

Title: Henry James's *Ambassadors*: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to"

Course Description The quotation in the title of this course comes from Book 5 of James's novel. The novel's goal is to consider what it means to "live all you can."

James regarded *The Ambassadors* as his favorite novel. It is not hard to see why. It is a difficult book, but it is marvelous. The ending is so complex that when I taught this course years ago, discussion finished in something that approached a shouting match.

In this book, James addresses what those who have never known the aesthetic life might gain from it. In James's view, the aesthetic life teaches how to be, in his phrase, "a social animal." It does so by practice in observation and appreciation of sensuous particulars—the smell of the air, the sound of footsteps on the pavement, the thickness of a napkin, but more important, in taking in individual people--their tone of voice, gesture, bearing. In short, the aesthetic life teaches one to pay attention. Observation and appreciation heighten the imagination, especially the imagination of what fellow social animals are themselves struggling with. Finally, they teach both patience and generosity in making judgments. In the end, the novel's primary concern is the difficulty of making wise judgments.

On reading this long book:

James recommended reading *The Ambassadors* in a slow and steady pace, 5 pages a day every day. Certainly, it has to be read with a great deal of attention if one is to understand the complexity of the ending. Its main plot lies in Strether's changes of mind as he thinks things out -- his surprises, shifts, concessions, discoveries, dismays, reconciliations. The plot is sort of like touring; to get a lot out of the trip, one has to go slowly and observe patiently. In the end, the novel is musing over the importance of a beautiful ideal both in making judgments and in living a full life.

Text: We will use the Penguin edition, edited by Adrian Poole, published 2008. On the front, there is a picture of two people looking at paintings in a museum. *Please be sure to get this edition.* There is some scholarly disagreement about the order of the first two chapters of Book 11.

Syllabus:

February 12 – Books 1-3.

March 11 – Books 4-6.

April 15 - Books 7-9.

May 13 – Books 10-11.

June 10 – Book 12.