HENRY JAMES AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION

When a writer is valued by the test of his art, some are great writers and some are less than great. But the criteria to test an artist are not the same always because the norms of historical and artistic importance tend to interpenetrate. But sometimes a whole literary era have a kind of genius of its own, giving a dimension of varied stature and interest, where the creative vitality of time and place in literary history provides an extra glory to their talents. The genius of nineteenth century American literature among other national literatures has its special identity and value in a world perspective because of its marked originality. The writers of this era claim certain debts to Europe and the past. Among many novelists of nineteenth century, only Mark Twain was essentially free of European influence. Henry James and William Dean Howells were European and French influenced realists and naturalists. Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose native sources tended to be more Elizabethan in thought and feeling than indigenously American, was a frequent borrower from European fiction. Melville's fiction is a richly variegated texture of echoes and adaptations from European classics like Shakespeare, Carlyle, Goethe and many more. But this word of indebtedness to Europe, which most of America's best writers adopted, served to dramatize their essential
originality, originality which Europe did not fail to notice. Originality of these writers were voicing a fresh and vital vision of social, spiritual and aesthetic aspects that was springing from the soil of America. Because of its natural derivation from the materials of real life, American fiction became the most revealing literary source of people's shared vision.

In the typical European novels of the nineteenth century, the resistant otherness of the world confronting, the ego, the society is more dominant. But in the typical American novel of the same period, society is only a minor element in a much more complexly constituted reality which may comprise not only society and its laws but also the moral law. The characters of American novelists find their fulfillment in the absolute realization of integrity, justice or truth but the European characters on the other hand believe in some purified form of socially sanctioned freedom, status or success. Integral with these themes is the typical setting of the nineteenth century American fiction. A bordered separation is felt not merely between two different worlds of Europe and America: Hawthorn's created 'settlement and uncreated forest, Melville's known shore and unknown sea, Twain's formed east and unformed west, James' innocent America and decadent Europe. Only one other national literature of the nineteenth century was so marked by intensity, idiosyncrasy and the spirit of
discovery as America's and that is of Russia. Both nations were, In a province of Europe, one having spun off, like a satellite, from the main body of the continent, the other deeply stamped with the oriental customs and temperament of its vast eastern reaches. The Russians produced writers whose minds were strongly magnetized by the cultural authority of Western Europe and its past. Thus the work of Russians was measurably European. The Americans moved towards the creation of a new and independent cultural identity that was full of novelty, rawness and freshness. Thus American literature has become accepted as a major world literature of the twentieth century and the writers had already achieved the status of world figures even in the nineteenth century.

So far as the case of Henry James and his contemporaries is concerned, it reveals that, Henry James' life though not exceptionally long, covered such a world of change that it is odd to realize that he was a grown man in the mid-Victorian period. He kept so abreast of his times that as a senior writer he was able to strike the modern note before modernism arrived and at the same time, it is also very true that this novelist grew up way back in the era of romanticism. In 1843 when James was born, Balzac had just written his general preface, Wordsworth was already a poet and Ruskin was quite unknown. Thus
“James, therefore, could think of Goethe and Scott as fairly recent predecessors.” ¹

When his first piece of fiction, ”A Tragedy of Error”, was published in February 1864, Thackeray was just dead, Hawthorne still just alive, Dickens and George Eliot in full career and Hardy far from beginning. James’s novel, ”Watch and Ward” (1871), precedes Hardy’s “Desperate Remedies” and George Eliot’s “Middle March”. James’s ”Roderick Hudson” precedes ”Trollope's, The Prime Minister”. But James is somehow not their contemporary. He eludes the nineteenth century classification. He comes after the Victorians. This advanced position of James in literary history is not merely a matter of his Americanisms. Mark Twain, for instance, seems far more that the eight years James’s senor that he was; he believed that the present and the immediate future were the best province of fiction, especially

”The future to which all our actual modern tendencies and leanings seem to build a sort of material pathway.” ²

This statement, made in a letter to his twenty-two year old sister, Alice, when he himself was twenty-six, is not just a refusal to write historical novels, still less a word in favor of science fiction; it is a commitment to enlarge and deepen experience through fiction rather
than to reflect it in fiction. James is thus not so much the child of his age as the father of the next. So as far as his contemporaries are concerned, they belong either to late nineteenth century or early twentieth century. Thus the close contemporaries of Henry James are Mark Twain (1835-1910) and William Dean Howells (1837-1920). As it is well said that –

"The situation of American literature is anomalous, it has no center, or if it has, it is like the sphere of Hermes. It is divided into many systems, each revolving around its several sun." ³

Thus this new era of later nineteenth century differed from its predecessors in many ways. The literary aims of Howells, Henry James and Mark Twain were widely different from those of Hawthorne, Melville and Cooper. Few of the important writers of this era were college-bred; and many of them like Howells and Twain had got much of their education in the printers shop and the newspaper office. They came into literature through the medium of journalism and were profited by the criticism they received from the editors of 'The Atlantic Monthly', 'The Century' and other magazines. With the enactment of the International Copyright Act of 1891 the financial status of the American writer notably improved. It is a fact that everybody read Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, but there were not many who
rated their books as literary masterpieces. People cared much for the novels and tales of Henry James. In 1890's Howells stood higher in the opinion of the literary critics than either Henry James or Mark Twain. They, along with Melville, had to wait for the twentieth century to canonize them.

The literary and cultural historians of America since the beginning of this century have been representing Mark Twain and Henry James as the idealized and somewhat oversimplified representative of two great opposing forces in American civilization. In 1926, in a classic study of American literature, Mark Twain is considered as the new American produced by the backwash of the frontier and describing Henry James as the American suffering from a deep nostalgia for a sentimentalized European past which existed nowhere except in the corridors of his own imagination. As stated by Henry Seidel Canby -

"Of course the men were else read Twain and only the elite have has yet read Henry James. Mark was often offensively American; Henry shocked even his family by his Britishness." 4

Mark Twain and Henry James came from two different Americas that are, Mark belong to a young civilization whereas James to a mature one. Mark’s technique is almost entirely oral, like a teller of
tales whereas Henry James, even in his own youth was not young in this respect. The contrasts between the two writers are too great to be analyzed both in his subjects and his art. Mark will live chiefly by his best books, Henry James by the influence his books have created. There are great contrasts between these two writers but at the same time if one juxtapose James' "The Portrait of a Lady" and Mark's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", one finds that these two writers are so much alike even though different. Both the novels are masterpieces, which their writers sought to perfection with a great deal of loving care. They are, at the same time almost contemporaneous, for Mark Twain was working upon Huckleberry Finn through much the same years when James was writing "The Portrait of a Lady". Both are novels of education, which initiate the hero or the heroine into the ways of the world and to bring about his or her moral and intellectual growth. The portrait of a girl grown into a lady and of a boy who matures into awareness, both describe the journey of innocence into the unknown world and how the encounter between innocence and experience brings not only great suffering but also wisdom and maturity. Before launching their characters on the journey through the regions of darkness and evil, Mark Twain, as well as Henry James takes very conscious and deliberate care to emphasize their state of innocence and their curiosity to probe the unknown.
Still a girl in her teens when one meets her first, Isabel Archer is lost in a world of books and the memories of a happy childhood. She formed her own idealized vision of the actual world and of human life, when her fairy godmother came in the person of Mrs. Touchett, Isabel was reading in the security of her library which shut her off from the rest of the world and was blissfully unaware of evil-natural or moral.

“A crude, cold rain fell heavily, the spring-time was indeed an appeal – and it seemed a cynical, insincere appeal – to patience. Isabel, however, gave as little heed as possible to cosmic treacheries.”

She had a great desire for knowledge, an immense curiosity about life, but her source of information so far had only been her library. Her handsome and loving father, who was now dead had instilled in her the gospel of “doing as one liked”, and the girl had formed a faith in infinite possibilities. Thus the impression of innocence is reinforced in the character.

Huckleberry Finn lived in a state of simple innocence and had not been exposed to any evil greater than the false romanticism of Tom, acquired from the pirate-tales and the robber-books. Till Tom Sawyer hunted up Huck in order to recruit him to his gang, Huck lived in the woods like a noble savage where he was free and satisfied. He had heard some vague references to death but had not yet known what it
meant nor thought that he himself would only too soon encounter it. It is thus observed that in the woods of Huck or in the cloistered chamber of Isabel, evil was some remote unknown entity that belonged to a world other than their own. The common words that both these novelists focus are freedom, independence, self-reliance, happiness and curiosity. Both Mark Twain and Henry James chose money as a symbol of the dark forces that subject the happy innocence of the two characters to the scars and bruises of experience. The day Huck came upon his fortune of 3000 dollars he invited unknowingly his own ruin for the widow Douglas took him for her son. The homeless person, who never had found love from any human being till then, not even from his own father, now became the subject of everyone's attention and was reduced to a pawn by the conflicting parties that contended for the rights to his possession. As the law trial kept grinding its slow course, Huck's Pap kidnapped his son to keep him prisoner in the woods while widow Douglas sent a man to regain possession of Huck. It is not Huck's prison alone that was made of the very golden bars he had inherited but the cage in which Isabel found her caught as a bird was also made of the same stuff. The house of suffocation, the house of dumbness; the house of suffocation in which there was neither light nor air had become her dwelling simply
because the fortune Mr. Touchett left her had invited the attention of the two characters Osmond & Madam Merle.

Whatever the ordeals of Huck or Isabel, they never fail to preserve their individual integrity and this is what turns even their defeats into victories. Though, innocence, in its encounter with experience gets bruised and scarred all through, it is never broken. On the contrary, trials and sufferings strengthen it and arm it further with knowledge. Huck's innocence learns through repeated shocks the lessons of love, responsibility, human dignity and sympathy while Isabel gains the sad lucidity of wisdom and combines now the faculty of judging with that of merely seeing.

Though these major works of Henry James and Mark Twain share the same theme, but they also have variations. The entire movement of Mark Twain's novel is from bondage towards freedom, whereas Henry James portrays the reverse of this movement. The last words of Huck carry in them a message that asserts the victory of freedom over fate, whereas the last sentence but one spoken by Isabel Archer suggests the limits of freedom to Caspar Goodwood who even in the despair of his hopeless love tries to give up and submit to fate. Thus a close study reveals that, there are many similarities as well as differences in the themes and writing style of Twain and Henry James. They, thus contain within themselves the "yes" and "no" of their
shared cultural heritage which in the nineteenth century express and define itself in terms of innocence, experience, freedom and fate.

In another close contemporary of James, that is, William Dean Howells, the general substantive trend is from simplicity to complexity, from external reportorial observation of international motivational analysis, from the relatively restricted boundaries of unconscious individuality, through awareness, to the breadth of social complicity and beyond social judgment. Artistically the work progresses from skillful expository narration to the widely discussed "dramatic unfolding", from the discovery of ambivalence in art as in life to a studied dismissal of oversimplification demanded by an increasingly experienced and perceptive authorial eye. Howells' interests in social and economic conditions widen his vision and simultaneously restrict penetration into human individuality. A major propelling factor in Howells' development is his increasingly conscious desire to see — honesty, faithfully and truthfully. A novel he one time said, is —

"A perspective made for the benefit of people who have not true use of their eyes."

Henry James, who elevated the infinitive to see the highest plane of creative reality, often said very much the same thing. Both Howells and James believe that the business of the novelist and the art of the novelist consist of seeing, first for himself, and then for his
reader; and seeing, in the best sense, is the ultimate comprehension of reality. Howells saw as deeply or as profoundly as did James. Thus the understanding of James and Howells comes to each other to understand Howells and his work; one finds a developing awareness between actuality and reality and his attempt to make visible that difference creatively in the attitudes of his fictive characters and, in his own authorial response to those attitudes. The readings of Howells' "Their Wedding Journey" reveals that the preserving quality of the novel rests in its faithful and pleasing picture of American life, but he did not add that the artistic vision which gives a value other than historical to the novel is less dependent upon the details of rail travel and fashion, of provincial cuisine and mannerisms, that it is upon the fictionalized attitudes of the Marches as they view and react to the American scene. The common reality of American life which Howells effectively evokes in "Their Wedding Journey" relates to the role of illusion in the lives of ordinary Americans. In this fiction the significant focus is on Basil and Isabel. The interest in "whom", but even more in "what" the Marches are, as reflected by how things appear to them, is a major factor. Clara Kirk was quite correct in asserting in a larger context that Howells used the Marches –

"To bridge the gulf between day-to-day actuality and the novelist's reality."
Howells uses Basil as the means of penetrating the illusions of Isabel. Isabel establishes her eagerness to conceal her bridal identity, even though the non-bridal pretense which is so dear to her is betrayed by her gestures. She is finally exposed in the game of pretense but also reveals her habit of rationalizing her. Pretensions as she explains the postponement of their wedding trip so as to place both of them in the best possible light. Basil’s bemused warning that her caress might expose as bride, communicates to the reader his own occasional option of reality that Isabel fails to understand. This type of writing pattern and sequential introduction of the characters is quite similar in Henry James’. “The Portrait of a Lady”, where the main character’s name is also “Isabel” who after getting a good fortune starts the journey of freedom where she chose Osmond as her life partner and James always placed Goodwood and Ralph to communicate the reality to the readers by their own perceptions. “Their Wedding Journey” of Howells incorporates a gentle awakening to reality, recognition of common pretense born and nurtured by Nan’s failure to see. The same realization takes place in James’ “The Portrait of a Lady”, where James made Isabel to realize finally that she met with a tragic end because she failed to see the innocent and genuine world of Ralph and Goodwood and nurtured in her the ego developed from the fortune and freedom she received. Thus one finds that the
character placement and the technique of Howells and Henry James are quite similar. Not only in characterization and technique, but even in the thematic aspect, the context of American and European world pops up quite often in Howells, as it is always there in James. For example, in Howells' "A Chance Acquaintance", Howells introduces a sharp contrast between his main characters, that is, Kitty Ellison and Miles Arbutus.

Kitty Ellison's wide, clear eyes framed by long lashes speak the innocence of the natural child, and it is her naturalness and her sense of democracy which repeatedly oppose Arbuton's pretension and factitious aristocracy. Her natural simplicity and self-reliance, mingled with an innocent trust of others and an ignorance of the world, contrast with his suspicious and arrogance. Surprises are honest and unrealistic, often motivated in sustained but sometimes revealing "decided upon" because she had been trained to think free from convention. By establishing strong character opposition in "A Romance Acquaintance" Howells' created a situation which enabled him to expose more clearly and more imaginatively, the illusions which he had come to see in American life. James also used this thematic aspect of Europe and America by placing the contrasting characters in his novels like innocent Isabel and cunning Osmond, Milly and Clerton, Maggie and Amerigo, Daisy and Mr. Winterbourne and so many others.
Though Howells is also considered to be a close contemporary of James he also differs in few cases from him. In 1880's when Howells became tangled in sociological considerations his vision was diffused and his fiction, no matter how interesting it may be in socio-economic orientation, began to seem less true. Also Howells found it difficult to keep himself out of his novels; therefore both his inhibitions and his centers were too strong. When Howells was at his best, he penetrated superficial actuality to see deeply into the reality of individual human beings. But when social considerations upstage character, when characters deny reality and become actors designed to play preconceived sociological roles, that is, when Howells started telling how it is – and how it should be – rather than seeing, his fiction lost its honesty and charm. Whereas in James, the case is vice-versa. Though James worked on social grounds made his characters mingle with society and accept cultures but his fictions never were the superficial attire. He always presented reality through the behaviour of his characters and he never took himself into the novel but he expressed his perception through the characters that he creates. This is the reason that James’ fiction never lost its charm and always attracted readers throughout the globe.

Thus one finds that the literary pioneers of nineteenth century American fiction are Hawthorne, James Fennimore Cooper, Melville,
Twain, Howells and Henry James. But cooper, Hawthorne and Melville are close contemporaries to each other because, their major writings were published when all three of them were at the peak of their literary career and on the other hand Twain, Howells and Henry James wrote fiction that are quite similar in their presentation and their fictional career ran parallel to each other. But at the same time intelligence and reality which is also a form of art, its joy and its civilizing power are also James’ preoccupations. James alone in his time and place in the English speaking world holds fast to the insight of organic esthetics and thus constitute a bridge from the early 19th century to modern criticism.
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