IDENTITY THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN TWO OF H. JAMES'S TRAVEL NOVELS

Yildiray CEVIK[G]

Abstract: *New American Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary method including points of contacts through various discourses of cultures. Political, social cultural and aesthetic dimensions of various representations embedded with existing issues of races, history and politics lead to highlighting discursive points of interests. The cultural tone as mingled with the formation of identity in James studies sheds light on reinterpretation of the image of James, who depicts identity worked out through culture in his travel novels. The American Scene is known as a key text because it represents an ideal site where arts and culture are linked in the birth of a relevant identity. The novel is also an account of American culture, literary and manners exposed to those of Europeans which bring about clashes and alterity. The main focus of the paper, thus, is the linking of aesthetic experience and one's perception of culture in The American Scene and The Ambassadors. The protagonists in the novels sustain the view that identity becomes "alien" in a land through artistic and cultural (mis)perceptions. James's picturesque descriptions of architectural and artistic metaphors become meeting points of the identical and the cultural in his two texts.*

Keywords: *culture, aesthetic, identity.*

1.Introduction

The cultural ties to the Old World have always been a great attraction to American writers. The international theme exploited by Henry James as a motivation for the expatriation can be tracked down in many relevant writings. In his book on Hawthorne, he says: "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, where it requires great history" (James, 1967: 25). Embedded with comprehensive and complexity of relations, Europe offered an ideal place to carry out literary studies and also provided unlimited material for his fiction. It is so because European life hoisted to a higher power with richly charged and largely informed qualities. For James, Europe was history which was the easiness for continuity of various experiences. In his expatriation, the objective was to juxtapose his native society with older European social medium rather than observing it from far distance.

James never gave up his attraction to romance, for his youthful apprehensions of Europe were intermingled. Rourke comments; "He wrote of the European scene with warmth, lust and enchantment; even his dull passages have their inner glow (1991: 61). His connection to Europe originates from the conviction: Wegelin states:

> From surfaces and stereotypes of behavior, his focus shifted to motives and causes. At first painting matters, he proceeded to analyze morals, and ended by creating his own image or Europe, richer and subtler than earlier ones" (1958: 19).

James recurrently used the theme of comparing America and England standing toward each other on the social field. He was under the conscious of the supremacy of

[*] International Balkan University, Skopje, Macedonia, cevikyildiray@yahoo.com

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American values but could not ignore the vast possibilities offered by the European civilization. Europe was neither a paradise lost, nor a Promised Land; it cherished the experiences necessary for the imagination. It is the fertile land in which the Self is molded in relation to the Other. Further, it retained the forms of existence despite the risks of failure.

James also deliberated on the "general outlook of the Americans in Europe, being aware of a kind of life" (1962: 187). This life can be stated as 'a kind of life' as it is much different from the Newfoundland as being intricate, experienced, culturally enriched and corrupt. In his art, he is busied with "innocence and worldliness … or on other variations, youthful ignorant America and wise and civilized Europe" (Edel, 1969: 280). The moral contrast between Europe and America is a part of the complex contrast of civilizations affected by history. In other words, the moral outweigh of America is poised against the carefully cultivated manners of Europeans. It is also the comparison of a classless society with a society organized in a hierarchy.

James continued with close observation of Europe, and its culture; hence, he has come up with the creation of his own Europe. We see the shift from comedy-based conflicts between American and European manners to a more serious tragic problem. In such tragedy, manners determine morals. So Europe is depicted as an invented land based on civilization, grace, urbanity and refined manners. This depiction extends into such dimensions that James is attracted by the continuous existence of beauty and romance in all the locations where human beings are collected. He touches on bricks and stones as well with peculiar state of architecture. Yet, he preserves his objectivity as Luther underlines:

> The light of his England is as far as removed from that of his America. His Paris haze is possessed of an entirely different personality from his London fog; he respects the facial view of an English country-house or an Alpine hostelry" (1991:71).

Lupu in her article maintains that Europe developed a set of contrasts to American features and to the three types of American characters in his international fiction: they are the artists, the businessman and the girl. In their relationships, Europe's role is ambivalent and contradictory; it is high in manners but low in morals (2012: 187). Perosa in this regard states: "Europe is glamorous and enticing, yet treacherous and corrupting; rich in history and art, in social graces and social ease, but lacking in fundamental decencies and moral values, in honesty and human kindness, in seriousness in purpose" (1990: 50). James personally desired to assimilate high standard of living in Paris, but he failed. He anticipated that his residence in Paris would have turned him into a contented Parisian with connections to the soil (James, 1974: 48). However, he did not have the privilege to enter the aristocratic society, but only into the American colony in Paris.

As a child James traveled to France with his family. Therefore, this country stayed in his memories very strongly. He says:

> Conveyed along the Rue St-Honore while I waggled my small feet, as I definitely remember doing, under my flowing robe, I had crossed the Rue de Castiglione and taken in, for all my time, the admirable aspect of the Place and the column Vendome (James, 1956: 33).

Later on, he met important literary figures, such as Turgenev, Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant, with whom he developed his style. In his associations with these important figures, James built the image of France through the eyes of the American characters

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that visited these lands (Lupu, 2012: 188). As to the depiction of the image, Wolkenstein states:

> James enriched his experience and knowledge of France without ever departing from a certain reserve toward the country: England reassured him, Italy seduced him, but French history and habits remained unfamiliar to him (2008: 417).

2. Identity in Two Canonized Novels

The two canonized novels *The American Scene* and *The Ambassadors* are particularly selected in that they offer ground for aesthetic experience or imaginative understanding to interpret one's culture in the target location. The similarity between the protagonists of the novels lies in that both are aliens in a land they are supposed to comprehend and in that they both try to make sense of this land through imaginative projection (Piper, 2008: 113).

The architectural descriptions of the two travellers are abounding in New York and Paris. Follini states: "architectural descriptions in James' fictions serve relevance to the structure of the mind and language (Follini, 2008: 33). Aesthetic values appeal to James as richly creative analogue for culture related concerns that might lead to formation of identity in historical and aesthetic context serving for compare and contrast to the protagonists who are in need of shaping identities. Picturesque descriptions of panoramic literary techniques focus on protagonists' quest for identity juxtaposed in cultural varieties.

The American Scene, one of his travel novels, is known as a key text in James' studies as it supplies a milieu of cultural and aesthetic values set against. The novel is critical because of its rich context in the depiction of American cultural influence in the formation of peculiar national manners. To be more specific, it exhibits a solid ground views leading to modernization in America. The author-hero is in quest of understanding American culture in order to interpret interpersonal mysteries and bewilderments. Such intricacies in the interpretations pave the way to the formation of identity through experiences derived from aesthetic concerns that are closely tied to Americanism. The author-hero develops a tendency to resist diversity and agency in European culture. Thus, it still stays as a Jamesian question if aesthetic experience develops his character ready to harmonize with cultural differences in an identity devoid of "I" and "Other" dilemma.

Jamesian heroes travel enriching their personal experiences that they might consequently transform into personal interpretation about people and localities. In the novel *The American Scene*, James the author-hero, is in the quest of an imaginative adventure in which sites attract his imagination and impressions that are interpreted in the eyes of an American. Yet, his expressions in America are related to the lack of subject matter, or impressions do not activate experience of understanding America. For James, the main reason of lack of impressions is that America is embedded with social uniformity. James in the American mentality experiences blankness, as Selltzer states, which justifies imperialism. Jamesian experience of the difficulty to gather experience produces positive aesthetic value. As Scherzinger maintains; wherever James experiences the blankness of America, he is taking part in a forced experience which marks the in-between position where one is forced to ponder about the impressions and make sense of them (2003: 170-71). Actually Jamesian experience in the novel requires

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reflecting on shifting the point into the plurality of experience. In other words, the hero is obliged to project meaning to blank scenes "with the imposition of the "I".

The American Scene provides rich material for analyzing through James' descriptions which depict his reaction and relation to the American "blankness". America has a unique social uniformity that he encounters through his experience in New York. The vision of the city is fraught with high-rise buildings with which James shows that he is shocked by the crude skyline. His impressions prove that the identity he formed in the face of the city needs to be altered as this is no longer the city that James has already structured the identity in union with America. He is much repelled with estrangement and hostility as the skyscraper lead to create. Firstly, James juxtaposes his identity with Waldrof-Astoria hotel considered as the symbol of American spirit. The unique architectural design of the building with the absence of doors makes James come to feel the American spirit of publicity and transparency. He feels hard to protect his identity being too much exposed to transparency. In a similar manner, The New York Public Library has the horizontal layout which gives the impression of a possible refuge from the amplified verticality of the buildings around it (James, 1968: 343). The horizontal structure is seen to exert the impression of a mental asylum with exuberant life of the progressing city space (Follini, cited in Kovacs, 2008: 343).

The feeling of alienation and estrangement is reinforced on James during his visit to the Jewish quarter of the East side. He encounters sordid and squalid crowds in abundance. All crowds give the feeling as if they were living outside the buildings, in public places in front of the stores. James' interpretation of style of poverty infused with loud crowds is also strengthened with fire escapes of the buildings and with the feeling that the building are still under constructions. What James sees in the Jewish quarter displays an exterior surface difficulty to penetrate and at the same time threatening to the observer. In this sense, James experiences a cleavage of identity between his imaginative alterity and the actual representation of the location. In addition, what James undergoes in New York can be evaluated as the metaphor of American life infested with vertically-constructed building with their open internal spaces. The change of identity of James imbued by mass produced homogeneity of Modern America can only depict a sound experience that has neither space nor subject (James, 1968: 344).

As for the novel *The Ambassadors* (1903), Henry James plots the story around the experiences of Strether, who is tasked in a peculiar mission to Europe. As an ambassador to Paris, he adapts the task of rescuing a New Englander's son from a lady who is believed to have beguiled him. In the course of events, he surprisingly changes his intention of entrusting the son to the mother, and thinks that the son would be happier in Europe. However, Strether cannot convince him to stay in Paris. As Strether is too old to differentiate between the Self and the Other, he decides to return, too.

James in this novel handles Paris as a life-giving force and constructs Mrs. Newsome who wants to save her son from the bad European influence. After the arrival, Strether experiments a "personal freedom [that] he hadn't known for years" (James, 1909: 4). Paris provides him with a civilized life in the vast bright Babylon, but at the same time, the realization of the connection between him and Chad, the process of which makes him aware of having grown old without experiencing youth.

French Madame de Vionnet represents the Other for Strether as she is charming, but Strether keeps her at a distance, because Fowler states that "loneliness and isolation of the self are preferable to the danger of connection and intimacy with the Other" (1993:191). This has to be so, for he is scared by the passion from the woman in the final encounter: James states, "It might have made Strether hot or shy, as such

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secrets of others brought home sometimes do make us; but he was held there by something so hard that it was grim" (1909:285). Strether is regretting that train of youth is missed, although he did not get on it while it was waiting at the station: "It's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line" (James, 1907-1909:217).

The novel exploits the characters within the French milieu that gives various impressions according to the taste, capacity and receptivity of their characters. For example, Gloriani and Vionnet absorb European taste; Waymarsh does not understand it. Strether appreciates it, and Chad has learned much from it, whereas Mamie Pocock is alien to it. Strether finds Europe agreeable to his imagination, so he is able to find his true place in it. Through the European experience he seems to be separated from his best part of the character that longs for the loss of youthful years.

As for Sarah Pocock, the second Woollett ambassador knows that Paris is "the consecrated sense of rash infatuations"; to her an attachment of a young American to a French woman is wicked by definition (Wegelin, 1958: 92-3). The irony is that her view appears correct because Strether develops the real type of relationship with Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

The novel illustrates a highly suggestive setting. Strether finds the Glorian gardens as the source of "survival, transmission, association and strong order" (James, 1985:38) in contrast to America. In a similar view, "the peace of intervals, the dignity of distances and approaches" in Vionnet's house lays open the distinction between French and American perspectives. Strether feels that European traditions provide sustenance, a vital thing that their nation searches. He believes that he has found in Paris what he has longed for. Europe appears as a treasure house in which Americans must assert their purchasing power. Paris seems to him as a place where ideas are in circulation, and are subject to free and animated discussion, a trait which makes ideal setting for self-realized man. In this way, the novel illustrates how innocent Americans become wise and softened through varied experiences in Europe. For Strether Paris gave him the awareness that he missed the charm although he was first appointed when he was twenty-five years old. If he had been able to grasp the true meaning of the richness of life, he would have established much different social acceptability.

There is a series of spaces and building that are critical links to Strether's experience. The process of learning in Paris is linked to specific locations, such as Chad's balcony, the theater box, *Notre Dame* and Glorian's gardens. In the novel, architecture takes on a cultural significance. The descriptions of the apartments function as analogues for spaces. For instance, the meeting of Chad through his apartments symbolizes the value of privacy which is missing in the novel *The American Scene*. Chad's apartment house is "high, broad, clear in quality and is produced by measure and balance, the relation of part and space to space aided by the presence of ornament as positive as it was discreet, warmed and polished a little by life (James, 1968: 69). In this setting, Strether experiences a sense of balance, symmetry and proportion.

Another location that creates unique experience to Americans is Gostrey's apartment that can be called "a nest". The chambers are crowded and dusky. Strether finds it as a temple where Gostrey's life is burdened with possessions. It is crammed with precious objects, which represent the sucking interiors for Strether and he "feels the life lived" amidst many details. This acute sense of life is unfamiliar to Strether who has undergone blankness as an American. On this point, Henry James presents us viable chance to compare "blank Americanism" with "diversified Europeanism".

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The unique building and spaces in Paris give way to interpretations and the work of the imagination. The crammed interior stands for promise of life, rich, colorful, shiny life, historical awareness and value. These interpretations transform the identity of the Americans as they never felt such a full sense of life in American locations.

3. Conclusion

Henry James was preoccupied with the international experience. Europe is seen as the place for moral destruction of the innocent Americans who were deceived by the experienced Europeans; however, in his late novels the conflict is no longer external one. It is rather presented within individual awareness of the cherishing qualities of the European medium through the possibilities offered to explore the contrasting models of moral life. The exterior images of the European culture are combined with the interior reflections as a part of James's aim to internalize the scenery with action. Expressing his preferences toward European cities, he chose to judge Europeans morally. In these novels, James exploits the milieu of France through in the perceptions of American characters. For the innocent Americans, the French milieu could be a standard of civilization, but also a land of corruption and cynicism for some others.

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