

# Houses and Class in Henry James's *In the Cage*

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*In the Cage* (1898) is unique among James's novels and novellas because it has a heroine who is a working girl. It is most manifestly about class differences as observed by a working girl. In this essay, I shall show that in this novella, the question of class differences is intriguingly correlated with the subject of houses, both physically and metaphorically. Houses not only indicate class status, but they also provide the sites where the possibility of inter-class socialization is tested.

## (1) The Heroine's Attitude toward the Upper Class

The unnamed telegraphist-heroine has complicated and strong emotions toward the upper class. Her attitude toward her upper-class customers is a mixture of hate and envy. She testifies on several instances that she hates her customers and enjoys hating them. For her, "the fascination" of working at Cockers is "a sort of torment" (317), but "she liked this torment" (317).<sup>1</sup> It is a torment because seeing the leisured-class extravagance before her eyes makes her acutely aware of "the immense disparity, the differences and contrast, from class to class" (323). She describes the contrast in the following way: "What twisted the knife in her vitals was the way the profligate rich scattered about them, in extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins, an amount of money that would have held the stricken household of her frightened childhood, her poor pinched mother and tormented father and lost brother and starved sister, together for a lifetime" (324). She makes an effective use of adjectives in this description, calling every noun related to the rich "profligate" and "extravagant," and putting adjectives that recall misery and poverty before every noun related to her family. As seen in the example just quoted, the heroine often adopts a language of comparison to describe the difference between the rich class and her own, and the comparison is always based on money.

However, she is also helplessly curious about the rich people because she lacks an immediate knowledge of what their luxurious lives are like. She often wishes in vain that she could have been one of them: "She quivered on occasion into the perception of this and that one whom she would on the chance have just simply liked to *be*" (325). Therefore, the heroine's opinion of the upper class is a complicated mixture of hate, curiosity and envy. What she tells Mrs. Jordan of her feelings toward her customers is another illustration: "I hate them. There's that charm! [...] They're *too* real! They're selfish brutes" (331). The telegraphist wants to boast to Mrs. Jordan of her firsthand knowledge of the rich. Pamela Thurschwell shows that around the turn of the century, "intimacy comes to be mediated through tele-technology" and "new communication technologies such as the telegraph and the typewriter are instrumental in

creating transgressive fantasies of access to others who would be otherwise inaccessible" (5). As Thurschwell argues, the telegraphist's sense of intimacy with the aristocracy acquired through her job is illusory. She does not know her customers apart from their behaviour at the post office, and remains ignorant of what goes on at their homes. The desire for this knowledge contributes to her curiosity, although she hides it behind her hate. Tzvetan Todorov has written that in *In the Cage*, "[w]e can see only appearances, and their interpretation remains suspect; only the pursuit of the truth can be present; truth itself, though it provokes the entire movement, remains absent" (151-52). The truth of the lives of her upper-class customers dwells in their homes, and it is what the heroine seeks.

The heroine mentions to Mr. Mudge about her masochistic hate of the rich: "What I 'like' is just to loathe them" (334). Her repeated reference to her "liking" hating the aristocracy is peculiar indeed. Perhaps she can really like hating them because it provides a sense of revenge. But she also seems to camouflage her envy and admiration of the rich; perhaps she does not hate them but admires them. Her feelings anyhow are not so easily determined; for, she does express her hatred on one hand as in the above quotation where she compares the affluent people with her poor family, and on the other she adores Captain Everard. She talks about her pleasure in hating the rich even to Captain Everard himself. To his surprise, she tells him that the "attractions" of Cockers are the "horrors" of the rich class and seeing "[y]our extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes" (353), and that she "like[s] them" and "revel[s] in them" (354). Because admiration can lead to envy which can then lead to hate, these feelings are correlated in themselves. The girl's complex mixture of hate and envy in her dealings with the rich is an important factor throughout the tale, until she learns to resolve it at the end.

The heroine's position toward the rich is divided between her male and female customers. She adopts a double standard where she is harsher toward her female customers. Among them "there were those she liked and those she hated" and the latter are the "brazen women" whose "squanderings and graspings, whose struggles and secrets and love-affairs and lies, she tracked and stored up against them" and whom she wanted to "betray, to trip up, to bring down with words altered and fatal" (324). While there are other women whom she would like "to help, to warn, to rescue, to see more of" (324), she is hostile toward those whom she hates. She has a rule of "making the public itself affix its stamps, and found a special enjoyment in dealing to that end with some of the ladies who were too grand to touch them," which "brought her endless small consolations and revenges" (324). The telegraphist feels avenged by placing the grand women under her power, if only temporarily, because she also prides herself as a "lady," and despises being thought of as below the upper-class women.

However, she finds comfort and interest in her gentlemen customers, and is lenient toward them. She admits that she "herself a little even fell into the custom of pursuit in occasionally deviating only for gentlemen from her high rigour about the stamps" (325). In her belief, gentlemen "had the best manners (325)," and she "could envy them without dislike" (325). This double standard derives from the fact that, while gentlemen provide a chance for her to marry into high society, ladies only generate envy for their wealth or a sense of rivalry in their common pursuit of the gentlemen. William Veeder attributes the heroine's misogyny to her anger at her alcoholic mother who failed to nourish her: "The heroine focuses on women because their very

gender elides them with a pinched mother, while their upper-class status allows envy to be vented as well” (267).

Other critics have emphasized the heroine’s desire to please rather than her anger at the upper class. Heath Moon brings up the heroine’s loyalty toward Captain Everard and writes that she “harbor[s] fantasies of being the object of special recognition, noticed for exemplary dedication, since [...] loyalty to the gentlemanly class is inseparable from romantic school-girlish yearnings” (33) and that her “romantic Toryism” (31) should not be overlooked because of her imaginative tendencies. Jill Galvan argues that the telegraphist tries to distinguish herself from other working-class women by forming a unique relationship with her rich customers and working as their spirit medium. She tries to overcome the resentment of class disparity by “spiritualizing the moneyed class and envisioning her power to experience their thoughts” (301).

Eric Savoy and Andrew J. Moody have provided interesting historicist interpretations of the telegraphist’s relationship with her upper-class customers by employing the idea of “blackmail.” Savoy cites a contemporary scandal, the Cleveland Street Affair of 1889, in which a telegraph boy disclosed having had sexual relations with upper-class men for which he was paid, and which aroused fear among the upper-class customers about the “sexual knowledge embodied in [the post office’s] employees” (290) and the threat of blackmail. Savoy explains that the telegraphist’s knowledge and potential for blackmail must have been a great threat to Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen. Savoy also relates to Oscar Wilde’s trials to further explain the blackmailability of contemporary homosexual men, and conjectures that James “contained his anxiety by displacing it into a heterosexual register in ‘In the Cage’” (296). Moody indicates that worker discontent among the women post office workers was strong in the 1890s, which increased their potential for blackmail. Moody argues that “[b]y ignoring what was traditionally the upper-class’s exclusive right to privacy, the telegraphist experiences power over that class” (61) but that her inability to understand Captain Everard’s secrets and her decision to respect the anonymity of her customers reveal James’s intention to “[recreate] a British telecommunication system that does not threaten upper-class privacy” (55).

As these critics have shown, the central issue of *In the Cage* is the heroine’s relationship with her upper-class customers. I shall discuss this issue from a different angle—I shall examine the heroine’s desire to enter Captain Everard’s home, and interpret her failure as indicating her distance from his class.

## (2) Mrs. Jordan and the “Social Door”

It is through the heroine’s dealings with Mrs. Jordan that we can interestingly see their attempts at mixing with the upper class. They see each other as an equal. Both are from the working class, both earn a living from a job, both have suffered from poverty after the death of the family’s income-earner, Mrs. Jordan her husband and the telegraphist her father, and they share similar feelings toward the upper class, those of envy, curiosity and admiration. Mrs. Jordan hopes to marry Lord Rye, as the telegraphist has fantasies of becoming intimate with Captain Everard. However, they do not want to admit their equality and try to rise above the other: “It had taken some little time [...] for each to admit that the other was, in her private

circle, her only equal; but the admission came, when it did come, with an honest groan” (326-27). Because they are equals, they have a strong sense of rivalry between them. The younger woman concedes Mrs. Jordan’s “distinct rise in the world” (328-29) and feels “with a twinge of her easy jealousy” (329) that her job in floral decorations may be ranked higher than her own because “[a] thousand tulips at a shilling clearly took one further than a thousand words at a penny” (329).

The two compete, especially in their connections with rich people. Mrs. Jordan emphasizes her knowledge of the “homes of luxury” where she goes to arrange flowers, about which the girl must feign her knowledge because she has never been to one. But the girl boasts of her knowledge of the rich people’s secret communications: “Their affairs, their appointments and arrangements, their little games and secrets and vices—those things all pass before me” (330). What is contested and put to the test is the extent of immediacy and intimacy in their relationships with the aristocracy.

Mrs. Jordan’s attempt at winning their intimacy seems promising enough because she physically enters their houses, as she tells her younger friend of “the way she was made free of the greatest houses—the way [...] she felt that a single step more would transform her whole social position” (316). She believes: “[A] door more than half open to the higher life couldn’t be called anything but a thin partition” (316). This sentence, before it was revised in the New York Edition, used to read: “[T]he social door might at any moment open so wide” (*The Complete Tales* 142). The key word is “social.” To be able to “socialize” with the upper class people means to mix with them by going beyond class boundaries, to know them personally. Mrs. Jordan hopes that, having entered the aristocrats’ houses physically, she will also soon be able to enter them socially when the “social door” opens, and have intimate human relationships with them. When encouraged by Mrs. Jordan to join her profession, the younger woman asks exactly this: “But does one personally *know* them? [...] I mean socially, don’t you know?—as you know *me*” (328). To this Mrs. Jordan replies, somewhat unconvincingly: “But I *shall* see more and more of them. [...] We have grand long talks” (328). Despite her hopes, Mrs. Jordan knows the poor prospects of her overcoming class differences and the aristocrats’ taking her in as their own. Even as she visits the houses of luxury and sometimes sees the inhabitants, she is socially and psychologically distanced and isolated.

Toward the end of the novella, a slump occurs in Mrs. Jordan’s business when the inhabitants of the homes of luxury go on a summer vacation and the houses become empty. The telegraphist, on hearing the ups and downs of Mrs. Jordan’s life, rightly attributes the cause to the condition of the “social door”:

This our young woman took to be an effect of the position, at one moment and another, of the famous door of the great world. She had been struck in one of her ha’penny volumes with the translation of a French proverb according to which such a door, any door, had to be either open or shut, and it seemed part of the precariousness of Mrs. Jordan’s life that hers mostly managed to be neither. There had been occasions when it appeared to gape wide—fairly to woo her across its threshold; there had been others, of an order distinctly disconcerting, when it was all but banged in her face. (373)

This description explains Mrs. Jordan's expectations of socialization and at the same time her anxieties about the wealthy people's elusiveness. The extent of the stretch of the "social door" measures her expectations and anxieties.

In the end, Mrs. Jordan confesses to her young friend her conclusion that the "social door" will not open after all, and instead of marrying Lord Rye she will marry his doorkeeper, Mr. Drake. The young woman recognizes Mr. Drake in an ironic way: "Mr. Drake then verily *was* a person who opened the door!" (378). Mrs. Jordan has arrived at this ironic conclusion after realizing that socialization is not possible; the upper class and the working class are socially divided and the divide cannot be bridged. The same realization has come to the heroine as she learns from Mrs. Jordan that Captain Everard will marry Lady Bradeen and that he has only to live off her riches because he is broke. The fact that this information has reached her via Lady Bradeen, Mr. Drake and Mrs. Jordan explains how far she has been from winning a personal, intimate relationship with Captain Everard. Because the "social door" will not open for her as well, she finally becomes resigned to marrying Mr. Mudge, a man from her own class.

The reference to the door has occurred in another instance in the story. Mrs. Jordan and the heroine first knew each other as a neighbour when each family was in its poorest state. At that time, Mrs. Jordan, "across the sordid landing on which the opposite doors of the pair of scared miseries opened and to which they were bewilderedly bolted, borrowed coals and umbrellas that were repaid in potatoes and postage-stamps" (327). What is significant is that their doors did open toward each other, unlike the doors of the aristocrats, because they are equals. Their equality is also expressed by the fact that they exchanged items of equal value, "coals and umbrellas" for "potatoes and postage-stamps." This comparison of each other's items to balance between them differs sharply from the various comparisons made by the heroine between the value criteria of the rich and the poor, such as when she compares the aristocrats' "compliments and wonderments and vain vague gestures" in their telegrams against "the price of a new pair of boots" (324). Therefore, the door functions in this novella as a measure of distance between individuals; it only opens toward someone who belongs to the same social group.

### (3) Changes in Class Structure

The heroine does not wish to admit it when she is still influenced by her fantasies about Captain Everard, but Mr. Mudge is a man full of future possibilities. She acknowledges his potential success at his trade, but cannot help being attracted to the more mysterious and luxurious charms of the Captain. The telegraphist states her acknowledgement of her fiancé's abilities in several instances. First, she gives as the reasons of her engagement to him the "evident sincerity of his passion" (333) and the prospect that "he would build up a business to his chin, which he carried quite in the air" (333). Also, as she observes with scorn Mr. Mudge's minuteness when they plan a holiday to Bournemouth, she recognizes his "mastery of detail that was some day, professionally, to carry him far" (345). Furthermore, she alludes to Mr. Mudge's "latent force" (357) by which he is still able to impress and surprise her. She cites the incident of his stopping a fight started by a drunken soldier at Cocker's, and his withholding the news of his

promotion at Chalk Farm until the end of their vacation in Bournemouth as the instances of his latent force.

Mr. Mudge is therefore full of positive and active possibilities. He promises to rise in society with the profits earned from his business, which will provide his future wife with a higher social status and economic stability. He has already picked out a house for them, and by his detailed holiday plan to Bournemouth he succeeds in persuading his fiancée, who has “not been out of London for a dozen years” (344), to vacation out of London. Mr. Mudge has energies that Captain Everard and other members of the upper class have now lost.

When asked by Mr. Mudge why she postpones her transfer to Chalk Farm, his fiancée says: “Where I am I still see things” (334) and explains: “Talk of the numbers of the poor! What *I* can vouch for is the numbers of the rich! There are new ones every day and they seem to get richer and richer” (335). This reference fits Mr. Mudge rather than Captain Everard whom the telegraphist has in mind, but neither she nor Mr. Mudge is aware of the actual economic conditions of the aristocrats. Mr. Mudge shows interest in his fiancée’s account of the economic state of the rich people at Cocker’s, because as a grocer he needs to make sure that they have capital which will revitalize the economy. Though unsure about the changing conditions of the aristocracy, he hopes their class “that Providence had raised up to be the blessing of grocers” (335) still exists: “He liked to think that the class was there, that it was always there [...]. He couldn’t have formulated his theory of the matter, but the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade [...]. It was a comfort to him to be thus assured that there were no symptoms of a drop” (335). However, there are “symptoms of a drop,” whose evident example given in the novella is that Captain Everard “has nothing” but “his debts” (381).<sup>2</sup>

Heath Moon writes that James’s major fiction of the late 1890s concerns itself with “the slow decline of this class into the modern era” (19). Moon explains that at the time of Jane Austen, the problem of the gentry’s losing moral sensibilities had been resolved by their harmony with the middle class and the “creation of a hybrid class” (21), but this resolution no longer functions in turn-of-the-century England. Jill Galvan also attests to the descent of the upper class by pointing out that the word “apparitions” is used in this novella to denote the aristocrats and argues: “In the manner of ghosts, these individuals personify a past that yet asserts itself in the present: they are visible reminders of the age-old principles of class and community inherited by late-Victorian London” (298).

Concerning the aristocrats, Mrs. Jordan says: “They *are*, in one way *and* another, [...] a tower of strength” (374). Her younger friend does not quite comprehend this point: “[A]s the allusion was to the aristocracy the girl could quite wonder why, if they were so in ‘one way,’ they should require to be so in two” (374). The exact reference of Mrs. Jordan’s point is hard to grasp, but it suggests that the “strength” of the aristocracy is no longer absolute but subject to description; that is, it needs description as to in which ways it is effective. As discussed earlier, “symptoms of a drop” in the aristocracy’s power are insinuated in *In the Cage* as well as the rise in the power of the working class. But the changes in each class as they happen are not directly observable by the other class, as the economic and social state of Captain Everard is not marked by the working-class heroine, because of the social gap that exists between the classes.

Mrs. Jordan informs the heroine of another group of individuals who are gaining power and

wealth. She calls them City gentlemen, who are her important customers: "There was a certain type of awfully smart stockbroker—Lord Rye called them Jews and bounders, but she didn't care—whose extravagance, she more than once threw out, had really, if one had any conscience, to be forcibly restrained" (373-74). According to Mrs. Jordan, the Jewish stockbrokers spend heaps of money on flowers not out of "a pure love of beauty" but as "a matter of vanity and a sign of business" and as one of the "weapons" to "crush their rivals" (374).<sup>3</sup> Although Mrs. Jordan calls them gentlemen, they are a distinctly different group of people from the upper-class and upper-middle-class gentlemen. This new group of gentlemen has gained power and wealth comparable to those of the upper-class gentlemen. Mrs. Jordan refers to their wives as also comparable to the upper-class ladies: "They were not quite perhaps Mrs. Bubb or Lady Ventnor; but you couldn't tell the difference unless you quarrelled with them, and then you knew it only by their making-up sooner" (374). The identity of the upper-class ladies with the wives of stockbrokers also proves their similarity in economic status, but those wives' "making-up sooner" possibly derives from the fact that they earn a living from business. Mrs. Jordan's reference to the Jewish stockbrokers and their wives as "gentlemen" and "ladies" validates the power they were gaining at this time and which made them indistinguishable from the traditional upper-class gentlemen and ladies. An overlap in wealth between different classes was occurring. Jewish businessmen, as well as Mr. Mudge, had "latent force."

#### (4) Upper-Class and Working-Class Homes

The interiors and exteriors of houses are scarcely portrayed in *In the Cage*. However, housing issues are mentioned and treated as important throughout the plot. In Chapter 1, it is stated as a premise of this novella that the customers of Cockers live in "the cream of the 'Court Guide' and the dearest furnished apartments, Simpkin's, Ladle's, Thrupp's" (314) in Mayfair. The heroine, who lives with her drunken mother, can get "cheaper lodgings" (353) and more "space" (353) if she moves from Mayfair to Chalk Farm. Housing is inevitably related to money and class, and the housing price depends on location as well as spaciousness and the quality of furniture and material.

Captain Everard lives in Park Chambers, and the heroine takes a circuitous route to pass this fancy apartment on her way to and from work. She stops before Park Chambers to "[reflect], as she looked up at their luxurious front, that *they* of course would supply the ideal setting for the ideal speech" (340). The heroine's admiration of the Captain is closely linked with her admiration of his dwellings. The attractiveness of the Captain is enhanced by the luxuriousness of Park Chambers. Also, by being his home, the Chambers add another charm to him when she envisions him there. As she looks up at the Captain's windows on the third floor, she imagines him in his room, either asleep in bed or dressing for dinner, because that is how she attains a personal, intimate picture of him. Her innermost desire is to enter his rooms, so as to achieve an intimate relationship with him.

That is what fills her mind on the night she finally encounters him in front of his apartment. At the outset of this one and only meeting with the Captain outside the cage, the telegraphist decides that he must have "wonder[ed] if he could properly ask her to come in" (346), and

meditates “whether people of his sort still asked girls up to their rooms when they were so awfully in love with other women” (347). In a separate sphere to the question of whether she would really go into his rooms if asked (which she insists that she would not do) is her desire to do so. This desire is analogous to Mrs. Jordan’s wish to “socially” enter the houses of luxury, to form a personal relationship with the members of the aristocracy. However, against her expectations, the heroine finds herself and the Captain walking away from his home, toward Hyde Park: “[T]hey presently moved, with vagueness, yet with continuity, away from the picture of the lighted vestibule and the quiet stairs and well up the street together” (347). This is when she realizes that his door will not open toward her and she will not be asked to enter Captain Everard’s personal space after all, and she feels distanced from his class: “She had already a vision of how the true answer was that people of her sort didn’t, in such cases, matter—didn’t count as infidelity, counted only as something else” (347). As was the case with Mrs. Jordan, the failure to enter the house of the rich has forced the heroine to finally admit the social gap.

In the Park, the telegraphist refuses to disclose to the Captain where she will go after her transfer. She says: “too far for you ever to find me!” (352) and “quite out of *your* way” (353). The telegraphist here has in mind not the physical distance between Mayfair and Chalk Farm but the social distance. Working in Mayfair, in the midst of her envy and hate, she is still able to “thrill with a sense of the high company she did somehow keep” (342) through her reading of the telegrams and feels a distinct possibility of entering the high society. She will go to Chalk Farm because she has understood that the possibility does not exist. The distance between Mayfair and Chalk Farm is a distance between classes.

The language of comparison is again used to describe this distance. The heroine constantly compares one with the other in order to figure out which place works more ideally for her pursuit of her desires. The most important factor is that she and her mother can “save on their two rooms alone nearly three shillings” (315) if she moves to Chalk Farm. For Mr. Mudge, the transfer to Chalk Farm has meant a “removal to a higher sphere—to a more commanding position, that is, though to a much lower neighbourhood” (315). Concerning the heroine’s work, changing to an office in Chalk Farm is “a transfer to an office quite similar—she couldn’t yet hope for a place in a bigger—under the very roof where he [Mr. Mudge] was foreman” (315). In economic contexts, “money was flying” in Mayfair whereas “it was simply and meagrely nesting” (335) in Chalk Farm. Mr. Mudge acknowledges that “[t]he air felt that stir [...] much less at Chalk Farm than in the district in which his beloved so oddly enjoyed her footing” (335). These comparisons serve as hints from which the reader judges the distance between the two areas, which the heroine is so concerned about.

Here I shall briefly refer to the social history of Mayfair and Chalk Farm. Mayfair is the very prosperous area to the east of Hyde Park and west of Soho, loosely enclosed by Regent’s Street, Piccadilly, Park Lane, and Oxford Street. It did not grow out of a village, but it grew as the site of a fair, first held in 1688 by the grant of King James II. It came to be called Mayfair because the fair was held annually in the first two weeks of May. The fair was so successful that by 1700 shops had been built to be let to the fair traders, and much of the land had been covered within a few years. The place was rapidly developed into a residential area, and the fair was discontinued in 1809 after it met oppositions from the landlords. Henry James lived in Mayfair



from 1876 to 1885. His rooms, which he rented for two-and-a-half guineas a week, were on the first floor of a “small four-storied Georgian house” (Hyde 6), now demolished, located at 3 Bolton Street. He quite enjoyed living in Mayfair, and he employed his direct knowledge of the place in writing *In the Cage*.<sup>4</sup> Chalk Farm is located approximately 4 km to the north of Mayfair, with Regent’s Park between them. During the seventeenth century, the area consisted of farmland, pasture and woodland, and houses were scarce. The place was originally called Chalcot which in Old English means a cold hut, and eventually Chalcot’s Farm became Chalk Farm. The soil is heavy clay, not chalk.<sup>5</sup>

In *In the Cage*, the homes of luxury in Mayfair appear in Mrs. Jordan’s speech but their interiors are not portrayed in the novella because the heroine, who is the central consciousness, never enters one. The knowledge is kept from the reader as it is kept from the heroine. The lack of description points to “her ignorance of the requirements of homes of luxury” (327) and the “cold breath of disinheritance” (327) she feels about them. However, the idea of the homes of luxury is significant in the story because it is central to the heroine’s and Mrs. Jordan’s attitudes toward the aristocracy. The future house of Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard is briefly mentioned by Mrs. Jordan; she tells the heroine that their domestic space will be ruled by the Lady. She says that the Captain will have no “authority” in the “domestic arrangements, things in the house” because “nothing in the house is his” (381). He will move into the house inhabited by Lord Bradeen before his death, and the authority toward the house as well as the domestic arrangements will belong to the Lady. It will be a female-dominated house, as those of the heroine and Mrs. Jordan are to a lesser extent also likely to be.

The heroine’s apartment is also never portrayed, but Mrs. Jordan’s lodging in Maida Vale finds a small description. On the November afternoon when the heroine visits her place, there is “a thick brown fog and Maida Vale tasted of acrid smoke” (374). The heroine enters the dark, empty room: “The brown fog was in this hostess’s little parlour, where it acted as a postponement of the question of there being, besides, anything else than the teacups and a pewter pot and a very black little fire and a paraffin lamp without a shade. There was at any rate no sign of a flower; it was not for herself Mrs. Jordan gathered sweets” (375). The bleakness of this room is emphasized by such features as: the smell of smoke, shroud of “brown fog,” lack of furniture and objects apart from the basic things, lack of decoration, and lack of natural light. Flowers would add more color to this room that is dominated by brown and black, but Mrs. Jordan does not buy them for herself presumably because they are costly and because she sees them only as merchandise, distinguishing between public and private spheres. The barrenness of the room is further expressed by the absence of any mention of it or the things in it by the narrator during the long conversation that ensues between the heroine and Mrs. Jordan. It is drawn as a fitting place where revelation comes to the heroine and she regains a sense of reality:

They sat there together; they looked out, hand in hand, into the damp dusky shabby little room and into the future, of no such very different complexion, at last accepted by each. [...] [W]hat our heroine saw and felt for in the whole business was the vivid reflexion of her own dreams and delusions and her own return to reality. Reality, for the poor things they both were, could only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the

escape, the rise. (379)

Reality is not the escape from their class or the “rise” into the upper class. However, reality for them is not as ugly and obscure as the reality they renounce, and their future is more attractive than this room, because each is going to live in her own house after marriage.

Having one’s own house is extremely important so as to avoid homelessness and parasitism, which is the fate of James’s other heroines, such as Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896). Having remembered this fact, the heroine says: “We shall have our own house, [...] and you must come very soon and let me show it to you” (380). To this Mrs. Jordan immediately replies: “We shall have our own too, [...] for, don’t you know? he makes it a condition that he sleeps out” (380). Mrs. Jordan declares that their insistence on having their own house is the reason why Mr. Drake has changed his master from Lord Rye to Lady Bradeen. Mr. Mudge has insisted on their own house, too, and he has chosen “a sweet little home” (357) through which he guides his fiancée in his talks “from garret to cellar” (367). He impresses her by procuring in the house a “niche” for “that dingy presence” (367), freeing her mother from homelessness as well. Calling her mother “that dingy presence” is extremely crude, whether they be Mr. Mudge’s words or the heroine’s, but it points to her mother’s narrow margin by which she has escaped homelessness. Granted the extent of the danger of homelessness and parasitism that women of this time and the women characters of James’s novels face, the ending that the heroine and Mrs. Jordan have reached is a happy one.

### (5) The Cage

I have discussed the physical and metaphorical functions of houses in this novella in the context of class differences, and finally I shall analyze another kind of indoor space: the cage. Nicola Nixon argues that the cage is James’s antithesis to the romantic prison praised in Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” written in 1897. Nixon writes that by portraying the cage naturalistically as a class barrier, James frees the heroine from the folly of the Victorian notion that young women should read only romantic fiction to preserve their innocence. The portrayal of the cage is indeed naturalistic, as I shall observe shortly.

Being the heroine’s workplace, the cage is where she spends half of her time and where she wonders about her identity in relation to her upper-class customers. The incipit of the novella reveals her wish to find her identity:

It had occurred to her early that in her position—that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie—she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance. That made it an emotion the more lively—though singularly rare and always, even then, with opportunity still very much smothered—to see any one come in whom she knew outside, as she called it, any one who could add anything to the meanness of her function. (314)

The telegraphist compares herself to an animal being shut up in a cage. Calling her office a cage is her own idea; none of her friends does so, and she does not use this word either when she converses with them. The word is only used by the narrator within the consciousness of the heroine. A cage commonly refers to a barred enclosure where a bird or a beast is kept, and also to a prison. At the post office the telegraphist constantly feels herself encaged and lacking a human, personal identity. She has an acute sense of the “outside” as a place where she will be freed from her confinement and where she has a possibility of being endowed with a recognizable identity. Recently, critics such as Sally Ledger have pointed out the publicity of the post office in fin-de-siècle London, and the danger of the publicized body of a female worker to be likened to a prostitute. If a prostitute is what the telegraphist has the danger of being identified with in the cage, she certainly wants to reject it.

This image of the cage as being enclosed and inmost is further brought forth in the following description:

This transparent screen fenced out or fenced in, according to the side of the narrow counter on which the human lot was cast, the duskiest corner of a shop pervaded not a little, in winter, by the poison of perpetual gas, and at all times by the presence of hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish, paraffin and other solids and fluids that she came to know perfectly by their smells without consenting to know them by their names. (314)

The post office is separated from the grocery by “a frail structure of wood and wire” (314), and the cage is additionally enclosed by the “transparent screen.” Furthermore, the sounder is “the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within the cage, fenced off from the rest by a frame of ground glass” (318). Despite the layers of barriers that distance the telegraphist from outside, she is exposed to the smell of gas and the numerous items from the grocery. The reference to her keen nose furthers her image as an animal. Therefore, the cage is depicted as a space that is secluded from outside by multi-barriers, and the telegraphist views the outside as where she will be recognized as an individual. The gap between the cage and outside is emphasized by the telegraphist’s inability to tell the weather, “speaking of the stuffy days as cold, of the cold ones as stuffy, and betraying how little she knew, in her cage, of whether it was foul or fair” (338).

The heroine becomes attracted to Captain Everard because she wishfully sees him as someone who comes from outside and recognizes her, and who will add to her identity. This desire fills her mind, as she wonders about “the possibility of her having for him a personal identity that might in a particular way appeal” (322). She is thrilled with the possibility that he might add an aristocratic connection to her identity. Outside is where she sees such possibilities to exist, thus she passes Park Chambers every night, hoping to meet him. When she slips into the hall of his apartment and finds his name on the board, she becomes excited with a sense of meeting him out of the cage: “It was as if, in the immense intimacy of this, they were, for the instant and the first time, face to face outside the cage” (340). On the night when she finally succeeds in meeting him there, what governs her mind is again the thought about her identity outside the cage, “the idea that she might be, out of the cage, the very shopgirl at large that she

hugged the theory she wasn't" (347). That of the "shopgirl" is far from the identity that she seeks, although she is never sure in the course of the novella what it is that she should identify herself with.

Therefore, *In the Cage* tells the process of the nameless heroine's search for her identity through her comparison of various places—the cage against the outside world, Mayfair against Chalk Farm, and Park Chambers against Mr. Mudge's little home. The identity that she finally discovers is that of a housewife, Mrs. Mudge, living in a small house in Chalk Farm with her grocer husband and alcoholic mother, and belonging to the working class. She will resign from work after marriage, as it was the official policy of the Post Office in the late nineteenth century that "married women should not be appointed and single women should resign on marriage" (Daunton 220). The heroine makes a final comparison and decides that Chalk Farm is more desirable than Mayfair for her particular identity: "[T]he circumstance that, [...] [Mrs. Jordan's] interests would still attach themselves to Mayfair flung over Chalk Farm the first radiance it had shown. Where was one's pride and one's passion when the real way to judge of one's luck was by making not the wrong but the right comparison?" (380). To be content with this identity that she has found is what her experience in failing to enter Park Chambers tells her.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James, Henry. *In the Cage. Selected Tales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001. The page references are to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the fall of the British aristocracy, see David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*. Cannadine explains that the 1880s was "a troubled decade" (25) for the aristocrats, when their power was severely challenged economically, politically and socially.

<sup>3</sup> There is an account of the history of the Jewish people in London by Beatrice Potter in *Labour and Life of the People, Volume 1: East London*, edited by Charles Booth. Potter's account mostly concerns itself with the description of the Jewish Community of the East End which is poor, but the account reveals that the rich Jewish people whom Mrs. Jordan refers to are descendants of the successful Jews who were originally restricted to the neighbourhood of Houndsditch, immediately to the east of the City, and who eventually "moved westward" (564).

<sup>4</sup> *Hotel, House and Apartment Advertiser*, a contemporary periodical, lists advertisements for houses and apartments for rent, and lets us see the rent of some dwellings in London. 15 September, 1902 issue gives the following advertisement for an apartment in Mayfair: "Bachelor's Chambers—Oxford Mansion, Oxford Circus. All modern improvements and thoroughly up-to-date. Coffee room and smoking lounge. Meals at moderate tariff. Rents £90 per annum, including attendance." £90 per annum is slightly cheaper than James's rent at 2 and a half guineas a week. These rates are presumably not so different from what Captain Everard paid for Park Chambers.

<sup>5</sup> The appendix to Charles Booth's *Labour and Life of the People, Volume 2*, provides useful data for comparing Mayfair and Chalk Farm. It illustrates what kinds of people inhabit the area by street, and lists the population classified by their income. According to Booth, between 1887 and 1889, the total population of Mayfair is 31,316, of which 832 (2.7%) live in poverty and 30,484 (97.3%) in comfort. The total population of Chalk Farm is 29,282, of which 5,259 (18%) live in poverty and 24,023 (82%) in comfort. The very high percentage of the people living in comfort shows that Mayfair is the most wealthy area in London, but compared to the average of the whole of London, whose population is 4,209,170, of

which 1,292,433 (30.7%) live in poverty and 2,916,737 (69.3%) in comfort, Chalk Farm is a comparatively wealthy area, too.

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