

Encounters with the Old World: Henry James' The American

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present fundamental aspects of the encounter between Americans and Europeans, interaction which results in perpetual misunderstandings and conflict. The analysis is centered on Henry James' The American and it portrays the Old Continent - seen as a fascinating Orient- as discovered by the main character of this novel, who perceives the real nature of the space that had previously enthralled him. This paper demonstrates the fact that these two spaces represent two opposed poles, characterized by a different mentality and different social mores and that it is exactly because of this social gap that the inexperienced new comer encounters difficulties in adapting to the new civilization.

Key words

identity, New World, Old World, difference

The American, published in 1877, is one of the novels that deal with James' International Theme and its very title suggests that it is about the stereotypical behavior of cultural types. James 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, the works of the American writer portraying instances of the encounter between these two opposed societies. It must be said that James' character, Newman, like all his other Americans who come to Europe, has something from James himself. Henry James

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left his home land for Europe in order to enrich his experience of life and found himself on a different territory. Travel is seen as a means of discovering an unknown and appealing world, an alluring Orient, “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, landscapes and remarkable experiences” [9, 1]. Christopher Newman, the central character, tries to find a world different from the harsh realities of the 19th century American business and comes to the tempting old continent only to encounter its ugliness and evilness, but learns how to preserve his moral nobleness despite the corrupting factors. As Oltean puts it, travel was an opportunity “to engage in a constructive questioning and self-examination of previously unquestioned beliefs and habits” [7, 272]. The ocean voyage stands for the voyage away from the familiar and toward a foreign land, a different culture, and other people, and it also represents an alternative mode of being. Newman’s discovery of another civilization and his ideas about the new reality he meets are best described by the author himself, who says that “in traveling abroad it was an excellent thing to look into the life of the country [...] he [Mr. Nioche] revealed ‘that stiff’ sum of civilization and sophistication which offered our hero so much easy entertainment and proposed so many curious problems to his idle but active mind” [4, 67].

Firstly, it is important to describe the prototype of the American in Europe, seen as an apparently simple character projected against a complex background. The one coming from the New World incarnates beauty, “innocence”, “liberty” [11, 114] and acts in a free, natural manner, “not artificial and constrained” [5, 31]. On the other hand, Europeans are characterized by “cynicism” [6, 129], “corruption” [13, 219], “despotism” and “sophistication” [11, 114]. From the first pages of the novel one can discover that Newman represents the prototype of the American: he is described as a “long, lean and muscular” man, with “the flat jaw and sinewy neck which are frequent in the American type” [4, 1-2]. The reader first sees him in the Museum of the Louvre, and this is the first moment when his American ignorance can be perceived: “Raphael and Titian and Rubens were a new kind of arithmetic, and they made him for the first time in his life wonder at his vagueness” [4, 2]. Therefore, he is shown in the space of the French culture, which he cannot understand, and where he cannot find his place. Gettmann describes him as “an embodiment of the commercial” and as “an American democrat who conducts himself as an equal to any man, a natural nobleman set among the Parisians aristocrats” [2, 55]. These are the traits that make him an outsider and make the French men repudiate him. Mr. Babcock, a man with whom Newman traveled for some time, reproaches his lack of profundity, as he says that his friend appears “to care only for the pleasure of the hour” and for “the mere amusement” [4, 97]. In addition, Anderson considers Newman to be characterized by various traits: he is “innocent and provincial, patriotic and culturally ignorant, youthful and robust in

the enjoyment of life, strong-willed and forceful in character, genial and open in personal bearing” [1, 53].

The discrepancy in mentality of these opposed poles is the reason why the union of the people from these societies is not possible. A first example of these differences is given by Newman’s first action in Paris, when it is revealed that his manners are different from the ones of Parisians. He offers to buy Noemie’s copy of the Murillo Madonna at the Louvre and although the price is high he buys it delightedly, as he is not actually aware of the fact that buying a copy does not make him the owner of an accurate masterpiece. Later on, he is shocked to hear from Noemie herself that she does not know how to paint at all, and this indicates his innocence and also his ignorance, as it is a moment that alludes to a lot of misunderstandings and deceiving moments that he will live exactly because of his nature, or, as Anderson puts it, the episode expresses the “dividing wall of art and manners” that represents “a comic prelude to later episodes where the relation becomes symbolically important” [1, 46]. Another instance of this contrast is shown by the houses of Newman and Valentin, which reflect the difference between their esthetic tastes, as a symbol of their individuality. As identity is directly associated with “place”, and, more importantly, with “the place we call home” [14, 65], their houses echo the gap existing between them, as figures of distinct worlds. While Newman lives in a residence with gilded saloons on the Boulevard Haussman, Valentin’s house in a basement on the Rue d’ Anjou St. Honoré, to the surprise of the American. He thinks the young Bellegarde’s house to be “low, dusky and contracted” and he is “puzzled by the [...] incoherence of the furniture” [4, 140], expressing the disparate characteristics of the two men, the difference between “the old and the new”, between “taste and the lack of it” [1, 49]. The contrast between them, as symbols of two different spaces, is interestingly expressed by Newman himself, who states that in America, growing men have “old heads and young hearts” whereas in France they have “young heads and very aged hearts” [4, 134], insinuating the corrupt nature and lack of moral principles of the Europeans.

The American’s expectations and ideas about the new space are entirely different from the reality he is about to discover and the attitude he shows in the beginning will suffer a major transformation in the end. A moment which points to the reasons why Newman came to Europe is represented by one of his conversations with Mr. Tristram. It seems that having made his fortune, he wanted to change the pattern of his life: “I want the biggest kind of entertainment a man can get. People, places, art, nature, everything! ... I’ve come to see Europe, to get the best out of it I can. I want to see all the great things and do what the best people do” [4, 29]. His statement proves that he aspires to enrich his experience, to learn more about the world that has remained unfamiliar for him so far and to live the life of the fascinating civilization of the Old World. He also believes the culture of old

Europe, with its art, its architecture and its women, to be not only the best, but also something he can possess, alluding to the idea of the captivating Orient as a space that must be discovered and appropriated. His purpose is to find and obtain several of the most valued cultural resources, and as a result he buys Noemie's copies of famous paintings, and to find one of those women, who are considered to be the best, and to marry her. In this way he can consolidate his place in society or, as Torsney affirms, he can show his goal of "a cultural imperialist" and he can "enhance his own position" [12, 41]. He tries to gather representative objects for the new space he encounters, this symbolizing his attempt to conquer Europe on the whole. It is essential to state that his desire to have power over the Old World does not stop just at owning objects, but, what is more, his intent to marry Claire de Cintre is another fact that points to his nature of collector. He sees the French woman as an object of conquest for the explorer, and perhaps his courtship fails exactly because he treats her in the same manner he treats an art object. Newman transforms everything in objects of a collection, "natives and sites of Paris" becoming "collectables" [7, 272]. He is described as an art collector who wishes to own too much and who does not become conscious of his high ambitions, not even when he desires to marry Claire, a woman of a higher standard than him. His wish of possessing is revealed even from the first lines of the book, when the reader is informed about a gesture which will prove to be a symbol of this character: he takes "serene possession of an ottoman and outstretches his legs" [4, 1]. Thus, his desire of conquering is expressed, indirectly, from the first page, pointing to what is about to happen further on, as the hero's attitude in the museum can be analyzed as a way of exposing his attitude towards the whole Old Continent.

Another very significant element, alluding once more, to the differences between these two spaces, to the character's ambitions and to a game of conquest, is Christopher Newman's name. His first name is a reference to the colonizer Christopher Columbus, and he symbolizes the Westerner who "repeats an archaic conquest of Europe" [7, 270]. This idea is expressed by Mrs. Tristram when she tells Newman that he is "the great Western Barbarian, stepping forth in his innocence and might, gazing a while at this poor effete Old World and then swooping down on it" [4, 380]. Likewise, when he talks with Noemie Nioche, he proudly asks her if she has heard about Christopher Columbus, and her answer shows their difference in mentality. While Newman is proud to think that he is named after the one who discovered America, the man who showed Europeans the way to another continent, Noemie states that he "showed Americans the way to Europe" [4, 8], expressing the Europeans' idea that they are better than the others. His second name expresses the idea of change, of alteration and of adaptation. "Newman" symbolizes a new person, who was transformed by the European experience and whose way of thinking was modified. In consequence, James "links

Columbus's given name, Christianity's complicity in Euro colonialism, and the Enlightenment's dream of the 'new man' to remind us of a history we repeat precisely because we won't remember its horrors" [8, 205].

The American's situation in the new location, after having crossed the boundaries between the two spaces, shows the dissimilarities between the two cultures and this is demonstrated by Newman's position in France, country seen as a closed space, symbolizing the rigidity of the Old Continent. This contrast is best shown when the hero goes to the house of the Bellegardes for the first time. He has no information about how this family is or about the place they live in, except for a few things that Mrs. Tristram told him. Therefore, his first encounter with the space of this family surprises him, and the house is described as a place which does not allow the access of strangers:

The house to which he had been directed had a dark, dusty, painted portal, which swung open in answer to his ring. It admitted him into a wide, graveled court, surrounded on three sides with closed windows [...] The place was all in the shade; it answered to Newman's conception of a convent [4, 59- 60].

This description illustrates the house as a fixed and closed world, where the access of the outsiders is denied, or, as Anderson puts it, "the house is described in terms of an actual wall of separation" [1, 57]. A second feature related to the difference between the French family and the hero is the latter's ignorance, revealed during their meetings. When Newman comes to their house he gives signs of not understanding the Old World and the role played by the Bellegardes in the history of their country. For instance, his question "Your house is tremendously old?" [4, 117], representative for the visitor coming from the New World, and Valentin's response "That is old or new, according to your point of view" [4, 117], pointing to the date 1627 - written on the chimney, shows that the American is incapable of comprehending the French family and divulges their different mentalities. Therefore, while Newman tries "to contain the cultural other", Valentin "undermines Newman's attempt to fix the culture he has come to colonize by omitting any discussion of the significance of the date, thus clouding his history for the would-be conqueror" [12, 42]. As representative for their countries and societies, the characters are described as free or rigid as well. Newman, Valentin and Claire are the ones who are described as being open to experience and representing an open society, while Urbain and Marquise de Bellegarde are satisfied with the place they have in the rigid society and are representative for the closed space.

The malefic influence of Europe cannot be perceived by the naïve American, even if there are some moments that could allude to what is about to happen,

highlighting the true nature of an old society. Mr. Babcock, the one with whom Christopher Newman traveled for some time, is the one that anticipates in a way the malefic influence of Europe. Babcock “mistrusted the ‘European’ temperament, he suffered from the ‘European’ climate, he hated the ‘European’ dinner hour; ‘European’ life seemed to him unscrupulous and impure” (AM 92). Another instance of prediction of what will occur is when Valentin says something that alludes to his family secret: “we’re very strange people [...] my mother’s strange, my brother’s strange, and I verily believe I’m stranger than either [...] old trees have crooked branches, old houses have queer cracks, old races have odd secrets. Remember that we’re eight hundred years old!” [4, 162]. Therefore, this points to the European people’s complexity and vicious nature, very distinct from the idea that the American had about this society.

Towards the end of *The American* the opposition between the Old World’s cynicism and the New World’s innocence is best exemplified by the discovery that the main character makes, discovery that not only shows Newman’s reactions when he sees that the French have rejected him even if they are not much better, but could also lead to a different end. He learns about the Bellegardes’s family secret: it seems that the deceased Bellegarde patriarch wrote a letter, on his death bed, accusing his own wife of his death. Newman first contemplates revenge, as his eyes are opened to the true situation and he considers the letter to be a possible solution. He thinks that this will be the way to bring Claire de Cintre back to him, as her family will approve their marriage for fear that Newman could reveal the content of the letter. He even thinks of a plan, of how to manipulate the French in order to obtain what he wishes, but, in the end, he decides to forget all about his vengeance and to burn the proof of the horrible crime, feeling even ashamed for what he intended to do. There is a moment though, when he throws the letter in the fire, when it seems he is not convinced he did the right thing by letting them escape. The instance when he suddenly turns to the burning piece of paper shows the “messy inter-spaces between self-preservation and self-surrender” [10, 286]. His attitude and the decision of remaining an honest man reveal the American’s moral superiority over the Europeans, the ones that rejected him precisely for not coming up to their standards. He comes from a different space, governed by other types of social rules, and he encounters a world characterized by corruption and falsity. He could have been influenced and corrupted, but he manages to preserve his innocence and he remains just a “good fellow wronged” [4, 528]. As Goldsmith states, he represents “a character who refuses to be victimized by the tricks of destiny, who triumphs in the end by means of the rigid control he exercises over his consciousness” [3, 119]. Christopher Newman, by renouncing to take revenge over the ones that hurt him, shows that he can preserve his American incorruptibility and innocence despite the corrupting factors.

In conclusion, this paper has explored instances of the encounter between Americans and Europeans, examining the new comer's initial expectations and beliefs and his final understanding of the real character of the Old World. This has been achieved by capturing different aspects of the contrast between the Old Continent and the New Continent, seen as spaces revealing, on the one hand, a constrained world, and, on the other hand, a free one. The paper has also illustrated the fact that the American is able to overcome the difficulties caused by his encounter with the European space and to preserve his virtue despite the disappointment caused by the European society and despite its corrupting influence.

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