

**EXPLORING CONFLICTING COSMOPOLITAN  
CONSCIOUSNESS:  
THE TRANSNATIONAL THEME  
IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE AMBASSADORS***

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**Abstract:** *Henry James was an avowed promoter of cosmopolitanism and transnational cultures. The cultural exchange between America and Europe finds its thematic locus in his novel The Ambassadors (1903). Among the characters, Maria Gostrey is an American expatriate who has spent most of her life in Europe and adopted its customs and tastes. Waymarsh, in spite of living for so many years in Europe, reveals a vehement predilection for his native land, America. Strether is the most noticeable cosmopolitan, who has the ability to adjust in both America and Europe. Our article will explore how the characters show their conflicting cosmopolitan selves and how some of them express their deep attachment to their native lands.*

**Keywords:** *America, conflict, cosmopolitan consciousness, Europe, Henry James, transnational cultures*

## **1. Introduction**

“*The Ambassadors* is a story of the making of an American cosmopolitan and in this sense may be regarded as a spiritual autobiography.” (Wegelin 1958: 88)

The theory of Cosmopolitanism, which traces its origin in ancient Greece, has gone through a discernible progress. Eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant gave it a modern dimension and modeled it to form a utopian world (Bohman and Bachmann 1997: 36). Georg Cavallar (2012: 95) says that Kant “is usually seen as a typical representative of eighteenth century cosmopolitanism. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, considers Kant an antidote to critics of Enlightenment universalism and cosmopolitan humanism.” In many ways, the works of Henry James could be regarded as the fictional embodiment of this Kantian conception of cosmopolitanism. James is widely known as a novelist and the conspicuous theme which his novels generally represent is transnationalism and its different facets. Though there were other writers who dealt with transnationalism, like W. D. Howells and Edith Wharton, it was only in Henry James that the theme became predominant. But there are some social and moral incongruities between Americans and Europeans, which are clearly portrayed in some of his novels. Some characters in his fiction are over-sophisticated, rich, and highly civilized. They are cosmopolitans in the true sense of the term, as they never feel at home in any particular corner of the world. Among his novels,

*The Ambassadors* (1903) is very prominent in portraying such characters that have conflicting cosmopolitan consciousness. The title of the novel – *The Ambassadors* – tellingly bears the cosmopolitan theme, because an ambassador always establishes connections among many places. There are scholarly articles which interpret this novel from various perspectives, but the characters' moral conflict regarding cosmopolitanism has not been discussed so far. This paper will therefore focus on this particular theme.

The first impact of the term “cosmopolitan” on us is connected to transnationalism, and any work bearing a cosmopolitan theme indubitably deals with transnational cultures (Ostby 2018: 263). Though the mingling of different cultures is very much essential in such a novel, the difference in manners is also an important factor in delineating the contention in cosmopolitan consciousness. Christof Wegelin's comment is quite appropriate for describing this theme which is present in *The Ambassadors*:

*The Ambassadors*, then, is another version of the conflict between American and European manners, of American misapprehension of European conduct which had occupied James during his earlier career. (Wegelin 1958: 100)

This is very different from the internal American conflict between Virginia and New England. It was also not the question of why Americans went to Europe for cultural reasons and what difficulties they faced there, but there is something more. James's novels address this theme from diverse angles. The author's own international experience improved his insight and some of his novels are the result of that fruitful experience. The cosmopolitan theme with its conflicting aspects is the keystone of his major novels, which are included among the most exquisite writings that America has ever produced.

## 2. Henry James as a cosmopolitan writer

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 made many young American men take part in that. Yet one person who did not was Henry James. And the reason for not joining the Union Army was that in October 1861 he had suffered a back injury, which he eventually called “a horrid even if an obscure hurt” (Dupee 1956: 415). In 1864 James's family relocated to Boston and he became familiar with New England. He travelled to many places and gathered experiences not only from America, but also from European countries. During these explorations of two continents, his taste in art underwent a paradigm shift. And because of this, he produced a great treasure of writings and his novels especially bear international themes. He began to devote most of his time to composing new literary pieces. His first short-story “A Tragedy of Error” was published anonymously in *The Continental Monthly* of February, 1864. *A Passionate Pilgrim* (1871), a novella, was one of the best reflections of what he had discovered in Europe (Tintner 1991: 116). It is perspicuous that, at the beginning of his literary career, he wrote short-stories and novels in which the protagonist's quest for manhood is related to his encounter with Europe. It is because of his writings that he found many opportunities to meet prominent literary figures like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Morris, and so on. Though America had proved to be a better

and more challenging soil for a writer, James felt contented and found better company abroad. In 1870 he came back to America, but was ill at ease in his home country. In his letter to Charles Eliot Norton from Cambridge, on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1871, he expressed this fact (Edel 1974, Vol. I: 252). In November, 1875 he went to Paris and settled there for almost one year. There he met literary persons like Flaubert, Maupassant and a few others. He again moved to England in 1876 and, except for some trips to America, he lived there for the rest of his life.

After travelling to so many places, James decided to incorporate the cosmopolitan theme in his writings, especially in his novels. He was so adept in this theme that it is really challenging to discover whether he was an Englishman writing with knowledge about Americans or an American writing with apprehension of English people. F. W. Dupee (1956: 96) – a famous American literary critic – appropriately says about James that “the American in contact with Europeans was his fine unique theme”. James was proficient enough to use the international theme in his fiction. He strove to focus on the elegance and refinement of European culture in contrast to the naïve American culture. As Tia Byer (2022: 39) observes, “Through James’s transatlantic examination and challenging dichotomy, he deconstructs mythic notions of the distinction between the Old World and New.” This particular theme was James’ persistent choice, which he implemented through the characters in the best ways possible. Sometimes he is accused of having abandoned his own country, America, in order to make his fortune in Europe, but this circumstance stood him in good stead to become a great novelist.

### **3. Twenty-first century relevance of cosmopolitanism and Henry James**

Henry James’s relevance in the twenty-first century is based on his writings that embody cosmopolitanism, identity, and cultural hybridity. His fiction explores many transnational features which lay emphasis on global interconnectedness. Most of the characters of his novels navigate international settings, identities, cultures that reflect contemporary globalized experiences. His novels often bear the traces of empathy and fellow-feeling which are indubitably essential for cosmopolitanism. Blurring the national boundaries and establishing cultural exchanges and hybridity are also the important parts of global citizenship. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s observation is quite relevant in this respect:

Cosmopolitanism shouldn’t be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association. (Appiah 2007: xvi-xvii)

The characters’ experiences in multiple countries resonate with James’s own global experiences as well as with present discussions about transnationalism. James’s works always encourage readers to embrace humanity beyond national peripheries (Tredy et al. 2019: 11). Diversity and intersectionality are major parts of cosmopolitanism. Garrett Brown (2009: 17) appropriately observes that Kant is the focal point of a

“viable form of Kantian cosmopolitanism” in our modern globalised world and James followed the Kantian cosmopolitan tradition in his writings. The intersections of gender, class, and race are included in much discussed cosmopolitan diversity (McMurrin 2013: 34). Some novels criticize privileged class people and power imbalances, which are still very pertinent in today’s world. *The Ambassadors* is one of such novels. James’s insight was so powerful that his works have become a rich repertoire which aids in perceiving the benefit of multiculturalism and understanding international relations.

#### **4. Contrasting cosmopolitan characters in *The Ambassadors***

##### **4.1. Lewis Lambert Strether and Waymarsh**

On his way to Paris, Lambert Strether, a middle-aged American, went to Liverpool for meeting his friend Waymarsh. Despite being an economically successful lawyer and living in Chester for a significant period, Waymarsh has to cope – as Strether describes – with “the ordeal of Europe” (James 2008: 37). But Strether feels the opposite after reaching Europe. He begins to see Europe as a land of new possibilities. Through Waymarsh and Strether, James portrays the dichotomy between American nationality and internationalism, but at the same time emphasizes the interrelation between the two. Sarah Wilson rightly points out:

Although this complexly modernist nationality may be neither acknowledged by nor desirable to all Americans, for James Americanness and internationalism cannot be separated. It is simply the American recognition of this condition that remains in question. Modernization of American conceptions of nationality will be brought about by American acknowledgement of the inescapability of internationalism. (Wilson 2004: 511)

The international contradiction and the characters’ response to it are meticulously represented by James “to show the exposure of American innocence to European experience” (Wegelin 1958: 106). Waymarsh is eager to remain an American, while Strether shows his complete adaptability in every place he visits.

Waymarsh is stuck in his past. He talks about his New England hometown situated at Milrose and praises the ethnic moral code of that place. He considers Europe only as a continent where his career can flourish more. This is why, after so much travelling, he wishes to go home. Despite being a cosmopolitan for the sake of his profession, he is deeply rooted in America. He is an American “type” and his dislike of Europe is described as “the sacred rage” (James 2008: 51) by Strether. The character of Waymarsh occupies a small space between cultures, which elevates as well as complicates his cosmopolitan understanding. On the other hand Strether’s is a journey to self-awareness. By getting acquainted with new cultures, he discovers his hidden cosmopolitan self. The two characters are therefore in stark contrast in their adaptability to multiculturalism.

#### 4.2. Strether meets Chad - cosmopolitanism and transformation

Strether is a character who likes diversity in life. He is the American “ambassador” to Europe. Mrs. Newsome – a rich widow living at Woollett in New England – has sent Strether to meet her son Chad Newsome in Paris and to bring him back, because she thinks that her son is under the spell of Madame de Vionnet, Chad’s patron in Paris. But when Strether sees Chad, it becomes clear to him that Chad has become a cosmopolitan or “a man of the world” (James 2008: 128). Chad is no more a person who can be part of a small place, as his mother wants him to be. He has become a mature and responsible person, who is now open to the world. When visiting Europe, Strether not only notices the changes of the places, but also of the characters he knew earlier. This is a reflection of his own journey from innocence to experience (Bauer 2016: 168). When Strether meets Madame de Vionnet, he compares her to a goddess. Later, when Chad wants to return home to Woollett, Strether requests him to stay on with her. In this context Paul B. Armstrong (2018: 65) says:

Woollett’s skepticism about Paris clashes with Strether’s revelatory trust in Chad’s transformation and the virtue of his attachment with Madame de Vionnet.

Strether becomes so enamoured with Vionnet, that he takes her out to lunch. As a consequence, he forgets his purpose “to save him [Chad] by removal” (James 2008: 226). When Strether asks Chad to remain in Paris, Chad is taken aback and cannot help questioning Strether whether he feels “the charm of life over here” (idem: 253). Strether immediately replies “Immensely...you’ve helped me so to feel it that that surely needn’t surprise you” (ibid.).

Strether perceives that she has made Chad better or even the best. Strether’s transnational and compassionate self feels sorry for Vionnet. His viewpoint regarding the Parisian woman becomes completely altered after seeing her. He encourages Chad to remain with Vionnet, against Chad’s mother, Mrs. Newsome’s wishes, and he feels his decision is justified. Strether’s experience of Europe becomes verily fruitful, as it elevates his moral consciousness. He came to Paris as an intolerant American representative of Mrs. Newsome, but the varied experiences in the Parisian society make him tolerant and amicable. Elizabeth L. Throesch (2017: 172) observes that “Strether’s transcendence of his limitations as a represented, literary character is obtained by entering ‘into’ and passing ‘through’ his aesthetic vision”. Throughout the novel, Strether tries to assess Chad’s circumstances, which ultimately aids him in discovering his own empathetic soul, and this contributes to his becoming a true cosmopolitan character. As Jessica Berman (2001: 64) opines, “Strether and Chad both return home changed Americans, changed particularly in their ability to be open to cultural difference, and to accept their perpetually incomplete and partial perspectives.”

#### 4.3. Strether comes across Maria Gostrey – a budding cosmopolitan meets an experienced cosmopolitan

When Strether met Maria Gostrey – an American woman in her mid-thirties, living in Europe – he thought his life would take a significant turn. Strether’s

encounter with Maria reveals her character quite conspicuously. She delineates herself as a guide for Americans and also declares that she is proficient at “putting them through” (James 2008: 44) so extensively, that they never wish to come back. Maria is therefore a cosmopolitan who not only becomes accustomed to new cultures, but also helps others to do so. Her character plays a significant role in Strether’s journey of embracing new people and their cultures. She is an emissary of light in his life and facilitates the bridging of the continental divides. As Sarah Wilson (2004: 517) says, Strether “takes solace in the thought of Maria Gostrey, the eternal expatriate, who will help him (and the reader) to cobble together some kind of an understanding suited to his new position”. She is an accomplished mediator, who bridges the crevasse between Europe and America.

In this context, Paul B. Armstrong (2018: 82) significantly remarks that “James establishes Maria early on as an authority in the well-known convention of a guide or teacher who helps a quester on a journey through unfamiliar terrain”. But in the novel, Maria’s disappearance and subsequent reappearance as a supporter rather than a superior positions her character in perfect equilibrium. She renounces her earlier authoritative mantle to become more acquainted with Strether’s journey of self-discovery. At the end of the novel, when Maria asks Strether why he must go back to Woollett, he answers “To be right” (James 2008: 470). The life he started in Europe would no longer be continued, as he has been unable to perform his duty as requested by Mrs. Newsome. Here, the word “right” has a moral connotation, because, despite being aware of his own flourishing life in Europe, he wishes to return to Woollett as he was feeling guilty. But the Parisian values change his mindset and “Lambert Strether’s narrative is intimately bound up with his desire to possess the city of Paris – visually and epistemologically – along with all that it represents” (Tredy et al. 2011: 44).

#### **4.4. Various traits of cosmopolitanism in other characters**

Miss Barrace, a friend of Chad and little Bilham, grew up in Paris. Her parents are Americans. She is so accustomed to the Parisian social structure, that French customs have become part of her being. Her character is a bit superficial, because she focuses on appearances rather than on cosmopolitan engagements. As she lives in Europe, she may be disconnected from her American roots and that highlights the tension between national belonging and cosmopolitan thinking. So, her character has both benefits and limitations. Miss Barrace probably resembles the charming American expatriate Henrietta Reubell, whom James met in Paris in 1876 (Edel and Powers 1987: 70). John Little Bilham is a young American who lives in Paris. He is one of Chad’s dearest friends. He came to Paris to study painting, but soon he understood that he had no talent in that. Although he has not much money with him, he continues to live in Paris, as he has begun to appreciate the socio-cultural life of the city. His cosmopolitan self overpowers his pecuniary problems, caused by his stay in Paris. There are other characters in the novel, like Gloriani, Jim Pocock, and Madame de Vionnet, who are the epitomes of transnational humanity.



## 5. Conclusion

Like in most of James's novels, the cosmopolitan theme is of paramount importance in *The Ambassadors* (1903). James is a writer who devoted most of his life to writing and his personal experiences gave momentum to his becoming a cosmopolitan novelist. James took Americans to Europe to portray their national distinctiveness, in juxtaposition with an already well known socio-cultural structure of Europe. Leon Edel (1968: 332) rightly observed that James's "cosmopolitan self had found fulfillment" in Europe. This novel reveals the author's modernism, as an opposition to national conservatism and the conventional. "Henry James is in a period of transition from realism to modernism" (Chen 2021: 77) and this modernism does not keep American nationality in isolation, rather makes it acquainted with the European culture. Despite having conflicting viewpoints on cosmopolitanism, the characters of the novel have their unique qualities that allow them to adapt in new countries and position themselves in their own particular manner. James is indeed an international novelist, who has not only created cosmopolitan characters, but also experienced being a cosmopolitan; his novel reveals that becoming a cosmopolitan does not mean discarding one's own nationality, but fusing and harmonizing national and cosmopolitan identities.

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