

The Henry James Society

CALL FOR PAPERS

37th Annual Conference of the American Literature Association

May 20-23, 2026, Palmer House, Chicago, IL

Minor Threads

“There are threads shorter and less tense, and I am far from implying that the minor, the coarser and less fruitful forms and degrees of moral reaction, as we may conveniently call it, may not yield lively results.”

Henry James. *The Prefaces*

“We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*

Despite their subordinate role, minor characters that occupy the periphery of the narrative and / or society serve highly specific artistic and psychological functions. In his Preface to *The Ambassadors*, James famously described the novel as a “figure in the carpet” – every part connected by design with ficelles or minor characters as the structural threads in that carpet. They may reside in the background, but their effects in “the thickened centre” of experience may threaten or provoke the boundaries of the more major characters’ social order.

James’s minor characters and ficelles dramatize the very process that Deleuze and Guattari theorize as minor literature: the undermining of major authority (Mrs. Grose, Fanny Assingham), the collective expansion of meaning (the observing guests in *The Aspern Papers*), and the deterritorialization of narrative space (Maria Gostrey, Mrs. Penniman). Considering the very real, revolutionary threat Deleuze and Guattari’s domain of *minor literature* and *minor language* presents against the standard or norm of society, James’s deployment of these seemingly marginal figures acquires a new critical weight.

This panel calls for papers that consider the role of minor or marginal characters, those whose status, role, or worldviews circulate along the periphery of the story’s society, yet whose threads of associations affect, disrupt, or propel both major and minor developments.

Possibilities include but are not limited to:

- The ficelle as line of flight: Henry James and the aesthetics of the minor – conduits, disruption, and regeneration
- Peripheral agency and the politics of the minor – the minor voice as revolutionary potential via aesthetic and political disturbances
- Marginal figures as minor agents: how socially marginal figures present counter-narratives that resist bourgeois consciousness
- The ethics of attention: minor characters and the expansion of consciousness in James’s work
- The ficelle’s transformation of narrative perspective

Please send a 250-word abstract and short biography to Ivana Cikes (cikesi@douglascollege.ca) and Sarah Wadsworth (sarah.wadsworth@marquette.edu) by **January 17, 2026**. Please note any AV requirements. For more details about the American Literature Association Conference please visit the ALA website: <https://americanliteratureassociation.org/ala-conferences/ala-annual-conference/>