

# Environment: A Crucial Motif in Henry James' International Novels\*

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**Abstract**—*The American*, *The Europeans*, *Daisy Miller*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* are four representative novels of international theme by Henry James. To ensure the successful proceeding of the international theme, James employs a common crucial motif—environment in the four novels. The motif is, in essence, one of the important narrating arts James invents. James' use of it is not only out of the structural consideration to carry out the narration effectively, for instance, to strengthen the theme, to foster the character portrayal, to increase the dramatic conflicts so as to drive the narrative to the climax, but also based on a philosophical concern with aesthetics and humanity.

**Index Terms**—Henry James, international theme, *The American*, *The Europeans*, *Daisy Miller*, *The Portrait of a Lady*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Henry James is a giant in English literature of realism. His realistic style is achieved on the one the hand because of his social concerns, such as about the issues of class, gender, and ethics, etc. On the other hand it is because of the unique narrating arts he employs, such as point of view, focus of consciousness, dramatic representation and the like, by means of which the psychological reality of the characters is explored and exposed to the readers. Actually, among the narrating arts James deploys, motif is also a very important factor to be reckoned with in terms of its contribution to the realistic vein of James' novels of international theme and to the aesthetic significance of the novels as well.

*The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Daisy Miller* (1878), and *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881) were accomplished almost in the first phase of James' writing career. They are the representative works of James' international theme. These four books were published successively within four years. The time span between the publication of the first one and the fourth one is not very long, which means the author's focus of interest may vary little. They all deal with the European-American's cross-cultural experience. To ensure a successful proceeding of the cultural conflict theme, he introduces an important motif— environment. "A motif is a conspicuous element, such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature" (M. H. Abrams & Geoffrey G. Harpham, 2010, p.205). It frequently occurs in the four novels of James' as a sort of device functioning as a foil or background. In this paper, we will try to answer these following questions: what is the environment, as a background, that the protagonists of the four novels are confronted with? How does the foil-like environment work with some other narrating factors of the novels in the process of narration? In terms of the humanity and aesthetic concern, what is conveyed to the readers by the use of the motif of environment?

## II. THE ENVIRONMENT CONFRONTING THE PROTAGONISTS

Environment was once a major concern for Zola, a great and famous French writer at James's age. He believes that by way of scientific observation and representation of one's heredity and environment, one can obtain scientific knowledge on the relationship between oneself and the society that one lives in, and that in fact heredity and environment exert a definite and decisive influence upon human beings (Emile Zola, 1963, p.p. 161-173). Influenced by the naturalist writers though, James is somewhat different from them and expresses his own personal view of the relationship between human beings and environment in the four novels. If the naturalists believe that environment and heredity make human beings, then to James, it is human beings who make the environment. In other words, the naturalists see the passive and resigning side of human when facing the overwhelming environment while James sees the subjective side of human with a more complex and profound insight into humanity. What James is intending to philosophize is the ways to perfect humanity in a certain environment. That is why he deploys the motif of environment.

Then what is the environment confronting the protagonists? In *The American*, Newman, the American protagonist, runs into a European society of the De Bellegardes who are exclusive, rules-and-convention-conscious, experienced and Machiavellian; The two European protagonists of *The Europeans*, Eugenia and Felix, are confronted with the society of a puritan family in New England, America, who are self-restricted, simple, democratic, provincial; Daisy, an American girl, the heroine of *Daisy Miller*, is entangled with a group of Swiss and Romans who are expatriated Americans,

\* This paper is the one of the results of the Research Program (XJ201242) sponsored by Qufu Normal University.

sophisticated, cultivated and faithful to Calvinism; The heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel, an American, runs into a group of English and Italians, a man-dominated society, who are good-mannered, artistically-cultivated and sophisticated. It is obvious that all the societies that the protagonists of the four novels are confronted with are essentially an environment which is quite different from their own. If it's difficult for people in their native environment to perceive the strengths and weaknesses of their national character, to realize the truth, or to obtain a guiding line for their individual development, it is much easier to be solved when they are placed in an alien environment where its residents are holding different social and cultural values from their own. Here one of the purposes of creating an alien environment to put the protagonists in is to form a background or kind of foil so as to protrude the actions, values or the characters of them. With the environment serving as a contrasting background, the strengths and weaknesses in people's characters are drawn to the foreground and thus the readers' senses get stimulated. However, the motif of environment here is not isolated from other narrating elements of the novels, such as characterization, theme, action, and end. They correlate with each other logically, and form a macro narrative structure. With environment as a key motif, the narrative structure presents the novels to the readers in a manner as paintings to the audience, reflecting the writer's "impression of life".

### III. THE CORRELATION OF ENVIRONMENT WITH OTHER NARRATING ELEMENTS

The environment that the protagonists get involved in is one in which the values or traditions of the residents are quite different from their own. If we liken the novels to a picture, the residents in a certain environment as a whole form a foil or background on the picture, contrasting with the characters and values of the protagonists. The environment that the protagonists break into is either a sophisticated and decadent European culture or a simple and vigorous new continent American culture. No matter which environment that the protagonists break into, it intensifies the tension between the protagonists and the people around them, implying great potential of dramatic conflicts and thus pushing the story to go forward.

Once the environment is pre-set as a foil or background, the novels run into an important phase, that is, the characterization of the protagonists through actions or incidents. James says, "There are bad novels and good novels, and there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning, I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a character. When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incidence, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incidence but the illustration of character? What is either picture or a novel that is not a character? What else do we seek in it and find it in it" (Henry James, 1999, p. 1145). According to James, the incidents are used to illustrate character. These incidents or actions in the target environment are mainly triggered by the cultural difference between the two parties. When one of the two parties, the people living in the target environment, talk about the actions or incidents related to the protagonists, their attitudes, tones, standpoints, judgments, etc. are implied between the lines, which furnishes the readers with the clues of the characters of the protagonists. It is from their mouths and minds that we know Daisy is ingenuous, naïve, untaught, scornful of convention, lacking the sense of propriety; Newman is lacking taste of arts, haughty, candid, naïve, democratic, simple; Eugenia is exclusive, biased, mature and good at social arts while Felix is aesthetic, artistic, footloose, insightful; Isabel is independent, democratic, indomitable and moral-conscious.

Characterization is crucial to James' novels because it is closely associated with the international theme, but without the pre-setting of the environment, it is impossible to achieve the international theme through characterization. For international theme, it mainly approaches cultural difference with an intention of observation of characters and exploration of humanity at the same time. To enable the theme proceed, there must be some conflicts between the characters so as to move the narration to solve the conflicts, which is usually the end parts of the novels. Under James' pen, the conflicts are in effect the sort of conflicts between individual and the overwhelming environments or rather the individual's struggle against such environments. The fates of the protagonists are mainly doomed by their characters.

As the stories go, all of the four novels are concluded with tragic ends. A. C. Bradley once pointed out the nature of tragedy based on a study of Shakespeare's tragedies and said that many people are placed in a certain environment, and then certain actions are produced when their characters cooperate with each other in this environment. And these actions produce other actions and others and others, until this series of interrelated actions are led to a catastrophe by an obvious and unavoidable concatenation" (1981, p.26). It is the same with James' tragedies. In James' case, the tragedies of the protagonists on the one hand owe to some weaknesses in their characters, for instance, inability or unwillingness to adapt oneself to the environment, over-confidence, or naivety and so on. On the other, the tragedies also owe to the overwhelming and uncontrollable power imposed against the individuals by the heterogeneous environment. Environment serves as a backdrop and a foil for cultivating the protagonists' character; and the characters of the protagonists which developed in a certain environment determine, to a large extent, the fates of the protagonists. All the three components are indispensable to reflect the novels' themes.

### IV. JAMES' AESTHETIC AND HUMANITY CONCERN

The use of the motif of environment is not just out of the narrating or structural concern. More important, it is out of

his aesthetic and humanity concern. First, the use of the motif of environment displays James' view that novelists are painters. In James' time, fictions were not given enough respects by readers, even at a time despised as jocular, for they thought fictions were lack of "air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it-of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison" (Henry James, 1999, p. 1139). The reason for fiction's status being low is in essence that it lacks arts or lacks craftsmanship like that of such arts as painting. To intimate the arts of painting and to rectify people's negative view upon novels, James invents and introduces the motif of environment in his novels because it serves well as the canvas, a kind of backdrop, to protrude the "painting" of different characters, just like the different colors painted in a picture. Contrasted with that of the people in the target environment around them, the characters of the protagonists are so clear-cut and impressive to the eyes of the readers that it attract all the readers' attention to the protagonists, the focus of the novel. This process is just like that of the audience focusing their eyes on the protruded expressions on the characters in a picture, from which the readers might make various readings of the fate of the characters. The foregrounding effects brought about to the readers by using such a motif of canvas-like environment are no less strong and shocking than that of the fine arts.

Indeed, as he has pointed out in his essay of *The Art of Fiction*, the art of painter and the art of novelist are the same. He says, "Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another" (Henry James, 1999, p.1140). The benefits of using the motif of environment are not only lying in its function as a background to contrast the characters, but also in its function of being competing with life or being realistic, because the environment occurring in the novels are not coined, but created based on the writer's personal experience and keen observation of life, and the realistic vein is "the only reason for the existence of the novel" (Henry James, 1999, p.1140) to James. In fact, the use of the motif of environment is James' innovation on the narrating crafts. In Stephen Spender's words, it is James' "revolutionary mode of using the scene mainly as a means of aligning the characters and explaining what are the reactions of each to the other" (Charles R. Anderson, 1977, p. 64), or in Peter Garrett's words, it is "his pioneering use of scenic presentation" (Charles R. Anderson, 1977, p. 64).

Second, the experience in an alien environment is a necessitated way to human perfection. James' international theme is concerned with two cultures: one is the American culture and the other one is the European culture. As for which one is the better, there is no ready answer for James at all. Either of them has strengths and weaknesses. In this aspect, James is rather objective and neutral than favors one of them. He, as an American, is proud of holding this nationality, as he once stated that, "We are Americans born—if faut enprendre son parti. I look upon it as a great blessing; and I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short claim our property wherever we find it" (Roger Gard, 1968, p.23).

Yet at the same time, there are some weaknesses for American culture. These weaknesses are just what James, as a patriotic American, worries and frets about. And that is why he puts it in his novels to show to the readers so as to invite their attention to such a state of minds of the Americans. Maybe Frederick Sheldon's remarks can give us a much clearer and brief idea about the weaknesses of the civilization that the American people take on: "He may have little taste or appreciation of art, he may be too ready to assert himself and to boast of his country, but he really believes in himself and in his country. The better-bred man, who looks down upon him, is in attack upon it with vigor; he may talk of its wealth, prosperity, ingenuity, and enterprise, but secretly he wishes he had been born elsewhere" (1978, p.355).

Nonetheless, European culture is not at all perfect. Although Europeans are characterized by their good taste of arts, the cultural enrichment which is accumulated through long histories, yet the European culture is old, compared with the New World represented by America. Decay and corruption have rooted deeply in the people's mindset. Therefore, James is much concerned with the achievement of an ideal civilization, in essence, the achievement of the human perfection. Yet "James rejected the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists' optimism about man's essential goodness and his perfectibility" (Alwyn Berland, 1981, p. 12), because the self can not guard against raw egoism, and only through civilization, through forms and manners, ritual, a shared ethic and art, can people finally become civilized. However, when in their own culture which is shared by them, people are blind with their own weaknesses. That is why it is necessitated for James to put his protagonists in an alien environment to check and consider their own strengths and weaknesses in retrospect.

At this point, James shows some traces of the cultural thoughts of Matthew Arnold, who employed two terms, namely, Hebraism—the call to duty, and Hellenism—the call to beauty, to state his cultural theory and believed that "they have the same general purpose, 'man's perfection or salvation', and both tendencies are necessary components of this perfection" (Joseph Carroll, 1983, p.73). "Like Arnold, James reject each of these two terms alone, each without some interfusion of the other, as fragmentary. He welcomed both together as comprising man's wholeness" (Alwyn Berland, 1981, p. 31). As it is noted, the Americans in the international novels actually almost all act with the tendency of Hebraism, a tendency of "self-conquest, rescue from the thrall of vile affections, not by obedience to the letter of a law, but by conformity to the image of a self-sacrificing example" (Joseph Carroll, 1983, p.72). However, they lack of the Hellenism characterized by the Europeans in the novels, in other words, the Americans lack intellectual and aesthetic

excellence which are just the characteristics of Hellenism.

In an alien environment, the people, represented by the protagonists, are most likely to enter conflicts to the other people. In the process of confronting and addressing the conflicting problems, the two cultures' own featured tendencies are exposed. Whether it is a successful case or not for the protagonists in the international novels, James eventually shows the readers something to consider in retrospect carefully and seriously, which may result in the reshaping of the people's concept of civilization and the development of people's self perfection. Most likely, people through reading James' international novels may get a message that only learning from each other's culture, can they achieve perfection of the selves.

Third, environment is a laboratory. The ends of the protagonists of all of the four novels are, to a large extent, the result of their own choices. What cause them to make such and such choices are, in essence, their own characters, or personalities. In a word, the tragic ends of James' protagonists are the tragedy of character.

Many of James' contemporaries, such as Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, had exerted great influences on James' writing. "The French novelist Emile Zola, beginning in the 1870s, did much to develop this theory in what he called "le roman expérimental" (that is, the novel organized in the mode of a scientific experiment on the behavior, under given conditions, of the characters it depict) (M. H. Abrams & Geoffrey G. Harpham, 2010, p.304)." And Flaubert pointed out that the artists should observe the characters objectively and should attempt to identify their natures by examining their inside world, while at the same time the author should make himself invisible in his own works (Rod Horton & Edwards Herbert, 1991, p.280). All these three novelists are attaching great importance on the character of human being, which James agrees, too. James "begins his novels with a situation and a character. Many writers—like Nathaniel Hawthorne—would begin with an idea or theme in mind and then would create a situation and characters to illuminate the basic idea, but James' technique is just the opposite. He created a certain situation, and then he would place his characters in it. James would then, in effect, sit back and simply observe what would happen when a character was confronted with this new situation" (James L. Robert, 1965, p.9). Therefore, the motif of environment he exploited in these novels is like a laboratory to examine the characters' reaction to a new situation and to display their personalities.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned three novelists, Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, all have a kinship with naturalism. The end of naturalistic novels is usually tragic. The characters under their pen are "helpless victims both of glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without" (M. H. Abrams & Geoffrey G. Harpham, 2010, p.304). The "sociological pressures without" is actually the term of "environment" frequently mentioned by the naturalistic novelists, who hold that human beings as a higher-order animal whose "character and behavior are entirely determined by two kinds of forces: heredity and environment" (M. H. Abrams & Geoffrey G. Harpham, 2010, p.304).

James may well agree that environment plays an important role in the development of human beings, as we can see that the Europeans and the Americans in his novels are significantly influenced by their own environments and respectively, have a similar idiosyncrasy. Yet, the environment in James' mind might not as so influential and decisive as that in the naturalistic novels in which the protagonists are usually inept and forced to do something inconsistent with the social mores by the overwhelming environment, which eventually leads them to tragic ends. To James, it is human beings' character that is the essential factor which causes all sorts of ends of the protagonists.

In his international novels, James focuses all his attention on the characterization, on the experiments with various protagonists of different characters and exposes many aspects of the possible lives of human beings, that of man and woman, of Americans and Europeans, of Puritans and artists, etc. Yet, there is something that is fixed and unchangeable in the characters of the people under his pen. Throughout the novels, his protagonists will "act in a consistent manner" and "will never do anything that is not logical and acceptable to his realistic nature, or to our conception of what that character should do" (James L. Robert, 1965, p. 8). This is actually reflecting James' conception of realism that men are true to his own nature. It is just this unwillingness to change and to adapt to the environment that leads most of his protagonists to face the tragic ends. Oscar Cargill, a famous critic of Henry James' works, made some remarks quite to the point: "An international novel is one in which a character, usually guided in his actions by the mores of one environment, is set down in another, where he must employ all his individual resources to meet successive situation, and where he must intelligently accommodate himself to the new mores, or in one way or another, be destroyed. It is the novelist's equivalent of providing a special medium in a laboratory for studying the behavior of an organism, only here it is a device for the revelation of character" (1978, p.433).

Felix Young in James' *The Europeans* is a good case in point. He is more adaptable and his "good-natured adaptability is, perhaps, his greatest charm. America, which Eugenia calls 'this dreadful country', is for Felix 'this comical country, this delightful country'. Whereas Eugenia, amid the dull, easy surroundings of the Wentworths, is 'restless', Felix had 'never had a greater sense of luxurious security' ". (Campbell I. Ross, 1985, p. xi). As is known, in James' time, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people are greatly impacted by Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest", and so was Henry James.

## V. CONCLUSION

Henry James is well-known for his contribution to the realistic literature, while the realistic vein in James' novels is mainly achieved through his invention of all kinds of forms. Art of fiction in James' eyes is, in essence, the various forms of narration, for instance, the form of characterization, the form of protruding the themes, the form of live-life

experiencing or observing in fiction and so on. To succeed in constructing the forms, especially in the four novels of international themes, the motif of environment is a very helpful and crucial factor. It is not only an indispensable part of the whole narrating structure. The use of it but also conveys the author's philosophical thoughts about life and the nature of human beings, for the reason of which form is significant and meaningful. In a word, the motif of environment is very crucial for James to explore the international theme of novels.

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