

A CRITICAL EVALUATION BY HENRY JAMES OF THE OLD AND NEW WORLDS IN HIS ‘*The Ambassadors*’

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Abstract

With his handful of works, a well-known American expatriate novelist and essayist, Henry James made us familiar with the transition process in the USA to modernism as an author witnessing both late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After experiencing a long period of puritanical order and remaining stuck in the strictly established moral rules of American society, with its earlier conservative crust with the start of the new century. James shed light on this process and reflected clearly the transition period in his well-acclaimed fiction, *The Ambassadors*. In this study, we scrutinize *The Ambassadors* by Henry James with respect to the comparisons made between Paris and Woollett or in a bigger scope Europe and America. As he spent most of his life commuting between the Old and New worlds, James demonstrated to us his impressions and observations of these places in hereby handled fiction through the eye of his protagonist and narrator, Strether. This study projects on the reasons pushing James to make such type of distinctions between Woollett and Paris and intends to present the value of these different geographies for James.

Keywords: Artistic Life, Henry James, Morality, Paris, Transformation.

1. Introduction

Today’s America modelled Europe and European values in many fields ranging from art and lifestyle to culture and literature. A great number of writers, poets, theologians and other scientists from different disciplines based their studies in America and on their background and mindset which they had gained in Europe. In particular, early American literature and art during the first years of settlement and migrations to America was to a great extent based upon European literature, namely, the literature of “Old World”. Many of the 20th century writers also benefitted from the old world.

Although centuries passed after this period of inspiration from Europe, we still come across the haunting impacts of it on modern American writers like Henry James. As a person who travelled to Europe many times, with reflected substantial cultural and moral elements, he saw and lived in Europe into his works by comparing them with those of the country where he was born. *The Ambassadors* (1903) is one of his works revealing the differences between these countries and then showing one of them superior to the other. One can find that there are parallels between James’ life and this novel. He was born in USA in 1843 and is regarded as one of the most important American writers. However, as he spent most of his life in Europe and not in his birthplace, he is closer to European culture and lifestyle. That is why he compares Europe and America and European and American societies and cultures in this novel.

When we get a closer look at the descriptions of France and Woollett, it is consciously seen that the New World lagged far behind the Old one regarding artistic life, individual freedoms and cultural richness. Woollett depictions are very traditionalist and the characters living here seem to be quite conservative and authoritarian. Yet, on the other hand, Paris is presented as a shining star and Parisians are introduced as highly intellectual, enlightened,

smart, golden-mouthed and open to external changes as they are extraverted, unlike introverted Woollettians.

In these comparisons, America represents strict puritanical values and material philosophy, however, Europe stands for the cultural, artistic values, plurality, novelty, openness to changes and developments and keenness on personal freedom and etc. In this sense, Teahan (1996) makes the comparison: "If James's America was a blank page, his "Europe" the text." (Teahan, 1996, p. 31) For Teahan, James presents America as a new established state at the beginning of everything and far behind the developments and standards of Europe. Supporting Teahan, Wilson (2004) interprets James's approach, "Americans continue to have unparalleled access to a kind of cultural blankness." (2004, p. 512)

Towards the end of his life, James took British citizenship and he completed his lifetime in England in 1916. Actually, Taghizadeh (2011), who focused on Henry James's *The Ambassadors* in his PhD dissertation, notes that "In letters and politics, James preferred Europe to his homeland" (1986, p. 21). This novel, in a way, reflects how James perceived Europe after America and then compared it with his homecountry through an emissary character called Strether. We are introduced a character who both experiences the cultural and mental transformation in his consciousness and narrates the story, which is quite modern in this sense.

2. Strether as The Emissary

In his *The Ambassadors*, James tells the story of Strether who is assigned by his betrothed, Mrs Newsome living in Woollett, Massachusetts with bringing her son, Chad from Paris. Newsome wants her son to return to his homeland and take over the business she endows. Strether sets out to Paris in order to perform his mission, yet things don't progress as expected and he gives up his task to convince Chad to go back to Woollett since Strether experiences a profound change in his character, consciousness and perspective to people and life.

In the aftermath of his arrival in Paris, Strether both gains a big chance to discover and enjoy the beauties of Paris and gets in contact with different people. During this period of time, enchanted by the city itself, he begins to experiment the pleasures he can't find and get in Woollett and meet people with whom he establishes intimate relations. Then, at a slow rate, his thoughts and feelings about Paris and Parisians are changing. As a result of this change and transition, he is indecisive whether to implement his principal mission in Paris or not. For Hutchison, "The novel's protagonist, Lambert Strether, finds him-self caught between New England dogmatism and Parisian aestheticism..." (2003, p. 231)

3. Transcendence in Strether

The change in Strether's character begins in the beginning of the book. He doesn't want to hear from Mrs Newsome and in a way he shows how he was willing to get rid of Woollett and its people like Mrs. Newsome. K. P. S. Jochum touches on this issue in one of his articles. He puts forward that:

Strether's emancipation begins quite early in the novel, in the Jardin du Luxembourg, again on the left bank, where he reads Mrs. Newsome's letters in the highly incongruous surroundings of "a penny chair" from which he observes "terraces, alleys, vistas, fountains, little trees in green tubs, little women in white caps and shrill little girls at play" (book II, chapter ii). Strether has escaped from the bank's office because it reminds him too much of the post office in Woollett, Mass., where the letters were mailed. (115)

After establishing contact with the people around Chad in Paris, he realizes that Parisian culture has improved Chad's interests, tastes and senses in many aspects. That's why he firstly postpones his plan to take him back to Woollett and then, totally quits his mission. For Taghizadeh (2011), Strether's change of decision is closely related with the transcendence of his consciousness;

...how his opinion of life changes in the Parisian culture, that is, how, contrary to his prevision, he loses his belief in the Woollettian "world of commonplace" and shares the Parisian "life of freedom," and how, as the result of such a radical change in his vision, he ultimately inverts his purpose. (218)

As a natural result of the comparisons he made between Paris and Woollett and the nice experiences he had in Europe, Strether undergoes a deep transcendence, which results in the failure of Woollettian influences and impositions on him and the victory of Parisian culture and sense of personal freedom.

4. Comparisons Between Paris and Woollett

Throughout *The Ambassadors*, James compares Woollett, Massachusetts, USA and Paris, France. Sometimes, he compares the cultural and social life of the old and new worlds and sometimes the artistic life in these worlds and sometimes the conservativeness and freedom in these geographies. Taghizadeh (2011) explains the reason for this comparison:

Throughout his career, James was conscious of the significance of the Civil War, and used his writing to help America develop a new sense of self. For doing this, he reexamined in his fiction the relationships of America with Europe. In many of his stories, he compared the true spirit of contemporary Americans with their European peers, and showed the active engagement of Americans with life in Europe, or of Europeans with life in America. (1986, p. 217)

In these comparisons, Europe, their cultural and artistic lives are found to be more superior to the more conservative American one. In most of the cases, America represents negative or undesirable characteristics for the protagonist of the novel, Strether. The most striking example of this situation is present even in the preface of the novel. James tackles with the mission of Strether and makes his first comparison:

The revolution performed by Strether under the influence of the most interesting of great cities was to have nothing to do with any betise of the imputably "tempted" state; he was to be thrown quite with violence, upon his lifelong trick of intense reflexion: which friendly test indeed was to bring him out, through winding passages, through alternations of darkness and light, very much in Paris, but with the surrounding scene itself a minor matter, a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett. (8)

Here, it is certain that Paris harbours more things that can be dreamt than Woollett, which demonstrates that it is a more modern and colourful city than Woollett. Surprisingly enough, the author uses two opposite terms here; "darkness and light" which will be determined in Paris. This in a way foreshadows that Strether will decide in Paris what is right and what is wrong, and which city is more modern and which one is not so. Similarly, Kohan (1999) claims that; James criticism, from the first, has considered the "international theme" by, in part, comparing American and European cultural values (mention frequently being made of James's comment that America lacks a tradition, or at least the institutions of a formal tradition) and translating America and Europe into their metaphorical significances. European "experience," "decadence," or "sophistication" and American "innocence,"

“naivete,” or “energy” are the often-invoked rough heuristic identifications made to characterize the two worldwide that come into conflict in James’s novels. (373)

Woollett represents commerce, but Paris represents artistic life because the reason why Strether comes to Paris is to take Chad back to Woollett so that he can manage commercial business of his family. However, in Paris, Chad and Strether go to theatre and opera which are the symbols of artistic life in Paris.

The following comparison is made between the styles of theatres and opera of Woollett and Paris. The theatres in Paris are more flamboyant than the ones in Woollett. For example, once Strether mentions an opera experience he lived with Mrs Newsome. The narrator compares this experience of him with the one Strether is witnessing in Europe as such:

He had been to the theatre, even to the opera, in Boston, with Mrs. Newsome, more than once acting as her only escort; but there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness, as a preliminary: one of the results of which was that at present, mildly rueful, though with a sharpish accent, he actually asked himself WHY there hadn’t. (38)

In these lines, it is obviously seen that Strether is not contented with the opera experiences he lived in Boston, for, compared to the one in Paris, it was very poorly decorated and there was not the romantic atmosphere provided by the decorations. He finds the one in Europe more appealing and beautiful than the one in Boston. Furthermore, he wishes there is in Woollett such kind of a theatre and opera as in Paris had been. In a way, the superiority of European culture to American in terms of cultural activities is revealed.

In addition, Paris is perceived as a more civilized city than Woollett. The culture of Woollett is not high as much as that of people in Paris. As Jochum (1983) emphasizes in his article entitled “Henry James’s Ambassadors in Paris”,

The name “Woollett” suggests “woolly” which may mean, according to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, “rude,” “barbarous,” “uncivilized,” but also “confused and hazy.” In contrast, Paris is orderly and civilized, although its order is enigmatic and its civility a little decadent. Paris, nevertheless, is real and verifiable, Woollett is not. Hence, Mrs. Newsome, Woollett’s first and foremost citizen and Strether’s wife-to-be, is finally a threat, rather than a fact. Also, when Strether prepared to go back to the United States at the end of the novel that doesn’t mean that he returns to Woollett and to Mrs. Newsome. The reality of Paris has changed him for better or worse. (Jochum, 1983, p. 117)

Strether strictly believes in this, that is why he tries to convince Chad not to return to Woollett. He wants him to stay in Paris because he is more civilized and mature and intellectual man in Paris and when he turns back he will be corrupted, which is ironical enough because Mrs. Newsome wishes her son to return to Woollett believing that he will go corrupt in Paris. Indeed, although it is not described within the story, it is obvious that Chad is a renegade who tented to emancipate himself from the restrictive and conservative puritanical rules, principles and moralities of Woollett, and accordingly moved to Paris and began to lead his life there as he wished. The person coming to fetch him experiences the pleasure of personal freedom and reaches the conclusion that Chad is on the true path.

Thus, Strether, who was appointed to take Chad back to Woollett is now insisting him to stay in Paris. This is mainly due to the deep transition in the consciousness of Strether. Strether says to him “You will be a brute...if you forsake her.” (326) Here Strether emphasizes the role

of a European in the improvement of Chad and he fears that he will be a “brute” when he leaves her by returning Woollett. Here, Strether does not only mean her, Madame de Vionette, but also Paris, Europe as well because of the fact that Madame de Vionette is associated with this city. However, his brother in law, Jim refuses such an idea. In response to Strether these words: “I’ve liked my Paris, I dare say I’ve liked it too much”, Jim says: “Oh you old wretch!” (208) Then, Strether tries to explain the situation in Paris by saying: “The case is more complex than it looks from Woollett.” (209) In a way, he makes an effort to justify his love for Paris and the well condition and beauty of Paris. But again, Jim opposes him adding: “Oh well, it looks bad enough from Woollett!” (209) Thus, Strether can’t break Jim’s prejudices about Paris. In his Strether’s Babylon: Counterplot in *The Ambassadors* Walton (2009) attracted attention the sharp distinction between Europe and America with respect to the changes and transformation occurring with these two different societies.

In the description of Strether’s Paris we see the rigid, abstract typology undergoing a partial dissolution under the pressure of a sudden sense of “personal freedom” (17), a re-awakening to “the immediate and the sensible” (18), a “sharper survey of the elements of Appearance” (17), a re-awakening to “the immediate and the sensible” (18), a “sharper survey of the elements of Appearance” (20). Such “spiritual” gifts as revelation, deliverance, and redemption arise for Strether from no transcendent source but from the “world” that revealed itself to James’s Small Boy in the Gallery of Apollon of the Louvre: “the world, in fine, raised to the richest and noblest expression.” Opposed to this highly constructed world, or “universe of the imagination,” is a brand of Puritanism—not Mather’s—that has settled, in Perry Miller’s words, for “an ideal of social conformity, of regulation and control,” of “worldly caution and social conservatism”: Puritan into “puritanical.” (Walton, 2009, p. 295).

Woollett is shown as having a lack of cultural and social activities. The people in Woollett enjoy themselves less than those in Paris. The dialogue between Strether and Mrs. Gostrey shows this comparison:

Ah there you are!" he laughed. "It's the failure of Woollett. THAT'S general." "The failure to enjoy," Miss Gostrey explained, "is what I mean." "Precisely. Woollett isn't sure it ought to enjoy. If it were it would. But it hasn't, poor thing," Strether continued, "anyone to show it how." (21) In brief, it is given that life in Woollett is more boring than life in Paris.

The night life in Paris is the other comparison element in terms of social life. Night life in Paris is praised by Strether. He appreciates Paris as; “the Paris evening in short was, for Strether, in the very taste of the soup, in the goodness, as he was innocently pleased to think it, of the wine, in the pleasant coarse texture of the napkin and the crunch of the thick-crusted bread.” (67) But in no part of the novel, Strether expresses such kind of an appreciation for night life in Woollett.

Strether also compares the roles of characters in Parisian theatre with those of Woollett as such:

However, he viewed his job it was "types" he should have to tackle. Those before him and around him were not as the types of Woollett, where, for that matter, it had begun to seem to him that there must only have been the male and the female. These made two exactly, even with the individual varieties. Here, on the other hand, apart from the personal and the sexual range—which might be greater or less—a series of strong stamps had been applied, as it were, from without; stamps that his observation played with as, before a glass case on a table, it might have passed from medal to medal and from copper to gold. (39)

In these lines, Strether explores round characters in European drama. They are changing during the play. In this respect, European drama is shown to be richer in terms of characterization in drama. Indeed, this comparison harbours in itself the metaphoric reference to the multiplicity and pluralism of Europe which can't be found in the New World. The metals in the last sentence such as copper and gold can be possibly used as metaphors for the presence of different and changeable character people in real life society as well.

While Woollett represents morality and conservativeness, Paris stands for freedom, especially for personal freedom. James offers his reader a lot of examples proving this. For instance, while Mrs. Newsome wears long dresses covering almost the whole body, Miss Gostrey wears skirt that is cut below and her throat part is not closed by any kind of dress unlike that of Mrs Newsome:

There was much the same difference in his impression of the noticed state of companion, whose dress was "cut down," as he believed the term to be, in respect to shoulders and throat a broad red velvet band with an antique jewel- he was rather complacently sure it was antique- attached to it in front. Mrs Newsome's dress was never in any degree "cut down," and she never wore round her throat a broad red velvet band... (38)

Here the clothing style of MissGostrey is compared with that of Mrs Newsome's. It is suggested that the clothing style of an American is considerably conservative and moral, but the one of a European is more comfortable and freer. Accordingly, people in the New World are more restricted than the ones in Paris while choosing what to wear. In another part of the book this freedom is stated as:

It was the difference, the difference of being just where he was and AS he was, that formed the escape-this difference was so much greater than he had dreamed it would be; and what he finally sat there turning over was the strange logic of his finding himself so free. (57)

In these lines, how Strether finds Paris so comfortable is mentioned. Even Strether himself did not suppose that he would find a freer country in Europe before he set foot there. In a way, H. James breaks the prejudices the Americans have about Europe and its culture. As experience he lived in Paris and thishad a significant role in Strether's deciding which culture is more attractive and human-oriented is described by Hutchson;

Strether's experience in Paris, particularly his moment of vision by the riverside, allows him to respond to the moral dilemma in which he is enmeshed with an entirely new attitude. Rather than recoiling with New England outrage, Strether accepts the knowledge of Chad and Madame de Vion-net's affair for what it is: an opportunity to revise his categories of human behavior.(249)

As Hutchson claims "The novel's protagonist, Lambert Strether, finds himself caught between New England dogmatism and Parisian aes-theticism." (231) In Paris, after staying for a while the effect of the dogmatism in New England slides away and he makes his choice in favour of Paris.

Conclusion

From the comparisons he made throughout the book, it is obvious that James is in favour of a more civilized, freer and comfortable society, and this is understood to bethat of Europe. He found many defects with the Woollett culture and morality, and showed their better forms in Europe. Thus, he tried to break the prejudices already existing in the New World



about Europe. As Jochum claims “Strether has learnt how to dispose of Woollett in favor of Paris.” (1983, p. 118)

It is worth considering that James builds his story on a conservative woman and the mission she assigns to Strether. Although centuries were left behind after the arrival of Puritans in the America, their influences on people’s lives and consciousness were still persisting. For this reason, James turned his face back to the old world for inspiration.



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