

RESEARCH ARTICLE



WHO IS THE IDEAL AMERICAN IN *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*?

DAVOOD MOHAMMADI MOGHADAM*¹, WAN ROSELEZAM WAN YAHYA², ROSLI BIN TALIF³

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia



DAVOOD MOHAMMADI
MOGHADAM

Article Info:

Article Received:08/09/2014

Revised on: 20/09/2014

Accepted on: 23/09/2014

ABSTRACT

Henry James is one of the most important American novelist, his novels mostly deal with the international theme of America versus Europe. *The Portrait of a Lady* is his greatest masterpiece, in which the contrast of America and Europe is depicted through James' basic pattern of bringing an American lady in a European society. Although Isabel is the heroine and the story is developed through her journey to Europe, the focus of this study is on the other American lady, Henrietta, who has a short but important role in this novel. She is depicted by James as the ideal American character, she is the most successful American in Europe. The study is going to discuss that Henrietta is the message of James to young Americans who were eagerly travelling to Europe in those days. James is showing that the only way of being successful in Europe is behaving like Henrietta.

Key Terms: Henry James, International theme, America versus Europe, Ideal American

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INTRODUCTION

The Portrait of a Lady, produced in the first stage of Henry James' literary career, is well-known to be his masterpiece as Clarke confirms, "*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is the first of the list of 'great' novels produced by Henry James" (1991: 191). In this novel, James again follow his basic pattern of depicting an American girl in a European society to show the contrast between America and Europe which was known as his international theme. Like many Americans of those days and like James himself, Isabel Archer is going to find a better life, she decided to travel and live in Europe. So by leaving Albany in America and going to Gardencourt

in London, Isabel is leaving America and its way of life and adopting herself to a European one. And it is through Isabel's decision for living in Europe that the international theme of America versus Europe is depicted in this novel. Although Isabel Archer is the heroine of the novel, the focus of this article is on the other American female character, Henrietta. She is felling to be the ideal American of those days in the point of view of Henry James. While Isabel is deceived in Europe, Henrietta manages her life and relationship so well, because she is a symbol of how an American should treat toward Europe and Europeans.

DISCUSSION

Henry James in the most of her international novels, especially in *The Portrait of a Lady*, which is his masterpiece, tries to depict the international theme of America versus Europe. Actually, this international theme was as a duty of an American writer in those days when Europe was looked superior over America, so "the duty that was defined for the American writers of 19th century [...] was to fight against the superiority of Europe over their country in those days" (MohammadiMoghadam 2014: 91). In *The Portrait of a Lady* Europe is depicted as a place of culture and civilization, and where the American go to find a better life and to gain knowledge although James shows how an American who is innocent can be deceived by sophisticated European in Europe. But anyway the American looked enviously to Europe and Europeans in those days, as James explains of Lord Warburton, who is a European in this novel, that "which would havemade almost any observer envy him at a venture" (James 1917: 10).

So American counted themselves inferior to European, even the American writers in those days had to first prove themselves in Europe if they wanted to be accepted in their own country America. Actually Europe in those days was a heaven for Americans who wanted to reach to a better life and a higher culture; they liked to seem civilized like Europeans. So many Americans had left their country in order to set their life in a European society to reach to a better life, culture and knowledge. Among the Americans who had travelled to Europe, Two groups were the main:

The first group was many noble families who [...] wanted to remain noble, so they despised the American new born riches and the way of their behavior, and traveled to Europe. The second group was several writers who believed that [...] the corruption[s] that were taking place in America, had made the situation intolerable for their imaginative mind. (MohammadiMoghadam 2012: 8887)

One can declare that it was an ambition for most of the Americans to live in Europe at that time. Because, as it was discussed, all the Americans look enviously to Europe and count themselves as inferior to European. They think that travel to

Europe means to find a better life and reach to a high civilization. And when in their confrontation to Europe, they saw the contrast between their country and Europe, most of them give their country up and tried to be Europeanized and forget all their American heritages whether they were better or worse than European characteristic, even they give up some good American behavior in order to be like European because they thought that all the European ideals are better than American ones. But again, they were not satisfied with their situation while they always felt to be an 'other' and 'foreigner' in Europe. They mostly were looked inferior by Europeans and were even deceived by sophisticated Europeans, as Isabel was deceived in Europe, Auchard confirms that James shows "much of Americans deceived by weary Europeans who have steeped so long in experience that their every move has become cautious, calculated, shrewd, and manipulative" (2004: xv). They were bewildered in Europe, they had forgotten America and were not matched or accepted by Europe, Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* clearly states this bewilderment as she confesses "if we are not good Americans we are certainly poor Europeans" (James 1917: 137).

This way of traveling to Europe and looking everything European and giving one's own country up, was not accepted by Henry James. James did not encourage Americans not to travel to Europe, but he wanted them not to feel inferior, he wanted Americans not to forgive their American heritages completely and no to become European in everything. He wanted them to preserve their American characteristic and just learn acceptable European characteristic, all he expected from Americans is shown in the way that he portrayed Henrietta Stackpole in this novel:

Above all, there is Henrietta Stackpole, the American lady reporter whom James uses as a means to dramatize, ironically but sympathetically nevertheless, certain phase of the American tradition of democratic criticism of Europe....she is aggressively suspicious of all that smacks of privilege and class, and most of all of American prostration before European standards. (Wegelin 1958: 64-65)

In this novel, James portrayed different kinds of Americans of those days who came to Europe. But the only kind of Americans whom James believed that have a right way and purpose for coming to Europe are those whom he portrayed in the character of Henrietta. She, unlike her compatriots, did not accept everything European; she did not feel inferior toward Europeans, and unlike her compatriots, she did not try to fit herself completely to the European way of life, but she tried to learn valuable things from Europe. She was not satisfied with the conventionality of the English; she did not agree the role of women in the family which was defined by European culture. For example, in the case of Misses Molyneux, who as a European lady had a passive character and was very quiet, but her quiet character and her passiveness were not accepted by Henrietta. But Isabel accepted that and even thought that if she herself should adopt such a characteristic and become like Misses Molyneux or not.

So Henrietta was James's message to Americans who travel to Europe, James wanted them to be like her in their confrontation to Europe. She did not give her country up and again she did not fight all European way of life, but she tried to be an American and learn from Europe and from its acceptable characteristic. She remained American but earned and used from European culture. For example, she met an English gentleman, and toured all of Europe with him; she gathered whatever she needed for her best and popular articles in her tour in Europe and finally marries to that English gentleman Mr. Bantling. Actually, she, as an American, used and took benefits from Europe and its culture. And one can see that she was the most successful American in Europe and had a better marriage than what Isabel had::

Henrietta's career serves mainly as a kind of comic counterpoint to Isabel's melancholy story, since she ends not only by tolerating all that she at first suspects, but by marrying a thorough Britisher and, unlike Isabel, finding happiness in her marriage. (Wegelin 1958: 65)

In the case of Isabel we can say that she like Henrietta and unlike other American such as Lydia Touchett did not forgive completely her American

heritage and did not give her country completely up. For example, she tried to preserve her American liberty and independence but the question is why she was not as successful as Henrietta and had a miserable marriage, the answer may be that Isabel unlike Henrietta stuck to America's conventional thinking so she rejected the proposals of nice men as Lord Warburton and Mr. Goodwood because she think that the marriage with them will bound her liberty and independence. She rejected her nice suitors and married with a monster named Osmond hoping that he could help her to preserve her liberty and independence but she was deceived by Osmond. So James wanted to show that both sticking to American conventional thinking and forgetting and giving it completely up are not correct, and only the way of Henrietta is correct who is in the middle of the condition of Isabel and others like Lydia Touchett. Henrietta, both remained American, and took benefits from European culture.

CONCLUSION

Henry James in his *The Portrait of a Lady* depicted many American characters in European society, some like Madam Merle, Mrs. Touchett, and Osmond, who try to completely forget America and their American characteristics and to be completely Europeanized, and some like Isabel Archer who tries to stick to her American conventions. But the ideal American that James believed in is depicted in the character of Henrietta, who takes the middle way. She, unlike her compatriots, did not accept everything European; she did not feel inferior to Europeans, and unlike her compatriots, she did not try to fit herself completely to the European way of life, but she tried to learn valuable things from Europe.

Henrietta is actually James' ideal way of being an American she is a Message of Henry James to American. He is suggesting American that they should behave like Henrietta if they wanted to survive in a European society and if they wanted to be successful. She did not give her country up, and again she did not fight all European way of life, but she tried to be an American and learn from Europe's acceptable characteristic. She remained American but earned and used from European culture. She remains American but took benefits

from European culture, and in this novel she is depicted as the most successful American in who had travelled to Europe.

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