screw*, Douglas says that his story is given “another turn of the screw” (1) and made more intriguing by the fact that it concerns a child. In *What Maisie Knew*, “another turn of the screw” refers to a satisfactory condition demanded by Mrs. Wix that would free her from homelessness.

Since that “turn of the screw” does not exist, Mrs. Wix joins Maisie’s project to live with Sir Claude. Mrs. Wix introduces this subject to him in the schoolroom in Chapter 12; she makes the “proposal that whenever and wherever they [Maisie and Mrs. Wix] should seek refuge Sir Claude should consent to share their asylum” (98). When Sir Claude protests: “It’s your happy thought that I shall take a house for you?” (98), Mrs. Wix answers: “For the wretched homeless child” (98). She continues shortly afterwards:

“Of course *we* shouldn’t dream of a whole house. Any sort of little lodging, however humble, would be only too blest.”

“But it would have to be something that would hold us all,” said Sir Claude.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Wix concurred: “the whole point’s our being together.” (99)

The narrator calls Mrs. Wix Maisie's "protectress" (99), and she has the child in her arms while she makes these pleas. She is taking advantage of her position to find her own lodging. By calling Maisie a "homeless child" and inviting sympathy, she makes her pupil a cover for her own situation. Maisie observes this exchange with some coolness, as if she has detected another motive behind Mrs. Wix's protection of her. Any attempt at independent intervention is precluded by Mrs. Wix's claim to take action on her behalf; Maisie imagines watching a football game, and feels "the doom of a peculiar passivity" (101). Some time later, Mrs. Wix restates to Maisie her hope of their dream home with Sir Claude: "Could they but hold out long enough the snug little home with Sir Claude would find itself informally established" (104). From then on, the actions and thoughts of Maisie and Mrs. Wix are directed toward establishing that home. However, there is a gap between their intentions, because while Mrs. Wix aims for a home shared by the three of them, Maisie is only looking for a home to share with Sir Claude.

The outcome of their search finally becomes clear in Boulogne. The outcome is brought about by Maisie's attainment of moral sense that is guided by her knowledge. The day before she leaves for Boulogne, the narrator comments: "Maisie had known all along a great deal, but never so much as she was to know from this moment on and as she learned in particular during the couple of days that she was to hang in the air, as it were, over the sea which represented in breezy blueness and with a summer charm a crossing of more spaces than the Channel" (162). During her short stay in Boulogne, Maisie crosses the line between ignorance and knowledge of the nature of the relationship between Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale. When she has just arrived in France, that insight has not come yet, and her goal is the same, as she asks Sir Claude: "[I]sn't France cheaper than England? [...] Then we shall live here?" (183). When Mrs. Wix arrives the next day her goal is also the same. Mrs. Wix pleads with Sir Claude to leave Mrs. Beale and live with her and Maisie: "[W]e'll live together without a cloud" (201). I believe the moment of Maisie's enlightenment occurs two days later, as she waits with Mrs. Wix for Sir Claude's return. The narrator says: "As she [Maisie] was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in fact as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything" (213). Maisie comes to realize what Mrs. Wix means when she says that Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale are "committing a crime" now in being together and that their "immorality" must not be condoned. She used to think that their "freedom" allows them to be together, but she now understands that "this made no difference" (215). The knowledge that she gains is sexual knowledge.

Maisie now only accepts Sir Claude as her guardian; she says: "Him alone or nobody" (231), and she declares that Mrs. Wix is "nobody." This shows that Maisie sees Mrs. Wix no longer as a protectress, but as someone who needs protection like herself. Ironically, the housing plan that Sir Claude finally offers Maisie is incompatible with her newly acquired "moral sense." He proposes that Maisie live with Mrs. Beale and he will visit them: "Of course it would be quite unconventional, [...] I mean the little household that we three should make together" (247). Maisie rejects Sir Claude's plan not because of its unconventionality but because of its immorality. Therefore, both Sir Claude and Maisie do not get the home and family that they search for.

When their search ends unsuccessfully, Maisie and Mrs. Wix find each other to live with. They arrive at a pseudo-parental relationship, but it is a peculiar relationship also in the sense that the mother-daughter dynamics are reversed. For, it is implied that they will live on Maisie's money that has been left her by her godmother. This money is mentioned only in the prologue and the ending, and it serves as a blank during most of the narrative, while Beale and Ida hide it from Maisie. But as Maisie has grown older in the end, the reader rediscovers that money as well as the godmother who is also mentioned only briefly in the prologue. This godmother is vitally significant because she determines the beginning and ending of *What Maisie Knew*; she provides Maisie's name without which the novel cannot begin, and the means which Maisie will live on after the novel ends. In a sense, this godmother is more of a surrogate mother than Mrs. Wix. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Wix finds herself relying on Maisie, who has grown older and become stronger morally and economically. Their relationship is reversed, a transition that is triggered by Mrs. Wix's teaching of "moral sense" to Maisie.<sup>5</sup> Maisie is thus in possession of her own life; in Carren Kaston's words, Maisie arrives at "an act of self-custody, as she struggles to achieve the 'imagination in *predominance*' that will enable her to possess the material of her life in a plot of her own design" (121).

### (3) Maisie's London

*What Maisie Knew* is exceptionally rich in allusions to the physical places in contemporary London. We find Maisie in Regent's Park, Kensington Gardens and Earl's Court, among other locations, where significant events occur. The importance of outside/public/open space in the development of the plot emphasizes the lack of inside/private space, that is, Maisie's home.

The events that occur in Kensington Gardens and at the Exhibition at Earl's Court are so schematically constructed that they can be compared in a table in the following manner:

Time	End of June, 1887	End of July, 1887
Place	Kensington Gardens	The Exhibition at Earl's Court
The person who takes Maisie out	Sir Claude	Mrs. Beale
The people whom Maisie encounters	Ida with the Captain	Beale with the Countess
The place where each parent was supposed to be	Playing billiards in Brussels	Yachting in Cowes
The colour of each parent's companion	Fair, white	"Brown"
The impression of each companion	Good, familiar	Bad, strange
The person with whom Maisie converses alone	The Captain	Beale
The place of the conversation	Nearby bench	The Countess's room

The year is presumably 1887, as Paul Theroux has written that the Exhibition opened in that year: "In 1887, a London entrepreneur (J. R. Whisley?) turned a piece of waste ground in west London into a permanent fairground and exhibition" (Notes, 272). This is mentioned in Karl Baedeker's *London and Its Environs*, a contemporary guidebook: "Earl's Court Exhibition Grounds, with elaborate annual 'national' exhibitions, numerous side-shows (adm. extra), bands, etc. Other features are a switch-back railway and a water-chute. Adm. 1s., 11 a.m. to 11 p.m." (49). Therefore, Mrs. Beale and Maisie have paid 1 shilling to enter the Exhibition, but not the "extra" fees to enter each show, which the narrator says are "sixpence apiece" (142).

These two situations are intentionally made similar, but a close comparison reveals that some of their aspects and final effects are in fact contrastive. The settings are different in that Kensington Gardens are much less crowded and more pastoral in atmosphere than the Exhibition site. The narrator says that Maisie's favourite park is Regent's Park, but Sir Claude takes her to Hyde Park because "this was the direction taken by everyone that anyone looked at" (121). It is implied that Sir Claude chooses Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens in order to avoid others' attention and the bustle of the city. This is the scenery that he calls "the Forest of Arden": "A great green glade was before them, and high old trees, and under the shade of these, in the fresh turf, the crooked course of a rural footpath" (122). By imagining himself and Maisie as characters in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Sir Claude attaches a fantastic image to the setting, but he is suddenly brought back to reality when he spots his wife and her lover. This encounter gives a somewhat implausible effect because the chances of such a coincidence occurring must have been minutely small. The other meeting at the Exhibition strikes one as likewise fanciful, because while being in a crowd makes one more likely to be unconsciously spotted by others, it also makes it more difficult for one to find another person. That is why Maisie looks for Sir Claude in vain. The place in front of the Flowers of the Forest appears unreal to Maisie because she finds there "bright brown ladies" who generate "tropical luxuriance" (142), an atmosphere unknown to her. Maisie, instead of acquainting herself with this new aura, immerses herself in the more familiar thoughts of Sir Claude. However, she is soon forced to face this unknown world as she runs into her father with a "brown" lady.

Maisie's opposing reactions to the Captain and the Countess comprise the greatest contrast between these two scenes. The contrast derives from the fact that the Captain is white and the Countess is dark. This is Maisie's first impression of the Captain: "His face, thin, and rather sharp, was smooth, and it was not till they came nearer that she saw he had a remarkably fair little moustache. She could already see that his eyes were of the lightest blue. He was far nicer than Mr. Perriam" (123-24). From this description we know that the Captain is white, and we may guess from Maisie's emphasis on the lightness of his blue eyes that he probably has an even fairer complexion than Maisie. She compares him favorably with Mr. Perriam, her mother's former Jewish lover. Maisie's impression continues to be positive as she begins a conversation: "As she met the Captain's light blue eyes the greatest marvel occurred; she felt a sudden relief at finding them reply with anxiety to the horror in her face. [...] [H]is face won her over; it was so bright and kind, and his blue eyes had such a reflexion of some mysterious grace that, for him at least, her mother had put forth" (126). Maisie thinks that it is "nice when a gentleman was thin and brown—brown with a kind of clear depth that made his straw-coloured moustache almost

white and his eyes resemble little pale flowers. [...] [H]e was sunburnt and deep-voiced and smelt of cigars, yet he marvellously had more in common with her old governess than with her young stepfather" (127). The foremost part of Maisie's impression of the Captain is the sense of security that he exudes, which is why he reminds her of Mrs. Wix. Although he looks "funny" (127), his impression is very positive because he is in Maisie's familiar racial group. It is meaningful to note that Maisie uses the same adjective, "brown," to describe the Captain positively, which she uses negatively to describe the Countess. "Brown" is the colour of the Captain's hair, and the colour of the Countess's skin, which makes a great difference to Maisie.

When Maisie sees the Countess at the Exhibition, the "lady was so brown that Maisie at first took her for one of the Flowers" (143). In surprise, she tells Mrs. Beale: "She's almost black," (143) to which Mrs. Beale replies: "They're always hideous" (143). Maisie equates the unfamiliar world of the Countess with fantasy and the Arabian Nights. The Countess's room is the only one in the novel that is properly described:

In the middle of the small bright room and the presence of more curtains and cushions, more pictures and mirrors, more palm-trees drooping over brocaded and gilded nooks, more little silver boxes scattered over little crooked tables and little oval miniatures hooked upon velvet screens than Mrs. Beale and her ladyship together could, in an unnatural alliance, have dreamed of mustering, the child became aware, with a sharp foretaste of compassion, of something that was strangely like a relegation to obscurity of each of those women of taste. (146)

As much as Maisie admires the room, she is conscious of the strange power of the Countess that can easily overrule her mother and Mrs. Beale. The sense of the fullness of things in the room is brought forth by the way that they are successively mentioned in one long sentence. Its attraction is so overwhelming that Maisie revises her first impression of the Countess. She declares that she hopes the Countess will turn up, speaking "with an earnestness begotten of the impression of all the beauty about them, to which, in person, the Countess might make further contribution" (147). However, when she does appear, Maisie feels that her presence quickly "dissipated the happy impression of the room" (157). She utters in her mind these seemingly discriminatory comments: "[S]he was brown indeed. She literally struck the child more as an animal than as a 'real' lady; she might have been a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat. She had a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache" (156). Maisie de-womanizes and dehumanizes the Countess.

The following passage makes clear that Maisie's rejection of the Countess derives from her colour: "The Countess stood smiling, and after an instant that was mainly taken up with the shock of her weird aspect Maisie felt herself reminded of another smile, which was not ugly, though also interested—the kind light thrown, that day in the Park, from the clean fair face of the Captain. Papa's Captain—yes—was the Countess; but she wasn't nearly so nice as the other: it all came back, doubtless, to Maisie's minor appreciation of ladies" (157). Maisie calls the Captain's face "clean" and "fair," which leads us to see that she perceives the Countess's dark face as crude and uninviting. I believe that the narrator is being ironic in pointing out that

Maisie's preference of the Captain to the Countess proceeds from her preference of gentlemen to ladies. As I have shown above, it comes from the fact that the Captain is white and the Countess is dark. The narrator's irony is supported by the expression, "doubtless."

I do not recognize Maisie's rejection of the Countess and her seemingly discriminatory comments as springing from a conscious racial prejudice; rather, I interpret them as James's rendition of the straight impressions of a young child who has encountered a person of another race for the first time.<sup>6</sup> As John Carlos Rowe has pointed out, we may not know the ethnicity and nationality of the Countess. She may not be an African American as she is implied to be. But surely she is dark, and it is enough to intimidate Maisie and make her express those negative comments against the Countess. However, all we are provided with is Maisie's opposite reactions to the Captain and the Countess, which are due, we are let to assume, to the fact that Maisie is familiar with the Captain's race but unfamiliar with that of the Countess, and those reactions by themselves are not enough in considering if Maisie, the narrator, or the author is racist. Maisie is reluctant to accept the new world embodied by the Countess, as she turns her head against the Flowers of the Forest when she first passes before the booth, and she summarizes everything which has occurred at the Countess's house as the "Arabian Nights" and devoid of reality. The significant element is that we are given Maisie's impressions, told by the narrator and written by the author, when she encounters a woman of another race as her father's new lover. Rowe argues that "issues of race and their entanglement with those of class, gender, and nation are central to any young person's education in the modern world that James evokes in *What Maisie Knew*" (152). The encounter with the Countess is a part of Maisie's education, and a part of Maisie's London.

The events at Kensington Gardens and the Exhibition are important in the plot because they conclude Maisie's experiences in London. They finalize the break-up between Ida and Sir Claude, and between Beale and Mrs. Beale. The competition over the custody of Maisie that used to be fought between her parents has now shifted to be between her governesses. These two events serve to free her from her parents, and to enable her step-parents to take her to France for the climax. As I have said above, the fact that these significant events occur outside, in the open/public space testifies to the lack of Maisie's home, a house that would have served as a central setting for the events/conversations in the novel.

The text makes references to other London places as well. We are told that young Maisie enjoys going out to Oxford Street with Susan Ash, and the "dangers of the town equally with its diversions added to Maisie's sense of being untutored and unclaimed" (69). Maisie compensates for the lack of attention for her in the private space with the bustle of the public space. Also, we find Maisie at the National Gallery with Sir Claude, looking at religious paintings. The narrator describes how these appear from Maisie's point of view: "They represented, with patches of gold and cataracts of purple, with stiff saints and angular angels, with ugly Madonnas and uglier babies, strange prayers and prostrations" (104). This scene shows in a comical way Maisie's encounter with classical art. Baedeker's guidebook devotes thirty-three pages to describing every room in the Gallery, and although it is not possible to determine which of the rooms containing religious paintings Maisie and Sir Claude are in, it informs us that the admission fee is 6d. On a later day, Sir Claude takes Maisie to lunch in Baker Street. Another significant place

is Regent's Park, which Maisie frequents because it is nearby Beale's house where she spends many months.

Still another important location is, of course, Hyde Park. We can observe a correspondence between the novel's description of the park and the guidebook's. Maisie and Sir Claude "[direct] their steps to the banks of the Serpentine" (121), and walk "on the Row and by the Drive" (121) for an hour. When they pass out of the park and enter Kensington Gardens, they feel that "through prepossessing gates and over a bridge, they had come in a quarter of an hour, [...] a hundred miles from London" (121-22). Baedeker writes that "[t]he finest portion of the park [...] is that near the Serpentine, where, in spring and summer, during the 'Season,' the fashionable world rides, drives, or walks" (326-27). He describes the scene thus:

In the Drive are seen elegant equipages and high-bred horses in handsome trappings, moving continually to and fro, presided over by sleek coachmen and powdered lackeys, and occupied by some of the most beautiful and exquisitely dressed women in the world. In the Row are numerous riders, who parade their spirited and glossy steeds before the interested crowd sitting or walking at the sides. It has lately become 'the thing' to walk by the Row on Sundays. (327)

These reports help us in imagining the contemporary spatial atmosphere of Hyde Park, and locating Maisie and Sir Claude in the scene. Baedeker continues: "At the point where the Serpentine enters Kensington Gardens it is crossed by a five-arched bridge, constructed by *Sir John Rennie* in 1826. The view from the bridge has 'an extraordinary nobleness' (Henry James)" (328). Thus Baedeker quotes James, who incorporates this bridge into his novel.

Furthermore, Maisie attends lectures at University College London with Mrs. Beale. This is Maisie's impression of the University:

The institution—there was a splendid one in a part of the town but little known to the child—became, in the glow of such a spirit, a thrilling place, and the walk to it from the station through Glower Street (a pronunciation for which Mrs. Beale once laughed at her little friend) a pathway literally strewn with 'subjects.' Maisie imagined herself to pluck them as she went, though they thickened in the great grey rooms where the fountain of knowledge, in the form usually of a high voice that she took at first to be angry, plashed in the stillness of rows of faces thrust out like empty jugs. [...] These weeks as well were too few, but they were flooded with a new emotion, part of which indeed came from the possibility that, through the long telescope of Glower Street, or perhaps between the pillars of the institution—which impressive objects were what Maisie thought most made it one—they should some day spy Sir Claude. (138-39)

This episode uncovers the paradox of Maisie's attending the same lectures as her governess, when their academic levels are so disparate. Although Maisie is eager to learn, her eagerness continues to be betrayed, firstly because Mrs. Beale gives up teaching her, secondly because Mrs. Wix can only teach literature, and finally because her chance to go to a school is constantly

denied to her. Attending the lectures at University College is Maisie's only experience at a "school," but they prove to be too high level for her, and her purpose of going to the lectures soon deviates to spying Sir Claude. Baedeker writes of the University College in the following way: "*Gower Street* [...] contains **University College**, founded in 1828, chiefly through the exertions of Lord Brougham, for students of every religious denomination. It is now a school of London University. A long flight of steps leads to the dodecastyle Corinthian portico fronting the main edifice, which is 400 ft. in length and surmounted by a handsome dome" (272). Its great architecture is a characteristic emphasized by both Maisie and Baedeker.

The other places that Maisie does not visit but which are mentioned are the City, where Mr. Perriam is supposedly "smashed" (123), Harrow Road, where Clara Matilda was run over, and Kensal Green, where she is buried.<sup>7</sup> Kensington Gardens, Earl's Court, Oxford Street, National Gallery, Baker Street, Regent's Park, Hyde Park, and Gower Street—these are specific places that formed the social world of late nineteenth-century London, as we could observe in Baedeker's accounts. As I have tried to show in this section, the actions of Maisie and the adults around her are locatable in the 1880s London, and Maisie is to a large degree a product of the town, all the more as she is denied the private space within the home. James effectively selects these real, specific locations for Maisie's story. However real the setting is that James adopts, he has tried to make his story unreal; that is, unique fiction. As much as it is easy to identify these locations in contemporary London, it is difficult to find a child who has led such a unique life as Maisie, where her family keeps breaking up so schematically. This uniqueness is James's intention, and the test of his originality. The effect of juxtaposing the imaginary events and emotions with familiar settings is even heightened by adopting Maisie as the central consciousness, giving the reader direct access to her reactions to her unique experiences. In the next section, I will survey the history of divorce, which is another "real" context of *Maisie*.

#### (4) Victorian Divorce and *Maisie*

Divorce starts the plot of *What Maisie Knew*, and divorce is a "real" context because there was a great debate on the system of divorce in the nineteenth century, which the plot takes in as a premise. If we consider the history of divorce which led to the changes in the system during the century, we come to perceive that it is at the same time the history of women's fight for more legal rights. Moreover, we will see that the attainment of those rights following the 1857 Divorce Act is exemplified in *Ida Farange*.

The history of divorce in England has been thoroughly related in Lawrence Stone's *Road to Divorce*. Stone starts by pointing out that although about one third of all marriages end in divorce in present-day England, "[i]t must never be forgotten that England in the early modern period was neither a separating nor a divorcing society" (2). Among the reasons of the rarity of divorce were:

the harsh facts that it was virtually impossible for all but a handful of the very rich to obtain a full divorce with permission to remarry, and that a separated wife faced exceptionally severe penalties. [...] All the income from her real estate was retained

by her husband, as well as all future legacies which might come to her. All her personal property, including her future earnings from a trade and her business stock and tools, were liable to seizure by her husband at any moment. She was unable to enter into a legal contract, to use credit to borrow money, or to buy or sell property. All her savings belonged to her husband. And finally all her children were controlled entirely by their father, who was free to dispose of them as he wished, and to deprive their mother of any opportunity ever to speak to them again. These were conditions which tended to make marital breakdown at the insistence of the wife a rarity, unless her interests had been protected by a carefully drawn up deed of separation. (4-5)

To add to the inequality in the financial conditions and the right to child custody, there was the tendency that adultery, almost always the sole cause of divorce, was seen as a serious crime when committed by a woman, whereas it was taken much more leniently when committed by a man.

In the mid-nineteenth century, divorce remained extremely rare, and there were only 4 divorce decrees granted in 1851. The cost of divorce was high; “[i]n 1846 a civil lawyer claimed that the average cost of a contested separation suit was £1,700” (355). It was the upper-middle-class women who fought for divorce reform, demanding “equal access to divorce on grounds of adultery by either husband or wife” (375) and “the placing of a married woman’s property under her own control” (375). These demands were fulfilled in the Divorce Act of 1857, at least for women with money. As a result, the number of divorces granted increased to about 500 around the turn of the century. The access to divorce was significant, as it “enabled these men and women to remarry instead of living in solitude, concubinage, or bigamy” (387). Moreover, there was a great change in attitudes toward child custody. Although it had been presumed for centuries that the father has the custody of children, in 1857, “the new Matrimonial Causes Court was empowered to allocate custody of children in divorce cases, a power which it exercised with extreme conservatism. But in 1873 another act enabled Chancery to award custody as it saw fit, and by 1886 it had become morally accepted that it was only right to grant custody of young children to their mother” (390).

Therefore, the upper-middle-class women had won the right to divorce, property, and child custody through the divorce reform in the nineteenth century. When we read *What Maisie Knew* in the light of this background, we realize how decidedly these changes are reflected in the novel and how fully Ida practices these rights. For, Ida’s actions are always paralleled to Beale’s, which emphasizes her equality with him. She exercises her right to divorce with permission to remarry, by divorcing Beale and remarrying Sir Claude. We are not told which of them committed the adultery that brought about the divorce, but we may suppose from the emphasis on their equality that it was both Ida and Beale. Ida possesses her own savings independent of Beale’s, as shown by the £2,600 she pays Beale as the expense of maintaining Maisie after the original trial. Finally, Ida exercises an equal right as Beale concerning the custody of Maisie, by fighting with him to keep her in the first instance, and eventually by forcing her on Beale as he does on her.

These factors reveal Ida as a greatly liberated woman. Also, reading about the

contemporary reforms let us realize that divorce is actually a timely topic, but it is still extremely rare. In 1881, around the time of the divorce of Ida and Beale, 311 divorce decrees were granted, and the divorce rate per 1,000 married couples was as low as 0.07%.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, many of the couples that divorced were childless. Allen Horstman explains in *Victorian Divorce* that “[i]n 1871, 40 per cent of the [divorce] suits involved childless couples, a marked contrast with the rest of Victorian society” (104). Considering these facts, we come to see how rare Maisie’s case is and why she attracts so much attention from the public.

Such is the circumstance that creates the fate of Maisie recounted in the novel. She is born into a situation where the private and public are reversed, and she is deprived of a permanent home where she can secure her parents’ love, a room of her own, possessions, and privacy. She thus goes on a search for such a home, and aims at living with Sir Claude. Her quest ends unsuccessfully when her attainment of moral sense prevents her from living with him. However, the ending is positive if we remember that it is hinted that Maisie will live on the fortune left by her godmother. She will win the control of the money back from her parents, and create by herself the home that they denied her. Therefore, in order to find the positive aspect of Maisie’s fate, it is vital to rediscover and reevaluate the godmother and her money, whose presence is hidden from the reader during most of the narrative.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> H. Peter Stowell has analyzed Maisie’s desire of permanence in relation to impressionism: “Like all children, she wishes to find refuge in permanence, while testing the limits of change. [...] What Maisie has learned by the end of the novel is that there must be a balance between change and permanence, relativism and the absolute” (187, 192). While I partly agree with Stowell, my argument, rather, is that Maisie’s perception of permanence and change is necessarily linked to the question of where she lives, and throughout the novel she is deprived of a house that gives her such a sense of permanence.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Paul Theroux declares: “[F]or much of the novel, his [Sir Claude’s] relationship with Maisie is plainly sexual and his tone a kind of bantering intimacy with its ‘dear boy’s and ‘old man’s” (Introduction, 16). John Carlos Rowe writes: “Sir Claude’s intimate relationship with Maisie often verges on the erotic, especially as Maisie grows older” (132). He also points out the various instances when Sir Claude addresses Maisie as if she were a boy, and argues: “Sir Claude is thus either trying to normalize his relationship with Maisie along homosocial lines or trying to accommodate her to the ‘delicate homosexuality’ often confused with just such homosociality in Victorian culture” (129). Julie Rivkin argues: “Maisie’s desire to go with Sir Claude, and Sir Claude alone, while it seems to restore propriety to the family by rejecting adultery, also removes all prospects for familial propriety forever. One way to put this is to say that she meets his offer of an adulterous family with an offer of an incestuous one” (158). Rivkin’s essay includes an intriguing analysis of the third-person narrator as another possible parental figure.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning Maisie’s perception of time, Stowell has commented: “Time is measured, not in increments of metric time, but through the shifts and fluctuations of sensations, impressions, and consciousness. As a result, elapsed time in this novel is vague” (189). I agree that this novel is especially concerned with the “present” time, induced by the use of Maisie as the central consciousness. While this method makes it difficult to determine Maisie’s age at the end of the novel, I take it to be about 12 or 13, in agreement with her attainment of sexual knowledge and sense of economic and moral strength.

<sup>4</sup> Rivkin explains Maisie's situation in the following way: "Unlike the homelessness of the orphan, Maisie's condition of deprivation is based on an apparent abundance. According to the paradoxical economy that governs these compensatory relations, the more the initial fault is supplemented, the more evident that fault becomes" (130).

<sup>5</sup> Philip M. Weinstein is more supportive of Mrs. Wix's stability, and writes: "Mrs. Wix, for all her dubious characteristics both moral and emotional [...], will provide Maisie with more security and stability than the two charming lovers" (95). I believe, however, that Mrs. Wix is able to provide stability only while Maisie is young, and at the end of the novel Maisie is stronger than Mrs. Wix.

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison declares that the critics generally have ignored the importance of the African issue in literature, and gives the Countess as an example: "It is possible, for example, to read Henry James scholarship exhaustively and never arrive at a nodding mention, much less a satisfactory treatment, of the black woman who lubricates the turn of the plot and becomes the agency of moral choice and meaning in *What Maisie Knew*" (13). My interpretation is that the Countess is a crucial character in letting us see Maisie's opposite reactions to a white person and a dark person, and this opposition is intentional on the author's part.

<sup>7</sup> Baedeker describes Kensal Green in the following manner: "Kensal Green Cemetery, laid out in 1832, [...] covers an area of about 70 acres, and contains about forty thousand graves. It is divided into a consecrated portion for members of the Church of England, and an unconsecrated portion for dissenters. Most of the tombstones are plain upright slabs, but in the upper part of the cemetery, particularly on the principal path leading to the chapel, there are several monuments handsomely executed in granite and marble, some of which possess considerable artistic value" (331), and lists the eminent people interred here.

<sup>8</sup> See the table showing the number of divorces in Stone, pp. 435-36.

<sup>9</sup> Some critics have written interesting articles on *What Maisie Knew*, although generally unrelated to my argument. For example, Christine DeVine reads the novel in the context of the social purity movement, and concludes: "While his most obvious attack in this novel is on the moral hypocrisy of the middle classes as embodied in Ida and Beale, James's experimental use of Maisie as center-of-consciousness character and his aligning her with marginalized 'lower-class' women, speaks of his concern with the ways in which the public discourse contributes to class othering such as occurred with the social purity movement" (14). In the extensive chapter on *Maisie* in *Versions of Pygmalion*, J. Hillis Miller states: "He [the narrator] gets Pygmalion's pleasure of knowing through making or of knowing what one has made. If he has not made Maisie, he has given superior words to her experience. [...] The reader then plays the role of Pygmalion to Maisie's Galatea every time he or she reads the novel and fashions a seemingly living person out of the performative reading of the words on the page" (55). Susan E. Honeymoon explains that children are inaccessible subjects for James, and maintains: "Locating the obstacle to representation in the language gap between adults (writers) and children, James exploits the inaccessibility of childhood to create an ironic center" (69).

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