

The Henry James Society

CALL FOR PAPERS

American Literature Association
36th Annual Conference
Westin Copley Place, Boston, MA
21-24 May 2025

Jamesian Beginnings

The appeal of teleological thinking often shapes our readings of James, whether of individual works or of his career as a whole. But rather than let a sense of the ending determine our interpretation of what came before, how might James look different if we focused instead on beginnings? How does he typically begin a tale or novel—and how, if at all, do his strategies differ from those of other short story writers or novelists? How, where, or when *doesn't* he begin? How is beginning thematized within the fictions, as in Isabel Archer's practice of "beginning afresh a great many times" or Madame Merle's wish that she could "begin again"? How did James himself begin as a writer? How did he retrospectively construct such beginnings in his Prefaces and autobiographies? What choices do we make when we decide where to begin a course or critical book on James? Where should a new reader of James begin—and why? How did we begin reading James, and what difference did that make later on?

All approaches are welcome. Some suggested topics:

- Beginnings of individual tales, novels, or other texts
- Beginnings of units within a text, such as chapters or volumes—or even individual sentences—as well as prefaces, prologues, preambles, or other preliminaries
- Beginnings in James as compared to those of other short story writers or novelists
- Acts of beginning—or beginning again within a work of fiction or travel writing
- Stage settings or opening scenes
- Beginnings in dialogue, beginnings of speeches, conversations, or other utterances
- James's beginnings as a writer or the beginnings of writings or careers of other members of the James family
- James and the beginnings of historical events or movements—wars, modernism, feminism
- James's own account of his beginnings in the autobiographies
- James's retrospective construction of his own beginnings—of individual works, of his career—in the Prefaces
- Origins, roots, influences, inspirations, antecedents
- Beginning a course in James
- Beginning a critical study of James
- Strategies for encouraging others to begin reading James
- Memories of first reading James—where did you begin, and what difference did that make?
- Fresh starts, false starts, late starts

Please send a **250-word abstract** and **short biography** to Ruth Yeazell (ruth.yeazell@yale.edu) and Sarah Wadsworth (sarah.wadsworth@marquette.edu) by **January 15, 2025**. Please note if you have any **AV requirements**. For more details about the American Literature Association Conference please visit this website: <https://americanliteratureassociation.org/ala-conferences/ala-annual-conference/>