

## *What Maisie Knew*'deki Farklı Algılama Alanları

## Different Realms of Perception in *What Maisie Knew*

Özlem ÖZEN\*

### ÖZET

Henry James'in *What Maisie Knew*'i çevresindeki yetişkinlerin farklı gerçekliklerinin parçalarından oluşan bir dünyası olan genç roman kahramanı Maisie'yi konu alır. Bu makalede eleştirel dilbilim yaklaşımıyla, özne (eyleme katılanın gücü) ile nesne (eylemden etkilenen katılımcı) arasındaki ilişkiye bakarak Maisie'nin dünyasındaki bazı söylemlerin tartışılması ve şu sonuca varılması amaçlanmaktadır: Ebeveynlerinin (çoğunlukla kendi annesinin) öznelliği ve bencilliği Maisie'nin gerçekliği algılamasında hayal kırıklığına sebep olur. Edindiği çeşitli parçalanmış tecrübelerle rağmen, Maisie gerçekliği kendi anlamlandırdığı biçimde oluşturmayı başarır. Bu da ayrıca romanın modernist bir eser olarak değerlendirilmesine ışık tutacaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, modernizm.

**Makalenin Türü:** Araştırma

### ABSTRACT

Modernism embraces the changes in modern life that seem radically different from traditional life -- more scientific, faster, more technological, and more mechanized. In modernism, order, sequence and unity in works of art might be considered only expressions of a desire for coherence rather than actual reflections of reality. The large cultural movement of modernism, emerging in Europe and the United States in the early years of the 20th century, manifests a sense of modern life through art and literature which is distinct from the past, as well as from Western civilization's classical traditions. Generalization, high-flown writing and abstraction might hide rather than convey the real. In this sense, the form of a modernist story, with its beginnings, complications, and resolutions might be artifice imposed upon fragmentation of experience -- a construction out of fragments. In other words, modernist work is notable for what it omits--the explanations, interpretations, connections, and summaries. Often the intention of writers in the Modern period is to change the way readers see the world and to change our understanding of what language is and does.

Modernism tries to portray the impressions events make on characters, emphasizing the role of individual perception and exploring the nature of individual mind. How and when and where, however, were just what Maisie was not to know is the modernist aspect of the novel implied by James. The novel is a perfect portrayal of the protagonist who sees much more than she at first understands, because she is portrayed as a child who has many more perceptions than she has terms to express them.

Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* examines the young protagonist Maisie's world which is constructed by fragments of different realities of the adults around her. This paper aims at discussing some discourses in Maisie's world through the approach of critical linguistics looking at the relationship between the subject (the power of one participant in the action) and the object (the affected participant by the action)--to arrive at a result: Her parents' (mostly her own mother's) subjectivity and selfishness causes disillusionment in Maisie's perception of reality. Maisie manages to construct her own version of reality in spite of the various fragmented experiences she goes through. This will also shed light to the evaluation of this novel as a modernist text.

What Maisie knows is bits and pieces from everything around her. She is the central object around whom everything revolves. She gathers the pieces of this puzzle of happenings in order to make meaning. In this way, she seeks order among the fragments of others' realities. For instance, when she realizes that the Captain is attracted towards her mother in chapter 17, she wants him to be with her mother out of her pity and love towards her mother. In her perception, the Captain is drawn as a "knight in shining armour." As a matter of fact, Maisie approaches him as an individual and recognizes the general forms of adult behavior without understanding the appropriate content. Although Maisie can interpret what is happening around her, there are things beyond her knowledge.

In her struggle for bringing people together she, actually, is looking for meaning and order in her world full of fragments that stem from selfishness and unreliable subjectivity. This is a world in which she is not able to sense what she observes as love or hate. However, the truth in Maisie's world does not seem to have consistency when her mother scorns her about Maisie's interpretation of the Captain. She naively states that she thought her mother liked him. This is the only truth Maisie can perceive, which clashes with that of her mother, who reacts angrily to Maisie's allusion to her relationship with the Captain. Her mother claims that Maisie has become "... a dreadful dismal deplorable little thing...").

Moreover, Maisie's mother Ida asserts her subjective reality. Furthermore, she makes Maisie another causer of his action: "You have gone over to him, you have given yourself up to side against me and hate me" (83). Ida has no affection for Maisie and uses her to punish her father. In another sense, attempting to play the loving mother, Ida causes the disillusionment in Maisie's perception of reality. Through constructing her own reality based on self absorption, Ida tries to demonstrate that Maisie's father is the only cause of this hate between them. In her first sentence, Ida relates, Maisie's father wishes Maisie's death; however she changes her statement (her tongue slips) to "his wishing that I'm dead." She is, obviously, in a great effort to prove that she is

\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Dumlupınar Üniversitesi

made an object by the subjectivity of her husband, exploiting the emotions of her own daughter. Furthermore, she constructs Maisie as the agent of the trouble between her husband and herself.

Like Ida Farange, Mrs. Beale (Maisie's step-mother) reverses the truth of things when she calls Maisie "little hypocrite" and talks about the time she has been a slave to gain Maisie's love. With the word "slave" she constructs herself as an object who is deprived of love. Maisie's first impressions on Mrs. Beale as her father's second wife are that she really struck her as a new acquaintance and a rich strong expressive affection that in short pounced upon her. For instance, Mrs. Overmore's title changes into Mrs. Beale; so she declares that she becomes Maisie's mother. Mrs. Beale's subjectivity is apparent when she first asserts her power: "He is my husband; if you please, and I am his little wife. So now we'll see who your little mother is!" (55). She implies that being her mother, she has a right to own Maisie as well as to educate her. The change of title and role from Maisie's governess to Maisie's mother leads to a riddle of realities in Maisie's vision—a distorted vision which has no stability: "If she was her father's wife, she was not her own governess" (109). Rather than conveying actual reflections in her world, she tries to express a desire for being the new mother of Maisie.

Maisie's both female parents establish their subjectivity that is based on selfishness. Through her observation of love, Maisie is disillusioned because she hears Mrs. Beale calling herself "an abominable little horror." This is the difference between the knowledge conveyed by statements and her vision of reality that leads Maisie into confusion. From a modernist sense, Maisie has many more perceptions than she has terms to translate them; so actually the adult world is seen but not completely understood or given meaning. Thus, these naïve perception of images do not function completely, after Maisie faces different realms of fragmented realities. (This is once implied by her father's saying to her, "You have become a monster")

With her newly acquired knowledge, Maisie knows how to make a distinction between good and bad. From another aspect, we see the expression of the inner vision, the inner emotion, or the inner reality in Maisie's character. In her judgment, there is more intuition than reason, apparent in her silence. Just like the verbal attacks of her parents, the unspoken language around her teaches Maisie. In other words, Maisie, asserts her own subjectivity—even implicitly—seeing the true nature of her step-father: a man's dependence upon women is a weakness that makes Maisie disillusioned.

As a result, what Maisie knows is, at the start, different from the knowledge adults possess. Maisie's look at the world later becomes fragmented which is drawn from different experiences and realities: she becomes, in a way, the affected participant of the relationships among the adults around her. Thus, the incongruity between language and reality in her world is the outcome of the fragmented realities. However, she encounters with an experience that shows how she is tempted to consent the divorce of language and reality—what makes us read the novel from a modernist sense. She, though used by her parents to win power, realizes that language does not speak the truth. She, therefore, seeks order among these fragmented realities and manages to establish her own perception of reality.

**Keywords:** Henry James, What Maisie Knew, modernism

**Type of essay:** Research

## 1. Introduction

The large cultural movement of modernism, emerging in Europe and the United States in the early years of the 20th century, manifests a sense of modern life through art and literature which is distinct from the past, as well as from Western civilization's classical traditions. Modernism embraces the changes in modern life that seem radically different from traditional life -- more scientific, faster, more technological, and more mechanized. In modernism, order, sequence and unity in works of art might be considered only expressions of a desire for coherence rather than actual reflections of reality. Generalization, high-flown writing and abstraction might hide rather than convey the real. In this sense, the form of a modernist story, with its beginnings, complications, and resolutions might be artifice imposed upon fragmentation of experience—a construction out of fragments. In other words, modernist work is notable for what it omits—the explanations, interpretations, connections, and summaries. Often the intention of writers in the Modern period is to change the way readers see the world and to change our understanding of what language is and does. A typical modernist work begins arbitrarily, advances without explanation, and ends without resolution, consisting of vivid segments juxtaposed without integrating transitions. Instead of statements, fragments are drawn from diverse areas of experience.

Just like the form of a modernist work, Maisie's world is constructed out of fragments. This paper aims at exploring in what ways Maisie's experiences are constructed by fragments of different realities. It will also examine some adult discourses in Maisie's world through the help of critical linguistics --looking at the relationship between the subject (the power of one participant in the action) and the object (the affected participant)—in order to arrive at a conclusion: Maisie's perception of reality is formed by her parents' (mostly by her mother's) subjectivity and selfishness which cause Maisie's disillusionment. However, Maisie manages to construct her own version of reality in spite of the fragmented experiences she goes through. This will also shed light to our evaluation of *What Maisie Knew* as a modernist text

regarding the distinction between knowledge (language) and apparent perceptions of reality as well as the expression of the inner vision or the inner reality in Maisie's character.

## 2. Different Realms of Perception

What Maisie knows is bits and pieces from everything around her. She is the central object around whom everything revolves. She gathers the pieces of this puzzle of happenings in order to make meaning. In this way, she seeks order among the fragments of others' realities. For instance, when she realizes that the Captain is attracted towards her mother in chapter 17, she wants him to be with her mother out of her pity and love towards her mother. In her perception, the Captain is drawn as a "knight in shining armour." As a matter of fact, Maisie approaches him as an individual and "recognizes the general forms of adult behavior without understanding the appropriate content" (Williams, 1992:37). Although Maisie can interpret what is happening around her, there are things beyond her knowledge. Bell states, "Maisie's knowledge is separate from the knowledge conveyed by statements" (1991: 257).

However, the truth in Maisie's world does not seem to have consistency when her mother scorns her about Maisie's interpretation of the Captain. She naively relates, "I thought you liked him" (180). However, this is the only truth Maisie can perceive, which clashes with that of her mother, who reacts angrily to Maisie's allusion to her relationship with the Captain: "You hoped you little horror ...you are a dreadful dismal deplorable little thing..." (180-1). Woolf states, "Maisie has thought herself not to carry hate-messages..." and in his *Preface*, James describes Maisie as:

*bringing people together who would be at least more correctly separate; keeping people separate who would at least be more correctly together...in short making confusion worse confounded by drawing some stray fragrance of an ideal across the scent of selfishness... (1991:73).*

In her struggle for bringing people together she, actually, is looking for meaning and order in her world full of fragments that stem from selfishness and unreliable subjectivity. This is a world in which she is not able to sense what she observes as love or hate.

As James maintains, Maisie is "introduced to life with a liberality in which the selfishness of others found its account" (74). Maisie's mother, Ida Farange's subjectivity, constructed upon her selfishness, leads Maisie to a state of perplexity and chaos:

*I don't speak of your father's infamous wife: that may give you a notion of the way I am letting you off. When I say 'you' I mean your precious friends and backers, if you don't do justice to my forbearing...about your stepfather...you will never do me justice at all! (178).*

Ida builds an opposition between herself and what she calls the supporters of Maisie, making herself the merciful one whereas showing the supporters as the judges of her action. This subjective version of Ida's reality adds more fragments to Maisie's vision since it is defensive and ill-tempered.

Even when the speech of Ida is not always intentionally deceptive, her desires are more dominant than the world her words pretend to describe. Ida's affection for Maisie is insincere. Kenny Marotta asserts "Ida typically sends her a letter which is her only communication with her daughter 'for weeks and weeks' beginning with 'my precious pet'..."(496). Obviously, Ida doesn't mean what she says, even though her speech with her daughter seems highly moralistic, discussing shame and inappropriate behaviour—another opposition between her speech and her desires: "He (Maisie's father) has taken you from me... He has set you against me. Your horrid little mind has been poisoned by him"(83).

Thus, constructing herself as the object of the agent—her second husband—Ida asserts her subjective reality. Furthermore, she makes Maisie another causer of his action: "You have gone over to him, you have given yourself up to side against me and hate me" (83). Ida has no affection for Maisie and uses her to punish her father. In another sense, attempting to play the loving mother, Ida causes the disillusionment in Maisie's perception of reality:

*Your father wishes you were dead—that, my dear, is what your father wishes. You will have to get used to it as I have done—I mean to his wishing that I'm dead. At all events you see yourself how wonderful I am to Sir Claude. He wishes me dead quite as much; and I am sure that if making scenes about you could have killed me--! (177).*

Through constructing her own reality based on self absorption, Ida tries to demonstrate that Maisie's father is the only cause of this hate between them. In her first sentence, Ida relates, Maisie's father wishes Maisie's death; however she changes her statement (her tongue slips) to "his wishing that I'm dead." She

is, obviously, in a great effort to prove that she is made an object by the subjectivity of her husband, exploiting the emotions of her own daughter. Furthermore, she constructs Maisie as the agent of the trouble between her husband and herself:

*I am good—I am crazy, I am criminally good. But it won't do for you any more, and if I ceased to contend with him, and with you too, who have made most of the trouble between us... I hope you will know what it is to have lost a mother. I am awfully ill but you mustn't ask me anything about it (176).*

Bell writes, “Good and mother, the two significant terms in Ida’s speech, are prime illustrations of the unreliability of language” (189:1991). Putting herself in the position of a weak object (pretending to be sick) that is exposed to the actions of the subjects—her previous husband and her daughter—Ida Farange constructs her unreliable subjectivity and abuses her daughter against her husband.

Like Ida Farange, Mrs. Beale (Maisie’s step-mother) reverses the truth of things when she calls Maisie “little hypocrite” and talks about the time she has been a slave to gain Maisie’s love. With the word “slave” she constructs herself as an object who is deprived of love. Maisie’s first impressions on Mrs. Beale as her father’s second wife are: “...she really struck her as a new acquaintance...a rich strong expressive affection in short pounced upon her...” (107). For instance, Mrs. Overmore’s title changes into Mrs. Beale; so she declares that she becomes Maisie’s mother. Mrs. Beale’s subjectivity is apparent when she first asserts her power: “He is my husband; if you please, and I am his little wife. So now we’ll see who your little mother is!” (55). She implies that being her mother, she has a right to own Maisie as well as to educate her. The change of title and role from Maisie’s governess to Maisie’s mother leads to a riddle of realities in Maisie’s vision—a distorted vision which has no stability: “If she was her father’s wife, she was not her own governess” (109). Rather than conveying actual reflections in her world, she tries to express a desire for being the new mother of Maisie.

Therefore, Maisie’s both female parents establish their subjectivity that is based on selfishness. Through her observation of love, Maisie is disillusioned because she hears Mrs. Beale calling herself “an abominable little horror.” This is the difference between the knowledge conveyed by statements and her vision of reality that leads Maisie into confusion. From a modernist sense, Maisie has many more perceptions than she has terms to translate them; so actually the adult world is seen but not completely understood or given meaning.

Maisie’s step-father Sir Claude’s discourse contributes to Maisie’s perplexity in her reality as well. He shows himself in the object position in his conversation with Mrs. Wix (Maisie’s former step-mother): “Why I can’t for the life of me is what Ida is really up to, what game she was playing in turning to you with that cursed cheek after the beastly way she has used you” (195). He, in fact, gives away the fact that a man who is dependent on women as he is should be so much afraid of them. Thus, in the end, Mrs. Wix, in the mouth of a character who is anything but objective, evaluates his action, “He was afraid of his weakness” (267). Furthermore, Sir Claude’s construction of subjectivity is based on his intention to possess Maisie as his daughter. He relates, “She is your mother now, Mrs. Beale, by what has happened, and I, in the same way, I am your father” (259). In this assertion, he struggles to form his subjectivity in the way Mrs. Beale has done before. Therefore, he becomes self-absorbed: “Mrs. Wix is the obstacle...if she has affected you. She has affected me...” putting Mrs. Wix in the position of an agent whereas Maisie and himself are the objects exposed to the action of the subject.

To sum up, Maisie is left with a collection of “images and echoes” in her mind to which meanings were “attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn’t yet big enough to play” (Wagenkrech, 1983: 160). Thus, this naïve perception of image does not function completely, after Maisie faces different realms of fragmented realities. (This is once implied by her father’s saying to her, “You have become a monster”)

Modernism tries to portray the impressions, events make on characters, emphasizing the role of individual perception and exploring the nature of individual mind. “How and when and where, however, were just what Maisie was not to know..” is the modernist aspect of the novel implied by James (134). The novel is a perfect portrayal of the protagonist who sees much more than she at first understands, because she is portrayed as a child who has many more perceptions than she has terms to express them.

Although there are gaps in her knowledge of the world: “Maisie’s ignorance of what her elders mean when they speak to each other makes for gaps and voids which the narrator does not directly fill by

explanation...,” she learns when she should reveal and hide her emotions (Bell, 1991: 247). When she finally expresses herself to Sir Claude, forcing him to make a choice between staying with her and leaving, Maisie knows very well what to expect from him. Maisie, in other words, asserts her own subjectivity—even implicitly—seeing the true nature of her step-father: a man’s dependence upon women is a weakness that makes Maisie disillusioned.

### 3. Conclusion

With her newly acquired knowledge, Maisie knows how to make a distinction between good and bad. Upon Mrs. Wix’s statement that Sir Claude has gone away, Maisie says, “oh, I know.” Even though Mrs. Wix has “room for wonder at what Maisie knew,” Maisie manages to construct her own version of reality (280). From another modernist aspect, we see the expression of the inner vision, the inner emotion, or the inner reality in Maisie’s character. In her judgment, there is more intuition than reason, apparent in her silence. Just like the verbal attacks of her parents, the unspoken language around her teaches Maisie. “Patient little silences” and “intelligent little looks” are the means that provide her with knowledge—a piece of knowledge that is less fragmented by the words (278). “What Maisie has preserved through silence is threatened by language” (Bell, 1991:259).

Consequently, what Maisie knows is, at the start, different from the knowledge adults possess. Maisie’s gaze at the world later becomes fragmented which is drawn from different experiences and realities: she becomes, in a way, the affected participant of the relationships among the adults around her. In another sense, the incongruity between language and reality in her world is the outcome of the fragmented realities. However, she encounters with an experience that shows how she is tempted to consent the divorce of language and reality—what makes us read the novel from a modernist sense. She, though used by her parents to win power, realizes that language does not speak the truth. She, therefore, seeks order among these fragmented realities and manages to establish her own perception of reality.

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