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HENRY JAMES'S VISION OF AMERICAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Henry James was a naturalized British citizen. He was born in New York on April 15, 1843 and died in London on February 28, 1916. Just before his death he was awarded order of merit on January 1, 1916. His father James Sr. was a thinker and was opposed to the optimism of Emerson. So there were a lot of intellectual activities in his house. His father's swedenborgian mysticism and pessimism influenced both the children: Henry James and William James, the noted psychologist and philosopher. All of them had fits of depression and contemplation. James Sr. had a deep love for life. He was a visionary, a philosopher and a cosmopolitan. Henry James had developed an analytical approach and condemned 'flagrant morality' of society and advocated a conscious moral sense. He was constantly in search for the integrity and nobility of soul and not happiness. He tried to discover greatness even in degradation as we see in the depiction of his heroines. Keywords: Henry, James, Vision, American, Woman

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Henry James, like Shakespeare, had the exceptional quality in divining and rendering the poetry of female psyche. Only a few novelists who have shown better understanding of tender and dreamy hearts of women than James were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Sir Walter Scott, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy.

James was a keen observer and could distinguish between American and European women. He was deeply affected by American women's spiritual charm and moral beauty. That is why George Eliot's heroines – Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth, in particular, is the nearest approximation of James's own heroines. Reviewing Middlemarch, James wrote about Dorothea: 'she exhales a sort of aroma of spiritual sweetness.' In deepest level, he was inspired by emotion and intuition rather than by intelligence and intellect. Due to certain deep, psychological reasons the young American woman evoked the strongest spiritual response in James till the end. As for his European heroines like Christina Light, Eugenia and Madam de Vionnet – they represent a different order and style of charm. Their appeal is that of 'achieved woman'. Madam Merle, Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant too belong here, except that they are cast too pointedly in the role of 'the wicked woman'. In his fiction American women were invested with a vestal aura whereas European women were older in age and more experienced, given a deep, sexual attraction.

Heroines of Henry James were nearly always an idealized figure. They have the force of the will and the soul. He intends to make his heroine the agent of his moral vision which is clear from our first view of her,

which is always nearly soulful. The opening scene in 'The Portrait of Lady', sets an apt background to Isabel Archer's 'aristocratic' compulsions and the stereotyped gender roles were set in the backgrounds.

The effect of Isabel's presence upon her old and dying uncle is like a 'touch of June in November'. Youthful female beauty at its purest has a transcendental aspect, and James's fiction is full of this feeling. Francie Dosson of 'The Reverberator' is another fine example of American innocence and loneliness. She is like James's other American woman who were almost incredibly 'unaware of life' – as the European order expressed life. She was characterized 'as straight as a wand and true as gem'. When Waterlow, an American painter settled in Paris, tells Gaston that Francie is 'the softest finest material that breathes', he is undoubtedly voicing James's sentiments.

The European pilgrimage of the Jamesian heroine has several aspects. The international tales were once an expression of the clash of cultural values and existential varieties. Thus for dramatizing such a confrontation between opposed modes of thought and patterns of conduct on the one hand and between innocence and experience, between appearance and reality on the other, James was obliged to ship off his heroines to Europe.

Jamesian heroines who engineer their suffering chiefly out of the generosity of spirit will in the end wear pain over her head and hide tears in smiles that are very nearly wrung out of a breaking heart. She will look queenly in suffering, and mint a philosophy of fortitude out of it. Perhaps the reason why the Jamesian heroine suffers so terribly in life is that her very virtues have a tendency to turn into vices. A surfeit of innocence and imagination, of refinement and sophistication may not save even the bravest spirit from a certain kind of crippling unreality; and even hardness of heart. James was fully aware of the peculiar vulnerability of his heroines, and that is why poetry and irony go hand in hand, with the honors clearly in favor of the poetry in the end. It did not perhaps occur to him though that his own world view and style were, considered thus, equally vulnerable, and that his heroines were the victims of his own unconscious moralities.

And finally there is the question of Jamesian heroines' sexual frigidity. There is no doubt that James's own repressed sexuality, which breaks out in the later fiction is chiefly responsible for his emotional shrinking and diffidence in the presence of roused sexuality. Isabel Archer's case is often cited as a typical example of sexual fear and frigidity. Perhaps deep down in her puritan psyche, there is still the idea of essential ugliness and bestiality of sex- an idea which somehow is not wholly dissipated, for all her cultural enlightenment. In fact her very refinement of spirit compounds her errors and adds to such distortions in her vision. Her rejection of Caspar Goodwood, in particular, appears to be a rejection of male sexuality roused to a desperate pitch. Somehow her spirit quailed at the thought of her body's violation by so insistent a lover.

The American woman somehow remains inhospitable to vigorous and athletic passion. For the satisfaction of dark carnal desires, and indeed for the restorative powers of sexuality, James in the end turns to his European women- to Madame de Vionnet and those 'other women' like Kate Croy who had, as he puts it, has 'direct talent for life.'

The American heroine of James however remains an attractive riddle till the end. Her mysteriousness though is the mysteriousness of a vestal virgin, not that of a Mona Lisa; that enigmatic quality belongs to James's European heroines like Christine Light and Madame de Vionnet.

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