

A Study on the International Theme, as a Prominent Subject in the Works of Henry James

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ABSTRACT

Among the subjects and themes which are found in the works of 19th American great novelist Henry James, the international theme of America versus Europe is the most recurrent one. Actually Henry James is well-known based on his international novels through which he uses his own experiences as an American in Europe and wrote about the adventures of Americans abroad, mostly in Europe. Actually through his international theme he deals with America and Europe, he practiced this matter so well in his works that he is in some degree known as the master of international novel. James through his international novels or better to say through his international theme of America versus Europe wanted to show the contrasts between America and Europe and between their societies, cultures, ideals, conventions and characters. Indeed Henry James is the most merited novelist to write about these contrasts and conflicts because he had the experience of living both in America and in Europe for a long time, so he was completely familiar with the societies, cultures, conventions, ideals, and the characters of both America and Europe. This research is going to first discuss international theme in its general meaning and then the international theme of Henry James and the reasons which caused James to practice the international theme through his works.

Keywords: Henry James; Theme; International Theme; America versus Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

When studying the works of Henry James one can obviously feel the recurrence of a prominent theme in most of them, and that is the international theme of America versus Europe. This theme is so repeated in the works of Henry James that it is known as the most famous theme of Henry James. James was so professional in practicing the international theme of America versus Europe that he is called as the master of international novels. In most of his works he deals with showing the America and Europe and the contrast which he believed to exist between them, the contrast between their cultures, societies, conventions, ideals and characters. So as Henry James was going to show the contrast between America

and Europe through his international theme, this international theme is known as the theme of America versus Europe.

Before discussing the international theme of America versus Europe in Henry James, the study is going to provide a very short description of international theme in its general meaning, and after the short description of the international theme, the research will start its discussion on the international theme in Henry James.

2. DISCUSSION

The international theme was in some degree the main subject of the American literature of 19th century especially in early 1870s, because in that period, American writers were going to define the relation of their country to Europe, it was as a duty and responsibility for An American writer to define a pure American culture that would be not a mixed or influenced one from other European countries, so they defined for themselves as a mission to fight against the valuations which was defined for Europe in those days. So they mostly dealt with the international subject of America and Europe in their works. The major and most well-known writer who practiced this international subject in his works, without any doubt was Henry James.

Through this international subject or better to say this international theme that is best explained as the issue of America versus Europe, the conflicts between America and Europe is portrait mostly through the process of showing the Americans abroad which is shown mostly as bringing an American character into a European society. As Erik Larsen in his essay *Identity and Otherness in two Texts by Henry James* defined the international theme as a process through which:

The American going to Europe and experiencing the clash between the American identity and the European origin, the American materialism and the European culturalism, the American vulgarity and the European sophistication and, also, the American dynamics and the European petrification. (1)

So one can say the international theme is the study of the Americans aboard. These Americans are unaware of the conventions and formalities of the Europe. So as they confront with a European society they understand that the reality of Europe is so different from the superstition value which was defined in their mind for Europe. Through the adventures of these Americans in Europe and the way in which they are behaved in Europe they are proved to be as a foreigner and other. So it is through the adventures and experiences of these Americans abroad that the contrast between America and Europe is portrayed. These Americans in Europe are as a symbol of their country America so the differences and conflicts between their ideals and conventions with Europeans show the contrast between their societies and cultures in which they were trained, so here the international theme of America versus Europe is brought up to the stage.

No writer was more capable than Henry James to practice the international theme in his works and to show the issue of America versus Europe through the stories of his protagonists who are mostly heroines, because James himself was an American abroad who had lived for a long time in Europe, so was completely aware about both America and Europe and their contrasts.

If speaking generally about the international theme in the works of Henry James, one can say that the international theme which is the main subject and the most recurrent theme in James' works is the contrast between American and European societies, conventions, ideals and characters. The contrast between all these is mostly based on the contrast which James felt and defined between Europe's culture and America's moralism. Marcus Munch in *The International Theme: The Conflict of National Types in the Tales of Henry James* mentioned that:

Among the central motifs that can be traced throughout Henry James' career as a writer is his concern with the social and moral differences between the New World and Europe (mainly represented by England, Italy and France), which he called the "Americano-European legend" and is otherwise frequently referred to as the "international theme". (2)

James in most part of his life had traveled to Europe in the search of experience, fame and a better life, so completely like himself, most of his protagonist for example Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, take a travel to Europe with the hope of a better life, freedom, culture and experience. But against their expectation they not only did not reach to a better life and experience, but also had lost what they could easily possess in America, which was freedom and morality. In his works usually the protagonist who is mostly an American young lady, struggles to protect her individualism and personal freedom in a European society that however has a high culture but is corrupted. In other words he concerns the deceived American young ladies in Europe. So James wanted to say that Europe is the place of culture but that culture is corrupted and is out of morality while the America is the place of morality.

Through this international theme, Henry James shows the young and innocent American ladies who leave America and travel to Europe, but when they encounter Europe and as the time passed they understand that Europe is not the paradise which they had the desire of, they understand that the dreamy vision of Europe in their mind was only a big mistake, and as they were innocent (which means for James lack of knowledge and experience) they were not able to read the wicked plan which was arranged for them in Europe by European or Europeanized American who were sophisticated or experienced as the result of living in a society with a high culture, so these American young ladies are deceived in Europe by European or Europeanized American and through their suffering they understands that their decision for leaving America and traveling to Europe was a big mistake.

Before discussing James' international theme in detail, first the importance of the international theme in the works of Henry James should be discussed to show that this theme is definitely an important part of James' career. James' literary career is classified into three main periods, explaining the way of his writing in these periods will make clear the importance of the international theme in James' works.

In the first period which is between (1875-1889), most or better to say all of his works deals with the international theme. In his works in this period he tries to show the relation of the new world America, to the old world that was Europe. It was James' starting period so he was yet an amateur, but most of his popular literary works were produced in this period. In them we can see the clarity, sincerity, naturalness and the beauty of the amateur and inexperienced James. His *The Portrait of a Lady* which is one of his masterpieces belongs to this period.

The second or middle period was between (1890- 1900). In this period the international theme was not as an important concern of James as it was in the first period. In this period

James' works mostly deals with the European life and tried to show its social, political and artistic areas. In the works of this period James tries to portray the high culture and civilization of the Europe and specially the English. In this period James tried to enter to the world of theatre and wrote some plays. His works in this period also concerns the problem of the evil existing in the society by dealing with the suppression of the strong characters on the innocent ones.

In the third period which was between 1900 till the end of James' life, again the dominant subject in his works was the international theme, James again return to this international theme and it was again appeared in his works but this time James was more mature, proficient and experienced in practicing this international theme. His proficiency in this period is proved through the maturity, intricacy and the language of his works.

Richard Hocks in his *Henry James: A Study of the Short Fiction* discusses the importance of James' international them and the prominence of this international theme in literary phases of James. Hocks called the international theme as an "international subject" for James:

James' international fiction can be thought of as the "second frontier" in our literary history: at the time it sensed the completion of the westward settlement, the American psychic instinctively began to gravitate back toward its European "memory". The international theme- or, more accurately in James, the international subject- is prominent in his early period, tends to disappear in the middle period, and reappears with great complexity in his late period or major phase. (5)

So as it is obvious the international theme is the important part of James' literary career, because it is the dominant subject in two of three periods of his literary life. As James himself states, he defined it as his role to write about this international theme. In one of James' notebook that is brought by Mathiessen and Murdock in *The Notebooks of Henry James*, James mentioned:

No European writer is called upon to assume that terrible burden, and it seems hard that I should be. The burden is necessarily greater for an American for he must deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe; whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America. (24)

So it's obvious that James himself was always concern to deal with this international theme in his works, James can be compared to Shakespeare in one case; Tragic Hero was defined by Aristotle, so Shakespeare was not the inventor of it but he through his works made it as his own and now Tragic Hero is synonymous with Shakespearean drama because he practiced it very well and beautifully through his plays. And in the case of James we can say that the international novel is not created by James but through his works he made it as his own, he practiced it with a high proficiency, and now the critics know James as the master of the international novel.

The international theme that is the most recurrent theme in most of James works refer to the impact of the European culture on the American characters who traveled there mostly in the search of a better life and culture. James' international theme mostly has a same basic pattern and that basic pattern is an American innocent young lady who travels to Europe in the search of a better life and culture but when she encounters to Europe she does not find it

as she expected it to be, she not only does not reach to a better life and culture but also is deceived in Europe and through her suffering the dreamy vision of Europe in her mind changes completely. The common basic pattern of James' international theme is discussed by Marcus Munch in his book as:

It reflects the mutual misunderstandings of Americans and Europeans, often by following the same basic pattern, i.e. the innocent and naive American girl who journeys to the Old Country and encounters a corrupt, mostly rigid set of values which its advocates attempt to subjugate her to. Usually the heroine struggles to protect her integrity, her individualism and personal freedom against a society that strikes her as oppressive, antidemocratic or, as is the case with *Madame de Mauves*, as immoral, and undergoes a changing process in which she abandons her romantic vision and nostalgic longing for a quaint and picturesque Europe. (2)

It is because of this common basic pattern that some critics as Howells called James as the master of portraying the American women in Europe. Through the process of this basic pattern and through his international theme James tried to show the contrast of America and Europe or better to say America versus Europe in his works. Through this international theme he tried to portray the conflicts which he thought that exist between America as the new world and Europe as the old world and between their traditions, societies, ideals, conventions and characters. For example in James' works the innocent characters are mostly Americans and the experienced or sophisticated ones are mostly Europeans or Europeanized Americans. As Munch mentioned:

Although in his exploration of the international conflict "between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook" „innocence" is invariably associated with the American side, whereas „knowledge" is mostly to be found on the European, the satire and irony in the study of national characters is aimed at both sides. (2)

But why Henry James defined his duty to write mostly about this international theme in his works? What is or are the motivations which led James to choose writing about this international theme of America versus Europe and to show the conflicts between America and? Which reasons caused the international theme to be the dominant subject of most of his works? Why he chose to show the Americans abroad through his works and the international theme? There are some reasons which will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

As was mentioned James, like his characters, was an expatriate in Europe for a long time. As he brings his characters from America to Europe in the search of a better life, he himself had left America and traveled to Europe in the search of a better life and a high culture. He was as an outsider in Europe, and we can say that the first reason of writing about international theme is that he had tried to write about his own Experiences as an American abroad or better to say as a young American in Europe. Maybe by this international theme James is writing his own feeling about this subject, he knows how an American is treated in Europe by Europeans. By reading his works one can understand James' childhood and adulthood experiences. About the influences of James' own experiences on his works, Madelina Stanescu in her essay *American innocence vs. European vice in Henry James' Daisy Miller* discussed that:

The international theme was one of James' biggest concerns and it was the theme that brought him fame. His works have autobiographical characteristics, because, like many of his heroes, James left his home land for Europe in order to find a better place and to enrich his experience of life and, therefore, he found himself on a different territory, with another mentality and another way of life. His experience is reflected in his works as all illustrate the European experience of young Americans, who come to the Old World to enrich their knowledge, but who find themselves against a space of difference. (1)

So James' experiences in Europe played a great role in his works because in contrast with some critics, James believed that the novel should be from its writer's experience. In his *The Art of Fiction* James discusses the impact of experiences on novel, in defining a good novel he states, "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the Impression" (4). He continues "Write from experience and experience only" (5) and then he adds his most famous quotation; "Try to be the one of the people on whom nothing is lost" (5). So he believed that the novelist should engage all his/her experiences, as he himself engaged all his childhood and adulthood experiences and nothing is lost in his works. This influence and reflex is mostly seen in the beginning of his career.

There is a reason which led not only Henry James but also many American writers of 19th century to leave America and travel to Europe. The reason is the fact that in those days the only way for an American writer to be appreciated and famous in his/her own country, was to be appreciated and famous in Europe. They first should find a name in Europe in order to be accepted in America, because the new world which was America after Civil war (1861-1865) had no place for the writers and their imaginative minds. The young writers believed that the ideals and traditions of American society after the Civil war were changed and the new generation of America was just thinking of money. So they believed that their imaginative mind is rejected in such a society, and decided to leave America and travel to Europe while they had a dreamy vision of its high culture. Brooks and Bettmann in their book *Our Literary Heritage*, discuss the reason that led several American writers of 19th century to leave America and live in Europe more generally:

For most writers, the question of facing the new America, with its worship of "bigness" and numbers, seemed overwhelming. Incapable of creating new aesthetic patterns out of this native chaos, many American writers closed their minds to America and its patterns... They agreed with Matthew Arnold that for the artist there was no room in a country where 'the sky was of brass and iron'. Henry James' yearning for Europe had the same motive; to forget America, - as for many other sentient artists and writers, the drama of Europe in American breasts remained a central problem. (164)

So many American writers in those days closed their eyes to America and declared their hello to Europe, but most of these writers once arrived to Europe confronted with a doubt in themselves; whether their decision for leaving America and coming to Europe was a correct and wise decision or not? They worried that how the European will treat them? And they think if the European accepts them or not? As Erik Larsen discusses in his essay *Identity and Otherness in two Texts by Henry James*, the Americans were as an "other" in the European society, he states "Once the American gets the taste for Europe, the relationship between an

Euro-American identity and its otherness is displayed or staged whether the American is at home or in the old world, but it is never lived through to a solution" (2).

So this feeling of "otherness" and the worries of American writers in Europe had cause most of them to return to America after a few months. They believed that America with any situation was better than Europe. Henry James although was not completely agree with them (he endure many years in Europe), he was more realistic than other Americans about America and Europe and was neutral even in his writing about America and Europe, he feels it is out of civilization to think just American or just European. But in spite of all these he again, like other American writers, had a doubt about his decision for coming to Europe. This doubt is even reflected in his works, he shows his doubt and anxiety through his characters dialogues. For example in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Madame Merle said "If we are not good Americans we are certainly poor Europeans; we have no natural place here, we are mere parasites" (James 1917: 137-138). Again in this novel Osmond who is an American who has left his country America and lives in Europe, in an occasion declares his doubt about his decision to Isabel; "I sometimes think that we have got into a rather bad way; living off among things and people not our own, without responsibilities or attachments, with nothing to hold us together; marrying foreigners, forming artificial tastes" (James 1917: 179).

And this doubt about his decision for living in Europe as an American or in other words his dilemma of living in his own country or live as an outsider in Europe, affected all James' life. He had the feeling of a person who has no country; he was a novelist but could not solve the problem of being an American novelist or a European novelist. Brooks and Bettmann in their book about James' dilemma explain that:

When he arrived in Cambridge, therefore, the younger Henry James' mind was torn already by a problem that he really never solved. He was bent on becoming a novelist, but novelists always had "native lands". Yet he looked at this "huge queer country" he felt he could scarcely endure an American existence. He had been struck too deeply by the "outland dart"; he had absorbed the "European virus". The English writers had filled his mind, and he knew the names of the London streets and he knew the names of the streets of New York. America, for him, afforded no objects of interest to compare with this European "fantastication". The problem remained on James' hands unsolved during all the years that he was to spend in Cambridge... To test his feeling Henry James had crossed and recrossed the Atlantic trying to solve his great dilemma, whether to live in at home or to live in Europe. (166-167)

So we can understand that James had a great doubt whether to live in Europe or return to his own country America. Through his characters one can understand that he was not completely satisfied with his decision for coming to Europe because like his characters he himself thought that he did not reach to a better life in Europe. And one can say that this dissatisfaction in searching a better life and culture in Europe, and his experience as an expatriate or American in Europe is one of the reason that James write mostly about the international theme of America versus Europe.

Another reason of choosing the international theme as the dominant subject in his writings, may be the duty that was defined for the American writers of 19th century and that was to fight against the superiority of Europe over their country in those days. As the dominant situation of the American literary environment of the nineteenth century, the writer of 19th century of America especially those of early 1870's defined as their responsibility to

fight against the superstitious valuations of Europe. The American writers of that period were exhausted of having their culture as a mixed one of some European countries culture, they did not want the culture of their country to be influenced or determined by other European countries like England. They wanted their values and culture to be completely American; they wanted to have a pure American culture. They wanted to be appreciated as Americans not as a second hand of Europeans. The American writers of that century concerns more the issue of American literature rather than literature itself, they looked for An American literature that would match the emerging political greatness of the nation. They even believed that sooner or later American writers would rival Shakespeare who was regarded as unattainable. The literature emerged in that century of America was distinctively new, and the critics began trying to define its special quality as different from European one.

It seemed that American writers specially after returning from Europe determined to create an American culture for their country. They wanted to break down the belief that an American writer is a second-hand of European, and he/she should first gain worth and appreciation in Europe in order to be accepted and read in their own country. They wanted their country America to be more valuable than Europe, so they fight against Europe and its values in their writings. James was also an American writer of this period so the duty of an American writer in that period and the dominated subject on their writings may have a great influence over his decision of writing about the international theme of America versus Europe. Up to know the reasons which led James to write about the international theme were discussed, but it was discussed too that Henry James practiced his international theme through a common basic pattern which was to portray the American young lady in Europe, so what is the motivation of this basic pattern? Why it is the common basic pattern of most of James' works which deals with the „international theme“? The reason of this basic pattern is mentioned by some critics to be one of the most important reasons of James' international theme. So the reason of this basic pattern is going to be discussed as one of the most important reason of James' international theme too. In the preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James speaks of an old or young motive as the reason of this common basic pattern, he writes:

The Wings of the Dove published in 1902 represents to my memory a very old- if I shouldn't perhaps say a very young - motive; I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present to me. (James 2001: 3)

Henry James' insist on showing the adventure of American ladies in Europe, made some critics to believe that this old or young motive that James speaks about, is James' memory and love of his young cousin Minny Temple. Completely similar to what James shows about Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, his cousin Minny Temple was very young when she died in Europe (even one can notice the similarity between the name, Minny Temple and Milly Theale).

The death of James' young beloved cousin influenced all James' works and his subject of writing. As Leon Edel quotes in his book *Henry James: The Untried Years*, James himself about his cousin had stated that “the more I think of her the more perfectly satisfied I am to have her translated from this changing realm of fact to the steady realm of thought. There she may bloom into a beauty more radiant than all our eyes avail to contemplate” (324).

Ernest Sandeen in his essay *The Wings of the Dove and the Portrait of a Lady: A Study of Henry James' Later Phase* discusses about the effect of the death of James' young cousin Minny Temple, on the basic pattern of the *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*:

In both *Portrait* and *Wings* the Minny Temple image points toward the same effect, and the sequence of events by which the two protagonists are led to their destiny is basically the same. Isabel and Milly are American girls, they are intelligent and sensitive, and they are equipped with wealth and personal charm. They are introduced into the great world of European society and there they enjoy a brilliant hour of triumph which includes the luxury of declining the "ordinary" form of success, marriage to a member of the English nobility. However, after they form what they believe are attachments of their own free choice, they discover that they have been betrayed by persons interested chiefly in their wealth. (1)

So James used the process of the deceived American young lady in Europe for his international theme. By this international theme and portraying the disasters and misfortunes of American ladies in Europe, James is going to discuss the conflicts between America and Europe and between their cultures, ideals, conventions, societies and character, because as it was discussed it was the duty of an American writer to split America from Europe and to show their contrasts.

3. CONCLUSIONS

But there is a difference between James and most of the other writers of that period. The writers of that period were very strict about this purpose they had an intense feeling of patriotism. James was a contemporary of these writers, but was more realistic and profound about this purpose; he wants to show that there are elements of good and bad in both America and Europe, based on Wegelin, in James' works "American vitality and European discipline both had alike their potentials for good and evil" (1958: 76). In James' view Europe is the place of culture and America is the place of morality.

Actually in the works of James no one is condemned or praised neither America nor Europe, he did not try to show that which one is superior, America or Europe. James defined for himself to be neutral in his writings about America and Europe because he wanted to remain civilized. As Berland quotes in the preface of his book *Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James*, James about his naturalness declared:

I can't look at the English-American world, or feel about them, any more save as a big Anglo-saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic; and that melting together will come the faster the more one takes the two countries as continuous or less convertible or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject. Literature fiction in particular, affords a magnificent arm for such taking for granted and one may so do an excellent work with it. I have not the hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries,) and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized. (xii)

So as James himself defined about his attitude towards America and Europe, he preferred to remain neutral towards them he tried not to write based on feeling of patriotism,

because as was mentioned above he believed that this way of writing for him is a sign of civilization and preferred to be civilized rather than being patriots.

So as a realistic writer, James tries to show the reality of 19th century America and its literary atmosphere which was the issue of America versus Europe through his international theme. And as was mentioned in practicing this international theme, the innocence is mostly associated with American characters and experience is associated with European characters. So through his international theme, James tries to only show the contrast between America and Europe, and never tries to show one of them superior or inferior to the other.

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