

The Image of a Corrupt Europe as Dystopia in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James

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Abstract:

*The purpose of this paper is to present some strategies employed by Henry James to reinforce the image of a corrupt Europe in *The Portrait of a Lady*. The image of a decayed, morally corrupt Europe is presented in opposition to an innocent image of America. What are some common features of this dystopia and the way the image of Europe is presented to the readers by Henry James in his novel?*

Keywords:

Grand Tour of Europe, travelling, Old World, New World, innocence, perception, culture shock.

Motivation

The purpose of this paper is to underline the fact that the way Europe is seen by critics, as corrupt, judging from how it is depicted by Henry James in his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, may lead to a dystopic vision on the cities of the continent. The image of a morally decayed Europe is presented in opposition to an innocent image of America. The way characters in Europe behave, the way they are described stand as a symbol for a morally corrupt Europe in relation to Isabel Archer's evolution. What are some other strategies employed by Henry James to reinforce such an image of Europe? Is this image of Europe an exaggeration, coming from the vision of the critics, or does the author truly present Europe in this way? How are the features of dystopia reflected in the image of Europe as presented to the readers by Henry James?

The theoretical framework that can further our understanding of this topic is mainly based on the psychological theory of perception. James has created his characters based on stereotypes. We need stereotypes since we have the tendency to categorize persons and objects around us in an effort to understand the world, as psychologist Gordon Allport suggests. The way Europe is described, negatively, comes from the perception of the Americans, who see a foreign territory in a bad way, since it is, after all, something unknown. We tend, psychologically, to see the unknown in a very negative, dystopic-like way, partly because we fear it, partly because we project on it what we dislike in ourselves. In the case of this novel, most likely, the Americans project on the territory of Europe the negative ways of behaviour which belong to their own culture. Freud's defense mechanism of displacement is also present here: the young people who go on the Grand Tour of Europe unjustly place the blame on Europe for what they do wrong. We need to look at the characters in the novel to see how they are portrayed by James in order to look for arguments that will illustrate and support these theories.

Characters associated with Europe and America

In Henry James' novel, I think that the images of Europe and America are created especially for their being associated with certain characters. Characters' representation affects the representation of the countries they belong to. As a rule, Henry James' good, likeable characters are from America and his evil characters are from Europe or are in some ways connected to Europe. The process of having the reader associate a positive image with America or a negative one with Europe is most likely an intentional one. The reader will generalize that good, innocent characters are American and mean, scheming characters are from Europe. By doing this, Henry James tries to bring the reader on his side, to share his vision, which is, after all, the vision of his characters and of the epoch and cultural context of this novel. The perception of the Americans during those times was structured in this way, and readers come to feel it so that they become convinced of it themselves.

As an illustration, Isabel Archer, a young American lady, is portrayed as innocent and as very likeable to the readers. She is portrayed as being very kind to Mr. Touchette and his son Ralph, who are both very ill. She is very innocent in comparison with the schemings of Mme. Merle and also very trusting. Isabel is portrayed as an independent young lady, who values honesty, truth and kindness.

Isabel [...] has a very attractive personality. She shows herself at every point in the novel as an intelligent young woman, who is the soul of kindness towards people who need kindness: the two most outstanding ones being Mr. Touchette and his son Ralph, as they are both ill unto death, this being especially sad in the case of young Ralph. She is too trusting (see later her relationship with Mme. Merle) but also capable of guiding others through a maze of complicated motives: here the daughter of Mme. Merle and Gilbert Osmond springs to mind. Isabel is lovable because of her independence and her love of honesty and truth. (Online Literature http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/portrait_lady/)

Henrietta Stackpole fits in the same portrayal of the American young lady. She is very similar to Isabel: she is independent, and very caring. She earns her own living as a journalist and she is portrayed as a very good friend of Isabel, who cares a lot about her. Readers come, thus, to sympathize with these American characters.

On the other hand, there are the negative characters associated with Europe. The pair Serena Merle and Gilbert Osmond are given all the negative attributes associated with Europe: they are "the sinister characters", Gilbert Osmond is "the villain of this piece", "a corrupt European, a money-hungry liar". (Online Literature http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/portrait_lady/)

However, the situation of characters is not that clearly delimited at all times. It is not as simple as categorizing characters as good or bad if they belong to America or to Europe. The situation is complicated by the fact that Madame Merle is an American expatriate. Besides, one of the very innocent characters, Pansy, is the daughter of Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle. Another innocent character, Rosier, with whom Pansy falls in love, is "a thoroughly Europeanized American". (Shmoop <http://www.shmoop.com/portrait-of-a-lady/edward-rosier.html>) Other good characters have travelled and left their countries, such as Isabel's cousin Ralph Touchett, who lives in England on his estate. We may say that the characters choose their place to fit in with their personality. This is the case of Madame Merle, who has left America. Pansy chooses Rosier, an innocent character who is Europeanized, as he "shares shares many characteristics with her dear old dad, without any of his scheming malevolence." (Shmoop <http://www.shmoop.com/portrait-of-a-lady/edward-rosier.html>) Thus, characters are either attracted to the place which is associated with their personality traits (Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle) or towards people sharing their own

traits (Pansy being attracted to Mr. Rosier). We may speak of a personification of Europe or America through characters which are scheming or very innocent. Nevertheless, the situation is complicated. We may think about a questioning of this idea of associating Europe or America with scheming or with innocence with characters such as Pansy and Rosier. These characters are quite complex and not built solely on the opposition good versus evil in their association with Europe and America. Henry James may be trying to tell his readers that there are always exceptions to these interpretations. Here, we see the stereotypes which were helping us understand reality by tracing patterns collapsing, as not helping us in all situations. Our established patterns of interpreting reality are challenged with these characters who defy the previously established stereotypes. This process serves to underline the idea that it is all a matter of perception, that it is all a matter of psychology. Forming stereotypes is something natural. Yet, at times they accurately describe reality, while at other times they fail to, or they are not enough to describe reality, which is complex.

The Grand Tour of Europe

It seems that in *A Portrait of a Lady* there is a continuation of the 17th and 18th century phenomenon called *The Grand Tour*. This tour was intended for rich young people in order to gain experience, to grow up. However, not all youths who came back from their tour of Europe returned wiser. Some tours resulted in loss of money and no gaining of life experience.

Isabel does travel a lot and goes through all sorts of experiences in Europe. We may say that she gains life experience, yet she does make lots of mistakes and the outcome is not a happy one. She goes through difficult experiences. For the readers, these experiences may be connected to Europe, because the characters who make her go through difficult experiences are associated with Europe. Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond both live in Europe and have their evil ways. In fact, these two characters are both American expatriates. Even so, the setting for their scheming is Europe, not America.

Isabel is portrayed as independent, as wishing to go through the later version of a Grand Tour of Europe. Does Isabel change as she travels? According to Michael Gorra, “[...] even in Europe, Isabel Archer’s sense of her independence and exceptionalism—and its limits—reflected America’s own.” (Gorra

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/30/is-henry-james-s-the-portrait-of-a-lady-the-great-american-novel.html>). In Gorra’s view,

The Portrait of a Lady tells the story of a young woman named Isabel Archer, who claims that she’s fond of her freedom but who stands just the same, after the death of her father, on the verge of marriage to a New England mill owner. Then she suffers a fairy-tale rescue at the hands of an aunt. Taken to Europe and furnished with an unexpected inheritance, Isabel finds what looks at first like an ever-expanding field in which to exercise her own sense of independence. She starts by rejecting one suitor after another, including an English lord who seems to her less a person than a personage, a set of inherited possessions and powers. She tells her aunt, moreover, that “I always want to know the things one shouldn’t do,” not simply in order to do them, but so as to choose. Isabel needs to know other people’s rules in order to make her own. For she sees herself, in Emerson’s words, as perfectly self-sufficing, and the consummation of that radical autonomy, that utterly American desire to choose, will be to elect a European home. (Gorra

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/30/is-henry-james-s-the-portrait-of-a-lady-the-great-american-novel.html>)

Travelling thus provides Isabel with new opportunities, with new perspectives on life, with independence. She remains unchanged by Europe, unlike Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, the two American expatriates.

The Old World vs. the New World

William James was preoccupied by the differences between the Old and the New World. Usually the New World seems to be preferred, if we think of America portrayed through the image of innocent, independent young ladies such as Isabel or her friend the journalist.

What makes critics or readers or even characters project a dystopic image on Europe? According to Gorra,

Isabel walks at night through London with the sense that “the world [lies] all before her,” that she may do whatever she likes. James’ words are, however, a deliberate echo of what Milton wrote in expelling Adam and Eve from Paradise, and in this fallen world not even Isabel can have that freedom.” (Gorra <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/30/is-henry-james-s-the-portrait-of-a-lady-the-great-american-novel.html>).

We can understand the view on the Old World first as positive then as negative through the experience of culture shock. First, the characters go through the honeymoon phase (illustrated by the image of freedom offered by the Grand Tour) and then they move to the negotiation phase of their experience of culture shock. The honeymoon phase includes fascination with the new culture, feeling excited by everything new, feeling overwhelmed with impressions, while the negotiation phase includes feelings of anxiety, of dislike regarding the foreign culture, of criticizing the respective culture, of withdrawing from it. These experiences are illustrated through the tight connection between characters and places.

Gorra explains that characters are entirely connected to places, to settings, to the Old or New World:

[...] the novel suggests that what's true for the character is true of her country as well, each of them attempting to define their relation to the world outside. What Isabel will eventually learn is simply what the Old World has always had to teach us. She learns that her own most intimate relations have been determined by things that happened before she was thought of, by a past of which she was ignorant and that she only understands when it's already too late. She learns that America itself has had no separate or special creation, that there is no fresh start, no city on a hill, no exemption from history itself. None of us are entirely self-made, and James's account of the limits of that Emersonian self-reliance, the limits of our own most cherished beliefs, is what makes *The Portrait of a Lady* a great American novel. (Gorra <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/30/is-henry-james-s-the-portrait-of-a-lady-the-great-american-novel.html>)

The strong connections between characters and places are also noticed by Cristina Nuta:

Compared to Europe, America was still a new, innocent country. European subtleties of manners and morality, evolved over many centuries, baffled the visiting American who was accustomed to directness of behaviour and simple notions of right and wrong. In 'The Portrait' we can distinguish very well this aspect, viewed as an international theme, that of a innocent American heroine who does not find herself

against an assortment of sophisticated and corrupt Europeans; she is deceived by corrupt Americans who live in Italy. (Nuta http://articles.famouswhy.com/strengths_of_the_multiple_points_of_view_in_the_portrait_of_a_lady/#ixzz274gHnzLf)

As noted in the previous section, Henry James did not stick to this view only as America and American characters being connected to innocence and Europeans or Europe being connected with evil. This indicates the relevance of the culture shock theory to the way James portrays his characters.

America as utopia, Europe as dystopia

The vision expressed by Henry James in his novel has been noticed before. It is specific to American culture. Michael Tapper speaks about a “national myth”:

[...] the concept of America is synonymous with utopia locked in a dichotomy with Europe as dystopia. The American utopia was consequently situated as far away from Europe as possible, in the post-civil war frontier west of Mississippi. There, in what was perceived as virgin territories, the USA claimed to have found its Garden of Eden, waiting to bring a regeneration to the European immigrants, transforming them in battle with the Indian savages into a new-born race of self-made aristocrats— i. e. the true Americans. [...]

This national myth [...] became even more popular with the disappearance of the real frontier in the late 19th century, and captured as a popular genre the imagination of both Americans and Europeans after the turn of the century. And as a brutal savagery seemed to lie beneath the façade of European sophistication, disclosing itself most nakedly in the first world war, American isolationism and chauvinism flourished, permeating the social hierarchy. (Tapper 7-8)

The vision of the characters in James’ novel may be shaped by this national myth. Otherwise, we may also claim that James himself was affected by this myth and it shaped his perception which in turn affected the way he represents Europe in his novel. By travelling to Europe, Isabel can only experience dystopia. Even so, in England, she finds nice persons, such as her cousin Ralph. What is more, I think that in some cases the place is seen as connected to evil scheming, in a dystopic way. If we think about the American expatriates Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, they are not pure Europeans. They have come to Europe perhaps because it suited their interests. Europe as a dystopic place seems to attract characters with rather evil ways.

The perception of Europe as a far-away land, as a different land, with other rules, and with other kinds of people, led by evil interests, seems psychological. Indeed, James writes a realistic psychological novel. The tragic situations he represents in his fiction bring similarities with dystopias:

Henry James is considered the father of the realistic psychological novel. His characters are defined by the world in which they live and the social requirements of their society. James’s brand of realism explores the psyches of characters grappling with complex social and ethical situations. While many early realists avoided tragic situations, James placed his characters in circumstances that did not always end happily. (Ozick 18)

Isabel finds in Europe a dystopic experience, which is brought by the kind of people she interacts with and which influence her life. However, she does manage to live an independent life as wished to. Up to a point, her experience is not necessarily dystopic. Just like the Grand Tour did not end up in a good way for all youths, who could become more mature or just lose all their fortune, so is the experience of Isabel.

Conclusions

We could speak about a negative projection American characters have on Europe. Since Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond are American expatriates who live in Italy, we may say that in James' vision characters and places become connected naturally. Corrupt characters, if they do not live there, move to the Old World. Isabel only wishes to travel in order to live an independent life. Throughout the novel, she remains the same, in the sense that she does not become corrupted by the characters who belong to the Old World.

Henry James appears to have been influenced by the national myth which sees America as utopia and Europe as dystopia. There were cultural differences between the two worlds, Old and New, and also differences of values as far as certain characters are concerned. The Old World as corrupt, as dystopia may be related to the negative experiences some youths had during their Grand Tour. Moreover, since James makes use of tragic aspects, the readers may keep those in mind after reading the book since they are more powerful and thus they may keep associating Europe with corruption, with a dystopic world.

I think that the term "dystopia" in this case does not obviously refer to science fiction aspects but to psychological aspects. The negative impression about Europe is brought into the foreground for the readers, for certain characters, for Henry James himself as it is shaped by what is called the national myth. All these experiences related to perception can be regarded as a result of culture shock. After all, two cultures come into contact during the Grand Tour and, for the Americans, culture shock occurs. They remain in the negotiation phase as far as their image of Europe remains in their national myth.

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