CHAPTER IV
THE VISIONARY JAMES

Henry James, who was an artist, has written stories dealing with the transatlantic intercourse of American and European society and culture. His novels deal with the contrast between moral uprightness in Americans and aesthetic richness in Europeans which is another facet of his international theme. His intention as a novelist was to represent life and he felt that a well-written story should strike the reader as experiences in real life do — that is, directly and without any comments and, particularly, with as much of life's complexity and richness as possible. The novel, he believed, must show all the complicated and various circumstances — especially when what it had to show was not only things (people, places and beautiful scenes) but typical human reactions and motivations. He was interested in human psychology as he himself said in an essay on 'The Art of Fiction':

And what is adventure, when it comes to that...? It is an adventure — an immense one — for me to write this little article; and for a Bostonian nymph to reject an English duke is an adventure only less stirring, I should say, than for an English duke to be rejected by a Bostonian nymph. I see dramas within dramas in that, and innumerable points of view. A
psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial, to catch the tint of its complexion - I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason, and yet, I protest, the novel seems to me the most magnificent form of art.¹

His moral concern, on the other hand, was directed to the individual human consciousness. He was interested in spiritual or psychological moral health and felt that successful human intercourse would result in a society comprises of individuals who knew and trusted themselves and could therefore respect the human integrity of others - individuals who could, then truly love their neighbours as themselves.

James stands as the "supreme historian of the colonial situation"² and was an artist who undertook the burden of exploring the consequences of his American protagonists. His best writings deal with matters of ethical concern, as is evident from his preface to 'The Portrait of a Lady' which expresses the genius of James as a novelist:

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the "moral" sense of a work of art on the amount


of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to "grow" with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality.... Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form — its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.

He, thus, in his different novels, wanted to represent the truth about the important aspects of life and with the help of his art, "the imaginative representation of life... gave value and meaning to, the contrasts and oppositions and processions of the society that confronted the artist." In his novels he juxtaposed the Puritan values of New England morality and aesthetic values permeating art, culture and human relations in Europe. It is interesting to note that his American protagonists like Christopher Newman, Isabel Archer,

Milly Theale and Maggie Verner represent moral rectitude, frankness, simplicity and even magnanimity, whereas European aestheticism is embodied in sophisticated ladies like Madame de Vionnet in 'The Ambassadors'. He also makes a reference to British nobility in 'An International Episode' and does not fail to deal with Italian art in 'Roderick Hudson', 'The Portrait of a Lady' and 'The Golden Bowl' which implies that the touchstone of taste is the measure of the good and the good is the function of the beautiful.

'The American' is a novel which is centrally concerned with the contrast of cultures and ways of life. It is a novel of social significance where the experiences of the hero are used to illustrate the contrast between the two civilizations. Our main interest is always centered on the contrast and we see Christopher Newman becoming more and more aware of the differences between America and France. But Newman and the Bellegardes are stereotypes and personify a certain set notion of America and Europe, whereas from 'The Portrait of a Lady' onwards, the principal figures, like Milly Theale and Maggie Verver, exemplify in varying degrees that synthesis of the particular and the general for which James had praised Turgenev. This

shift, however, does not result from his inability, when he wrote 'The American', to create vivid, complex individuals. Rather, he was so heavily preoccupied with the international contrast in the early phase that types is precisely what he needed to dramatize the cultural opposition.

The increased complexity of James's characters is matched by the changed technique of characterization. Newman and the French characters in 'The American' are, obviously described characters but his later characters are largely dramatized and only marginally described. In this shift, again, James was practising the method of the dramatist for which he had admired Turgenev as early as 1874. Thus, a notable difference between the earlier and later characters is that the earlier ones are portrayed externally, the later ones internally. The external mode stresses the physiognomy, gestures, manners and moral actions of the actors and thus emphasizes their national features. The later method of unfolding their psychology and consciousness portrays them in depth, revealing their general human traits. It exhibits with immediacy the flow of motives and motivations of the people as well

as their own responses. The cumulative effect of the change from telling to showing, from the external to the psychological, and from the drawing of representatives to the creation of highly individualized persons underlies the difference between the earlier international novels and tales of manners, and the later dramas of consciousness. Characterization in the later fiction, thus, represents a departure from what James himself called the "emphasised internationalism." 7

'The American' is the story of Christopher Newman who was "cruelly wronged" 8 by a foreign aristocratic society, and the famous city had "offered" 9 James ever so promptly the situation and the main character, everything that was needed to make his conception concrete: "It was all charmingly simple, this conception, and the current must have gushed, full and clear, to my imagination, from the moment Christopher Newman rose before me, on a perfect day of the divine Paris spring, in the great gilded Salon Carre of the Louvre." 10

The scene, at the very beginning, has a European

8. Ibid., p. 22.
9. Ibid., p. 23.
10. Ibid., pp. 23–24.
setting and epitomizes Newman's typical lack of aesthetic culture: "On a brilliant day in May, in the year 1868, a gentleman was reclining at his ease on the great circular divan which at that period occupied the centre of the Salon Carre, in the Museum of the Louvre" (AM, 5). He is occupying the " commodious ottoman", a refuge of "all the weak-kneed lovers of the fine arts" (AM, 5), and the museum gave him an "aesthetic headache" (AM, 5). His ignorance of art is further shown through the copyists who form an integral part of the Louvre milieu: Newman prefers poor copies of the Masters to the originals. For him "Raphael and Titian and Rubens were a new kind of arithmatic, and they inspired our friend, for the first time in his life, with a vague self-mistrust" (AM, 5-6). The opening scene in the novel, thus, promptly sets up the opposition between a commercial society and a leisurely, cultivated. At the same time, it foreshadows Newman's bewilderment in French society. Like the Masters in the Louvre, French society, from the petty bourgeois Noemie Nioche and her father to the aristocratic Bellegardes, will be beyond his simple "arithmatic".

The distance separating the American from European culture, suggested in the beginning, is consistently developed throughout the novel by the various houses
which serve as an accurate index to the character of their occupants. Newman's first impression of the house of the Bellegardes is described in the following words:

He walked across the Seine, late in the summer afternoon, and made his way through those gray and silent streets of the Faubourg St. Germain, whose houses present to the outer world a face as impassive and as suggestive of the concentration of privacy within as the blank walls of Eastern seraglions. Newman thought it a queer way for rich people to live; his ideal of grandeur was a splendid facade, diffusing its brilliancy outward too, irradiating hospitality. The house to which he had been directed had a dark, dusty, painted portal, which swung open in answer to his ring. It admitted him into a wide, gravelled court, surrounded on three sides with closed windows, and with a doorway facing the street, approached by three steps and surmounted by a tin canopy. The place was all in the shade; it answered to Newman's conception of a convent (AM, 41).

The house and its surroundings are very much revealing but Newman with his American innocence cannot read the portents of the house. He does think of it as a "queer way for rich people to live" which reflects his openness and eagerness characterizing his American candour and generosity. After his first visit to the Bellegardes, he sums up to Mrs. Tristram the impression the house makes on him: "It is like something in a play ... that dark old house over there looks as if wicked things had been done in it, and might be done again" (AM, 73).
Mrs. Tristram's response - "They have a still darker old house in the country ..." (AM, 73) - suggests that the Bellegardes are even more sinister than their Paris house would suggest to a perceptive observer.

Valentin's house similarly "was low, dusky, contracted, and crowded with curious bric-à-brac" and Newman thought of it "a damp, gloomy place to live in ... was puzzled by the obstructive and fragmentary character of the furniture" (AM, 90-91). On the other hand Newman's hotel apartment reflects his American candour, warmth, radiance and spaciousness. Newman has a "great gilded parlour" which reminds Valentin of a "ballroom" or "church" (AM, 82) and he compliments Newman on its "splendour, and harmony, and beauty of detail" to which Newman aptly remarks: "if anything around here amuses you it will all be in a pleasant way" (AM, 82-83).

The Bellegarde ball to celebrate Claire's engagement is an important incident in the novel because it is Newman's American social mode and manners in this setting that provoke the Bellegardes to break off the engagement. Principally, the ball emphasizes the elegance, formality, and the complexity of manners of the French aristocracy, and their absolute absence in the American society, of which Newman is a characteristic product. He is introduced to "three dukes, three
counts, and a baron”, specimens of what Valentin characterizes to Newman as the “high-nosed category” (AM, 189). Newman being unmindful of these distinctions indulges in a “series of impartial handshakes” (AM, 189). The ball becomes a means of contrasting the American’s openness and spontaneity with the French aristocracy’s ritualistic artificiality. Newman finds the Europeans strange; they in turn look upon him as queer and “bizarre” (AM, 193). He feels at home only in the United States and considers the French atmosphere to be uncomfortable, ugly and evil-looking.

Newman, thus, emerges as a typical American who is innocent and provincial, patriotic and culturally ignorant, youthful and robust in the enjoyment of life, strong-willed and forceful in character and genial and open in personal bearing.

'The Portrait of a Lady' is not only James's first major novel but also his first artistic triumph with a subject and a theme that had occupied him increasingly during his long apprenticeship: the American innocent involved in the international situation. In his late preface he recalled of his early years in London that “the ‘international’ light lay, in those days, to my sense thick and rich upon
the scene"; and of 'The Portrait' especially that this was "the light in which so much of the picture hung." 11

He was much more concerned with Isabel Archer, as he said that "the germ of my idea, I see... must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a 'plot', nefarious name... but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a 'subject', certainly of a setting, were to need be super-added". 12 He thought her to be a complex figure and wanted to know "what will she do?" 13

Isabel Archer is a fresh young American with a great desire for life and is introduced in the novel as a bright and charming young lady whose fate is of interest to her family and friends. She is typically innocent and comes to the Old World - a world of deep experience, long traditions, firm conventions and established institutions. A young woman who was "evidently both intelligent and excited" (PL, I, 14), she reveals characteristics of independence, a great concern for others and curiosity about the world. She is "interested in human nature" and likes to observe "specimens" of different types (PL, I, 58). She does

12. Ibid., p. 42.
13. Ibid., p. 53.
not drop these characteristics at the end of the novel, but as we will see, they have been much modified; the process of maturing and her marriage to Gilbert Osmond have changed her a great deal.

Isabel finds herself charmed by the European settings and feels out of place in America. Mrs. Touchett tells her that her house in Albany is "very bourgeois" (PL, I, 23). More fundamentally, however, the house explains Isabel's unique individuality: her inexperience of the world, her proneness to theory and her extravagant imagination. She has led a hermetic existence in the house and "never opened the bolted door nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its side-lights ... never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond" (PL, I, 20). The weather when we first come across Isabel in the Albany house hints at the unwary girl's eventual error: "A crude, cold rain fell heavily; the spring time was indeed an appeal ... to patience. Isabel, however, gave as little heed as possible to cosmic treacheries; she kept her eyes on her book and tried to fix her mind" (PL, I, 20). The Albany house, thus, defines Isabel's individuality and shows her alienation from her American setting.

On the other hand, Gardencourt is a charming place
and Isabel instantly falls in love with it: "I've never
seen anything so lovely as this place", she tells Ralph."
I've been all over the house; it's too enchanting" (PL,
I,12). She never changes her opinion of the house
throughout the novel. When she returns to Gardencourt
for the last time to meet the dying Ralph, the weather
is gloomy, but she finds the house itself unchanged:
"Nothing was changed; she recognized everything she
had seen years before; it might have been only yesterday
she had stood there" (PL,II,537).

Lockleigh, Lord Warburton's country residence,
is another English house that impresses Isabel favour-
ably: "Within, it had been a good deal modernised -
some of its best points had lost their purity; but as
they saw it from the gardens, a stout grey pile, of
the softest, deepest, most weather-fretted hue, rising
from a broad, still moat, it affected the young visitor
as a castle in a legend" (PL,I,70). England itself
captivates her: "England was a revelation to her, and
she found herself as diverted as a child at a pantomine"
(PL,I,48).

Isabel emerges as "the product of a different
moral or social clime" (PL,II,304-305) and has gained
the mobility which justifies her being called a "lady"
in the true sense of that word. Her career has taken her from the state of innocence deep into the world of experience, where she has seen the evil of that world — of course, she finds Madame Merle having a "different morality" (PL, II, 305) — as well as the goodness. The answer to the question as to what a person will do in such a world is given by Isabel herself when she says that one turns to face "this base, ignoble world ... to keep it forever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority" (PL, II, 405). Thus Isabel returns to Rome and to Osmond. She has been through the valley of the shadow and has lost her life in order to find it. She returns to Rome out of no sense of duty to Osmond but out of duty to herself — to that self which is no longer innocent but on which she can now safely rely.

The central thematic concern of 'The Portrait of a Lady' is Isabel's education and James reveals the cultured contrast through the various settings in the novel which serve as successive stages in the life of Isabel. Isabel's relationship with the European settings has been one of harmony and she does not visualize them as threatening or repelling.

'The Wings of the Dove' is the story of Milly
Theale whose drama has its source in human nature itself. Ernest Sandeen recognizes this when he says that "in 'Wings' James's perception of the human scene is at once wider in scope and more accurate in detail .... Milly Theale is much more important as a figure that dramatizes the whole human condition ...." 14 Milly's story is the general human story of betrayal by those from whom one least expects it. She is an American girl - "the last fine flower ... of an 'old' New York stem" 15 - who has wealth and charm, intelligence and independence - everything, as it turns out, except health. Kate Croy and Merton Densher, knowing that she is suffering from a mortal disease, make a plan upon her. Densher is to conquer her affections and marry her, so that the wealth may come to the lovers when she dies. In the end it is she who conquers him. The discovery of the truth is mortal to her and the "potential heiress of all ages" (WD, III, 72) leaves Densher a fortune and he realizes that something has happened which makes it impossible that he should profit by such generosity for the purpose proposed. Thus the contrast between the American and the European is significant as Dorothea Krock observes that

this [international theme] is one of James's principal 'objective correlatives' ... and in 'The Wings of the Dove' it is treated on a scale surpassing every previous attempt in magnitude and grandeur. All the families elements, we find, are there; but they are so magnified, heightened and intensified - so intensely "idealized" - that they assume virtually heroic proportions. Everything is larger than life, and in that sense of heroic stature; and everything has about it that air of the legendary which is inseparable from the heroic. 16

Milly Theale, despite her innocence, exerts her spiritual power on Densher which is recognized by Kate who tells him that he is in love with Milly. She is right and it is true that Densher can never be the same after his meeting with Milly. Thus, if the mainspring of the novel's plot is the relationship of Kate and Densher and their scheme to deceive Milly to achieve their own union, the central theme of the novel emerges as the power of the wings of the dove on human nature. It is this superior and moral power that makes things turn out quite differently from Kate's calculations. Even though Densher was basically an idealist, the change in him is certainly immense and he gives up Kate for whom he first stopped to play the ignoble game.

Milly's conversion of Densher endows the novel with a universal significance. The moral parable which

emerges from Densher’s change of heart vindicates the
the supremacy of good. She is the American dove who is
cleansing the erring English conscience. As Krook
observes, Milly is "at once the most heroic, most leg-
endary, element in this heroic and legendary tale and
also the most real and exemplary for exhibiting one
of the deepest aspects of James’s mature vision of
the human condition." Milly, thus, becomes a symbol
of redeeming nobility, moral superiority and power in
a base, self-seeking world of Europe.

"The Golden Bowl" is a novel which deals with
an irregular sex relationship. Prince Amerigo has,
"with missing steps in the staircase of his morals",
mixed with Maggie Verver who, unlike Milly Theale, is
in robust health but is typically innocent and extre-
meally unselfish. The Prince, despite his marriage, con-
tinues his relationship with Charlotte Stant who is
married to Maggie’s father – Adam Verver, an American
millionaire. The action of the novel centres around
these two marriages; marriages creating the dramatic
tangle which the entire Second Book is concerned with
untangling.

18. R.P. Blackmur, "Introduction" to 'The Golden Bowl'
Prince Amerigo is a sophisticated young man whereas Maggie emerges as naive and innocent. He lacks, as he feels, the moral fervor of the Ververs and confesses that he has no moral sense - only the aesthetic. He is guided by his taste. His aesthetic sense is like the moral spontaneity of earlier Jamesian heroines - not evil, but just insufficient. This insufficiency appears most urgently in his adultery with Charlotte and Maggie, after her awakening, recognizes that the life of all other characters is in her hands. Maggie herself is not evil. On the contrary, her life has been devoted to avoid even the knowledge of evil. She is generous and her regard for the well being of others is only a means for self-protection. She is the "selfless principle ... primary in God's nature" and her suffering is undoubtedly heroic. The novel thus is "a story of supreme goodness overcoming surreptitious evil." Maggie exhibits a morality of the widest relevance and salvages her marriage in order to resolve greater disorders plaguing a diseased civilization.

James has travelled a far distance from 'The American' and has brought his central themes to a

common conclusion in 'The Golden Bowl'. We are reminded of what he himself thought of his prefaces to the novels: "These notes represent, over a considerable course, the continuity of an artist's endeavour, the growth of his whole operative consciousness...."21 His vision has certainly deepened and with 'The Golden Bowl' the moral spontaneity of the innocent American finds meaningful expression in the conventional manners of experienced Europe.

On the contrary, European aestheticism is typified by Parisian elegance which is embodied in sophisticated ladies like Madame de Vionnet in 'The Ambassadors'. James's concern was to see his characters through "Strether's sense ... and Strether's only ... since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions."22 He has used Madame de Vionnet as a personal symbol of Europe - its past, its complexity, its mystery and its evil. In the preface he observes that "art deals with what we see, it must first contribute full-handed that ingredient; it plucks its material, otherwise expressed in the garden of life - which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable."23 Which

22. Ibid., pp.317-318.
23. Ibid., p.312.
reveals that he was not only a moralist but aesthetic experience was also important for him.

Madame de Vionnet is the only significant European in the novel and her house represents the ease, the security and the charm of European life. Strether feels the charm of European beauty and culture as he enters the house:

She occupied, his hostess, in the Rue de Bellechasse, the first floor of an old house to which our visitors had had access from an old clean court. The court was large and open, full of revelations, for our friend, of the habit of privacy, the peace of intervals, the dignity of distances and approaches; the house to his restless sense, was in the high, homely style of an elder day, and the ancient Paris that he was always looking for—sometimes intensely felt, sometimes more acutely missed—was in the immemorial polish of the wide waxed staircase and in the fine boiseries, the medallions, mouldings, mirrors, great clear spaces, of the greyish-white salon into which he had been shown. He seemed to see her, at the outset, in the midst of possessions not vulgarly numerous, but hereditary, cherished, charming. While his eyes, after a little, turned from those of his hostess and Chad freely talked—not in the least about him, but about other people, people he didn't know, and quite as if he did know them—he found himself making out, as a background of the occupant, some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads and faded surfaces of satin striped with alternate silk (AMB, VI, 149-150).

The place is extremely fascinating for Strether who
finds Madame de Vionnet appearing as a lady of infinite variety. The Paris of her house not only symbolizes a culture but expresses a way of life. She is a sympathetically drawn figure and, as we know, has been forced into a wretched marriage from which there is no release for her because of her Catholicism. She appears as a human character and her beauty and grace give Strether a "sense of her rare unlikeness to the women he had known" (AMB, VI, 151) and he, through his perception, tries to fill the gap created by America's failure to understand Europe.

'The International Episode', similarly, suggests, perhaps for the first time, the British nobility in the form of Lord Lambeth with whom Bessie Alden looks forward to renew her acquaintance, once again, in Europe. Lord Lambeth's family behaves in a freezing manner and Bessie suffers in the highly mannered world of Europe. Though Lord Lambeth and Percy Beaumont are satirized for their ignorance of America, Bessie Alden too seems vulgar in her actions while in England because of the gulf between American and English social customs. But she turns down Lord Lambeth which signifies the aversion of the Americans for British nobility.

James, continuing his depiction of European aestheticism, makes a reference to Italian art in
'Roderick Hudson'. Roderick and Rowland Mallett, his patron, are at leisure in a large garden talking about art and the artist's life and this Roman scene evokes the golden air of Italy:

One warm, still day, late in the Roman autumn, our two young men were seated beneath one of the high-stemmed pines of the Villa Ludovisi. They had been spending an hour in the mouldy little garden-house, where the colossal mask of the famous Juno looks out with the blank eyes from that dusky corner which must seem to her the last possible stage of a lapse from Olympus. Then they had wandered out into the gardens and were lounging away the morning under the spell, as it seemed to them, of supreme romance. Roderick declared that he would go nowhere else, that after the Juno it was a profanation to look at anything but sky and trees (RH, V, 84).

The surrounding of Rome is once again explained when Roderick establishes "himself in the basement of a huge, dusky, dilapidated old house in that long, tortuous and pre-eminently Roman street which leads ... from the Corso to the Bridge of Saint Angelo" (RH, V, 97). Here he found "everything romantic" and his apartment "gave an air of leisurely permanence" (RH, V, 98).

Isabel Archer, too, when she reached Italy, looked with yearning eyes along the eastward curve of the Italian Riviera: "The charm of the Mediterranean coast only deepened for our heroine on acquaintance, for it was the threshold of Italy, the gate of admirations. Italy ... stretched before her as a land of
promise, a land in which a love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge" (PL, I, 208). She further discovered that Osmond's villa was a kind of miniature museum of the art and history of Italy and as he showed her through the numerous apartments filled with his treasures, she felt almost "oppressed at last with the accumulation of beauty and knowledge to which she found herself introduced" (PL, I, 246).

Adam Verver, similarly, in 'The Golden Bowl' goes to Europe because he has a wonderful plan. He is going to present his native place, American City, with a whole museum of the world's masterpieces. He loves and understands art and in the beginning of the story we find the Ververs established in a fashionable part of London "where Mr. Verver had pitched a tent suggesting that of Alexander furnished with the spoils of Darius" (GB, I, 40).

James, thus, maintaining the contrast between moral uprightness in his American protagonists and aesthetic richness in Europeans, makes us believe that the insistence on moral rectitude by his Americans in all situations of life appears to be provincial and lacks higher social accomplishments. In this context, Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver, appear as provincials because their moral values are not tempered with
aestheticism. Isabel with her American independence tries to judge Osmond, a thing the shallow aesthetic will not bear: "The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all (PL, II, 407). She is also shocked by Osmond's perverse view of feminine sexual morality and her own idea of morality reflects a characteristic nineteenth century regard for moral decency:

She was not a daughter of the Puritans, but for all that she believed in such a thing as chastity and even as decency. It would appear that Osmond was far from doing anything of the sort; some of his traditions made her push back her skirts. Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four that didn't deceive their husbands? When Isabel heard such things she felt a greater scorn for them than for the gossip of a village parlour — a scorn that kept its freshness in a very tainted air (PL, II, 407-408).

Isabel's outrage at European moral cynicism highlights her own independence and moral purity which are American qualities clashing against Osmond's repression and unclear mind. Maggie, on the other hand, emerges, as a paradox and we see James trying to make 'The Golden Bowl' a moral parable.

As is evident, James seems to be in a dilemma between unsophisticated but good Americans and polished but morally corrupt Europeans. The depiction of this
contrast, which makes his novels more complex, has been
done in various ways and with varying degrees of em-
phasis in his different novels starting from 'The
American' to 'The Golden Bowl'. In 'The American',
one of his earlier novels, the contrast is sharply
drawn in favour of the Americans. Newman is wronged
by the class which pretends to represent the highest
codes of civilization and culture which makes us believe
that Europe and America are irreconcilable, a fact James
was trying to express through his novels and tales. No
happy union is achieved between American and European
in his fiction and it is only in 'The Golden Bowl' that
the union between Prince Amerigo and Maggie Verver is
to be achieved and that too because the heiress has
come to understand that the old civilization cannot
be faced with Emersonian innocence. But in 'The
Ambassadors' James's choice between the American and
the European is not as clear as it was in 'The Ameri-
can'—his earlier novel. Strether, the most impor-
tant character in the novel, comes to Paris as a
zealous ambassador of the Woollett morality and
ultimately becomes an admirer of Parisian aestheticism.
This change in Strether represents a similar change in
the vision of James and, as we will see, like Strether's
gradually evolving consciousness, his outlook too went
on enlarging.

Lambert Strether, an elderly American, has come
to Paris at the request of a wealthy friend, Mrs. Newsome, a widow whom he expects to marry. He is an ambassador to the Parisian world and has to find out why her son, Chad, is staying in Paris and showing a reluctance to return to the family business. He comes to know that Chad is having a scandalous liaison with an aristocratic Parisian adventuress - Madame de Vionnet. His views on Madame de Vionnet are clearly expressed when Miss Gostrey asks him about the mission of separating Chad from the "wicked woman" (AMB, II, 35). He says that "she's base, venal - out of the streets" (AMB, II, 36). Chad Newsome's name is also introduced to us and we find Strether having his initial taste of Paris, that "vast bright Babylon" (AMB, II, 57). He stands looking up at the balcony of Chad's apartment and recognizes that the life which goes on in such balanced and measured surroundings cannot possibly be the crude dissipation that Woollett, Massachusetts believes. As the story progresses we find Strether developing his relationship with Madame de Vionnet and it is interesting to note that he, who had come to bring back Chad, himself falls in love with Paris and at last comprehends that the young man has been improved and not corrupted by Madame de Vionnet, his French mistress. Strether's position is completely reversed and it is Chad who is willing
to go back whereas Strether is urging him to stay. Strether who had initially dubbed Madame de Vionnet as "base" and "venal" now tells Chad during his last talk with him: "You'll be a brute, you know - you'll be guilty of the last infamy - if you ever forsake her" (AMB, XII, 364).

Strether, thus, has had a rich experience in his contact with Europe and in his involvement with the Chad-Vionnet relationship. He has preserved his native moral integrity and in this way the issue of moral integrity assumes a profounder significance in the novel than the theme of the American in Europe. He appreciates the social and cultural virtues of Europe and on the other hand shows his contempt for Woollett which makes us believe that James, at this moment, was not concerned in making a distinction between American virtue and European viciousness. Madame de Vionnet symbolizes for Strether not the moral corruption of Europe but a culture in which social and aesthetic beauty forge an autonomous order of values. Christof Wegelin very rightly says that "unlike 'The Portrait of a Lady', a story of disenchantment which provokes our sympathy for American idealism, it ['The Ambassadors'] is a story of conversion" and "what we are asked to share is Strether's growing awareness and finally his high
sense of the moral sufficiency of Madame de Vionnet, even of the moral beauty which he comes to see in her despite her conflict with the moral regimen of Woollett. The novel, therefore, is important, as the issues raised in it are, as Joan Bennett sees them, "ever-relevant issues between true and false values." James's vision too, not very much unlike that of Strether went on enlarging gradually from 'The American' to 'The Golden Bowl'. His earlier fiction read with his later one will make us see the evolution of his fictional universe from the American - European theme to an exploration of profound, universal questions.