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Title

Socialized: An Investigation into How the Phrase "As If" Is Used in Henry James's Novel What Maisie Knew

Permalink

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Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 26(3)

Author

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/B3263024757

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THE BERKELEY UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL



Summer Undergraduate
Research Fellowship

◆ Winter 2013 ◆



Contents

Plenary Sessions

Discussant: Timothy Rodríguez	7
<i>Socialized: An Investigation into How the Phrase "As If" is Used in Henry James's Novel What Maisie Knew</i> —Emily Doyle	9
<i>Exploring Power Systems Among California's Female Inmates</i> —Julissa Muñiz	15
<i>(Re)Imagining Food Systems: From Chariy to Solidarity</i> —Hussin Javier Kordi	21
<i>Enhancing Memory for Therapy in Depression: A Text Messaging Intervention</i> —Anita Satish	31

Media Protesting, Political Networking, the Cross, and the Potomac

<i>An Exploration of the Perceptions and Utilizations of Networking Systems in Washington, D.C.</i> —Robynne Lindsey	43
<i>Articulating Race, Geography, and Nostalgia in Rural Localities of the Potomac River</i> —Gabriel Schwartzman	49

“Howl,” Nietzsche, Bilingual Detention, and Collective Memory

Discussant: Sheila Hernandez 55

The Statement of Who?: The Narrative of the Howl Trial and its Discontents
—Andrew David King 57

Work in Progress: A Nietzschean Interpretation of Autobiography
—Tiffany Ku 63

Producto de La Ley: Immigration Policy and Literature
—Kiara Ivette Covarrubias 69

Psychology, Medicine, and Robotics

Online Social Networks and People's Psychology
—Hai Hoang 77

The Effect of Cognitive Load on the Interaction Between the Declarative and Procedural Memory Systems
—Ben Reuveni 91

Paleolithic Fat, Probiotics, and the Corner Store

Discussant: Nicholas Calderon 97

Hey Fatty Boom Boom! Fat and Fit in the Uper Palaeolithic
—Suzanne Ubick 99

The Healthy Corner Stores Network
—Alina Enoiu 113

When Bacteria Get Good: Progress, Purity, and the Making of Probiotics
—Allison Yates 119

Martyrdom, 3-D, Black Earth, and the Liquid Border

- The Stone Age Meets the Digital Age: Exploring the Application of Digital, Three-Dimensional Technologies for the Study of Lithic Artifacts*
—Nicole Lang 129

Refugees, Hunger, Indigeneity, and Spirituality

- Discussant: Hector Beltrán 145

- Identity at the Fringes of Citizenship: Experiences of Afghan Refugees in Turkey*
—Kamyar Jarahzadeh 147

- The National Crusade Against Hunger in the Highlands of Chiapas: Autonomy and Participation in a Neighborhood of San Cristobal de Las Casas*
—Adriana Sanchez Pillot 153

- Natives, Tourists, and Spirits: Contemporary Existences in Rapa Nui*
—Pablo Seward 159

Ecology and Geology

- Modeling Wildfire Hazard with a Geographic Information System*
—Scott Farley 167

Surviving Sexuality, Writing Femininity, Domestic Work, and Androcentric Interpretations

- Discussant: Ashwak Hauter 177

- Exploring Young Adult Female Burn Survivors and Sexual Intimacy*
—Huyen Vo 179

- The Social Politics of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*
—Fikreselam Habebo 187

- The Mind in the Vulva: Deconstructing the Androcentric Interpretation of Prehistoric Images*
—Nada Hosking 193

Poster Session

<i>Power and Pro-Social Behavior: The Powerful Will Help in the Presence of Others</i> —Nikolay Nichiporuk	203
<i>Grassroots Leaders within the Salvadoran Indigenous Rights Movement</i> —Hector Callejas	223
<i>Education & Incarceration: How Their Intersection Affects a Latino/a Household</i> —Wendy Hernandez	239
<i>Ch'wichip in South Korean Female Identity: Untangling the Contradictions of Finding a Job and Getting Married</i> —Yunhee Roh	255
<i>Maybe Big Boys Do Cry: An Examination of Male College Students' Reactions to Situations of Competitive Loss</i> —Tagart Sobotka	275
Author Acknowledgments	290
Additional Thanks	296

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PLENARY SESSIONS

The Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) conference is a moment when a select group UC Berkeley students arrive at a new threshold. They transform from being students to becoming scholars themselves, and thus producer of knowledge. As the first step toward writing their senior thesis, SURF scholars present their summer research findings to peers, professors and the public. The 2013 SURF Social Science and Humanities cohort are honored and privileged to publish the conference proceedings in the third annual Berkeley Undergraduate Journal (BUJ) special edition. Given the diversity of projects and disciplines of this year's group, there was no one particular unifying conference theme. But, there was a unifying question that all "SURFers" engaged in their mediated experiences of inquiry and scholarly self-formation. This question is: What does it mean to understand? Put another way: What are the parameters in the process of understanding?

I briefly touch on the question of understanding byway of the five plenary papers published in this special edition. Paraphrasing Paul Rabinow (2003:3), the practice of understanding is conceptual, political, ethical, and stylized. To understand is conceptual, as Julissa Muniz's paper on incarcerated women shows, because without concepts we would not know where to look or what to think about. She brings to bear the concept of "fictive kinship" as an understanding of how women in California prisons think about each other and self-organize. This female carceral kinship is created in a social milieu of love, support and empowerment of prison life and beyond. Hussin Javier Kordi's paper on food insecurity in Oakland, California helps us consider the political aspect of understanding. He articulates that the politics of urban hunger is a question of human dignity toward a solidarity-model of food justice. Thus, understanding is political as it is always tied to the social condition that facilitate the possibilities of reflection and agency. Taqwa Elhindi urges us to reflect on understanding as an ethical practice with her study of Palestinian boys systemically imprisoned by Israeli military for throw stones. Her work with youth and families gripped by "necropower" (Mbembe 2003) brings forth the ethical point that 'why' and 'how' to think

are questions of the types of actions one takes toward living a meaningful life. Finally, as all actions are stylized, Anita Satish's research shows how cognitive support for patience by way of mobile phone text messages is a fashioned means of understand that increase positive outcomes. Further, understanding is stylized and hence aesthetic. Emily Doyle makes this point with her literary analysis of the phrase 'as if' in Henry James novels. She artfully demonstrates that the phrase "as if" performs a philosophic social interaction from information one is told as a moving ratio to which one gather on her own--from that of the unreal to the real. Thus, the question of understanding is about an engagement of transformation from incapacity toward capacity. Understanding is mediated through concepts, politics, ethics, and ultimately an aesthetic action that is shaped and presented to others. This is accomplishment of understanding is what SURF scholars achieved!

—Timo Rodriguez, PhD
 SURF Program Coordinator
 UC Berkeley Chancellor's Public Fellow 2014

Work Cited

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SOCIALIZED

An Investigation into How the Phrase “As If” Is Used in Henry James’s Novel *What Maisie Knew*

SURF Conference Panel Opening Plenary Session

By: Emily Doyle

Mentor: Professor Charles Altieri, English

I. Introduction

As my title states, this essay concerns a phrase comprised of two words. Why? Simply put, words are important, and by choosing to use certain words over others (seemingly insignificant ones included), one might actually reveal quite a bit about the world—about the parts of the world, even, that sometimes go unseen. The phrase in which I am interested is “as if” which, for its smallness, does an immense work in that it illuminates the struggle of a little girl named Maisie. By virtue of a particular textual presence, this phrase communicates a philosophy which necessarily acknowledges social existence—even that of a child—as simultaneously dependent upon that which is and that which is not. My research question, therefore, concerns how the phrase “as if” implies integration into a social existence in which the curious and problematic acceptance of both reality and unreality is required of the self, particularly the pre-adolescent self.

For the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on a specific instance in which “as if” appears in *What Maisie Knew*, a novel by Henry James. For Maisie, who James describes as “a ready vessel for bitterness; a deep little porcelain cup in which bitter acids could be mixed,”¹ obtaining the kind of knowledge required of integration into a social existence is additionally difficult. Objectified by her parents and thereby stripped of societal meaning, her journey toward personhood is therefore both compelling and, by virtue of her struggle, socially informative. Our little and significant phrase “as if” confirms Maisie’s evolution and integration into society

1 Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

through a gaining of perceptual control and speaks of the factors involved in socialization such as the falsehoods which it perpetuates. Throughout this essay I will address the theoretical basis for my research, outline the methods utilized, and examine an example of my findings.

II. Theoretical Basis

I base my investigation into how Henry James uses the phrase “as if” tentatively upon the work of German philosopher Hans Vaihinger who wrote *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*. In his book, he explores “as if” as a fiction, asserting the phrase “plays an enormous part in science, in world-philosophies and in life.”² Because Vaihinger applies his argument concerning “as if” mainly to the fictions of science, I must gather from his words what is useful, directing the basic principles they contain toward the specific fiction of literary story, which I define as: a written event or series of events which the storyteller creates based on the imagination and information embodied by his/her consciousness for a purpose other than the accurate representation of events as they occurred.

Beyond this, Vaihinger contributes something vital: his definition of “as if” or, as he puts it, what “as if” contains.³ Immediately, the phrase can be termed as the “consciously false”; however this is just the surface of all that it means and does not address what it does. Vaihinger therefore insists that there “must apparently be something else hidden,” that the particle of ‘as if’ implies a decision, a decision to “maintain” falsity “*formally*” and “*in spite*” of difficulties: between the “as and if” a “whole sentence is implied.”⁴ In attempt to address the implications of the phrase, he asks:

What, then, does it mean if we say that matter must be treated *as if* it consisted of atoms? It can only mean that empirically given matter must be treated *as* it would be treated *if* it consisted of infinitesimals. Or finally, that social relations are to be treated *as (wie)* they would be *if (wenn)*.⁵

In open recognition of the dilemma of “as if,” that it perpetuates and makes room for conscious falsities both within science and social relations, he concludes “there is, then, a clear statement of the *necessity (possibility or actuality)*, of an *inclusion* under an *impossible or unreal assumption*.”⁶ From this, I arrive at a definition of “as if” as a linguistic construct which makes possible the recognition of unreality (that which is not) as a movement within and toward reality (that which is). Embracing the appearance of unreality, therefore, ironically allows for a more total and ultimate embrace of reality itself. Within Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*, for example, we may see evidenced both how “as if” may be used as a tool within social existence and as a way for the conscious mind to privately grapple with contradictions apparent within that existence external to her person.

Finally, “as if,” as Vaihinger emphasizes, is, grammatically a double conjunction that communicates a “*fiction*.”⁷ And fiction, as previously stated, is that story which is told and

2 Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’* (Mansfield Center: Martino Publishing, 2009), xli.

3 Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*, 93.

4 Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*, 93.

5 Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*, 93.

6 Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*, 93.

7 Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’*, 92.

must be, in order to be utilized and enjoyed, treated by the mind as simultaneously true and untrue. Therefore, the fictional story itself is an “as if” double conjunction. With this in mind, we understand this essay concerns instances of “as if” within dialogue and narrative that appear within the greater “as if” construct of the story *What Maisie Knew*, considering all the while Vaihinger’s assertions about the phrase: that it is a fiction, that it exposes both reality and unreality as present within social existence, and that it is a unique double conjunction which may at once be a story and a phrase within a story.

III. Methods

As previously stated, the goal of my research is to explore the ways in which Henry James uses the phrase “as if.” My methods, then, necessarily involved engaging in a consideration of Henry James’s novelistic works through reading and re-reading; close-reading and annotation of each applicable text; and, finally, an extrapolation, grouping, and analysis of the information yielded.

IV. Findings

“As if” appears throughout *What Maisie Knew* 125 times. At this point, I will examine a small excerpt comprised of three sentences in which our phrase appears twice. In order to understand this excerpt—who is speaking, to whom she is speaking, and why—a bit of context is needed. Maisie’s parents have recently divorced and remarried. Sir Claude, her stepfather, comes to fetch Maisie from her stepmother, Mrs. Beale, at her father’s house. Mrs. Beale addresses Sir Claude as follows: “Don’t talk to me about her ladyship!” she went on to their visitor so familiarly that it was almost *as if* they must have met before. ‘I know her ladyship *as if* I had made her. They’re a pretty pair of parents!’ cried Mrs Beale.”⁸ Immediately one must take notice of several factors which contribute to the social climate of the scene, Maisie is handled not by her parents but by her stepparents. Further, the stepparents’ discussion communicates a negative portrayal of Maisie’s parents; Mrs. Beale exclaims, “Don’t talk to me about her ladyship!” and, sarcastically, “They’re a pretty pair of parents!” In short, the meeting is socially awkward, strained, even inappropriate; and, importantly, our phrase “as if” emphasizes its awkwardness, confessing clash and contradiction. Its presence, once within narrative and once within dialogue, raises several questions. For instance, in what or whom is the “as if” rooted? Is it the omniscient voice of the narrator? If not, or not completely, then who? What *work* does “as if” do? Is the work “as if” done within narrative as opposed to dialogue at all different? And if so, how?

Within dialogue, the phrase “as if” begins and ends with Mrs. Beale. She speaks it; therefore, she thinks it. However, within narrative, its origin is less clear. The observation contains the fact that Mrs. Beale speaks to Sir Claude “so familiarly that it was almost as if they must have met before.” In what or whom does this “as if” originate? Answering this question, while not without complication, is vital because it will inform us of the apparent limits of the narrative voice and, if originating in a single character, will reveal something of that character as well. It will reveal perception and possibilities of consciousness and unconsciousness. Beginning with the title of the work, *What Maisie Knew*, we can assume that the novel largely concerns (if not

⁸ James, *What Maisie Knew*, 56 (emphasis added).

wholly reveals) exactly that. The preface confirms this. Just as James describes Maisie's novelistic role, so she operates. Maisie is a "centre and pretext for a fresh system of misbehaviour" who would, with the "consciousness of relief" attempt to interpret the "close web of sophistication" that is social relationship.⁹ Maisie, therefore, registers in her small and profound way the fact that Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude behave in a way which suggests they "have met before"; they, in other words, act "as if." It can therefore be safely assumed that the "as if" is a mark of Maisie's consciousness and, as the title claims, what she knows.

If, within the narrative, the "as if" acts as a signifier for Maisie's knowing, to what degree does she know and what is the substance of that knowing? That is, what *work* does this little phrase do? How does it perform? The presence of "as if" indicates that Maisie's knowledge consists of a clear perception of unreality as present within social interaction. She makes note of an inconsistency between information that has been fed to her—that Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude have never met before—and information she gathers on her own—that, despite this, they behave in a way that suggests they have. Without, in her innocence, comprehending the social implications behind this inconsistency (that Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude are beginning or have already begun an affair) she intelligently makes note of its existence through the use of the phrase "as if." In doing so, she reflects contradiction and acknowledges the presence of both reality and unreality. That is, she captures the "unreal assumption" of which Vaihinger speaks of as being present in society.

Considering, for a moment, the remaining "as if," the "as if" of dialogue, will confirm what the "as if" of narrative suggests: that Maisie is beginning to understand what the use of this little phrase means socially. "I know her ladyship as if I made her," Mrs. Beale claims. In doing so, her stepmother acknowledges an instance in which reality represents an unreality. Of course, this acknowledgment is to her social favor. By using "as if," she adorns herself with superiority and power over the person of whom she speaks—Maisie's mother, Mrs. Farange. Her utilizing "as if," though, ultimately raises a significant question: Can reality and unreality merge and/or transform from one into the other? If Mrs. Beale can assert dominance over Mrs. Farange through the use of "as if," she can perhaps truly add to her social power as well. She could, in other words, impact reality through a particular use of an unreality. "Socialization"—and, specifically, Maisie's—therefore, depends not only on understanding the divide between that which is and that which is not but in willfully and advantageously manipulating the divide through social interaction. Through this, an expansive reality may be harnessed in the same way, as Vaihinger claims, matter is harnessed through the concept of the infinitesimal atom. To be a socialized being is to simultaneously wield the dual forces of reality and unreality in effort to manipulate the representation of the self within society without necessarily altering the actual self.

V. Conclusion

It is an uncertain world which Maisie faces, one in which social existence depends with equal weight upon appearance and actuality. It is her struggle for knowledge throughout *What Maisie Knew*, however, which reveals a wonderful insight: that through particular use of a small phrase comprised of only two words, a great philosophical work can be done, implicitly. That is, a phrase—and in this case, the phrase "as if"—may act within a literary fiction as a root for concepts as inherently unwieldy and complex as reality and unreality, knowledge, and social

⁹ James, *What Maisie Knew*, 5.

existence. It is, as Hans Vaihinger asserts, a fiction which sheds light on fact, which exposes the ways in which Maisie's socialization requires an understanding and acceptance of both reality and unreality as present and ever-merging within society. This is what she comes to know. This is what allows for her to become either through ascending or descending (depending on your perspective) a socialized being.

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