

Confidence (Illustrated)



Two leisure-burdened young Americans frolic around Europe during the 1850s. One is rich and science minded and without a sense of humor or common sense, the other just well to do and art minded and a little inconsistent and frivolous. They meet some women and try to figure out what they think of them. The artsy one (Bernard) is more in the focus of the narration. His friend (Gordon) asks him to figure out what he thinks of the woman to whom he has recently proposed and who has rejected him (Angela). Our hero tries to do that and the inevitable complications happen. The woman becomes aware of the consulting project and sabotages the investigation by odd behavior. (This situation is reminiscent of the physics problem that the observation of an experiment tends to interfere with the results of the experiment.) The basic story sounds as old and solid as a Boccaccio tale. The Decamerone would have gone straight for a love affair between the hero and his spying object, but James didnt do things nice and easy. He thrives on the roundabout way. Frankly speaking, James overdoes the complications of the plot towards the end. Had it shut down after 25 chapters instead of 30, the novel were better. James lets the spy give his friend a negative verdict on the advisability to renew the quest for the woman. Decisions in other directions are taken (Gordon marries somebody else), but there will be a later re-match, a second round of guessing. The novel is structured like an hour glass: the first half set in Italy and Germany, then an interruption (with an un-detailed Asia trip), then a continuation, some years later, in NY and France. By now, Bernard has started to feel the emptiness of his life, while Gordon has at least started doing something: he owns a chemistry research lab (unclear if for profit or not). One of my favorite little texts by Bert Brecht is this: Herr K met a man whom he had not seen for a while. You have not changed, said the

man. Herr K paled. Consider this Jamesian version, which has clear historical precedence, making Brecht a plagiarist: You are the same man I used to know (says Gordon to Bernard when they meet again). I am sorry for that (says Bernard). (The dialogue is repeated by two other protagonists later in the story.)

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