

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University
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HENRY JAMES’S INTERNATIONAL NOVEL

Doctoral Thesis
-Abstract-

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Key words: *international theme, expatriation, New World, Old World, innocence, experience, sexuality, tragic, comic.*

Abstract

To the aim of providing a comprehensive and thematic analysis of Henry James's international novels, the thesis brings together the various fields of cultural studies, gender studies, poetics, psychology and their corresponding methodologies in a complex approach, generating a new subject of critical survey. With a view to illustrating James's literary "transatlantic pilgrimage" to Europe, his major contributions to the (pre)modernist and postmodernist literature, it offers a complex image of the cultural, social, moral, spiritual conflict between the "New World" and the "Old World", which generates behavior mutations and even personal tragedies. The present work is an attempt to capitalize on one of the most essential themes met in James's novels, the so-

called “international theme”. Having as a starting point the information found in his journals and letters but especially in the novels, it tries to depict the “ethno-mental” clash between America and Europe, as seen by Henry James. The European values fascinated him, like Cooper, Melville or Hawthorne too, but in a distinct manner, his novels illustrating a continuous tension between past and present, innocence and experience, tragic and comic. They couldn’t be interpreted as mechanical mixtures of the European and American cultures, because James was neither an exclusively European nor an exclusively American writer. His novels were actually a synthesis of all the major elements of expatriate writing, a special form which was different from any other writing done in the context of a single culture.

The paper provides a detailed analysis of the selected novels, from various and innovative perspectives. Beyond the brief theoretical approach of the main concepts discussed by James himself in his famous critical studies, there are more applied and minute references concerning the innovations he brings

in his international novels. These include discussions about the international fictional reality and reflectors, the American innocence versus the European experience, the delicate subject of sexuality, the tragic and comic elements, but also the author's contradictory attitude towards these aspects. The research methods take into account the American and European cultural identities, too. A combination of the explicative-theoretical methods and the demonstrative ones is provided, using not only the analysis, the comparison but also the theoretical reflections and the biography. The transversal study of the international novels with a permanent correlation of the discussed concepts and the selected novels is completed by a longitudinal one, illustrating their evolution in time, in different periods of the Jamesian literary creation. The thesis approach has a causal character with correlations among different concepts of the paper, a functional one with an emphasis on the international phenomenon in the modernism system, a hermeneutical one, applying the symbolic information through highlighting the implicit meaning of the concerned phenomenon, and an acting one, offered

by the dynamics of the two poles, the European versus the American culture. The many personal observations, comments, emphasis contribute to the originality of the paper, sustaining its practical utility.

Taking into account the limited character of a doctoral thesis, the impressive number of critical works devoted to Henry James's life and work, his vast literary creation, a selection of the most representative international novels has almost been compulsory. The thesis includes references to novels from different periods of his life and work: *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904). This is the guaranty that an overall, undivided, complete image of the Jamesian international theme is offered. Furthermore, the bibliographical sources have facilitated the identification of the reference elements, of interest areas, offering a wide source of interpretative options. The thesis is actually structured in five chapters: **1. Henry James- An American Expatriate; 2. The International Reality and Reflectors; 3. The Image of the Old World; 4.**

The Quest for Identity: Reflections on Innocence and Sexuality; 5. Comic vs. Tragic; 6. Overall Conclusions. Each chapter begins with general assumptions and ends with a detailed analysis of the discussed concepts in the texts.

The first chapter, **Henry James- An American Expatriate**, focuses on the presentation of Henry James as an American expatriate, continuously “oscillating” between the innocent America and the experienced Europe. It starts with a historical and cultural analysis of the American expatriation phenomenon, investigating the identity similarities and differences between the two worlds. It develops the mentality context in which James becomes a British subject and his expatriation reasons, with a clear view of his European “failures”, too. This complex image is completed by a short biographical illustration of his voyages to and back from Europe. **1.1. The Historical and Cultural Context** creates an overall image of the gradual shift in power from Britain/ Europe to America, insisting upon the role of ambassadors that writers play in the international conversation of the two worlds. It also stresses the changing historical, social,

political and cultural realities and the shifts in consciousness that generate new literary opportunities.

1.2. “Expatriation” vs. “Dispatriation” shows the different opinions about the two terms chosen for describing James’s condition and their implications for the novelist. **1.3. Biographical Overtones** offers a short biographical account of James’s many trips from America to Europe in his childhood and from Europe to America later on. It also illustrates the impact of these voyages on his life and literary creation, the notable personalities and the common people he met and influenced or changed his perception of life and vision. **1.4. The Reasons for Expatriation** explains the James’s decision of leaving America and his option to become a British subject towards the end of his life. The subchapter **1.4.1. Incompatibility with the Native Country** insists upon James’s difficulty in identifying oneself with the American structures and his feeling of non-acceptance by the society because America offers a hostile and inappropriate atmosphere for any novelist and the intellectual aspects are subordinated to its practical and business interests. Furthermore, he is

strongly disappointed by America's detached attitude in the First World War. **1.4.2. Literary Quarrel with American Culture** has as a main focus the vacuum of American culture reflected in the reception of James's literary works and the innocence of American literature in its literary purpose. **1.4.3. England's Attraction** offers the image of the James's adopting country as a place where he can express freely, approaching English life from his point of view, with his own methods and instruments. **1.5. James's European "Failures"** emphasizes the risks and penalties implied by James's expatriation, with an accent on the strong difference between his illusions and the European reality and on his play writing disappointment. **1.6. James's Detached Cosmopolitanism** presents his admiration for and his opinion about the cosmopolitanism he finds in Europe, his preference for a detached cosmopolitanism that allows him a superior perception of the international reality. **1.7. Between Two Worlds** illustrates the controversial aspect of including Henry James in a certain category, American or European, when he actually seems to live in a space between American

futurity and European cultural past, and this can be seen not only in his everyday life but also in his international novels. **1.8. Conclusions** represents a short summary of the main ideas and their consequences which are illustrated in the first chapter of the paper.

The second chapter, **The International Reality and Reflectors**, highlights James's main innovations in the poetics of the novel, as they are reflected in his international novels. Having as a starting point his famous critical works, *The Art of Fiction* and *The Art of the Novel*, where he strongly disapproves the omniscient author's convention, the present chapter defines the reflectors, illustrates their great variety and highlights their complex functions, which include, beside recording and telling the events to the reader, the one of making moral and psychological analysis of the reflected situation. James's narrators "reflect" a complex world, many times unintelligible, the result of their subjectivity, of the deviation from the real. They represent the real characters of the international novel, and the accent is moved from the "story" to the "perception". Their fictional reality can't be a complete one, because it

depends upon their interests, habits and limitations. The present chapter is divided in eight subchapters. **2.1. Introduction** gives an overall image of James's theoretical approach on the mentioned concepts. **2.2. *Roderick Hudson*** develops Rowland Mallet's role of interpreter or *raisonneur*. **2.3. *The American*** insists on Christopher Newman's active role of observer. **2.4. *The Portrait of a Lady*** is a record of Ralph Touchett's feelings and impressions about Isabel, presenting him as a central observer and the novel's second center of consciousness. **2.5. *The Wings of the Dove*** illustrates the multiple point of view technique and the existence of three "centres": Milly Theale, Kate Croy and Merton Densher, as a completion to the reflector Mrs. Stringham. **2.6. *The Ambassadors*** is the subchapter where the main character's thought is used by James as a vehicle by which the story is revealed. **2.7. *The Golden Bowl*** depicts an adulterous relationship which is presented exclusively from the adulterers' point of view, and which is not filtered through the consciousness of a detached observer. **2.8. Conclusions** gives an overall

image of the reflectors' importance and roles in James's international novels.

The third chapter of the paper is called **The Image of the Old World**. If in his earliest novels James reflects the traditional image of Europe, the place for the moral destruction of the innocent Americans who are deceived by the more experienced Europeans, in his late fiction he creates his own Europe, which is the result of a closer vision, replacing the comedy based on the conflict between American and European manners with a tragic problem, in which manners act like conventions determining morals. The international contrast is no longer an external conflict alone, but it is presented in terms of individual awareness of the foreign aspects of Europe, of exploring the origins and possibilities of contrasting models of moral life. In the comparison between the two Worlds, Europe was a better place to live and work for him as it offered a greater complexity of social relations and a material for his fiction. Being a land of the individuals and not of communities, it later evolves into a society which lacks well-defined social classes, oriented towards the individual. **3.1.**

Introduction briefly introduces the main aspects which are developed in the third chapter. **3.2. The Image of Italy** shows how Italy and Italian art exerted such an amazing power on James which determined him to use the Italian scenery, settings, and Italian characters in opposition to America in his novels. It presents James's own experience in Italy, but also the ambivalent image of this country and of its people as it is seen by his American characters. **3.3. The Image of France** illustrates how James builds the image of France through the eyes of the American characters that travel in this country. He doesn't have the privilege to enter the aristocratic society in Faubourg St. Germain, but only that of the American colony in Paris, so he uses his imagination to create the French setting and characters in some of his novels. **3.4. The Image of England** focuses on the connection between James and England with biographical, personal, historical, public aspects which are mediated through the literary. From all the European cities, James felt a high passion for London, which survived with him, flowered in his literary works and determined him to choose it as a place to live. In some of

his international novels, he makes articulate use of Englishness in culture, ideology, but first and most memorably, in place. **3.5. Conclusions** offers an overview of the most important ideas which are discussed in the third chapter, with an emphasis on the image of Europe as it is created by James.

The fourth chapter of the thesis, **The Quest for Identity. Reflections on Innocence and Sexuality**, is divided in two main subchapters: **4.1. The Innocence of the New World** and **4.2. Aspects of Sexuality**. The first of them highlights the innocence of New World, and whether or not the American can preserve this quality in a space of vice and complexity. James uses the contrast between Americans and Europeans with the purpose of highlighting the Americans' innocence, provided that only in the presence of each other their traits can be fully identified. In his international novels James's major protagonists are the individuals who struggle to protect their integrity and freedom against violation by the world. The problem of the dual nature of both innocence and experience is present in the international conflict, but obviously, innocence is to be found in the American,

knowledge on the European side. **4.1.1. Introduction** establishes the various aspects related to Americans' innocence which are developed in the next subchapters. **4.1.2. The Innocent American Girl** portrays the image of James's fictional American girl. Appeared in the context of the Victorian ideology of the feminine which was similar on both sides of the Atlantic, the idea of the marital and maternal true woman was a central aspect in America as well as in Victorian England. It insists upon the lack of women's independent life, the feminine innocence depended on its existing in a rigid society, but especially on the situation of the American women in Europe. **4.1.2.1. Isabel Archer** embodies the image of the innocent American girl, with little experience, placed in a European external world of social relations, but who, unlike her predecessors, has a consciousness capable of understanding, judging and accepting the values of that world. **4.1.2.2. Milly Theale** tells the story of an American heiress stricken with a serious disease who begins to discover that she can use the attributes of the American girl, of dove or princess to her own advantage. She is aware of her innocence which together

with her culturally determined psychology leads to her victimization by the European experience. **4.1.2.3. Maggie Verver** presents the incestuous relationship between Adam and Maggie Verver as the cause for Maggie's innocence and her difficulty of finding a sense of identity. Unlike the other Jamesian women, she passes over innocence and asks for and fights for power by accepting the condition of being human. **4.1.3. The Innocent American Male** shows how James's interest in the international subject made him aware of the innocence of the American male, too. The subchapter draws a line between the innocence of the American girl and man, as James himself treated his issues in a gendered manner. The gender-shaped society of his homeland imposed cultural, political and sexual functions upon its women and men. He admitted the existence of two gender types: men who are in business and women, who are responsible for the American culture. **4.1.3.1. Roderick Hudson** describes the Roderick's European experience. Being presented as a rude, corruptive, contradictory and without manners innocent with a great ambition as violent as naïve, he

finishes his trip in a tragic manner. James's main intention is to emphasize the artist's aesthetic development but also his moral decay. **4.1.3.2. Christopher Newman** illustrates the main character's innocence which can be equated with the ignorance of the complex arts of European high society, with an absurd naiveté, as he is not young character. **4.1.3.3. Lambert Strether** reflects the male innocence connected to the fear of feeling passion for women, the protagonist's ignorance of the true nature of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet. He finally becomes aware of the differences between the two worlds. **4.1.4. Conclusions** summarizes James's concept of innocence in his international novels.

4.2. Aspects of Sexuality emphasizes that in James's international novels, sexuality plays an important part in the constitution of 'the self', in the conception of identity. The author insists upon the meeting between 'culture' and 'the self', where the notions of a gendered, sexed 'self' are always interrogated. His international fiction is consciously dealing with the constraints related to the representations

of the erotic and the deviant. **4.2.1. Introduction** brings on stage the main features of James's fictional sexuality. **4.2.2. "Homosexual" and Marginality Aspects** reveals James's combination of the feminine and the masculine in his literary writings, continuously oscillating between geographical, sexual, ideological worlds and sharing with some of his characters the satisfactions and the agonies of marginality. Henry James's most complex characters are never exclusively "masculine" or "feminine", but they are androgynous mixtures. His novels are infused with same-sex eroticism and the connection between same-sex passion and 'identity'. **4.2.2.1. Roderick Hudson- Rowland Mallet** presents a lack of concordance between the official text and the unofficial subtext of desire, the unacknowledged desire of the tale being a homosexual desire, Rowland's desire for Roderick. **4.2.2.2. Ralph Touchett** exemplifies the theme of marginality and shows an atypical masculine behavior because Ralph suffers from an illness that doesn't allow him to live a normal heterosexual life, to marry his cousin, Isabel Archer. **4.2.2.3. Lambert Strether** presents the protagonist's uncertainty about the

focus of his sexual desire. On one hand, he wants to remarry, on the other, he admires Chad's extramarital romance. Strether lacks in male aggression, he is timid and passive avoiding heterosexual relations to his own eccentricities. **4.2.3. Desiring Woman and Erotic Triangles** is a reflection of James's vision of marriage which seems to express some doubt about the capacity of this institution to secure harmony and happiness. The subchapter makes reference to the "other" woman in James's international novels, who is sexually more attractive and whose adventurous nature invests sin with romance. **4.2.3.1. *The Portrait of a Lady*** presents Isabel as a woman caught in an erotic triangle. **4.2.3.2. *The Wings of the Dove*** explores the already developed idea of an erotic triangle made of two women as rivals for a man. **4.2.3.3. *The Golden Bowl*** insists upon the love triangle idea, too, returning to the problem of marriage, which triumphs due to the renunciation of adultery. Sexuality is only suggested and not directly portrayed. The sexual desire takes shape only in the bonds of matrimony. **4.2.4. Conclusions** gives a final image of James's sexual world, where possibility reigns over

mundane reality, with glimpses of alternative sexual desire and expression.

The last chapter of the novel, **Comic vs. Tragic** tries to establish whether James's international novels are mainly tragic, comic or a hybrid literary creation. His vision doesn't exclude any, as he agrees that comedy is related to tragedy. The tragedy reflects the isolation of man from society, death and deconstruction, while the comedy emphasizes the integration of man into society, the continuity of life and construction. Many of the main characters in Henry James's international novels are comic in their egotism, self-deception and ignorance, while some of them have a tragic end. **5.1. Introduction** presents the different critical opinions regarding the comic and tragic elements in James's international novels and his own opinion and vision about them. **5.2. *Roderick Hudson*** emphasizes that despite Roderick's death and Rowland Mallet's serious and complex duty of the normative consciousness, the novel isn't free of the Jamesian ironic treatment. **5.3. *The American*** highlights that the whole novel is a light satire and also a comedy of manners, but the last part of it becomes melodramatic,

because the comic hero is placed in a tragic situation. He loses Claire, so he learns he can't buy her for his wife.

5.4. *The Portrait of a Lady* evaluates the novel as a tragicomedy, since Isabel's failure in marriage and her sufferance are clearly the result of her comic egotism.

5.5. *The Wings of the Dove* illustrates the drama of Milly Theale, a young woman who is affected by her inner conflict between sickness and her will to live. The dramatic irony on which the novel is based is that Milly's shadow would continue to fall athwart Kate and Densher's lives even after her death.

5.6. *The Ambassadors* shows the novel as a comedy of manners, in which the conflicting societies that generate the drama are Europe and America, represented by Paris, on one hand, and Woollett, on the other. **5.7. *The Golden Bowl*** insists upon the main irony that even the four protagonists behave in what they think to be a 'beautiful' and 'magnificent' manner, the result of their behavior is the falsest, ugliest, most painful situation.

Despite the great variety of critical analyses on Henry James's fiction, the topic "Henry James's International Novel" is viable for research. A major

category of the existent researches are organized according to and focus on the division of James's literary creation in the three well-known parts: the early, the middle and the late periods of creation, illustrating the evolution of the Jamesian themes, characters, plots, techniques, ideas in time. Other studies are specialized on a single, specific aspect which is analyzed in detail in certain literary creations and often in comparison to other writers. The novelty of the present thesis is represented by the complex, varied character of the proposed analysis. It is not only a sum of the most important innovations James illustrates in his international novels, but also a personal attempt to present his great contribution to the development of the modern and postmodern novel. The intention is to have a clear and overall image on the selected aspects in his most representative international novels. The actuality of the chosen theme is obvious as many of the modernist and postmodernist ideas are rooted in Henry James's critical and literary works. Furthermore, the international theme is a current topic in the world literature, especially in the context of a multicultural existence, which is still

governed by the same problems, more or less evolved in comparison to the initial forms.

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