

EUROPE AND AMERICA IN HENRY JAMES'S INTERNATIONAL NOVELS¹

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ABSTRACT

IN HENRY JAMES'S INTERNATIONAL NOVELS, THE CONTRAST BETWEEN EUROPE AND AMERICA REFLECTS THE COMPLEMENTARY VALUES OF SOCIAL EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL SPONTANEITY. AMERICANS IN EUROPE, AS SYMBOLS OF THE NEW WORLD, ARE USUALLY CHARACTERIZED BY POSITIVE ASPECTS, WHILE THE EUROPEANS, EXPONENTS OF THE OLD WORLD, ARE CHARACTERIZED BY NEGATIVE ONES. THE MORAL AND CULTURAL CONTRAST BETWEEN AMERICANS AND EUROPEANS IS REMARKABLY USED BY JAMES WITH THE PURPOSE OF HIGHLIGHTING THE AMERICAN'S INNOCENCE AND THE EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE, AS A FORM OF PRESENTING THE LARGER PROBLEM OF SELF AND OTHER, OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY. IF JAMES'S EARLY NOVELS DEAL WITH THE COMEDY BASED ON THE CONFLICT BETWEEN AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN MANNERS, IN HIS LATER NOVELS IT IS REPLACED BY A TRAGIC PROBLEM, IN WHICH MANNERS ACT LIKE CONVENTIONS DETERMINING MORALS.

KEY WORDS: *INTERNATIONAL THEME, AMERICA, EUROPE, INNOCENCE, EXPERIENCE.*

Henry James is one of the writers interested in capturing fundamental aspects of the national experience and of the international encounters, as he wrote in the 19th century, when industrialization reached full speed and crossing the Atlantic was much faster, making it easier for Americans and Europeans to discover each other. It was the first time after the Civil War when the well-off Americans could afford visiting Europe, and that revealed that they had different manners, values and customs. Many American writers felt the necessity to define their own and their country's relation to Europe. James himself

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mentioned that: “One of the responsibilities” of being an American “is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe.”³

The spectacle of his compatriots travelling to Europe was rich ground for reflection as they missed the real experience of its complex culture. He wrote to his mother in 1869: “What I have pointed at as our [American] vices are the elements of the modern man with culture quite left out. It’s the absolute and incredible lack of culture that strikes you in common travelling Americans. The pleasantness of the English comes in a great measure from the fact of their each having been dipped into the crucible, which gives them a sort of coating of comely varnish and colour. They have been smoothed and polished by mutual social attrition. They have manners and language. We lack both.”⁴

Despite this, he had a more favorable view regarding the potentiality of American identity. In a letter to Thomas Sergeant Perry he writes: “To be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a regret and a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world.”⁵

The international theme was one of James’s biggest concerns. He varies infinitely on the contrast of American and European, and the differences in the mould of personalities which the grain of each of the two worlds creates. His novels have autobiographical characteristics, because, like many of his heroes, James left his home land for Europe in order to find a better place and to enrich his experience of life and, therefore, he found himself on a different territory, with another mentality and another way of life. His experience is reflected in his novels as the majority of them illustrate the European experience of young Americans, who come to the Old World to enrich their knowledge, but who find themselves against a space of difference. The importance of the international

³Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James* (London: Macmillan &Co., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), I, 13.

⁴ Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James* (London: Macmillan &Co., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), I, 152.

⁵ Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James* (London: Macmillan &Co., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), I, 77.

theme stands in the fact that it helped shaping and understanding better the American and European culture, as James himself said in the Preface to volume XIV, that “Europe only makes sense due to the existence of an America, and vice versa” . Therefore it is the meeting between the two nations that leads to the configuration of the American distinctiveness.

In order to explore the differences between the two civilizations and the effect that these have on the identity of the one coming from the New World, it is important to describe the prototype of the American in Europe as opposed to the personality of the Europeans. The heroes and heroines created by James represent beauty, innocence, freedom, vitality, and freshness as they are open to experience and they seem to be more morally evolved. On the other hand, Europeans are characterized by cynicism, corruption and sophistication. The Americans in Europe are projected in contrast with the Old World’s way of life. The American hero, charming, simple, and to a certain extent ignorant, acts in a natural manner, as opposed to the self-consciousness of the Europeans he meets. Thus, Americans in Europe, as symbols of the New World, are usually characterized by positive aspects, while the ones they meet, symbols of the Old World, are characterized by negative ones, meant to emphasize the huge contrast existing between these two cultures. It is this contrast that is responsible for Americans’ misunderstanding of the new space and their difficulties in living among the people from the Old Continent. The moral and cultural contrast between Americans and Europeans is remarkably used by James with the purpose of highlighting the American’s innocence and the European experience.

“The Americano-European legend” is sometimes treated in a neutral manner, sometimes with sympathy for the American abroad, and sometimes with sympathy for the European confronting American vulgarity. “At times James satirically deflates American cultural naïveté and moral rigidity; yet sometimes, in defending American innocence, he brings into question an impenetrable European sensibility so complex as to seem (or be) morally duplicitous.”⁶ Obviously he chose the impartial irony as a creative method.

The first period of James's fiction concentrated on the contrast between Europe and America. Even if he fails sometimes to be objective, this happens because “he still feels himself very much an American fighting against a ‘superstitious valuation’ of Europe, and

⁶ James W. Tuttleton, *The Early Years in A Companion to Henry James Studies* edited by Daniel Mark Fogel (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 98.

consequently he sometimes fails to allow the European values their full weight.”⁷ *Roderick Hudson* (1875) illustrates the international theme as it reconstructs, in part, James’s pilgrimage to Italy in 1869. The wealthy Rowland Mallet visits Northampton, Massachusetts and meets a young sculptor, Roderick Hudson. He proposes him to come to Italy and study art. They leave for Europe, leaving behind Roderick’s fiancée, Mary Garland. Once arrived in Italy, he develops his talent and falls in love with Christina Light. His passion for Christina and the grandeur of European sculpture begin to destroy him as a man and artist. The result is his disappearance into the storm and his death. Henry James was preoccupied with how the American small town and the foreign colony in Rome may assimilate the egotism of this genius. Even if he intended to present America as a humane society incapable of providing for art, restrictive and inhibiting to the aesthetic genius, his American bias couldn’t be passed over.

Although *Roderick Hudson* featured mostly American characters in a European setting, James made the Europe–America contrast even more explicit in his next novel. In fact, the contrast could be considered the leading theme of *The American* (1877). This book is a combination of social comedy and melodrama concerning the adventures and misadventures of Christopher Newman, an essentially good-hearted but rather gauche American businessman on his first tour of Europe. Newman is looking for a world different from the simple, harsh realities of 19th century American business by means of immediate contact with European focuses of civilization. He has behind him the fortune and position and now his instinctive hunger for progress in refinement of mind and personality determines him to wish to complement his material possessions by adding everything immaterial up-to-date. He encounters both the beauty and the ugliness of Europe, and learns not to take either for granted. As his name suggests, Christopher Newman is the new man, the representative of egalitarian America, a kind of reversed Christopher Columbus, who discovers the strangeness of Europe. At the beginning of the novel, he is presented as “the great Western Barbarian, stepping forth in his innocence and might ‘to gaze’ at this poor corrupt old world”. He undergoes a test as he is wronged by a family of French aristocrats that pretend to be superior to him and to represent the highest possible civilization. The revenge is an unusual thing for him, as he is the best American

⁷ Brian Lee, *The Novels of Henry James: A Study of Culture and Consciousness* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1978), 29.

type, “one of nature’s noblemen”, and the novel illustrates a conflict between the “natural” nobility and the “artificial” nobility of the French family.⁸

Being a young millionaire, he goes to Paris to appropriate culture and to have an aristocratic wife. Completely innocent and ignorant of the hierarchical class arrangements and of the social forms from the polite French society, he wants to marry Claire de Cintré, the daughter of an impoverished family with an eight-hundred-year-old name. He must first pass the tests with the old Marquise de Bellegarde and her son Marquis Urbain de Bellegarde. At the beginning he is accepted by the family, due to his fortune, but then he is rejected because of their disgust at his commercial vulgarity. “As such, the novel dramatizes the victimization of the innocent but over reaching American at the hands of an aristocratic family whose treachery is the stuff of rankest melodrama.”⁹

As any other typical American Puritan, he is at the same time attracted by the forms of the European civilization and repelled by the impurity on which it is based. He has a sense of superiority of human values over the meaningless convention that lacks a basis of moral conviction. He was innocent to believe that “Europe was made for him, and not he for Europe” and that the world “was a great bazaar, where one might stroll about and purchase handsome things.”¹⁰ Newman’s beliefs show the typically American attitude toward work, money and power, which was deplored by James.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) James concluded the first phase of his career and started his middle years with a novel that remains his most popular piece of long fiction. The story is of a spirited young American woman, Isabel Archer, “a female counterpart of Newman”¹¹, who “affronts her destiny” and finds it overwhelming. She inherits a large amount of money and subsequently becomes the victim of Machiavellian scheming by two American expatriates. The narrative is set mainly in Europe, especially in England and Italy. Generally regarded as the masterpiece of his early phase, *The Portrait of a Lady* is described as a psychological novel, exploring the minds of his characters, and almost a work of social science, exploring the differences between Europeans and Americans, the

⁸ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: [Charles Scribner's Sons](#), 1960), 91.

⁹ James W. Tuttleton, *The Early Years in A Companion to Henry James Studies* edited by Daniel Mark Fogel (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), p.106.

¹⁰ James W. Tuttleton, *The Early Years in A Companion to Henry James Studies* edited by Daniel Mark Fogel (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), p.82.

¹¹ Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James* (London: Macmillan &Co., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), II, p.179.

old and the new worlds. Isabel's hunger for knowledge could only be overcome by the European civilization.

Isabel Archer embodies the image of the innocent American girl, with little experience, a redundant fund of life. She begins her European initiation without knowing "what her self is, or what it may do."¹² Despite her innocence, she also has the "duty" to fulfill other characters' incomplete selves through her own. If at the beginning Mrs. Touchett takes her to Europe as a perfect companion, her cousin Ralph empowers Isabel with his ideals that can't be entirely accomplished by himself, later on she is manipulated by Madame Merle who doesn't care at all about her happiness: "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for...I only know what I can do with them"¹³ and by Osmond, who is attracted by her new fortune.

Isabel is placed in a European external world of social relations, but, unlike her predecessors, she has a consciousness capable of understanding, judging and accepting the values of that world. She suffers because of her many social limitations imposed on her by the European world. "Many of Isabel's limitations result instead from James's determination to present a realistic portrait of a particular kind of nineteenth-century woman, and such a realistic portrait was determined in no small way by the conditions of the world the heroine inhabited. The social and economic restraints suffered by an ordinary woman of the nineteenth century are necessarily suffered.

In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the international theme becomes a metaphor for the distances separating the Self from the Other. In comparison to the characters from the early international novels, here the Americans have the power and responsibility converged from their fabulous wealth. Their innocence is presented in ironic juxtaposition to this power and they take part in the plots that exploit them. Milly Theale represents an exponent of Henry James's American girls who are unable and afraid to become wholly human and to achieve a mature identity. Her inability to achieve a sense of self leads inevitably to her death. It is not only her innocence and goodness that leads to her victimization by the European experience, but also her culturally determined psychology. The consequences are the most extreme for James's American girl.

The Ambassadors (1903), is a dark comedy that follows the trip of protagonist Lewis Lambert Strether, a middle-aged American, to Paris. He was sent by Mrs Newsome

¹² Tony Tanner, "The Fearful Self: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*" *Critical Quarterly* 7, 1965, p.150.

¹³ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 210.

to rescue her son Chad from immoral life. The positive result would enable Strether to marry her, and would again reflect the Jamesian pattern of the submission of the New World innocence to European experience. But the result is an unexpected one. He initiates himself in the life of Paris. He becomes aware of the differences between the two worlds, of the existence of a finer existence. The novel shows how American innocents become wiser and mellowed after their rich and varied experience of Europe. Though Lambert Strether had been to Europe when he was twenty-five years old, he had missed the charm of it and now the “views of cathedral tower and water-side fields, of huddled English town and ordered English country”¹⁴ delight him. He is enthusiastic to see Chester, London, and Paris. Europe and Europeans are exotic for Strether. *The Ambassadors* analyzes the European scene itself and Paris represents the beautiful order which results from a continuity of social experience.

If his earliest novels reflect the traditional image of the contrast between Europe and America, later on, James creates his own Europe, which is the result of a closer vision. He replaces the comedy based on the conflict between American and European manners with a tragic problem, in which manners act like conventions determining morals. His creative method in his novels and tales is the irony as his theme in one novel might be just the reverse of his theme in another one. In the late novels of Henry James, the international theme is no longer just a tool of social analysis and criticism, it is no longer about Europe and America, but about the American experience of Europe and the European experience of America. The opposition between Americans and Europeans goes beyond the external aspect, it becomes a growth of the individual awareness of foreign modes of living, thinking. It is “both a manifestation of and a metaphor for the gap between the Self and the Other.”¹⁵ Europe is obviously the Other, because James has an American identity.

Henry James felt the necessity to define his own and his country's relation to Europe. He was aware of his cultural ties to the Old World as many American authors had to make a name in Europe before their countrymen took them seriously. Furthermore, the cultural opportunities and resources were infinitely more impressive and valuable on the continent. Henry James's motivation for the expatriation to Europe and for his international theme can be found in a passage in his book on Hawthorne: “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep...it takes a great deal of history to produce a little

¹⁴ Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (London: Penguin, 1985), 13.

¹⁵ Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 144.

literature...it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion.”¹⁶ Europe represented for him a place to live and work because it offered greater complexity of social relations as material for fiction. His intention was to see his native society against the background of the older European civilization, instead of seeing it within its local limits only. His most recurring theme was the attitude in which America and England stand toward each other on the social field. Even if he presented the supremacy of American values, he couldn't avoid the endless possibilities offered by the European civilization. The moral contrast between Europe and America is a part of the complex contrast of civilizations affected by history. The moral spontaneity of America is juxtaposed to the carefully cultivated manners of Europeans, the manners of a democratic society without “classes” to those of a society organized hierarchically.

¹⁶ Henry James, *Hawthorne*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: Macmillan, 1967), 25.

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