

RESEARCH ARTICLE



DEPICTING THE CONTRASTS WHILE REMAINING NEUTRAL IN “THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY”

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ABSTRACT

Among the subjects and the themes in the works of Henry James, his international theme of ‘America versus Europe’ is the most recurrent one. James’ literary career is divided into three periods, and the international theme is the main subject of the first and the third period. Through his international theme, James had tried to show the contrasts which he believed to exist between America and Europe. *The Portrait of a Lady* is his most well-known masterpiece; which again deals with the international theme of America versus Europe. All parts of this novel, like its characters, settings and events are used like a chain to show the contrast between America and Europe. But this study is going to discuss that although James tries to show the contrast between America and Europe, he remains neutral towards America and Europe completely skillfully. He defined neither America nor Europe to be the superior or the inferior one. As a realist writer, he only shows the reality about America and Europe and leaves it to his audiences to decide about them. The main contrast in this novel is between American morality and innocence and European high culture and sophistication.

Key Terms: Henry James, International theme, America versus Europe, Neutrality

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INTRODUCTION

The Portrait of a Lady is a well-known masterpiece of Henry James. All the parts of this novel are like a chain which helps James to show the contrast of America and Europe while remaining neutral towards them. The main way which James chooses to start and progress his story in this novel, is his common way of bringing an innocent American girl in a European society, this young and innocent girl in this novel is Isabel Archer. The entire story is shown through the process of Isabel’s decision for coming and living in Europe with the hope of gaining a better life and a high culture and civilization. But again, like most of James’ well known heroines, this American young girl is deceived in Europe. Because of her innocence and lack of knowledge, she was not

able to read correctly the people around her and so was not able to make correct decisions. She has ‘American innocence’ as the result of living in moral American society and is deceived by sophisticated European who lives in a high culture.

Actually “deceived American lady in Europe” is the “common basic pattern” of Henry James’ international theme (MohammadiMoghadam8886). Through these deceived American young ladies in Europe, James shows that America is the place of morality while Europe is the place of high culture, so Americans have innocence while Europeans are sophisticated.

The Portrait of a Lady shows these contrasts in the best way because James used all the parts of the story, including the characters, cultures, settings and

events for his purpose to show the contrast between America and Europe. But it is important to know that he defined neither America nor Europe as the superior or the inferior one. James as a realistic writer is completely neutral towards America and Europe, while showing their contrasts.

DISCUSSION

Right at the moment of starting the story, James depicts a scene in which some American characters are sitting for an afternoon tea, and are discussing about Isabel Archer, their young American relative, who is coming to Europe. Richard Chase believes even this scene of an afternoon tea drinking has a message behind it:

On the broad, sloping lawn of the mansion, James calls Gardencourt we discover people taking tea, and they are finding agreeable, not only because it tastes good, but because drinking it is a mild ritual by which they show themselves to be a part of a way of life... (1)

The way of life which they are trying to be matched to, is the European way of life. All these Americans had left America and had come to Europe in the search of a high culture. They think of Europe as a place of culture, so to live like Europeans, means being cultural for these Americans. Actually Isabel also is coming to Europe again in the search of a high culture and a better life. And it is through her decision to leave America and live in Europe for its high culture that James develops his international theme of 'America versus Europe' in this novel.

All the elements in this novel cooperate in depicting this contrast between America and Europe, they all are planned to show Europe as a place of high culture and sophistication while America in the place of morality and innocence. Even the houses in this novel include in showing this contrast. Albany, the house where Isabel lived in America, is standing for America and Gardencourt, the house where Isabel lived in London, is standing for England or for Europe.

Albany, the house in America, has an important room named "the office". It shows the "officiousness" of America. Although America is full of lecture halls and platforms, it lacks royal residences and glorious palaces, and remarkable artistic figures which are the sign of high culture. But

the house in Europe was a symbol of Europe's high culture:

Her uncle's house seemed a picture made real; no refinement of the agreement was lost upon Isabel; the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world of gratified a need. The large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and ... the deep greenness outside that seemed always peeping in, the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a "property"... these things were to the taste of our young lady, whose taste played considerable parts in her emotions. (James 1917: 41)

Isabel's journey from Albany to Gardencourt is a symbol of her journey from America to the high culture of Europe. Through these houses James depicts that while America lacks an old culture, Europe is the place of old culture as it is a place of aesthetic. This aesthetic difference between America and Europe is also emphasized in the way that James represents the American and European characters. At the beginning, James describes Lord Warburton, who is an England, and Daniel Touchett and his son Ralph, who are Americans and had preserved their American characteristic or in James' words "American physiognomy". Lord Warburton and Ralph Touchett are both young characters, but the appearance of England young character is described in a way which shows that he is from a high culture, something which the appearance of the young American lacks. James describes Lord Warburton as:

One of the remarkably well-made man of five and thirty, with a face as English as that of the old gentleman I have just sketched was something else; a noticeably handsome face, fresh-coloured, fair and frank, with firm, straight features, a lively grey eye and rich chestnut beard. This person had a certain fortunate, brilliant exceptional look a happy temperament fertilized by a high civilization which would have made any observer envy him at a venture. (James 10)

But in describing Ralph, the American character, James writes:

His companion... was a person of quite a different pattern, who, although he might have excited grave curiosity, would not, like the other, have provoked you to wish

yourself, almost blindly, in his place. Tall, lean, loosely and feebly put together, he had an ugly, sickly, witty, charming face, furnished, but by no means decorated, with a straggling moustache and whisker. He looked clever and ill (James 10)

So the European character is described fresher and more attractive which represents the culture of his country, while the American one is described with some positive points, but disordered and unhealthy. So while American characters are represented "rootless" and look enviously to the high culture of Europe, the European ones are honoured by their culture, as Wegelin confirms "Warburton is not false simply because he is not rootless. The traditions which the other pretends to, he possesses securely, legitimately"(Wegelin74).

But the American characters, although are not from a high cultured country, are represented more independent than the European ones. It shows James's neutrality between America and Europe, he is just depicting the truth. And while he is discussing the contrasts, he is not going to show neither America nor Europe, to be superior or inferior one. This American independence is more emphasized in Isabel Archer, as an American lady, in contrast of European ones. Lord Warburton once describes Isabel as "the independent young lady" (James 16). Isabel confirms when she makes Goodwood informed that "I like my liberty too much" again to him she said "I can do what I choose, I belong quite to the independent class" (James 114). But this independence and liberty are not allowed for European lady, as Isabel was once warned by Lydia Touchett that "Young girls here [in Europe] don't sit alone with the gentlemen late at night" (James 49). But Isabel tries to preserve her American liberty while she does not accept the way that European ladies are restricted.

Another situation which proves James's neutrality toward America and Europe in this novel is what Wegelin discussed in his book. Wegelin believes, the way that James used to define the personality of Goodwood and Lord Warburton as a symbol of America and Europe, shows the neutrality of James:

The American manufacturer, engineer, mover of men, and the English Lord represent qualities which James considered more and more as typical of America and

Europe. but it is important to see that they represent these qualities in a neutral equilibrium of positive and negative, that each satisfies where the other does not, that if in Warburton the man is smothered by the "system," Goodwood shows his appetites "too simply and artlessly"; that if Warburton's virtues are too much cultivated, Goodwood's are not cultivated enough. (76)

Although James tries to show the contrast of America and Europe in this novel, he tries to remain neutral while showing Europe as the place of culture and America as the place of morality. The case of culture between America and Europe in this novel was discussed above, in the case of morality, there are some examples which show the contrast between America and Europe in their concern of morality.

The most obvious examples of immoral characters in this novel are Madame Merle and Osmond; they were Europeanized American. Living in a European society, cause them to be less careful about the moral dimensions of their behavior. We see that the persons who were trying to deceive Isabel are Madame Merle and Osmond and they were successful in their plan because of Isabel's innocence and lack of knowledge. Isabel was a young American recently arrived in Europe and she had not enough knowledge so was innocent. Madame Merle and Osmond like Isabel were Americans, but they had lived in a European society and had turned into Europeanized Americans, by living in a European society they gained experience and knowledge so they had lost their 'American innocence'. So the European culture due to its corruption and lack of morality (James believed that the culture of Europe was corrupted) took the innocence of Osmond and Madame Merle and made them experienced and sophisticated. As Wegelin discusses about Osmond in his book:

Osmond's corruption is of course not the result of his being an American. What it illustrates is the danger which Europe exposes Americans to. It is a danger inherent in the very process of ordering experience significantly the danger results from the action of spirit on experience. It is the danger typical of Europe (74)

So these Europeanized Americans arrange a wicked and immoral plane for innocent American Isabel. And here is the point that the contrast between the innocent American and the sophisticated Europeans or Europeanized Americans is presented. Lee Yu-ch'eng called Isabel's innocence as a "limitation", he believes:

Isabel, an Emma-like character, belongs to "a gallery of limited heroines" Her limitation lies in her immaturity and inability to penetrate the true face of reality. To break through this limitation, the price she pays is high indeed. (92)

By the death of Mr. Touchett, and with the help of Ralph, Isabel gained a good wealth and this was the motivation for Madame Merle and Osmond's immoral plan. Madame Merle and Osmond, who were each other's mistresses behave in a way that Isabel was so impressed by them and felt that Osmond is the only man in the world with whom she could turn her dream into reality. So in spite of Ralph's and Henrietta's warning, she decided to marry with Osmond, but the motivation of Madame Merle and Osmond behind this marriage was not, as they show, for the love of Isabel but the real motivation for this marriage was Isabel's money. They want to gain her wealth, so they arrange an immoral plane for a young girl and deceived her. About Osmond's motivation, Lee Yu-ch'eng mentions:

But Osmond, as noted by Oscar Cargill, "is Henry James's most completely evil character." As it has been plotted, his intention of marrying Isabel is chiefly for her wealth the fact is a tragic recognition which Isabel eventually reveals to her cousin on their last meeting: "He married me for the money" (96)

Another thing which shows the immoral aspect of Madame Merle and Osmond is their illegitimate daughter, Pansy. They show their immoral aspects once more when they tried to force Isabel to encourage Lord Warburton to marry their illegitimate daughter Pansy again for the wealth of Lord Warburton. The wicked and immoral personality of Osmond is once more obviously flourished when the message arrived that Isabel's cousin, Ralph is on his death bed and wants to see Isabel for the last time, so Isabel wanted to go to the

Gardencourt and visit Ralph, but Osmond who made a miserable life for Isabel did not let her go.

The examples of the immoral personality of these Europeanized Americans were mentioned. But completely vice versa, there are many examples for the morality of American young girl, Isabel Archer. First of all she remained moral and even under the pressure of Osmond she did not accept to encourage Lord Warburton to marry Pansy, because she may think that such a plan is as immoral as the plan which was arranged by Madame Merle and Osmond for Isabel herself. Because Osmond force her to encourage Lord Warburton to marry Pansy his illegitimate daughter, again not because of love but because of Lord Warburton's wealth. Isabel remained moral and did not try to encourage Lord Warburton to marry Pansy even when Osmond misbehaved her. Pansy indeed was in love with other man Edward Rosier, and Rosier was also in love with Pansy but Osmond did not allow them to marry because Rosier was not rich enough.

The morality of Isabel is shown once again when she finally went to visit Ralph in Gardencourt in his deathbed and there she met Mr. Goodwood who revealed his true love once again for Isabel and beg her to come away with him and do not turn back to Osmond. But Isabel although was not satisfied with her miserable life with Osmond and "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (James 290), did not accept to flee with Mr. Goodwood and returned to Osmond for the reason that Sigi Jottkandt mentions; "She returns simply because she must, she must obey the moral law that obliges her unconditionally" (Jottkandt 29). She believed that, it was immoral to flee with other man when she was the wife of Osmond, Isabel had a moral duty towards her marriage, she had obliged herself to be responsible for his decision and her marriage as Ralph wanted her to endure the consequence of her decision. As Lee Yu-ch'eng discusses:

Isabel, who comes from a country deeply influenced by Puritanism, is a girl who firmly believes in "all the traditionary decencies and sanctities of marriage". No evidence indicates that, even in her desperate sufferings, it has ever occurred to her that she might someday violate these decencies and

sanctities. Therefore, to respect the sacredness of marriage, she has no other alternative but to return to Rome although she fully realizes that what lies before her is a future of horrible blankness. (98)

So as a result of living in a moral society Isabel is concern about morality. Again Isabel's morality became more obvious when we know that one of the reasons that cause Isabel to return back to Osmond was because of her promise to Pansy to return back to her, because she may feel pity toward Pansy as Dorothy Van Ghent mentions:

It is there, in the ruin where Pansy has been left, that Isabel has placed roots, found a crevice in which to grow straightly and freshly, found a fertilizing, civilizing relationship between consciousness and circumstances. (228)

So through these explanations it may be clear that James in this novel shows the contrast which he knew as the main contrast between America and Europe, this contrast is between American morality and European culture. As is clear through this novel James believes that America is the place of morality while Europe is the place of culture, a culture that is corrupted and out of morality. He shows that Americans are more concern about morality than Europeans, and by portraying the characters like Osmond and Madame Merle, James is going to show that living in a society which has a high culture would not assure a high culture for a character who is living in that society.

CONCLUSION

So from the way which James used to show the America and Europe, and their culture, setting, societies and characters, one can understand that James is not trying to show which one is superior or inferior to other, he shows the contrasts which he believed to exist between America and Europe and leave it to the readers to understand which one is better. Although he shows that Europe is more civilized than America and depicts that Europe is the place of high culture and America is the place of morality, he remains neutral and does not aim to define which one is better than the other because as a realistic writer he only speaks about the reality of America and Europe. He tries to remain neutral toward them while realistically shows their contrasts.

So *The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel which shows James' international theme of 'America versus Europe', through all the events and atmosphere and characters of the novel. James tried to show the contrast of America and Europe while remaining neutral towards them, and was not going to write, like some of his contemporary writers, in a patriot way because as a realist writer James shows only the reality of both America and Europe of his days.

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