

A STUDY OF EMPIRICISM IN HENRY JAMES' NOVEL *THE AMERICAN*

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Abstract

Henry James committed himself to making his way as an author outside America. Thus it formed a part of the brief that James drew up both for and against his countrymen and evinces the influence of French literature on James as he oscillated between the genres of the romance and realistic novel, the many-layered French political scene that he incorporated into the novel, the complex gender roles of his characters, and the pervasive effect of capitalism upon them. Its simple romance is the history of man's dream of better worlds, travel to strange lands, and marriage to high and noble ladies. *The American* reveals a deep affection for American innocence and deep awareness that such innocence carries with it a fund of ignorance. Its novelty lay in its international character. It is a masterpiece of American romanticism in which James shows us his profound grasp of what he was ultimately to call the Americano-European legend.

Paper Identification



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In James' youthful novel *The American*, Christopher Newman goes to the cultural capital of the old world, Paris, to give himself some refinements. Newman is rich, a naïve admirer of culture

but so sincere in what little he knows that he is not ridiculous in his pursuit of the best that Europe can give. In Paris, he is accepted as a charming, innocent American taking a look at a 'poor, effete old world'. But he conceives himself as a representative of a high civilization, and the novel gradually reveals what it is which makes the kind of civilization he has in mind. In Europe, there is one word to use in regard to Americans-vulgar, vulgar. This refers to their ignorance-their stingy, defiant, grudging attitude towards everything European. 'Americans in Europe are 'outsiders', James states that this is the great point. James' second great point is that he wants to drop the use of distancing terms that fix Americans as foreign objects eyed by one who is himself an 'outsider' to their condition. But Newman is 'the modern man', he is not the man of the part who possesses history-that is the manners and memories out of which culture is made. It means the Americans are "argumentative national self-consciousness" and "a profound imperturbable unsuspectingness" a quality that "has always been, we suggest, the mark of great nationalities." The great innocence by the usual American tourists is perhaps his most general quality. The American in Europe often enters into what we have called the conscious phase by a great deal of irritation. Caustic Europeans, it turns out, serve the Hegelian process by jolting Americans back into a fuller awareness of their own nature. The path to self-knowledge is hardly smooth. As James emphasizes, there are "many anomalies and crookedness in the lot of the conscious American" caught in the hard stare of "the others". Leon Edel believes that James wrote into Newman's character all that he himself disliked about his homeland. James wrote in a letter to Howells on March 30, 1877" "I have written my story from Newman's side of the wall."1

Newman is a money - maker who has won his way through difficulties usual enough in the generation of Americans to which he belongs. It was his necessity to make money so that he could be independent. The brash confident American, who had been humiliated by Europeans, would himself humiliate his humiliators by forgiving them, by withholding his power to demolish

them. It sounds like the solution of a dream-like reverie. The materialist who had striven to conquer by means of marriage is shown at the end of this international parable to demonstrate a finer moral tone than the Parisian inheritors and protectors of established 'consideration'. Up to this point, he had attempted to conquer European 'culture'. The new man who had been introduced as a character with an eye in which innocence and experience were singularly-blended', who had sought the more or less anonymous Claire as the crown jewel of his Europe-raiding booty, had finally shown them all that the cowboy was superior in fine sensibility, as

well as in wealth. Leon Edel states, "What happened to *The American* was that it set off in one direction - a direction that gave great pleasure to its readers - and then it sharply veered into pathos and disaster".²

The American is James' first major transformation of the romance into his own brand of realism. Critics are fond of discussing Newman's education from innocence to disillusioned knowledge. R.W. Butterfield's argument is representative: "It should be noted that *The American* changes character, as Newman's vulnerable naivety develops into a self-protective awareness. It begins as a novel that is 'realistic' in its social observation and narrative material, yet one that is seen chiefly through the eyes of a man who has a 'romantic' vision of Europe, a vision altogether too benign and 'innocent'. It concludes as a novel in which melodramatic and 'romantic' events (duels, dark secrets, devilish glances, murders, flights into convents) expose the 'reality' of Europe, which Newman now sees, in all its thickness and complexity of history and evil, beneath the deceptive surface of appearances."³ Yet, Newman's consistent ignorance of French politics and history supports another view: that Newman's fatality is his utter failure to turn his experience into any kind of instructive or useful knowledge.

The sensitive character of James' conception of the central figure should have an active imaginative faculty and with its help should be able to enrich further the impressions it receives through direct observation and carry with him a dash of this romanticism. Yet that novel, James continues would not have been *The American* as originally conceived from its inception was committed to the idea of 'wrong' done to Newman with his subsequently gaining access to knowledge of the Bellegardes' evil nature and past dark deeds, and thus holding them in his power. This in turn leads to James' parenthetical reflection on power as the defining characteristic of romance: "It is as difficult, I said above, to trace the diving line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south; but I am not sure an infallible sign of the latter is not this rank vegetation of the 'power of bad people that good get into, or vice versa. It is so rarely, alas, into our power that any one gets!"⁴

Newman is the sensitive character and the central figure who has the imaginative faculty for romanticism. In his preface to *The American* James defines romantic as "the things... we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire" So, there is the fusion of realism and romance in *The American*. Henry James, writing in Paris in 1875 in the preface to *The American*, recalls the fascination of the novelist with the "particular cluster of circumstances with the life of the splendid city playing

up in it like a flashing mountain in a marble basin." 5 The novelist has its pattern; he has also his wide choice of subject as James commented in *The Art of Fiction*: "There is no impression of life no manner of seeing it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer place."6 The artist absorbs every experience. James also points out preface that the intensity of the creative effort to get into a character with a view to possessing it at its completest and thereby attaining unity and the effect of a centre which is to be prudently used is a fine fascination for the novelist. The full possession of a character's personality will act like the guiding light in the expedition of the novelist and serve as a centre to keep in check the fissiparous tendencies of a novel.

James' successful vindication of the character's point of view in his Novels changed in a perceptible manner the entire technique of fiction. It was a method calculated to make possible the complete rendering of experience by putting the reader in direct communication with the awareness of characters. The American receives a fair amount of attention in the magazine James' placement of Newman in the midst of the Parsian atmosphere of perfectly cold politeness and perfect inanity has the fortunate consequence of setting off "our American barbarian lover" to advantage. That Newman is able "to interest the reader" is "striking proof of Mr. James' power as a novelist".7 Though the reviewer felt that it would be rash to express an opinion on the story till it is completed, he believed it was safe to say that it was by far the most important contribution to American fiction made for a long time. The American is the novel which we may take as on the whole perhaps most representative of his early quality, and as in its kind a masterpiece of simple rather than complex art, but unmistakably of art. Henry James' self-consciousness with him has passed into poise, cultivation has brought forth luxuriant bloom. And the fact that he composed from the beginning with his eye on the object, that he saturated himself from year to year with the experience upon which it was his steady intension to draw for His pictures of life, gave his work the consistent quality that wraps it together.

Henry James, as we have analysed, on the basis of this novel, is an artist who takes experience alone to write his fiction. Believes that art lives on experience. His own brother, William James was a Radical empiricist, believed

he did, that experience cannot be encompassed. In his own essay "The Art of Fiction", Henry James points out that experience has to be endless, for which the artist has to be curious to know more and more of it. It is on this basis that he thought of giving his Novels the central theme, popularly called, the international theme. Curiosity as to what lies beyond is the basis of his art. He

makes his American characters to come to Europe, precisely because Europe has centuries of

Experience at its back. In comparison, America is a new continent. That is Why; his characters are often deceived, because they have limited Experience.

In this regard, James has no theory of writing novels. In fact, his novels are neither written to a theory, nor has the novelist any conviction, or consciousness of what life has to be or is. On the contrary, he feels he was not the worse for that. In this respect, he is more with Dickens than with Hardy, or Thackeray, for instance. It is for this reason that his novels have a tint of incompleteness. The novel under study may look naïve, but they are better for that because the novelist does not put any theory on them. In *The American*, Christopher Newman goes to the cultural capital of the old World, Paris, to give himself some refinements. In Paris, he is accepted as a charming and innocent American but he conceives himself as a representative of a high civilization, and the novel gradually reveals what it is which makes the kind of civilization he has in mind. He was ignorant of the psychological complexity of human relations. He knew the reality of Bellegardes and their evil nature that was hidden behind their good nature. But his civilization and his unregenerated good nature did not allow him to disclose the secret of them. The materialist who had striven to conquer by means of marriage is shown at the end of this International parable to demonstrate a liner moral tone than the Parisian inheritors and protectors of established consideration. Up to this point he had experience to conquer European 'culture'.

James fiction is ethical at base that is why he is novel leave his characters cheated deprived of their presumptions. He tried to sound a clear call of a simple living and high thinking and this message cannot fail to strike the reader. Experience, call it a point of view, always best, is our only guide, James seems to say.

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- ³R.W. Butterfield, **The American**, in **The Air of Reality : New Essay on Henry James**, ed. John Goode (London; Methuen, 1972) 9-10.
- ⁴Henry James, **The Art of the Novel : Critical Prefaces** Introduction by R.P. Blackmur (New York : 1962) 37.

⁵Henry James, **The Art of the Novel**, 23.

⁶Henry James, **The House of Fiction : The Art of Fiction**, 45.

⁷James' Review, **The Nation**, 14, January 11, 1877, Norton Critical Edition ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978) 29.

