



The American

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Henry James's third novel is an exploration of his most powerful, perennial theme - the clash between European and American cultures, the Old World and the New. Christopher Newman, a 'self-made' American millionaire in France, falls in love with the beautiful aristocratic Claire de Bellegarde. Her family, however, taken aback by his brash American manner, rejects his proposal of marriage. When Newman discovers a guilty secret in the Bellegardes' past, he confronts a moral dilemma: Should he expose them and thus gain his revenge? James's masterly early work is at once a social comedy, a melodramatic romance and a realistic novel of manners.

The American Details

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From Reader Review The American for online ebook

Werner says

In the most recent installment of my review of the short story anthology I'm currently reading, I couldn't resist being quite snarkily critical of the (to me) unreadable Henry James selection there, which I noted shows him at his worst. So I thought it only fair to offer a review of a work that shows him at his best (or as far as I can determine that, from my limited reading of his corpus). IMO, his ghost stories exhibit some of his best work; but this mainstream novel (which I read as a high school student, but on my own rather than for a class) also proved to be a pretty good read by my standards. My theory is that he was better at writing in the novel or novella format than in the short story; in the latter, he could get by without offering much in the way of event or plot, and just wallow in character's interior monologues as they intuit things, but at novel-length, neither the readers nor the publishers of that day would tolerate that. :-) Of course, this is based on limited data, since this is the only James novel (unless you count *The Turn of the Screw* as a novel) that I've actually read; I experienced *Washington Square* and *The Spoils of Poynton* as dramatic adaptations. (That's a doubly good way to experience James, since it eliminates exposure to his extremely prolix, dense and ponderous prose narrative style --and that description comes from someone who doesn't mind most 19th-century diction!) Still, those gave me enough idea of the plotting to believe there's something to this theory. James' style here isn't a plus; but at least his prose here DOES go somewhere worth getting to.

American born, but long resident in England, James was strongly interested in using his fiction to explore the differences, individual and cultural, between Americans (democratic, forthright, future-oriented, sometimes brash and naive, and convinced that money is a universal problem-solver) and Europeans (aristocratic, tradition-steeped, suavely mannered, sometimes hypocritical and proud to the point of idolatry, and convinced of their own superiority to everyone else). That contrast was never more thoroughly plumbed in fiction than in this tale of a self-made American millionaire, General Newman (whose last name isn't without symbolic significance!), in Paris as a tourist, who sets his heart on marrying the daughter of a widowed noblewoman. The young lady returns his affection; but she can't marry without the consent of her centuries-old, ultra-snobbish --but sorely cash-strapped-- family, and thus the lines of the conflict are drawn. In his preface to the original edition, which was quoted in the introduction to the one I read (not the same as the one pictured above), James describes how the idea for the novel popped into his head on a streetcar ride: "I found myself, of a sudden, considering with enthusiasm, as the theme of a 'story,' the situation, in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust but insidiously beguiled and betrayed, some cruelly wronged compatriot.... What would he 'do' in that predicament, how would he right himself, or how, failing a remedy, would he conduct himself under his wrong?" That quote suggests something of the verbosity and convolutions of James' way of writing, even without the extra verbiage I elided. (He goes on, in the full preface, to practically provide a spoiler for the ending, so I don't recommend reading that particular preface unless you don't mind that!) But more importantly, it also suggests that the protagonist's central challenge here will be what amounts to a moral decision, a dimension that, for me, always raises the ante in fiction.

While the short Goodreads description above mentions "comedy," that's perhaps an exaggeration; James wasn't an exuberant humorist in the way that his Realist contemporary Mark Twain was. But he did have a real sense of irony and at times a capacity for satire, and he deploys them here; while nothing in the book is laugh-aloud funny, there are some lines here (that I can recall after over 40 years!) that are certainly snicker-worthy. :-) Add in some strong characterizations (likeable or unlikeable) and a plot that includes a REALLY dark family secret, possible blackmail, and a duel, and you have a novel that held my interest, kept me reading, and left me thinking the read was worthwhile!

the gift says

i decided to read henry james one summer a few years ago (decades...) and decided to approach him with one book from each 'era': early, middle, and late. this was the early. 'middle': portrait of a lady

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2...>, 'late: the ambassadors

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7...> actually an easier read than i thought, i understand it is an early version, a draft, of james' architectonic and archetypal story: contrasting the innocent, honest, open american, with various layers of corruption of the old world, of europe. some readers really like this motor for the plot and find james as an engaging storyteller, for me, his reputed great ability to understand and reveal the characters' natures did not work. as an early version of this story, i would not have gone on had i not already schemed to. middle james' was the portrait of a lady, and it was worth the approach...

Susan says

This was a reread, I think the third time, but I haven't read it since the mid-Seventies at the latest. Rereading, I must say, was a huge enjoyment. This is James at the best of his earlier period, where he was exploring the naïve American in Europe, packing enormous meaning in every sentence, but before he began with the super subtle detail and very long and complex sentences that characterize his later masterpieces like *A Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. [By the way, the difference between James' long sentence and Faulkner's is simple: James are architected sentences that depend on intricacies of English syntax while Faulkner's sentences are not so complex as they are conversational and accretive, where he adds and modifies rather than subordinates.]

The story is of Christopher Newman (new man, right? Not only from "the new world" but from "the West", practically a hero riding on a white horse) who left school very early somewhere in the East and by 35 had made himself a millionaire businessman in California. He wakes up one morning and thinks there must be more to life. Like other Americans of his generation who can afford it he heads for Europe to learn about the rest of life. In Paris—for James always the center of European culture—one of the first things he does is order several paintings from a beautiful young girl copying paintings in the Louvre—always supervised by her father. We gradually come to realize that Mlle. Noiche is a very bad painter. Later she plays a more sinister role in the plot but early on Newman's business relationship with her and her father (who teaches him some conversational French) helps to establish Newman's naiveté.

Newman thinks he will look for a wife in Paris and an ambitious American ex-patriot rather mischievously suggests Madame de Cintré, widowed daughter of the late Marquis de Bellegarde. Her family is 1000 years old. Her older brother, the present Marquis, declares his loyalty to the Bourbons and refuses to go to the Napoleonic Court. Claire de Cintré, it is clear, was married young to an old man chosen by her family who has mercifully died before the story begins. She is beautiful, delicate, shy and completely under the thumb of her family. Nevertheless she is drawn to Newman and for whatever reasons after some initial insults her mother and brother agree to the marriage. While you must have the patience to wait for James to set the scene, the novel contains a full measure of suspense so I'll not give away the plot, except to suggest that aristocratic French families have traditionally looked down their noses at "commercial men".

Finally, I was struck by how completely and effectively James followed his own theory of narrative point of view in *The American*. All readers recognize that novels are most often told from the point of view of a third person narrator (often not even identifiable as a person) who "knows everything" or from the point of view of one person, in which case the author has to work hard to give the reader knowledge that the narrator doesn't have. James thought there was a better way. He called it "centre of consciousness" and it's so familiar now we rarely single it out, but James used it to radically change narrative from the 19th century

“dear reader” style to something much more subtle. James described it as the narrator looking through the back of the character's head, seeing what he sees, though described from the larger experience of the invisible narrator. It combines the virtues of the omnipotent narrator and the first person narrator. Here James uses detail brilliantly to characterize both Newman and the people he interacts with, always telling the reader far more than Newman understands, but rarely revealing who's telling the story.

William Leight says

The most prominent difference between the early and the late works of Henry James is, I think, subtlety. Not only did his writing style become more subtle, to the point that some passages require multiple rereadings just to figure out what he's driving at, his characters and stories became subtler, with more nuance in the former and less open conflict in the latter. "The American" is a quite early Henry James novel (either his second or his third, depending on whether you refuse, as James did later in life, to count "Watch and Ward"), and as such is not subtle at all. The story is one of American archetypes colliding with European ones, so the title character must be as American as you can get, and James doesn't hold back, telling us right away that the character is an American stereotype: "an observer might have felt a certain humorous relish of the almost ideal completeness with which he filled out the national mold." Our American is tall (he is always stretching out his legs), laconic, good-humored, unsubtle, difficult to snub, defiantly class-less (mostly in the sense of social class, though also somewhat lacking in refinement), and self-made, a Western (from San Francisco, as far west as you can get) millionaire. Since he is a new man, from the New World, James, with a directness that not even Dickens would have been likely to adopt, names him Newman. His European counterparts are the Bellegardes, a blend of the old aristocracy of England and the even older aristocracy of France, who have not just old names but old opinions: the Marquis believes that Henri V (the last Bourbon pretender) is the divinely ordained ruler of France, while his younger brother Valentin fought for the Pope in the wars of Italian unification. The Marquis and the dowager Marquise are caricatures of aristocratic pride, while Valentin is mostly a standard-issue playboy. We are also given Mlle. Noemie, a caricature of a social-climbing gold-digger, and Lord Deepmere, a caricature of a weak-minded British lord (he could have stepped out of the Drones club, if such a thing existed in the late 1860s). Mme. de Cintre, Newman's love-interest (the Marquis de Bellegarde's widowed younger sister), is at least a cardboard cutout of a more standard kind, a typical Victorian-era heroine who is so good that she can't actually do anything. The only character of any interest is the American expatriate Mrs. Tristram, who is also, by no coincidence, the only character one can imagine appearing in one of James's later novels.

As befits such characters, the story is mostly melodrama. Some passages, mainly those in which Newman converses with Mrs. Tristram, are fairly Jamesian, but much of the plot seems to have wandered in from other books. The family secret known only to the old servant is straight out of Wilkie Collins, while the Bellegardes themselves are too old-fashioned to belong to a novel set in the 19th century and instead behave more like characters from Dumas, with Valentin dying in a duel and Mme. de Cintre, after having been bullied out of marrying the man she loves by her family, immuring herself in a convent. The continuing adventures of Mlle. Noemie also seem a bit out of place, not so much because they're not Jamesian (though they do have a tinge of Dickens or Thackeray) as because they mostly just don't have much to do with the rest of the story. The moral is that Americans and Europeans are fundamentally incompatible, unless said Americans are strange, like Mrs. Tristram, or fools, like her husband. This is a somewhat ridiculous notion, but it might not be a problem for the book except that James insists on hitting you over the head with it. Over and over again, we are told that Newman doesn't understand: he is constantly being told that he can't comprehend how a Bellegarde feels, or asking to have their jokes and remarks explained to him, or trying, to no avail, to persuade Valentin or Mme. de Cintre of a course of action that seems obvious to him (and to the reader, for that matter). And when Valentin and Mme. de Cintre do make an effort to become more American, Mme. de Cintre by marrying Newman and Valentin by at least considering allowing Newman to

set him up in business in America, they are both efficiently and permanently slapped down: they are Europeans and simply can't be anything else. (How James squared this attitude with ongoing European immigration to America is beyond me.) The book ends with Newman determined to quite Paris, and probably Europe, for ever: as an American, he just doesn't belong there.

In the end, the lack of subtlety dooms "The American" to be a lesser work. It's still a good read (though, as anybody familiar with James will not be surprised to hear, it lacks a happy ending), but if you want a Henry James novel where an American takes on Paris and the French, "The Ambassadors" is considerably superior.

Ensiform says

Christopher Newman, a wealthy, good-natured Western magnate, has retired to Europe in order to better himself. There he is introduced to Claire de Cintré as a representative of his ideal woman. He does prize her, and determines to marry her, though the nobility of her family, the Bellegardes, seems to preclude such a bond. His friendship with her brother and easy democratic feeling make Newman regard himself as "noble" as they, though of course he isn't.

It's quite a subtle and clever tale; it's not quite a doomed romance, for there's little indication that Newman and Claire really love each other. She finds him novel and he finds her ideal, but would they make a happy couple? And as the book is told mostly from the viewpoint of Newman, it requires reading between the lines to see just what a blunder the tall, rich, confident American is when it comes to European social traditions. Finally, there is deep suspense when Newman has the chance to damage the Bellegardes' reputation. James draws the question out masterfully, and provides a very correct, if bittersweet, ending. It's a fine novel of manners, written in skillful, deft prose.

Kalliope says

I have felt with "The American" as if I had been watching a balloon inflating. As it gradually gained shape, as this shape expanded and expanded, and as its surface became more and more tense, I experienced a similar tension in my nerves. I was absolutely glued to the pages of this novel out of which this extraordinary balloon was swelling. The strain on its stretching rubber was also elating my expectations. But just as I was anticipating for this balloon to take off and reach the sky and fly in the air of literary bliss, it burst.

Well, no, it did not burst. It just began deflating and deflating until it became a formless substance that could just be discarded away. It just fizzled out.

But then I began to wonder whether it was all an illusion. As if some magician had conjured up a phantasm or as if I had been hallucinating.

So, this is how it was with this novel in which the plot seemed to be driving it for a while. As the story became more complicated, and gained in intrigue, I wondered if Henry James had gone 'gothic', or if there had been any matter with him when he wrote this. He was still a young writer and was possibly finding his literary path.

At least that is what I thought while the balloon inflated and the tension grew. But when it exhausted itself and we were left at the end of the book with the protagonist almost as he was at the beginning, then I realized that no, that this novel had the same Henry James seal with which I was already familiar.

For *Christopher Newman* was a good singled-minded man in the first pages, and after entering a corrupt world where he is manipulated, teased, provoked, fruitlessly encouraged, affronted, ridiculed, wangled, and where revenge, spite and ruthlessness futilely tempt him, he however remains at the end good man who looks at life single-mindedly.

The busy plot is a teaser; the novel is after all a careful meditation on morality -- without moralising. The story that supports the rumination on ethics may just be, after all, a wink that the author is addressing to his readers. Yes, he can write stories too; but he can also discard them.

And so when the balloon has shrunk, and the reader and his/her nerves are calm again, Henry James's signature stands in high relief.

Cphe says

Another book where it's all about the money. In this case those who were born to it although they no longer possess it and those who have earned it through their own sweat and tears.

The third novel by this author that I've read to date. A better read than my previous foray into James but it didn't manage to reach the heights of *The Turn of the Screw*.

Julie says

7.0/10

What saves this from a lesser rating is that this is Henry James. If someone else had written it, it might barely garner a "just plain awful" rating. But as with all James, there are layers upon layers to peel back and so one discovers lovely seams of sweetness hidden between the dried, stale cake.

I didn't much care for anyone in this novel, except perhaps Mlle Noémie, for at the least there is no pretense with her. Like the erstwhile Becky Sharp, she knows what she wants, and pursues it with vigour. The egalitarian soul in me cheers her on and longs to see more of her -- but alas, James decrees she is a classless woman, in both senses of the word, and leaves her to languish, off-stage, for most of the novel.

The evil gothic family twirls its collective mustachios, also mostly off-stage, and makes spontaneous, almost-unscripted appearances that reinforce how evil they are, without giving much substance to the story.

An idiot-looking-for-a-village appears in the languid, spiritless Mme de Cintré who meets a justifiable end in sackcloth and ashes. I was glad to see her go.

And Christopher Newman -- the lovable, trusting, hero who lays his metaphorical cloak in the mud for the almost-supine de Cintré, is a character study in passivity. The word pudd'nhead comes to mind.

Just the kind of pseudo-gothic novel I despise.

On the other hand, there is James fighting the never ending hand-to-hand combat of comparing and contrasting old world sensibilities with new world morality, and occasionally throws us a few gems, hidden in Newman's character. It is for these gems that one reads James.

And as with all James, one is lost in the soft beauty of the language -- so much so that reading him is like watching paint dry: but what a painting!

Nothing happens, nothing at all. But you are content to gaze upon it for hours.

To his credit, James realized the major errors in this novel, and considered it one of his least successful; he re-wrote major parts of it later in life -- but even he knew it was too riddled with error that it couldn't be rewritten to any satisfaction. In fact, most of the revisions were scrapped, and most modern editions stick to the original version. This is one of those novels that should, probably, never have seen the light of day -- except of course, that it was James.

Teresa says

A 'connection': I chose this book to take with me on travels not too long ago, not realizing I would see the real-life version of its cover near the end of my trip: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/146453712@N...>

A connection: If I hadn't recently reread Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, I wouldn't have noted this novel's obvious debt to it. And I do mean *obvious*, though James employs a different setting and different nationalities to create another theme ("I've never met an American before" is a literal or almost-literal quote, said to Newman (the New Man)). And I do mean *obvious*, though James swaps the genders of his protagonist and a mercenary parent, while increasing the 'reality' at the heart of darkness of the latter's family, instead of deflating it as Austen did.

This is an early James and I missed his semicolons.

Bryan says

The third novel from Henry James that I've read. The previous two, from both his earliest and last periods, and this one conform to the theme of un-fulfillment--either in life or love or both.

James, as always, is rather subtle--there is rarely much of a dust-up in the books of his that I've read; this one might come as close to it as any of them, with the skeletons in the closet which are briefly trotted out for an airing (and a duel too!). Otherwise: Newman, a self-made man, the eponymous American, comes to France

with matrimony on his mind, but the family of his intended take affront at his being 'commercial', and put everything they can in the way of the marriage.

From what I know of them, James' books are less plot-driven than they are very fine shadings of personality. And the solution to his characters' problems are derived less by events than by an accretion of detail, and which probably hews a bit closer to reality than most fiction. I believe that for most of us, our personalities are built on this step-by-step accumulation of traits, so that, when it comes time to make some sort of decision in our lives, it is the full process of that maturation that comes into play when choosing an option. Or not choosing, as the case may be. It seems to me that this is what James is getting at, at least from the little I've read. Is there also a European/American conflict in his plots? Well, yes, but that seems superficial to me, especially as those who may be involved in this confrontation of cultures are still subject to the vagaries of their upbringing. There doesn't seem to me to be anything inherently European in a proud family obstructing one of their daughters from marrying someone they believe is beneath them. Nor does it seem particular that a woman might be subjected to many different emotions if she feels she's going against her families wishes.

Still, from early on in the novel, I had the premonition that (view spoiler), and so, even though I appreciated James' craft, I can't say that this excited me a whole lot. 3.5 stars.

Paul Bryant says

THE AMERICAN : PLOT SYNOPSIS WITH SOUNDTRACK

On a lovely day in May, 1868, Christopher Newman, a wealthy American businessman, sits down in the Louvre with an aesthetic headache, having seen too many paintings.

A young Parisian copyist, Noémie Nioche, catches his eye, and he agrees to buy the painting she is working on for the extravagant price of 2,000 francs.

BARRET STRONG : MONEY

Money don't buy everything it's true

But what it don't buy, I can't use

Here's 2000 francs

(that's what I want)

For your painting

(that's what I want. although 3000 would be good too)

Shortly thereafter, Newman recognizes Tom Tristram, an old friend from the Civil War, wandering the gallery.

THE CARTER FAMILY : FRIEND TO ME

If ever I have had a pal

You've been that friend to me

Since the day I helped saw your leg off

Newman explains that he has made quite a fortune and now he has come to Europe to find a wife to complete

his fortune.

BOBBY DARIN : DREAM LOVER

*Every night I hope and pray
A dream lover will come my way*

Mrs. Tristram suggests Claire de Cintr , the beautiful and widowed daughter of an impossibly aristocratic family, the Bellegardes.

JACKIE WILSON : REET PETITE

*Well, lookabell,lookabell,lookabell,lookabell Ooooooh Weeeee
Lookabell,lookabell,lookabell OoooooWeeee
Oh, Ah,Oh,Ah, Oh wee
Well, she's so fine,fine,fine,She's so fine fafafa fine
She's so fi iii ine,She's so fine,fine,fine
She's really sweet the finest girl you ever wanna meet
Oh,oh,oh,oh Oh,oh,oh,oh,oh
Rrrrrrrr Reet Petite, the finest girl you ever wanna meet*

Several days later, Newman stops by the Tristram house only to find the visiting Claire, who politely invites him to call on her.

MARLENE DIETRICH : FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN

*Men cluster to me like moths around a flame
And if their wings burn I know I'm not to blame*

When Newman stops by the Bellegarde home, a pleasant young man promises to go get Claire, but is checked by an imposing older figure who claims she is not at home.

SMILEY LEWIS : I HEAR YOU KNOCKING

*I hear you knocking but you can't come in
Come back tomorrow night & try it again*

Shortly thereafter, M. Nioche, No mie's father, appears at Newman's hotel with his daughter's heavily varnished and framed picture. When the timid, bankrupt Nioche admits his fear that his beautiful daughter will come to a bad end, Newman offers to let her earn a modest dowry by painting. When he meets No mie in the Louvre to commission the paintings, however, she tells him bluntly that she cannot paint and will only marry if she can do so very well.

THE SPICE GIRLS : I WILL ONLY MARRY IF I CAN PAINT VERY WELL

*I'll tell you what I want
What I really really want
I will only marry if I can paint very well
I will only marry if I can paint very well*

Yeah

Mrs. Tristram encourages Newman to spend the summer traveling, promising that Claire will wait for his return.

CLIFF RICHARD : SUMMER HOLIDAY

*We're all going on a summer holiday
Doing things we always wanted to
Fun and laughter on our summer holiday
Exploring ruins, monuments and cathedrals
Ha ha ho ho*

Newman spends a wonderful summer exploring ruins, monuments, cathedrals, and the countryside with his usual enthusiasm. On his return to Paris in the fall, Newman calls on Claire and finds her at home with her brother Valentin, the pleasant young man he met on the first visit. Newman is deeply drawn to Claire's presence, her peace, and her intense yet mild eyes.

ELVIS PRESLEY : I GOT STUNG

*Holy smoke, land sakes alive!
I never thought this could happen to me*

Mm, yeah! Mm, yeah!

*I got stung by a sweet honey bee
Oh, what a feeling come over me
It started in my eyes
Crept up to my head
Flew to my heart
Till I was stung dead
I'm done, uh-uh
I got stung!*

About a week later, Valentin calls on Newman at home. The two talk late into the night and soon become fast friends. Valentin explains to Newman that Claire was married at eighteen, against her will, to the disagreeable old Count de Cintré. Valentin tried to stop the wedding, but his mother, the Marquise and his brother, Urbain—the imposing older figure who barred Newman's first visit—coveted the Count's pedigree and fortune.

EMINEM : I COVET YOUR PEDIGREE

[lyrics removed after complaint received from copyright holder]

When the Count dies and his questionable business practices are exposed. Claire is so horrified that she withdraws her claim to his money. The Marquise and Urbain allows this withdrawal on the condition that Claire obey them completely for ten years on every issue but marriage.

THE STOOGES : I WANNA BE YOUR DOG

*And I'll lay right down in my favorite place
And now I wanna be your dog for ten years
And now I wanna be your dog for ten years
And now I wanna be your dog for ten years
Well, come on*

Newman tells Valentin that he would like to marry Claire.

PERCY SLEDGE : WHEN A MAN LOVES A WOMAN

*When a man loves a woman
Spend hisa very lasta dime
Tryin' to hold on to what he neeededs
He'd give up all his skanking around Europe
Stop visiting prostitutes
If she said that's the way it ought to be*

Valentin promises to help Newman's cause, out of both friendship and a spirit of mischief. The following day, Newman calls on Claire and finds her alone. He frankly details his love,

THE WHO : I CAN'T EXPLAIN

*Dizzy in the head and I'm feeling blue
The things you said, well, maybe they're true
I'm gettin' funny dreams again and again
I know what it means, but ...*

*Can't explain
I think it's love
Maybe
I dunno
I'm inarticulate*

his assets,

MUDDY WATERS : I'M A MAN

*I'm a full grown man
Man
I'm a natural born lovers man
Man
I'm a rollin' stone
I'm a man-child
I'm a hoochie coochie man
well, well, well, well
hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry
It can't have escaped your notice
What I'm actually singing about here
I got a big one*

Yeah

and his desire to marry her. Fascinated but hesitant, Claire tells him she has decided not to marry, but agrees to get to know him if he promises not to speak of marriage for six months.

MARNI NIXON (dubbing for Deborah Kerr): GETTING TO KNOW YOU

*Getting to know you,
Getting to know all about you.
Getting to like you,
Getting to hope you like me.*

*Getting to know you,
Putting it my way,
But nicely,
You are precisely,
My cup of tea.*

Delighted by Newman's success, Valentin arranges an audience with the heads of the family later that week.

BLACK UHURU : GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

*Guess who's coming to dinner, Natty Dreadlocks
Guess who's coming to dinner, Natty Dreadlocks
So let's give thanks and praise, Natty Dreadlocks
I appreciate the herb you brought for me, Natty Dreadlocks*

On the appointed evening, after some painful small talk, Newman horrifies the assembled company with a long and candid speech about his poor adolescence

BILLY JOE ROYAL : DOWN IN THE BOONDOCKS

*Down in the boondocks, down in the boondocks
People put me down 'cause that's the side of town I was born in*

and the makings of his fortune. When the others have left for a ball, Newman bluntly tells the Marquise that he would like to marry her daughter.

HERMAN'S HERMITS : MARQUISE VON WHATEVER YOU'VE GOT A LOVELY DAUGHTER

*Walkin' about, even in a crowd, well
You'll pick her out, makes a bloke feel so proud*

After inquiring with equal frankness about his wealth, the Marquise grudgingly agrees to consider his proposal. Several days later, M. Nioche unexpectedly appears at Newman's hotel room, clearly worried about Noémie's antics.

THE COASTERS : POISON NOÉMIE

*She comes on like a rose
But everybody knows*

*She'll get you in dutch
You can look but
You better not touch*

*Poison Noémie, poison Noémie
Late at night while you're sleeping
Poison Noémie comes a-creeping around*

Newman decides to visit Noémie at the Louvre to discern the trouble. He encounters Valentin en route and brings him along. Valentin, completely charmed by Noémie and her ruthless, sublime ambition, resolves to pursue her.

THE BEACH BOYS ; HERE TODAY

*it starts with just a little glance now
right away you're thinking about romance now
you know you oughta take it slower
but you just can't wait to get to know her*

Shortly thereafter, Newman receives an invitation to dinner at the Bellegarde house. After dinner, Urbain confirms that the family has decided to accept Newman as a candidate for Claire's hand.

DEAN MARTIN : MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

*one girl, one boy
two bags of joy*

Over the next six weeks Newman comes often to the Bellegarde house, more than content to haunt Claire's rooms and attend her parties.

DOBIE GRAY : THE IN CROWD

*Any time of the year, don't you hear? Spendin' cash, talkin' trash
I'll show you a real good time, come on with me, leave your troubles behind
I don't care where you've been, you ain't been nowhere til you've been in
With the in crowd, with the in crowd, in crowd!*

One afternoon as he awaits Claire, Newman is approached by Mrs. Bread, the Bellegardes' old English maid, who secretly encourages him in his courtship. Meanwhile, the Bellegardes' long-lost cousin Lord Deepmere arrives in Paris. Upon the expiration of the six-month period of silence about marriage, Newman proposes to Claire again, and she accepts.

EDDIE CANTOR : YES YES MY BABY SAID YES YES

Instead of no no

The next day, Mrs. Bread warns Newman to lose no time in getting married. The Marquise is evidently displeased by the engagement, but agrees to throw an engagement ball.

THE B52S : PARTY OUT OF BOUNDS

Who's to blame when situations degenerate?

*Disgusting things you'd never anticipate
Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo--ooooooo...*

The following few days are the happiest in Newman's life, as he sees Claire every day, exchanging longing glances and tender words. Meanwhile, the Marquise and Urbain are away, taking Deepmere on a tour of Paris. On the night of the Bellegarde ball, Newman suffers endless introductions gladly and feels elated. He surprises first the Marquis and then Claire in heated discussions with Lord Deepmere, but thinks little of it. Afterwards, he and Claire exchange declarations of happiness.

VELVET UNDERGROUND : I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

*I find it hard to believe you don't know
The beauty that you are
But if you don't let me be your eyes
A hand in your darkness, so you won't be afraid
I'll be your mirror*

The next morning, Newman arrives at the Bellegardes' to find Claire's carriage packed. In great distress, Claire confesses that she can no longer marry him. The Marquise and Urbain admit that they have interfered, unable to accept the idea that a commercial person should marry into their family.

THE SHANGRI-LAS : LEADER OF THE PACK

*One day The Marquise said find someone new(new,new)
I had to tell Mr Newman we're through
(Whatcha mean when he said that you better go find somebody new?)
He stood there and asked me why
But all I could do was cry
I'm sorry I hurt you, American man of independent means*

Vrrroooooommm Vrrroooooommm

Now read on....

Alan says

The novel summary does not capture this: of course it is CLASS that divides the New-Man from his aristocratic innamorata and her 800 year French family. Bellegarde confides that occasionally the men in the family descended to marrying down, bourgeoisie--"lawyers' daughters." Newman offers, "that's very bad, is it?"(Buccaneer, 99)

And now we are trying to institute class in America, with money = class. But it assuredly does not. Many European aristocrats are now, as they were a century ago in James's novels, nearly penniless. Money may be the very opposite of class, despite the indebted president-elect's proclamations. Granted, we concede money can lower businessmen to act on the level of aristocrats; it can lead to murders, within and without families, as in the Family Secret of the aristocrats like the Bellegardes here. Haven't heard of it causing duels recently, though perhaps certain suicides are the modern version of a duel, at least the duel that Newman's friend undertakes in Switzerland.

Newman cannot but feel himself "a good fellow wronged," but unlike in Dickens' endings with the moral congratulations of the "good few," Newman has no society to appeal to. His failure to achieve his goals is not as in Dickens a flaw in the social system, for Newman's appeal is to another society. The book ends, but it doesn't conclude.

All of James's novels confront the New World, with its men of "good nature", versus the Old World and its class and assumed distinctions. Perhaps this lasted till the 50's, perhaps only to the Depression? Newman, for instance, assumes that he is "noble," and Bellegarde pursues, "I did not know you had a title." To which, Newman, "A duke, a marquis? I don't know anything about that...But it's a fine word [noble] and I put a claim to it."

As Mrs Tristram sums it up, "Their [foreign] confidence, after counsel taken of each other, was not in their innocence, nor in their talent for bluffing things off; it was in your remarkable good nature. You see they were right."

Laura says

From BBC radio 4 - Drama:

Love Henry James: The American Ep1/2

Dramatised by Lavinia Murray

Humour and heartache collide in this early James novel. When Christopher Newman, an American and self-made millionaire businessmen arrives in Paris he falls in love with Claire de Cintre. A wife from an aristocratic French Family is exactly what he's looking for, but he's unaware of the dark mystery surrounding her family, and the misery and mayhem they have yet to cause.

Produced and directed by Pauline Harris.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b1...>

4 Daisy Miller*

3 Washington Square*

4 The Ambassadors*

4 The Turn of the Screw*

4 The Wings of the Dove*

4 The Portrait of a Lady*

2 The Bostonians*

2 The Real Thing*

4 The Aspern Papers*

3 What Maisie Knew*

4 A Little Tour in France*

3 The Madonna of the Future*

2 Lady Barbarina and Other Tales*

4 The Beast in the Jungle*

3 The Jolly Corner*

3 The Art of Fiction*

3 Roderick Hudson*

3 Henry James: A Life in Letters*

4 The American*

TR The Tragic Muse

TR The Pupil

TR The Other House

TR *The Spoils of Poynton*
TR *The Princess Casamassima*
TR *Hawthorne*
TR *The Great Good Place*
TR *The Art of the Novel*
TR *The Middle Years*
TR *The Golden Bowl*
TR *Nona Vincent*
TR *Italian Hours*
TR *The Ivory Tower*
TR *Ghost Stories*
TR *The Outcry*
TR *Collected Travel Writings: The Continent*

About Henry James:

3* *The Real Henry James* by Philip Horne
3* *Henry James at Work* by Theodora Bosanquet
TR *Portraits from life* by Ford Madox Ford
TR *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* by F.R. Leavis
TR *The Realists: Eight Portraits:* by C.P. Snow
TR *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women & His Art* by Lyndall Gordon

Fionnuala says

Are you the kind of person who enjoys fast-paced melodrama? Fortified castles where dreadful deeds are carried out at midnight? A beautiful heroine who is destined to be buried alive? Evil villains straight out of a gothic romance? No?

Perhaps you are instead the kind of reader who prefers a more sedate narrative full of realistic depictions of everyday life. If you are, you share a trait with Christopher Newman, the American of the title. Though his story is set in the 1860s, Newman is a modern man who would never be caught dead inside the pages of a Gothic romance. Dramatic heroines given to extravagant displays of passion don't interest him, nor do flirtatious or hysterical characters. In fact, he rarely reads novels of any kind. He is practical rather than romantic; he likes new inventions, things that make life faster, easier and brighter; things like trains, lifts, electric lighting. Dark and gloomy castles aren't really his thing.

But though he favours the modern and the innovative, Newman is quite simple in his personal tastes, and especially in the way he expresses himself. While traveling through Europe visiting the many magnificent monuments to be found there, the brief comments he pencils into the margins of his guidebooks summarise his reactions perfectly: "*Wherever you find a scratch or a cross, or a 'Beautiful!' or a 'So true!' or a 'Too thin!' [in the guidebooks] you may know that I have had a sensation of some sort or other.*"

So we know early on that Newman doesn't waste time on extravagances of expression. When he meets the beautiful Comtesse de Cintre for the first time, his reaction is characteristically low-key : *She was pleasing, she was interesting; he had opened a book and the first lines held his attention.*

Yet his muted reactions don't equal a lack of feeling, he simply prefers to keep some feelings private. He is a man who knows the value of silence. He is surrounded by characters who love to expound. A few of them know what they are talking about, others, perhaps not. Newman stands out among them for the careful way he uses words, and when he is silent, it doesn't mean he disapproves or that he has nothing to say, just that he

is wiser than the rest.

His quiet wisdom makes him a daunting opponent for anyone who tries to thwart his plans for the future: *if he were to take the trouble he might, as he phrases it, break all the windows* (I really liked the way HJ juxtaposes phrases reflecting Newman's New World origins with the sedate language of the narrative).

Newman's plans for the future aren't hugely ambitious however. Making money has always been easy for him so wealth is not something he covets. Neither does he have any social aspirations; he is oblivious to class distinctions and is not intimidated by aristocratic families with 'noble' lineages. He measures people by their behavior rather than by the deeds of their ancestors, and he has very high standards for his own behavior. In short, everything he says and does reveal him to be a thoroughly noble character, though he will always be plain 'Mr' Newman.

About half way through this book, Newman's nobility and patience suffer a terrible test, and this reader's patience along with him. If you glance at the updates, it might seem that I gave up at page 225. I didn't stop reading however, but I did stop posting updates; there were simply no more passages that struck me as memorable. Newman too is out of his natural habitat in the second half of the narrative. His sense of both fairness and fun are no longer called for. He finds himself among people he can't recognise and situations he can't negotiate. *It was too strange and too mocking to be real; it was like a page torn out of a romance, with no context in his own experience.*

Yes, you've guessed it. Newman finds himself trapped in a gothic melodrama, complete with fortified castles, imprisoned heroines and evil villains. There is nothing to be done but get through it as quickly as possible. And so we both did.

Stephanie says

I suffered but I was happy about it

sigurd says

Prima di addentrarmi in una specificazione vorrei riassumere brevemente la trama di questo romanzo. L'americano del titolo è Christopher Newman, un quarantenne di bell'aspetto, molto facoltoso. il quale va in Europa deciso a trovare la migliore delle mogli. Si innamora, ricambiato, di una donna intelligente appartenente a una famiglia nobile. la famiglia della donna però si oppone a questa unione, poiché vedono Newman come un arricchito (un po' quello che potrebbe succedere alla fidanzata afro-americana del principe Harry con la famiglia reale...). La famiglia pertanto convince la donna a rinunciare a lui, e questa si farà monaca. Tuttavia, veniamo a sapere che Newman entra in possesso di un documento contenente un'infamia che potrebbe distruggere il buon nome della famiglia. A Newman è data la possibilità di vendicarsi di questo torto e questa umiliazione. A questo punto, c'è un ultimo capitolo. (sorvolo su tutte le chiacchiere a proposito del contrasto America-Europa in James, che tanto amano i critici) Henry James riscriveva/revisionava i suoi libri, è noto. Uno dei migliori interventi della letteratura è quello che fece su questo romanzo, *The American*. Purtroppo, la maggior parte dei critici sono concordi nel ritenere superiore la prima versione del romanzo, quella del 1879. Tanto è vero che Piero Pignata, curatore di questa edizione UTET, decide di prendere anche lui posizione a favore di questa versione. Cito le testuali parole: "ma *The American* è il romanzo di un trentenne, non di un sessantenne: perciò, se da un punto di vista stilistico, i risultati di questa ripulitura sono senz'altro apprezzabili, la trasformazioni di Newman in una

persona di sensibilità più raffinata mal si accorda con le sue azioni, che saltato in quanto compiute da un individuo istintivo ed esuberante sono apparse convincenti. per questa ragione, del resto in linea con quella che sembra ormai essere la propensione della maggior parte della critica, ho preferito attenermi, per il testo, all'edizione londinese del 1879, ossia alla prima edizione inglese autorizzata da James".

Cosa succede però nell'ultimo capitolo?

Nella prima versione, quella del 1879, Newman decide di parlarne con una gossippara parigina ma brucia il foglietto contenente il segreto, convinto che non ci sia altra strada che dimenticare tutta quella dolorosa faccenda. Newman è presentato come uno sconfitto, ma moralmente integro.

Nella seconda versione invece, del 1907 credo, Newman si reca dalla pettegola, chiede di essere invitato a casa sua. La donna si aspetta tutto il tempo una rivelazione, ma questa non arriva. Newman rimane in silenzio per tutta la cena. Quando tempo dopo si trova in America pensa al perché sia stato in silenzio e non abbia rivelato il segreto, dice a se stesso che era talmente enorme il suo odio per la madre della donna di cui era innamorato, che la vendetta lo avrebbe legato a lei più che la dimenticanza e il perdono.

Trent'anni separano la prima versione dalla seconda.

Trent'anni in cui una azione semplice e lineare diventa segreta ed esoterica.

Trent'anni in cui James diventa definitivamente James, senza che nessun critico se ne accorga.

Henry Avila says

An American millionaire businessman arrives in Paris, Christopher Newman, in 1868, to get "Culture," and find the perfect wife, after all he's 36 and lonely, and while walking through the gigantic Louvre museum, the tired man sits down, he views the magnificent paintings surrounding him on the walls. Newman notices too, young, pretty girls, copying these exquisite works, particularly the highly ambitious Noemie Nioche efforts, making an offer to buy the picture, and does, for a greatly inflated price (Christopher is not wise on the quality of paintings, very far from it indeed). Her ancient father comes to escort her home , and is delighted to discover the sale of a painting, he is discouraged , depressed, a failure in business, but offers to teach the American, French, he the compassionate foreigner, readily agrees...Mr. Tom Tristram, a fellow American and old friend of Newman's he sees walking by, they haven't met since St.Louis, during the American Civil War (he fought, Tom didn't), after taking a minute or two to remember Christopher, the millionaire is happy to have someone to talk to in the city. Later taking the businessman, back to his modest home, and introducing him to his intelligent, but sarcastic wife, Mrs. Tristram (that the intimidated Tom, is afraid of), another American, who knows all the important people in the town. She recommends her friend, a young, beautiful widow, by the name of Claire de Centre (nee Claire Bellegarde) from a very proud aristocratic family , in need of money, their houses are becoming shabby, as a candidate for his future wife. Mr. Newman's at first sight is intrigued, by Claire, from the beginning, he has not seen any woman like her before, smart, gorgeous , well spoken and the manners of the nobility. But there is a problem, her mother and older brother Urbain, feel Christopher is beneath them, a common man in commerce, even though he is rich, yet still not in their class, he wouldn't fit in, holding their noses they permit him to court her, the money is too tempting. After a lengthy, respectable , getting to know each other better, Claire and Christopher become officially engaged...Mr. Newman had followed the rules, the goodhearted , amiable man, visited his love almost daily at her family home, it has seen better days, the aloof relatives still show him their distaste, except for Valentin, the amusing, younger, lazy brother, who becomes his close friend. A crisis develops, right after a sparkling party given by the arrogant Bellegardes, for the engaged couple, to show their great, noble friends , Mr. Newman, though something is not quite right, the atmosphere is thick with uneasiness, the people are polite but rather remote, it is not the kind of thing that Christopher will ever feel comfortable with or they him (he was born and raised in a Republic)...Life is not tranquil, it is full of obstacles to be overcome by the brave, Mr. Newman learns.

Cheryl says

I wasn't sure I would like any of Henry James' work after reading the acclaimed *The Portrait of a Lady* and being unable to finish it. Even now, I pulled it off my shelf to give it another go and still, I can't just yet. *Portrait of a Lady* is a novel said to be one of the greatest 19th Century American realist novels. So pardon my reader obstinacy and humble opinion, James fans, when I say that no, I did not see Isabel as a "realistic invention of female psychology."

But now that James has given me Newman...

Imagine a character who loses himself in this labyrinth that he can't seem to find his way around. Think of him as all these things: noble, honest, arrogant, rich, classist, stubborn, rude. Now consider how lovable and convincing he is despite all this.

You've got something it worries me to have missed. It's not money, it's not even brains...it's your superfluous stature...it's a sort of air you have of being imperturbably, being irremovably and indestructibly at home in the world.

Noémie was the minor character and artist who dazzled me from the beginning, even more than the main character Claire, whom Newman is on a quest to marry. If I could ask for one thing, it would be to have more of Noémie and the old mysterious housekeeper, Mrs. Bread.

But romantic tragedy, this is. Man chases woman based on a lofty idea he has, man thinks too much of himself and his potential conquest, man enters a world so unlike his own, and man is disappointed. This is a novel about failure and romance, freedom and bondage, gain and loss. It is about seeing a culture through the lenses of an American entrepreneur in Paris who tries to blend in with high society. But oh the secrets that the society weaves...

The drama begins when our character realizes that he is in over his head. This was an alluring narrative arc as we see a man lose himself in his illusion:

Never was a man so pleased with his good fortune. You've been holding your head for a week past just as I wanted my wife to hold hers. You say just the things I want her to say. You walk about the room just as I want her to walk. You've just the taste in dress I want her to have. In short you come up to the mark, and, I can tell you, my mark was high.

The language is fascinating and I loved the infusion of French phrases throughout the book. The character descriptions reminded me of Turgenev's writings (his essay on the murder of Tropmann for example).

It is said that James had numerous revisions to this book. My version is the New York edition of 1907. However, other versions may have some slight changes because at some point, James developed this for the stage and also changed some lines and character interactions. The notes state that some readers also disliked the sad ending. I didn't. I loved the sad ending because without it, this could have been any other romance novel. But here we had tragedy.

He came back to reality indeed, after such reveries, with a shock somewhat muffled; he had begun to know the need of accepting the absolute. At other times, however, the truth was again an infamy and the actual a lie, and he could only pace and rage and remember till he was weary. Passion, in him, by habit, nevertheless, burned clear rather than thick, and in the

clearness he saw things...

Kurt Reichenbaugh says

My first introduction to Henry James was having to read *THE AMBASSADORS* for a course in college. I wouldn't recommend starting his novels with that one. It's an exceedingly difficult book; thick prose with many clauses and asides, swimming in commas and dashes, to the point that one is easily frustrated and lost. You know it's supposed to be a classic, but who the hell cares anymore. Thankfully, years later, I decided to give *THE AMBASSADORS* another read and actually enjoyed it. I then read *THE GOLDEN BOWL*, knowing what I was in for. After that was *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* and I decided that, okay, I could finally call myself a Henry James fan, and understood why all my professors raved about him so.

This novel is from James' early period. In it, James describes the events surrounding Christopher Newman's courtship and marriage proposal to French aristocratic Claire de Bellegarde. Newman has made a commercial success of himself in the states and arrives to Europe with thoughts of enjoying his wealth, experiencing the culture and, hopefully, finding the perfect woman to become his wife. Claire de Bellegarde had been previously married to a much older aristocrat who had the grace to die quickly on her. Newman's plans for marrying Claire move along accordingly until her family suddenly and publically reject his intentions. Newman, stung by the public humiliation, embarks on a path of revenge.

In spite of its length, this novel moves at a brisk pace. The contrast between the brash, somewhat overly confident American and his European counterparts provides James plenty of room for both comedic and melodramatic turns. It's a great place to start enjoying Henry James' novels.

Issicratea says

The American was my second dip into early Henry James, after *Roderick Hudson*, his very first, published in 1875. *The American* is a little later; it appeared in 1877, although James seems to have rewritten it quite extensively in 1907 for the New York edition of his collected works. I read it in the 1907 version, in a very good Oxford World's Classics edition, which contains a fascinating essay by James, written at the time of his revision, recalling the work's composition and retrospectively critiquing his work.

One fascinating thing about these early novels is that James doesn't seem to have decided definitively by this point what kind of novelist he wanted to be. Most of *The American* reads like Henry James, but, disconcertingly, towards the end, it takes a sudden lurch into "sensation novel" territory, as if the young James secretly nurtured an ambition to become the next Wilkie Collins. It's a terrible idea, and it pretty much kills the book, but it's always interesting to see a novelist's trajectory, especially one who ended up with as clear a formula as James.

Before its Wilkie moment, I was enjoying *The American* very much. As the title suggests, the novel pivots round James's classic theme of New World vs Old, as does *Roderick Hudson*. The American of the title, the aptly named Christopher Newman, is an American entrepreneur who retires after making his first gazillion dollars and goes to Europe to snaffle up some culture and find himself a pedestal-worthy wife. He begins courting a young widow from an aristocratic French family, who are horrified at the thought of a daughter of theirs staining her ancient name by marrying a man who has actually done a day's work in his life. The

mature James of the 1907 edition cheerfully admits the implausibility of this scenario, admitting that, in reality, his noble Bellegarde family would happily have swallowed their pride and snapped up Newman's proffered millions like a shot.

Whatever the plausibility issues, the Bellegarde family is a beautifully drawn little pack of monsters—with the exception, I found, of Newman's obscure object of desire herself, the undercharacterized Claire de Cintré (a "great white doll of a woman," as a minor character, Tom Tristram, tellingly describes her.) Madame de Cintré's harpy of a mother; her viperous, stuffed-shirt elder brother Urbain; her charming, doomed younger brother Valentin, who befriends Newman; Urbain's brittle wife—these make up a marvelous quartet. Newman is an engaging character, as well, although I wasn't sure I found him 100% plausible. I could perhaps have done without the subplot involving the demi-rep Noémie Nioche and her father, but I was steaming along very happily until the novel took its melodramatic turn.

There is a lovely passage in James's 1907 essay on the novel when he recalls the Parisian apartment in which he wrote it, thirty years before. He recollects it essentially in sound terms, not visually: the "particular light Parisian click of the small cab-horse on the clear asphalt, with its sharpness of detonation between the high houses," punctuated by the "hard music" of a troop of cuirassiers charging down the street to a nearby barracks (a sound that "so directly and thrillingly appealed" to his young self that he had to force himself not to hang out of the window each time to see them pass.) I loved his proto-Proustian description of the way that rereading the novel triggered this sharp recollection of place (much more vivid, as he freely admits, than any description of Paris found in the book.)
