

Discussion Questions for *The Golden Bowl* by Henry James

(page references are to *The Bodley Head Henry James Volume IX: The Golden Bowl*)

1. Did you like the book? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. Did you like the characters? Did you find them believable?

3. The prince says with a laugh (p. 47):

I like the class in which you place me! I shall be one of the little pieces that you unpack at the hotels ... and put with the family photographs and the new magazines.

How do you suppose this feeling of being an item the father has collected for his daughter affects the prince's relationship with his wife and father-in-law?

4. Which characters underwent change? What brought about these changes?

5. Who was the most likeable character in the book? The least likeable? The most interesting?

6. We are first presented with the "golden bowl" when Charlotte and the Prince visit the shop (p. 120).

He handled it with tenderness, with ceremony, making a place for it on a small satin mat. "My Golden Bowl," he observed – and it sounded on his lips as if it said everything. He left the important object – for as "important" it did somehow present itself – to produce its certain effect. Simple but singularly elegant, it stood on a circular foot, a short pedestal with a slightly spreading base, and, though not of signal depth, justified its title by the charm of its shape as well as by the tone of its surface. It might have been a large goblet diminished, to the enhancement of its happy curve, by half its original height.

What does the golden bowl symbolize? (See also p. 120, 125, 465, 466) (p. 492, spoken by Maggie):

I want a happiness without a hole in it big enough for you to poke in your finger. ... The golden bowl – as it *was* to have been. ... The bowl with all the happiness in it. The bowl without the crack.

7. We are told (p. 151):

It was of course an old story and a familiar idea that a beautiful baby could take its place as a new link between a wife and a husband, but Maggie and her father had, with every ingenuity, converted the precious creature into a link between a mamma and a grandpapa.

Also (p. 224), Charlotte says:

I've simply to see the truth of the matter – see that Maggie thinks more, on the whole, of fathers than of husbands.

Did you find the relationship between Maggie and her father Adam believable? Have you known a father/daughter (or mother/son) with a similar relationship?

8. How might the issues raised in this novel be modified if the time period were changed to today's?

9. What did you think of Henry James narrative style and plot development? Poet T.S.Eliot said:

Henry James is an author who is difficult for English readers, because he is an American; and who is difficult for Americans, because he is a European; and I do not know whether he is possible to other readers at all.

(From *A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors* by T.S. Eliot, *Vanity Fair* (February 1924))

10. What connections does social class have with happiness or responsibility?

11. Generally speaking, do people get what they deserve, for better or worse? Is that what happens in this novel?

12. What are the roles of material wealth, social interaction, and social position in the attainment of happiness?

13. Any comments about the way the book ended?

14. Are there any questions you would like to ask?