

MINUTES
Of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
June 7, 2016

Twice in one year. First to the Hills of Tuscany where David Novak was pater-familias –(oh, did I say Tuscany, I really meant the Hills of the equally attractive area of Italy called “Parma;”) and second, on June 7th, we east-siders again transported ourselves west to the “gilded age” of Rocky River’s Westwood Country Club where under the firm direction of our own Ms. Louise Mooney, Novel Club members were hosted, wined, hors d’oeuvred, and desserted to a point where one could only share the net effect with a seamstress or tailor in the most hushed tones. I can't really say enough about the elegance of the appetizer buffet and the quality of presentment – as we all happily munched watching the sun as it dropped beyond the western horizon. To top it off, if this is truly possible, Louise had the Westwood Country Club staff bake a splendid cake in the shape of a book appropriately entitled "The Ambassadors" - what thoughtfulness and what a cake! Rarely do we see such splendor at our Novel Club meetings – so in our minutes I want to take special care to pay tribute to our hostess Louise escorted by her husband John Gamble - they were simply - in the vocabulary of the 1920's "swell". Thank you Louise and John for asking us to travel west for our June 7th Novel Club meeting – you were exceptional hosts.

Absent tonight was our chief spear carrier. Ms. Ann Ogan, who with her husband (and tonight's critical paper presenter Nick,) was traveling abroad. Ham Emmons, who chaired the meeting, demonstrated the skills he wielded while a professor at the Weatherhead School at CWRU. Ham did an excellent job in keeping the proceeding on track. Because of the previously mentioned buffet and the lovely surroundings we were a little late in getting started – so at 8:15PM we launched.

As his first order of business Ham asked that guests be introduced. Sue Sande (guest of Ted Sande,) Marie Lathers (guest of the Stupay's,) John Gamble (guest of Louise Mooney,) and David Welshhans (guest of James Saunders) joined us tonight. Emeriti members June Salm and Larry Siegler were present and “quite vocal” in their views of tonight's offering.

Per Ann Ogan's request a shift in the date of our October meeting – to September 27th, 2016- was approved by a voice vote. Said change was effected

so as to avoid a conflict with the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah. The Glazer's will host this meeting.

David Welshhans, who if I recall correctly has a PhD in comparative literature from Michigan, was introduced as a full member of The Novel Club. Our current membership total stands at 34 – two shy of our membership cap. Per Art Stupay, there are several prospective members who might fill our current shortfall.

Moderator Hamilton Emmons, put on his Novel Club Treasurer's cap and advised that only 15 members have paid their 2016 dues of \$20.00/per. Time to "pay up!" We still have approximately \$2,600 in our Club checking account – not counting what was collected tonight.

Next year's Annual Meeting is scheduled for April 23rd and it's to be hosted by Tom and Veronica Slavin.

The Novel Club keeps both hard and digital copies of all presentations for posterity. Mr. Saunders and Mr. Emmons, as the respective chairs of said tasks, admonished speakers not to forget to deliver their work product so proper archiving can be effected. As you know all presentations are kept on file at the Western Reserve Historical Society.

In his lawyerly way Andy Fabens commenced the edificatory process by delivering a biographical paper on the life Henry James. Henry James Jr. was born in Greenwich Village in 1843 into a family of some means. Henry benefitted from a wealth that enabled him to grow up a French speaking gentleman. The James family proved to be fertile soil for talent. Henry became a critically acclaimed author; William – Henry's older brother by two years – became a Harvard psychology professor and philosopher; and sister Alice also was a published writer. The siblings were "close" their whole lives notwithstanding the distance that separated them

Henry spent most of his life in London and eventually became an English citizen. Notwithstanding his favoring England, James included Americans as central figures in his many novels. I list *Daisy Miller*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *The American*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, and of course tonight's novel, *The Ambassadors*. James during his lifetime received much critical acclaim, but little popular appreciation. As a consequence, he was always looking for ways to earn money – which led him into writing plays – an experience which proved most disappointing – neither of his two plays yielded

any profits and each closed after runs of only a little over a month. Henry was devastated that after so much hard work the yield proved to be so meagre.

It should be noted that Henry was a very social man – he knew legions of authors, actors and actresses, artists, and the like and spent his evenings in their company. James never married and had no lasting attachments. While not particularly evident in “The Ambassadors” James did focus much of his writing on homoerotic subjects – although the preponderance of commentators believe he conducted his personal life as a celibate. Louise Mooney, during the discussion, stated that James had a long, homosexual relationship with a sculptor, but so far as I know – there’s no empirical evidence that confirms that statement.

Much has been written about James, given his role as one of the literary lions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; however, other than learning of James’ frustration with the reading public – we learn little. Therefore, let’s segue into Nick Ogan’s critical paper – read in Nick’s absence by Dr. Brody. Nick, in his first paragraph states that critics believe *The Ambassadors* is one of the greatest novels of the 20th century. As an aside, there were a number present that demurred from that level of adulatory praise.

The book’s principal venue was Paris, following a relatively short disembarkation in England. Its central protagonist is 55-year-old Lewis Lambert Strether – who is best described as our “friend.” The book utilizes a third person narrator to carry itself along. The plot line is simple – Strether has travelled to France, at the behest of his purported fiancé/employer, the wealthy Mrs. Newsome, so as to induce Chad to excise himself from his “rich boy in Europe” ways, and return to the family home and business located in Woollett, Massachusetts. Strether is a widower whose only progeny died years ago from diphtheria; therefore, he was technically unattached – although under the belief that he was “engaged” to Mrs. Newsome – for whom he served as “the editor” of a high-brow journal based in the same town.

Two women – one French, named Madame de Vionnet, and one English (living in Paris) named Maria Gostrey, are both the eye-candy and the precipitators of the book’s “plot.” The book’s character count was really quite small – and the plot can best be described as nuanced, and glacially slow in its development.

The critical paper discussion was unusually polarized. There were those who felt that James’ sentence structure is too complicated, too long, and too convoluted to read and enjoy – I count myself amongst that following. There are many delicate discussions, descriptions, and amusements; however, the

stylistic overload makes reading *The Ambassadors* more of a challenge than a pleasure. Brother William James advised his brother, according to a member whose name I neglected to write down, to “simplify” his writing style, but at least in *The Ambassadors* said admonition was ignored. Some in the Club, and I note from June Salm’s remarks, said the book had a natural sort of elegance, that was both repressed and reticent. She said that James wrote the book as if he were painting a picture. June and tonight’s guest Marie both said the book was a satire, but I think that’s stretching things a little too far – a satire on Americans in Paris? That to me was only one component dimension of the novel – not the main dish. June also said that, had the book not been serialized, it wouldn’t have been so difficult to slog thru.

Larry Siegler said the book was “musclebound,” and autobiographical, the former characterization I had trouble getting my mind around, while I think Larry is right when he says that James saw himself in Strether. Expanding on Larry’s views – he said “the book doesn’t work” it’s too dry and arid – seemingly a great place for the musclebound. Art Stupay correctly stated that the book reveled in the European (Pre-WW I) lifestyle. Our newest member Dave Welshhans suggested that James had an abundance of imagination – and I’d have to agree that James did write with word pictures in mind, but in my opinion, without belief in plot development. Father Dave Novak felt that Strether was not a loveable guy – and that Strether had a very low level of self-awareness.

Bob Brody stated something interesting – he believed that James was disappointed he couldn’t, in his old age, participate in WW I. I wrote this note without citing Bob’s source, but I find its message interesting. Bob also said that although the book focused on “going back to America” it was bereft of any good or positive aspect used in describing the country.

Leon Gabinet, in discussing Chad, and whether or not he would go back to America said correctly, “money always trumps culture.”

The discussion questions that Nick prepared were all discussed, but the speed of member’s comment, and the tangents we kept going off on, made it difficult to summarize by simply posing a written question and then discussing the responses of members. During this highly charged meeting, with James adherents doing battle with those who were not at all enthusiastic, left a lot of blood on the floor – and the truth is that I couldn’t do justice to the fine papers, erudite commentary, and lively discourse of the members.

At the conclusion of each Novel Club year we vote selecting our “favorite” amongst the nine books we read and discuss each year. This year only three books received “favorite” status: *Brothers Karamazov* was the book members most enjoyed, followed, with only one vote separating each, by #2 *Mrs. Dalloway*, and #3 *All the Light we cannot See*. Thus, the 120th year of The Novel Club comes to a conclusion, with non-stop dialogue taking place as the Westwood Country Club staff tried to shoo (is a better word “usher”?) us off into the dark late spring sky. 2015-16 was a great year for The Novel Club in that we experienced enthusiastic discussion, furthered our readings, and bonded with fellow novel lovers.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Slavin