

Henry James's Ideal Culture in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract: Henry James is a great novelist, dramatist and literary critic. During his writing career, he created many famous works and made great contributions to American and European literature. His *The portrait of a lady* is widely regarded as the most prominent work. In this novel, James explored cultural conflicts between the new land and Europe, and proposed his solution to cultural integration, which he named the ideal culture. The present study is to explore the ideal culture embodied in the novel from a cross-cultural perspective, as well as James's unique views on the resolution of cultural conflicts. The significance and value of this thesis lies in its role to help people understand the cultural diversity in the world, eliminate some people's biased conception of cultural centralism, and improve people's cross-cultural awareness in international communication by referring to the ideal culture presented in the novel.

Key Words: ideal culture; cultural fusion; American culture.

I. Introduction

Henry James is regarded as one of the most controversial writers in the literary history. He devoted his whole life to the creation of the internationally-concerned themes, and published nearly 7 plays, 22 novels, 113 tales, a lot of literary criticisms and numerous letters during his lifetime. His life experiences exerted a particular influence on his creative work. The themes of his literary works can be divided into three types: the conflicts between the civilized but deceptive Europeans and the vulgar but pure Americans; the employment of psychological standards but not moral ones; the conflicts between artistic reality and social reality. James's attitude towards American and European cultures revealed in the novel is of the first-type theme, which is named international theme in this study. He created an ideal American culture that should adopt the virtues of European cultures to complement its own. Based on the study of other scholars' contrast between the European and American cultures related with Henry James' works, this thesis is an attempt to give a supplementary analysis of James's ideal culture from the cross cultural perspective with the identity negotiation theory in the hope of bringing some fresh interest or insight in understanding the novel, namely the ideal culture Henry James longs for.

II. Literature Review

Nowadays the cross-cultural study has become one of the most important research subjects for communication between different cultures. The previous researchers of Henry James and his works studied the international theme, techniques and skills. There is a process for Henry James' development of his international themes, the characters he portrayed, such as Daisy Miller and Isabel, changed, since he explores his international themes in his novels intentionally. However, it is a pity that later on he turns his mind to the themes

of humanity. So, the international theme becomes weaker correspondingly in the works of Henry James. In addition, the book, *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* written by Anesko focuses on the techniques and skills of Henry James's writing (Anesko, 2009). Besides, Meina discussed James's writing style in *A Crucial Motif in Henry James's International Novels*, and he also demonstrates the sharp contrast of American sincerity to European deceit and American crudity to Europe culture (Menia, 2015). Menia's ideas strongly influenced the later studies, but it is a pity that he did not do any further research in this aspect.

In the western world, though James and his novels are intensely discussed, he and his novels were introduced to China quite late since James's novels mainly concern the leisure class whereas in China the master had been the working class for a long period before and after the founding of the new China. James's novels do not cater to the common tastes of China. His novels were seldom translated into Chinese before the founding of the People's Republic of China. However, in China, some scholars also analyzed the features of characters and techniques in the works of James. Guo Yan talks about the Isabel's features in *The Features of the Heroine in the Portrait of a Lady* (Guo, 2018). Wu Qi analyzes the techniques of Henry James in *The Para Narrative in the Portrait of a Lady* (Wu, 2018).

James's attitude towards American and European cultures is revealed in the novels, forming his international theme. He created an ideal American culture that should adopt the virtues of European cultures to complement its own shortcomings. This thesis will focus on analysis of James's ideal culture from the cross cultural perspective by using the identity negotiation theory with the hope that it may bring a fresh angle for readers to interpret the novel, help them to understand foreign culture and improve the cultural exchanges.

III. The Theme of Henry James's Works

Henry James's ideal culture is closely related with the international theme.

3.1 The Influence of James's Life Experience and the international theme

James's special childhood experiences broadened his mind and shaped his cultural outlook as well. James was brought up to be a cosmopolitan by his father. His father, Henry James senior, was keenly interested in philosophical and theological studies. And Henry James had been influenced by his father and became dubious of Puritanism. However, at the same time, his father himself could not break away from its influences completely. He settled the family down in New England, the Land of Puritans, and lived there until the end of his life, but showed obvious hostility to puritanical morality. The moral basis of the New England was indeed an important part of James's inheritance and he formed an attitude half mocking and half respectful to it. This controversial attitude was later revealed in his future novels. James was taught in some assorted private schools by varied tutors. Besides, he got the chance to be taken to art shows and theatres at his early age. And he was a devourer of libraries, reading widely. Since his father held the opinion that his children should approach life with the broadest possible outlook, and strongly against any dogma.

What's more, there was a thick intellectual atmosphere in his family. His father was an amateur philosopher, and some of the most famous minds of the nineteenth century like Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley were his frequent guests. James's youngest sister, Alice, was also talented in writing. And his elder brother William James was the founder of pragmatism philosophy and a famous psychologist. Deeply immersed into such an atmosphere, irregularity of curriculum, together with his own particular interest in learning, he learned and developed his love for high culture. His father claimed that Americans could not provide "sensuous education" for his children. So he took his children to Europe to learn the brilliant civilization. Travelling among the various ancient cities, James spent a lot of his time visiting galleries, museums, churches, and so on. After he

grew up, James was more interested in European cultures and went there again and again. James was so familiar with such an international scene that it became his major subject accordingly. This special childhood experience definitely broadened his eyes and his mind, cultivated his aesthetic taste, improved his awareness of manners, forms, and provided him with first-hand writing materials about the old continent where he was to set most of his writings. Then, he got the entrance to the saloons of some society matrons, where he got acquainted with some prestigious writers of that age, such as Flaubert, Zola, and Gurgenev. He thought that only those who were willing to absorb the essence of European culture could mature in their writing, which corresponds with his ideal culture. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, America developed quickly in politics and economy. By then it had long got rid of the dominance of the Great Britain, and moved a big step forward in the process of industrialization. Although James spent most of his time in Europe, and at last settled down there, he criticized some Americans' thinness in his novels, he remained committed to America. More than once he said that a writer should root himself in his own country. Then what did America at that time offer him? And at the same time, except the corporations sprang up, cities expanded, population grew explosively, the most important thing was that vast wealth accumulated. At that special age, American thinking was greatly influenced by several philosophical theories, and transcendentalism was one of them.

3.2 James's Cultural Ideas

In fact, James's ideal culture is mainly reflected in three aspects. Firstly, it was a response to the widespread materialism and the growing individualism of that time. Indeed, James's individualism is responsible for his own actions and those of the rest of society. So in James's mind individualism is different from egocentrism. Secondly, James's ideal culture was a strong reaction to the ignorance, arrogance, and chauvinism of the American people of the time. In his opinion, Americans should learn from other cultures with an open mind in order to perfect themselves. When James traveled around Europe, he realized that many Americans had their limitations in their knowledge structure and aesthetic appreciation. Even after Ralph Waldo Emerson visited the Louvre, he made no mention of the glories of European culture. A few years later, James recalled, he was shocked by the unusual behavior of an elegant and intelligent man who made no comments after visiting the museum with a collection of the first class art works. Thirdly, James's ideal culture was also a strong response to contemporary American culture. In short, readers can not only find a clash of cultures in his early novels about "International themes", but some possible solutions in his mid-career works, and the ideal cultural fusion in his later works. Thus, James's ideal culture is actually formed from his reflections on American culture and European culture.

IV. Isabel Archer as the Potential Achiever of Ideal Culture

4.1 The Relationship between Isabel and Ideal Culture

Isabel had a passion for knowledge, she wanted to explore life, and even longed for unpleasant experiences, such as watching ghosts. Isabel's quest for culture was an special understanding of life, high culture and social practice. Isabel tried to put forward the questions about American society, especially its culture, and she really appreciates beauty from a cultural point of view. Presumably, Isabel wanted to learn more about European culture because she read the latest publications, such as Browning's poems and George's prose.

Isabel had special ability to find good virtues and merits in other people, and then tried her best to learn from them. In her opinion, life is only worth living only "when one should be of the best, should be conscious of a fine organization, should move in realm of light, of natural wisdom of happy impulses, of inspiration gracefully chronic" (James, 1987:41). Isabel strongly believed in her own opinions. Therefore, she usually

makes her own judgment when dealing with something or someone. Isabel also had some strong American characteristics. Isabel chooses Osmond as her husband, neglecting the advice from others. What's more, Isabel wanted to know what one should not do, because she preferred to choose rather than to follow. So far, we can infer that Isabel has a positive attitude toward European culture, but is also endowed with American individualism and independence. Naturally, sometimes her behavior does not conform to the local culture, but she can listen to others and correct her misconducts when she is convinced. But she doesn't accept everything without thinking. Isabel was fiercely protective of her ethics, even as it is threatened by European culture. Isabel embodied a number of new qualities that enable her to be a potential achiever of Henry James's ideal culture. In James's eyes, "Innocence" has two meanings: ignorance and integrity. In relation to her morality, Isabel's mind is like a garden in full bloom with fragrant flowers.

In addition, Isabel's attitude toward money was negative, and in fact, she knew nothing about money. At that time, an overemphasis on money was a new element in American culture, in other words, rampant materialism. She thought her money was a burden, a duty, not a pleasure. As a result, Isabel became an attacking target for the wealthy. And her argument with Mrs. Mel made her position even clearer. Although Isabel had no concept of money, according to her unique theory, it was the money bequeathed to her by Ralph's father that enabled Isabel to make her own decisions freely.

As a result, Isabel was endowed with unique qualities that were different from those of his compatriots in James's novels. Thus, Isabel became a model of James's ideal culture. So far, his ideal culture was a combination of knowledge, experience and morality from different cultures.

4.2 Isabel's Attitude toward Marriage

Isabel met her first suitor, Lord Warburton, a famous figure, who was called a radical from the upper class, a person with wealth and wisdom. Lord Warburton decided to propose to her after only three talks between them. But, Isabel thought that Lord Warburton liked her beauty rather than her intelligence. Isabel refused to marry Lord Warburton, despite his wealth and special background, because she could not accept a man backed up with a system full of rules which limits women's way of thinking and behavior.

Then, she met the second suitor, Goodwood, a rich businessman in America, who left a good impression on Isabel at their first meeting: he was the nicest young man she had ever met. He inspired her with a rare kind of reverence. She had never felt so moved by anyone else. For Goodwood, it was Isabel's beauty, not her intelligence, that attracted him. Isabel liked to develop a taste for things around him, especially art. However, she gradually found Goodwood was not a proper candidate. The reasons why she thought so were that: Firstly, they were born in the same country, though he seemed to be a man without any system. Secondly, Goodwood's muscular build gave Isabel the impression that he was full of energy, specifically, sexual desire. Isabel had little desire for physical love. She thought it would be terrible if she married Goodwood, because she would be a housewife. She was convinced that she would be blinded by his reputation. Goodwood had a well-known social position. As mentioned above, Isabel was a proud girl who liked to show her special values and proved her special abilities to the people around her. Therefore, if she marries him, it means that all her own theories, including her knowledge, wisdom and good ideas, will be hidden because he was afraid of her mind. In that sense, she will lose her freedom and independence, so Isabel decided to reject this man's proposal.

Then Isabel met Osmond, an American who lived in Europe. Her friend Merle described him as a man without a career, without a name, without a position, without wealth, without a past, without a future, without anything; but she regarded him as a "Demoralized prince in exile" who destined to become an outstanding figure. Isabel thought that Osmond was very interesting and gentle. At the same time, although Osmond also claimed that he fell in love with Isabel, unlike her two previous suitors, he said he did not ask her to marry him

because he could give her anything. But Isabel did not mind his “Nothingness” . Because she had so much money, at first she didn’t even know what to do with it, but now she found a right person to spend her life together happily. She finally found a proper way to spend her money. This apparent humiliation has a profound effect on our innocent young heroine. So she tried to rescue the hermit from a desperate situation. Isabel came to understand Osmond in her own unique way. She had in mind the idea of turning Osmond into a good and gentle man of her type. For Isabel, Osmond’s indifference means that he has not been defiled by earthly things, so he must be pure. Osmond was, in a sense, a man without fame or fortune. But Isabel was only attracted by Osmond because he had so many qualities which are different from the people around her . As an imaginative girl, Isabel unconsciously began to doubt whether she would ever find her dream. Of course, an immediate marriage between Isabel and Osmond seems unlikely, as she has yet to realize her dream. She continued her journey without delay. But now she could not travel as she had hoped, because she had met a man, Osmond. Isabel only wanted to complete her journey as quickly as possible, because she knew that Osmond was waiting for her. Isabel was fascinated by Osmond’s quiet life, the artistic atmosphere of the villa, and the beautiful collection of art works. But in fact, Osmond is just an amateur, because he was just copying ancient coins. The objections of her friends were certainly a major factor for Isabel’s decision. Another important reason was Osmond’s unique taste in art. Because Isabel loved art so much, in her mind, her life should be a special kind of art. So she likes to appreciate art works and other beautiful things. To Isabel, Osmond was a great artist. For Isabel, it was a pleasure to live in a big house with such a person. In private, she was so imaginative that she had already pictured their life together in the future.

Osmond lived in Isabel’s imagination, which was full of space. So she could breathe freely and do whatever she wants and go wherever she wants. Obviously, such a good life is all women aspire to. Isabel wanted her life to be as beautiful as a piece of art work. So she was happy because she had found someone she wanted to be with for the rest of her life.

From James’s point of view, Warburton and Goodwood could not be considered the best combinations of different cultures on two continents. If Isabel chooses one of them, she would not be able to fulfill her special mission because these two people could not represent the ideal culture of the Henry James. He felt she was better suited to Osmond because she could provide him with the money, roles of both mother and wife. Goodwood and Lord Warburton were only attracted by her good looks, they were even afraid of her imaginative mind. More importantly, Osmond was born in the United States, and lived in Europe for many years, so he was an America with European grace. So, in the eyes of James and Isabel, Osmond was at least the best of the three culturally.

However, Isabel found this was a shell game, Osmond was Merle’s lover and they had a daughter. The reason why they cheated on her is that they wanted to get the money of Isabel. At last, Isabel decided to return to Rome. Her decision was based on three important motives. First, because she promised Pansy she wouldn’t leave her. The second motive was that, in her opinion, she should accept the consequences of her choice fully. Lastly, she was given a special mission in the novel. As a potential practitioner of James’s ideal culture, the product of cultural fusion, though Isabel should be clear about what she will encounter in the process of accomplishing her mission. but the obstacles in the novel could be seen in Isabel’s tragic marriage. Isabel expressed her national identity, her cultural identity. Osmond was born in the United States, and he lived in Europe for many years, so he also has some European characteristics. Isabel believed in her theory of knowledge, which was one of the reasons her marriage failed. Apparently, it was Osmond’s differences from other men in Isabel’s life circles that deeply touched Isabel. Although Isabel knew that Osmond was just an unusual man in her imagination, she chose to return to their unhappy marriage.

4.3 Isabel's Marriage from the Cultural Perspective

From a cultural point of view, her decision was sound. Osmond is the perfect combination of European elegance and American integrity, which complements James's ideal culture. She loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honors. From his poverty and passivity, we can see Osmond's powerlessness. In Isabel's view, poverty is not property, not title, not honor, not house, not land, not status, not reputation, not any kind of glorious property. Apparently, it was Osmond's inability to do anything that deeply touched Isabel. Osmond is a combination of two cultures. This is what Henry James desires for. Therefore, Osmond becomes the perfect person. In addition, Isabel's acceptance of Osmond made sense from the personal identity's point of view. He expressed his love for Isabel, but did not propose as Warburton and Caspar did. In contrast to Warburton and Caspar, he encouraged Isabel to explore her life freely, and he said he liked waiting for her. Here, his personal identity is revealed in Isabel. Therefore, it is his negative attitude that caters to Isabel's quest for freedom and independence. In a sense, Isabel's final choice of Osmond is also James's deliberate strategy.

The special significance of Isabel's marriage is that it is not only a marriage of two sexes, but also a marriage of two cultures. James Henry didn't just blend American culture with European culture. What he really wanted is to improve American culture, to form the ideal American culture, to achieve cultural integration. As a result, Isabel must continue her quest for cultural integration. As a practitioner of James's ideal culture, Isabel had to choose Osmond. Henry James's determination to find a way to merge cultures is illustrated by Isabel eventually returning to Osmond. Isabel has made a bigger step forward in realizing James's ideal culture than in Daisy Miller. So far, she is the best candidate for James's ideal culture. James's theory of cultural integration is consistent with the concept of harmonious society advocated by our country. Therefore, the study of James's ideal culture is of special significance to present China and even the world.

V. Ideal Culture Reflected in Tea Ceremony

5.1 Henry James's Ideal Culture

James drew a sense of responsibility from Puritan morality, but he removed a strict part of it and inherited from Ralph Waldo Emerson a valuable legacy of being able to think independently of personal liberty. The ideal American culture is the combination of the European and American cultures, the perfect combination of different cultures between the two continents. However, American culture should play a major role, because what he is looking for here is an American ideal culture, not a European ideal culture. Individual independence and a sense of responsibility to prevent extreme individualism, as represented by Americans, are ensured by individual liberty. At the same time, the aesthetics and civilization represented by Europe can eliminate the possible inhibition and make life rich and full. If these virtues are embodied in a man, he is a whole man; if they are embodied in a culture, they are a perfect culture. This is James's ideal culture, a kind of cultural fusion in a sense.

5.2 Henry James's Attitude towards the Two Cultures

There are a lot of sayings about Henry James's views on both cultures, with James's attitude toward American and European cultures being discussed in detail. Some people think that in terms of culture, he yearned for civilized European culture because he found the thinness in American culture. Some people think that he despised European culture, and in his mind, American culture was the best. But most critics share the view that Henry James has held a snobbish attitude toward Americans. On the cultural front, there are some people who believe that James craved civilized European culture because he found American culture weak.

In a letter to his sister, on September 15, 1878, James described himself as a “Cosmopolitanized American” which has two meanings: he is essentially an American; he is a cosmopolitan, not a nationalist. He cannot give up on creating an ideal American culture, because he was an American at heart. But James’s naturalization of himself as a British subject may have been intended to illustrate the difficulty of achieving cultural integration. But in order to realize his ideal culture, his ideal American culture can not be changed, especially in his creative writing, because his novel is the real record of his exploration of the ideal American culture.

5.3 James’ Ideal Culture in the Tea Ceremony

Henry James is the founder of the famous psychological realist novel, he wrote a large number of works in his life. Most of his works are about International Cultural Theme and attempt to explore this issue further from the perspective of the tea ceremony. But no one has ever attempted to approach the issue from the perspective of the “Tea ceremony”. From a new perspective, through the analysis of tea including tea scenes, tea characters and tea set in this novel.

In this novel, the setting of the afternoon tea, the image of the tea man, and the description of all the details of the lady in the novel all show their unique charm, thus highlighting the international theme of the novel, in line with James’s ideal culture. The tea ceremony in the novel fully demonstrates the process from cultural conflict to fusion of European and American cultures, and makes a deep exploration of James’s ideal culture. Tea is the material witness of the special process of cultural integration. In the novel, James provides us with a new perspective to understand cultural conflict and cultural fusion. However, from the perspective of “Tea ceremony”, the novel gives a new interpretation of the true character of a lady, thus revealing James’s skillful handling of details, themes and ideal culture.

VI. Conclusion

James’s ideal culture is such a culture that is the good combination of Americans’ uprightness and Europeans’ virtues. In other words, it is a merge of good facets of different cultures between the two continents. Like the protagonist Isabel, an American girl, she was unable to understand and accept the political system in Europe, so she rejected Lord Warburton who represented the European hierarchy in some way. But the fact that culture is created by human beings makes it possible for people from different cultures to understand each other. In order to find an ideal American culture and achieve cultural integration, James created the protagonist Isabel in his novels as a potential achiever of his ideal culture of ladies in the 1890s. For James, American culture was deficient, so it needed some new blood from outside to keep it alive and perfect.

Henry James’s ideas about the ideal American culture had a profound impact on the United States. His ideal culture is actually a kind of cultural integration. In his novels, he proposed a way to achieve cultural integration, which has a special significance to present world. James’s exploration of the solution to cultural integration can still guide us to deal with similar issues in cross cultural communication internationally.

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