

A Painter's Eye: Exploring "The Last of the Valerii" through the Narrator's Character

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In Henry James' "The Last of the Valerii", the narrator provides a useful vehicle for exploring hidden aspects of the story. By questioning his identity, his beliefs, and his role in the story, we can learn a great deal. Readers are always at the mercy of their narrator, always compelled to see the story through the narrator's eyes, but this story cannot be fully understood without learning more about the narrator and his situation than he discloses.

We begin at the beginning. In a curious twist, James begins "The Last of the Valerii" by describing the narrator's aversion to the idea of his goddaughter marrying a foreigner. This exposition foreshadows a central plot conflict of the story, where Marco's apparent identity threatens his future, but his true identity saves him.

But there's more to the introduction than mere foreshadowing of events to come. In that first paragraph, we see James presenting a microcosm of the story's key conflict. We watch as the narrator vows his objection to his goddaughter's marrying a foreigner but we also see the narrator unwilling to follow through on his pronouncement upon seeing Marco.

In fact, the sight of Marco with the narrator's goddaughter provokes "a certain paternal benevolence" (13). The narrator recognized Marco as being a prototypical Roman with his "hair as the old Romans must have had" (14), his "head as massively round as . . . Emperor Caracalla" (14), and his voice that had the "massive sonority with which civil speeches must have been uttered in the age of Augustus" (14). All these confirm that Marco is a "sturdy young latin" (14) and a "good Italian" (14).

Despite these observations, the narrator finds Marco to be more authentic, more sincere than he expects for Italians. Marco has "a beauty which was less a matter of mere fortunate surface than usually happens in the handsome Roman Race" (14) but "little of the light, inexpensive urbanity of his countrymen" (14). His gaze belied "a stupid sincerity" (14).

Interestingly, he attributes the positive characteristics he sees in Marco to the ancient Romans while comparing Marco to modern day Italians when looking for character weakness. This vision of Marco as so very Roman, a member of an old world race, coupled with the discovery that he is not like other Romans compels the narrator to accept him. Later on in the story, that same dynamic of concern over his Italian nature followed by reassurance based on deeper understanding of just how Italian Marco really is saves them.

The narrator does little to describe himself beyond claiming to be an old artist who has spent a long time painting and sketching antiquities in Rome. He is "an unscrupulous old painter of ruins and relics" (17). Even the old archaeologist hails him with the title "*illustrssimi forestieri*" (17). His long standing rejection of foreigners suggests that he is, like his goddaughter, an American.

The narrator explains why he thinks foreigners are unworthy to marry his goddaughter

on a number of occasions. For starters, he suspects that any “good Italian” (14) would care more for his goddaughter’s fortune than for herself. Since the narrator finds that Marco is “even rigid rules have their exceptions. . . [Marco is] as genuine as possible” (18) and “a perfect original (not a copy). . . [who] seemed quite content to be appreciated” (18), we can surmise that the narrator expected Marco to be dishonest simply because he was an Italian count. As further proof of the narrator’s belief that foreign men are incapable of honestly relating to women, we refer the many occasions on which he told his goddaughter that “a Frenchman, an Italian, a Spaniard might be a very good fellow, but that he never really respected the woman he pretended to love” (20). When the countess is at her most desperate, the narrator exclaims, “An Italian count may be mighty fine, but he won’t *wear!* Give us some wholesome young fellow of our own blood, who will play us none of these dusky old world tricks” (29).

Looking over the story, we can see that the narrator’s early fears were both confirmed and dispelled by later events, and this is the beauty of James’ work. The narrator had feared that if his goddaughter married a foreigner, she would be unhappy. That was true for a time. But the narrator erred in believing that it was the Italian’s insincerity that would destroy their marriage. In fact, the cause of their discontent was the depth of the Count’s authenticity. It was that authenticity that prevented him from abandoning the ancient religion that James claimed lived deep in his bones. That the narrator should be so wrong and so right simultaneously gives the story an ironic element which greatly enhances its charm.

The irony is that its not the insincerity that the narrator associates with foreigners that

undoes his goddaughter's happiness, but the deep authenticity of Marco's ancestry. James ultimately describes a man so rooted in his heritage that the old religion lies just beneath the surface, waiting to destroy their marital bliss upon being exposed. But the key to understanding this is to understand how the narrator fits into this story.