

## HENRY JAMES & THE CONFLICT OF CULTURES

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper deals with the conflict of cultures in James' fiction which is usually dramatized by a typical innocent American who is confronted by characters who represent sophisticated and somewhat crippling European traditions. This does not imply that James is against the observance of social manners. The heroine in Daisy Miller is condemned for being openly a flirt and she dies symbolizing her inability to adapt to European social standards. James is only against dogmatizing social conventions to the extent of restricting the freedom of individuals. Christopher Newman in The American retreats to America avoiding the evil and sophisticated Bellegardes in Paris without compromising his integrity. However, Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady stands the challenge posed by European tradition. She is able to maintain her goodness and confront a world dominated by conventions and evil, although the price is quite high: it is her happiness and spontaneity that she has compromised.*

**Key words:** Henry James, cultural conflict, International theme, Individualism, spontaneity, sophistication, tradition, adaptability.

Humans are social animals who can never survive without some sort of society. Yet, ironically, their main problem in life is connected with their power of adaptability to their social circles, whether this is related to their relation with their family or the world outside. Psychologists have recently concentrated on defining intelligence as basically related to humans' ability to survive and adapt themselves to the environment in which they find themselves. In sociology there is a strong tendency to illustrate humans as basically determined by social forces that they can hardly control. In literature there are many writers, like Zola, Gissing and Dreiser, who emphasize the impact of environment on humans and illustrate them as a prey to circumstances outside themselves. By contrast, there are those who are more concerned with the individualism of humans than with the social forces which influence their life, as in the writings of Lawrence, Woolf and Becket.

Although Henry James can be classified as a writer who is more concerned with refining and cultivating the consciousness of his protagonists, he never neglects the social milieu into which his characters are plunged. Indeed, if anything, it is the outside world which helps his characters gain the necessary experience needed for their development. He is by and large concerned with a class of people who are financially secure but need to explore life more fully and interact with people of a different culture in order to become more sophisticated and better equipped to deal with any situation. The bitter irony in most of his fiction is that his characters do learn their lessons but the price is quite high: they lose some of their spontaneity and although their consciousness becomes more enlightened, this makes them somewhat crippled; they are too good to avenge themselves or seek material gains out of their situation. They usually prefer to be victims bearing their suffering in silence rather than cheap victimizers who lower themselves to the level of personal revenge.

The typical character in James's fiction, especially that type which has been characterized by critics as belonging to the international scene where two cultures are exposed to each other, is that of innocent or naïve Americans who are willing to 'rush where angels fear to tread' in order to gain experience and realize

themselves. They are immediately exposed to an older and more sophisticated culture in Europe, where they have to confront values, traditions, institutions, and ethics quite different from their own.

James firmly believes in the sanctity of humans and he sees the development of each individual towards achieving self-realization as the ultimate good. In this way, he unequivocally belongs to the liberal tradition which fosters values promoting human freedom and self-knowledge. His fiction is peopled with characters searching for some sort of individual meaning out of their situation and encounter with life and people. Whatever paves the way towards self-fulfillment James sees as essentially good; by contrast, every obstacle which hinders this search he considers ultimately evil.

The obstacles which confront the individual are usually related to the various laws, conventions, and traditions which often stifle the individuality of humans and in some cases cripple their movement and search for the good life. Thus, the villains in James's fiction are those who represent the voice of tradition and pose themselves as the authority which supervises social conventions and restrictions. James of course is not a naive idealist who always ignores the role of cultural conventions which may in certain cases function as a sound basis for communication between the individual and society, but he is against the rigidity of social institutions which restrict human freedom and also against dogmatizing those conventions.

In *Daisy Miller* James seems to criticize the heroine for failing to observe European social rules of behavior which are quite different from those adopted in her American society. Daisy presents an extreme case of American naivety. She is openly and defiantly a flirt and she is quite confident that she is on the right track in her behavior which is outrageous for both the European and American communities in Italy. She protests:

The only thing I don't like ... is the society. There isn't any society; or, if there is, I don't know where it keeps itself. Do you? I suppose there is some society somewhere, but I haven't seen anything of it. I'm fond of society, and I have a great deal of it.... In New York I had lots of society. Last winter I had seventeen dinners given me; and three of them were by gentlemen ... I have more friends in New York than in Schenectady -more gentlemen friends; and more young friends too... I have always had a great deal of gentlemen's society.... (James, *Daisy Miller* 18)

She rejects the advice of her would-be friends Winterbourne and Mrs. Walker insisting on behaving as she desires. She thinks that in as much as she harms nobody then she is free to adopt any style of life which suits her. Furthermore, she feels that she is only misunderstood by her society and persists in her refusal not to be told what to do and what not to do. The question is: can she be considered a victim of society which suppresses her desire and individuality? It is true that we have Giovanelli, the opportunistic little Italian, who is definitely exploiting her lack of experience and encouraging her to persist in being a flirt. There is also the implication that he has his own designs to entrap her into marriage and in this way she is on the same line of her American compatriots whose cash is the main motive for their seduction. But we also have Winterbourne, who seems genuinely interested in her and who provides her with an opportunity of having a relationship based on understanding and mutual affection and respect. He is truly pained 'to see so much that was pretty and undefended and natural sink so low in human estimation'. Yet she constantly turns him down giving him the wrong impression that she might be engaged to Giovanelli, and he becomes quite perplexed and confused not knowing what to do. His wondering 'how far her eccentricities were generic, and national and how far they were personal' has some authorial force which implies that her behavior can be attributed to her misguided upbringing that fosters her absolute confidence in herself to do what she wants regardless of social rules. James seems to be supporting the observance of manners in a civilized community and to imply that goodness of heart is not sufficient to deal with any situation. Daisy's naivety symbolically drives her towards death as a sign of her inability to adapt to the demands of a

respectable social life. She has been warned not to visit the Coliseum by moonlight but she throws herself into the mouth of death, indicating that she will never learn prudence. James arouses our sympathy with a good-hearted flirt but he also condemns American failure to grasp social manners in the outside world. In a word, Daisy Miller is not only a victim of cultural differences and the society around her but also of all the elements which constitute her individuality, including those which tempt her to be a flirt.

The relationship between the individual and society is quite intricate and complicated. It is very difficult to accept absolute sets of principles and ideals to be imposed on every situation. It would seem that the logical and pragmatic way is to work out a flexible system whereby every situation demands a special kind of judgment. The liberal minded writers usually reject any approach to life based on rigid and dogmatic rules and conventions. They are aware, however, that the individual cannot openly challenge society and they advocate a kind of compromise which facilitates the process of communication among the members of a particular community. As a liberal humanist, James firmly believes in the capability of humans to rely on their resources and discover the good life for themselves. He is also aware of the evil engulfing society, of avarice, lust, greed, and the world of appearances. Nonetheless, individuals for him cannot be sheltered indoors; they have at least to become aware of evil, and of those who represent it, without of course being affected by them. Humans have to acquaint themselves with all forms of life without compromising their integrity.

This is actually the dilemma of the hero of James's well known novel *The American*, who again combines goodness and naivety in his character, but at least he is willing to learn. As his name indicates, Christopher Newman is an American who yearns to go back to his roots in Europe, and it is Paris, the heart of tradition, that he decides to explore. He is wealthy and intends to 'buy' not only a piece of culture but also the best wife that money can make available. He wants to possess the best pictures in the world of art and to marry Claire de Centre, a widowed daughter of the Bellegardes family in Paris. Although impressed by his money, the aristocratic family, to his dismay, does not find him suitable for their daughter, especially in terms of social manners. Claire is forbidden him despite her tacit approval of the match. Eventually he possesses secret information which might incriminate and destroy the whole family, but turns down the idea of bargaining for Claire, who is made to enter a convent, a symbol of stifling her emotions. He returns to America disappointed but with a sense of personal triumph and moral superiority that he has not lowered himself to the level of the Bellegrades.

There is no doubt that James in this novel presents the negative side of social conventions and the evil pervading the aristocratic class. The Bellegrades prevent both the American and their daughter from achieving their happiness in their own way. They prefer to bury their daughter alive rather than give her a chance to pursue her happiness. In other words, they form a kind of barrier between two people who desire to fulfill themselves through marriage, and they represent the oppressive power which usually stifles the individuality of humans and leaves them with little room for maneuver. The Bellegrades are well mannered and have mastered the art of communication in a highly civilized society but they are deep down evil and corrupt. They are prepared to sacrifice even their very humanity to keep up a false façade of appearances. Not only have they led an artificial life which is an incarnation of death but they have also inflicted death upon others, whether this is literal as in the case of the old Marquis, or metaphorical as in the case of Claire and her suitor. In a word, their cultural maturity is not supported by a sense of moral responsibility. By contrast, Christopher Newman has a heart of gold but his lack of experience deceives him into believing that his cash can create miracles for him even in the sophisticated world of art and the complicated sphere of human communication and relationship. In some way, he represents Rousseau's idea of the noble savage whose goodness is a raw material that cannot be corrupted by civilization (Powers, 48-9). His return to America can be seen not so much as a sign of his total defeat but rather as symbolic of the triumph of his heart and unwillingness to enter in an evil world where culture and conventions discard

the human side in dealing with everything. In order not to exaggerate in romanticizing his hero (1) and to appear chauvinistic on the American side, the author presents Claire de Centre in a favorable way. She is both well-mannered and human and made a victim by her own family. James also introduces her admirable brother Valentine who befriends the American and is again made a victim of cultural conventions and traditions. He dies in a dual to symbolize his defeat in the face of conventional society whose evil is pervasive in all spheres of life.

Whatever the implications of Christopher Newman's return to America may be and regardless of whether or not he has become experienced enough to meet his future life and adventures, he decides to avoid the challenge posed by the evil Bellegardes once and for all. By contrast, Isabel Archer, the heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*, decides not only to confront evil but to embrace it as well, unconcerned that it might affect her in any way. For after discovering that she has been entrapped into marriage to the satanic figure of Gilbert Osmond she decides to return to him by her own free will, aware of the difficulties of having to live with somebody who is the embodiment of cultural 'conventions' itself, while rejecting a final attempt to save her from her situation. As a typical Jamesian character that is aware of her need for experience and eagerness to explore the world, Isabel starts her journey into the old world of Europe. She has a great desire for life and she is particularly endowed with moral spontaneity. She is plunged into Europe, again a world of long cultural traditions, firm conventions and established institutions. As she develops, she becomes more sophisticated but regrettably less spontaneous and natural. She rejects two marriage proposals, both of which might limit her freedom and threaten her independence, and both are looked at as a shelter from the outside world. Her marriage to the Europeanized American Gilbert Osmond seems to her initially as a prospect which will enable her to keep both her independence and freedom. But, to her consternation, she discovers that she has been victimized by his evil, his 'emotional cannibalism', and by a form of life which looks like 'suffocation'. It is made abundantly clear that her individuality has almost been devoured by an artificial world which is dead in human terms, and only concerned with appearances. Her admirable and self-denying cousin, Ralph Touchett, who is devoted to her, observes:

Certainly she had fallen into exaggerations - she who used to care so much for the pure truth.... Of old she had been curious, and now she was indifferent, and yet in spite of her indifference her activity was greater than ever... there was an amplitude and a brilliancy to her personal arrangements that gave a touch of insolence to her beauty. Poor human hearted Isabel, what perversity had bitten her? Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good heavens, what a function!' he then woefully exclaimed. He was lost in wonder at the eternal mystery of things.

(James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 143-4)

Why Isabel returns to Gilbert Osmond, in spite of her recognition of his evil and conventionality, is probably related to her pride as a female who has rejected all sorts of temptations to contain and protect her. For one thing, she does not like anybody to gloat over her misery since she has been warned against marrying Gilbert Osmond. For another, her sense of duty, rightly or not, would not allow her to break off the marriage. However, the more convincing reason, which is firmly established in the world of the novel itself, is that she has become a new, person capable of dealing with evil on its own term. She visits her dying cousin Ralph against Osmond's wish, which means that she is not going to be a slave to her husband. Moreover, she learns that her cousin has all the way through been in love with her. Thus, armed with his love and memory and with her new personality, she willfully determines to go back to a world of evil, convention, and artificiality, possibly because now she is a different person and in a more powerful

position to redeem the world, or at least to give it a try.

This solution may appear too romantic and far-fetched, but James, through his suggestive and evocative style and building all sorts of spiritual associations with Gardencourt, the abode of the Touchetts, persuades us of the possibility of this interpretation. There are, indeed, the implications that Gardencourt is suggestive of Eden which presumably both arms and inspires Isabel to go back and do something about the world rather than resign herself to the evasive solution of Christopher Newman.

There are many other works by James which illustrate his concern with how individuals can be exploited by cultural appearances and society whether these belong to the international scene or not. The usual choice of American characters to represent innocence and of Europeans or more ironically Europeanized Americans to represent evil and convention is indicative of the general situation of humans, that they are initially spontaneous and later corrupted by the demands of civilization and culture.

It should by now be clear that the idea of cultural conflict, especially the aspects connected with the international theme, is well established in James's fiction. However, the relationship between characters is not always straightforward or easy to determine. The subtle and complicated psychology of humans does not encourage such a patterning. Some characters may sometimes obtain a lot of pleasure out of inviting their 'tormentors' to use them. The flirtatious Daisy Miller enjoys challenging society. Christopher Newman is gratified by his wealth while throwing himself in the heart of Europe. And finally Isabel Archer, despite all the odds or rather because of them, satisfies herself with being a female challenging a whole world of evil.

### Works Cited

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### Notes

1. F. R. Leavis (in *The Great Tradition*, Penguin Books, 1980, 164) refers to the American as 'romantic, unreal and ridiculous', a charge which is refuted by R. W. Butterfield in his fine essay 'The American' in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), 19.