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Introduction

Henry James (1843-1916) in his book “the American” exposes the various roles assumed by both men and women in the society. The novel takes a complex approach with the theme cutting across the lifestyles in America and Europe. In this novel, James portrays an in-depth greed and selfishness that compels characters to indulge in acts of hypocrisy and greed. Some characters in the novel are readily willing to forego their dignity in the quest to achieve personal glory and attainment of the power, class and a good title. The role of women in the society seems to conflict with the common norm, as both men and women endeavor to fight for space in society, men’s dignity is infringed on and they are left without any other option but fight for their place. As the world changes from traditional to modern, the gender roles also transform.

Theme of Gender in “the American”

Newman being a rich American visiting France is portrayed to be egoistic and had little respect for the European.

Some European also perceived the American as inferior while others perceived him as superior. For instance Mademoiselle likens Newman way of talking to that of an angel (James10). Although the lady is being hypocritical, her enticing complement attracts the Newman who feels at ease enough to learn more French. Just like in the rest of the novel, James has used conflicting personalities to portray women to be willing to pursue their dreams irrespective of whatsoever obstacle standing in their way.

This determination meant that women were no longer to be confined to kitchen chores. Such an outgoing character makes women to disregard marriage as a necessity. The novel depicts the females as more inclined towards upholding the true meaning of institution of marriage. Mr.

Tristram suggests that European women take upon themselves to cater for the family as well as promote unity among members (James 14). This noble role has made the institution of marriage retain its meaning despite the several challenges emanating from trends in the modern world. However, the role of women is also portrayed to change as modernization take place. Mrs. Tristram, though she performs her daily chores, does not see anything worth appreciating in her marriage (James 28). According to the ensuing plot, the transition of the world from the old to the new era has greatly affected the way women behave. Unlike the old days, the modern women are striving to match men to an extent of abdicating their traditional responsibilities, roles and obligations. Some of the modern women are not ready to get married and they therefore believe that living independent life is better than staying under men's bondage.

The implication of this is that the importance of the institution of marriage is becoming increasing unpopular. The genders issues are centre stage in the book " the American" given both men and women relentlessly push for their happiness. Mrs. Tristram does not give up in her pursuit to win the affection of Mr. Newman (James 28). According to her, being married meant nothing because she was not satisfied by it and she therefore tried to appeal for Newman's attention.

The topic generates a lot of debate as most women are reluctant to uphold their morals and instead they opt to use dubious ways coupled with hypocrisy to meet their goals. The determination described make the women proactive in meeting their needs and life aspiration, no matter the challenges presented. However, in past women were less active and often they were perceived as naive and lived under the shadow of their male counterparts. The desire to pursue personal satisfaction and goals has made ladies to be less submissive to their husbands.

This attitude has contributed to most marriages crumbling or losing harmony and cohesion. Women characters in the novel are portrayed as hungry for fame and material possessions. It beats logic for a woman to agree to marry an old man in fact three times her age in order to acquire a good title. The motive that drives woman to do such things is described in the novel as an abnormal self gratification. The attitude has left many families in tatters as marriage vows have been rendered insignificant and unbinding. This scenario has been presented by Claire de Cintr who is willing to marry Newman despite his old age just to acquire a noble title. Although Claire is deemed to be noble, her action and intention portrays a wayward person with selfish motives and personality. Her family is equally to blame as they strive to ensure she entices Newman to marry her to access his wealth.

Throughout the novel, some characters are fond of using threats to pursue their personal gains. Claire's mother had killed her husband over unmentioned reason; though it is rumored that it was due to family squabbles and miss understandings. This portrays a conflict between genders where in this case the female character is the instigator. On the <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-european-some-european-also-perceived-the-american/>

other hand Newman is also using this information to coerce Claire's mother to give her consent to the daughter's marriage. This meant that the coward nature of women was replaced with aggression and determination to maneuver their ways.

Although Newman was a wealthy person who wanted to achieve the best, he is not willing to let his money to buy joy but rather he resorts to using intimidation (James 23). Both men and women are resolved to using wit and other dubious means to achieve their satisfactions regardless of the effects their actions would have to others. The novel, in many ways, portrayed women at equal footage with the male counterparts; with equal respect, dignity and ability. Valentin confronts Newman as being partial and he claims he is not worth marrying her sister. Valentin suggests that women should be accorded the respect and a fair treatment. The character of Valentin is that of promoting equality in the society and across the gender divide (James 171). This is a new societal development given women in old days were not entitled to self-expression (James 28).

In the traditional world, women were not allowed to voice anything and mostly they kept much in themselves rather than airing their concerns. Just like men, the voices of women have been recognized and it has brought the desired gender equality and equity into the society. Even though Newman is disgusted by Valentin's proposition, he has no option but to respect his idea. Initially, the role of women was that of following the men rather than taking the leadership position. However, this is not the case in the novel as women have joined hands with men to offer leadership. Most women are not shy of taking readership position be it in their homes or even in their places of

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work. As the world changes women are assuming more responsibilities and are equally competitive in their execution and dissemination of duties.

However, the women empowerment does not go well with majority of men who are not willing give the leadership mantle to the women. Mr.

Tristram just like Newman is disgruntled by the new found duties of women.

To them women ought remain silent and refrain from taking responsibilities in the leadership positions. Despite the much dissatisfaction the women in the novel have proved to be intelligent enough and competent enough to handle some readership positions expertly Gender is rendered the custodian of the culture and the agent through which the norms are passed over to the other generations. Although, Marquise is eager to enjoy Newman's dollars, she is torn apart by thought of compromising her customs by allowing her daughter to marry the aged American and holding fast her social class. The European perceived the American to be of a lower class than them. However, the European's greed for money makes them to compromise their stance simply because they could not instill the European culture to the proud American. The story exposes the reluctance of individuals to embrace changes as they world changes.

The Americans are perceived as willing to change while the Europeans are adamant to stick to their old ways of life. The struggle between embracing the culture and change has helped towards understanding of the hypocrisy. Despite their hatred for the Americans, the Europeans are in dire need of improving their welfare regardless of the means. To them the end justifies the means and that is why they are swift to compromise their personal principles.

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Despite the strong love attraction towards the Newman, Claire proves to be an emblem of change and morally upright person. When her mother Marquise fails to sanction the marriage, she resolves to become a nun. Her stance angers Newman to the point of regretting having fallen in love with her. Her courage to denounce her relationship with the rich American depicts her as a stand out among the greedy society. Despite the erroneous image that has been given by other image the novel reveals that some women are different and are willing to forego their personal joy to advocate for justice and to deny coercion.

The novel has also endeavored to illustrate the importance of the all members of the society. Mrs. Bread being a maid in an aloof family is regarded as custodian of vital information which proves importance to Newman's quest to pursue his love. She reveals the Bellegarde's family secret to Newman. Mrs. Bread has been used to voice the plight of the marginalized member of the society who when given the platform are willing to influence the proceedings of the society (178). Although Newman's effort to make good his threat proves futile as the letter containing the evidence is destroyed, the intervention of the maid is important in the development of the plot. Similar intervention has been made by Mrs.

Tristram who helped Newman to meet the Claire. In spite of the fact both Mrs. Tristram and Newman were friends since meeting in London, her contribution in the story cannot go undermined. The novel has been quick to illustrate Marquis as the agent of civilization.

She is said to speak urbanite (James 59) and she is also said to have the best manners in the entire country (James 123). The family had taken upon themselves to carry out civilization, for instance the names of the family members were suggestive. Valentin is a powerful name often associated love and romance. While Marquis is perceived to advocate for civilization her ego and proud self leaves many people without option but to detest her. This implies that some characters are not willing to allow civilization to take its course but they are impatient to see it happen. Marquis behaviour generated a bad image to the society as Mrs. Tristram cautions Newman against the associating himself with Bellegardes family. The aspect of individual taking time to reflect on their lives has also been portrayed to a great extent.

Both men and women are sparing their precious time to spend alone to reflect on their lives. Since both parties are driven by the desire to the best in life they therefore take time before making any decisions. Claire resolves to terminate the engagement with Newman after analysis all many issues that were engulfing their relationship. On the other hand the character of Newman is founded on personal reflection and the determination to acquire the best in life. Although the novel surrounds the transition from the traditional age to the post-modern world, the author depicts a strong deviation between the character of Newman and that of the European. The proud American is so aloof and his pride makes him to disregard the European. He even thinks that his money was sufficient to acquire whatever he wanted in life.

In the event that his money fails to provide he often resorted to intimidation and threats. It is revealed that Newman's had planned to revenge on New
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York business world for business losses that he incurred. On another hand Newman was determined to expose the Bellegardes treachery to his advantage.

He represents the insensitive people who are willing to use everything at their disposal to attain their personal motives without considering the feelings of others. In the novel the gender balance had been enhanced and both men and women are portrayed to be as significantly addressing social aspects of life. Apart from procreation purposes, Newman and Mrs.

Tristram have revealed that romance is about having fun and is a basic requirement for healthy living. Furthermore, Newman is also an acquitted with the Parisian Nioche. His desire for happiness makes him an unreliable man and an untrustworthy one. His character sharply contradicts that of Claire who proves faithful to him.

It's therefore imperative to deduce that the female gender is more resolved to uphold good morals compared to the male characters.

Conclusion

The entire novel harbors numerous themes such as melodrama, romance and comedy. However, the theme of gender has also featured to a great extent. In the novel, the women characters led by Clair have been portrayed to advocate for good morals while her mother Marquis is represents women who are filled with greed and selfish motives. Both men and women are involved in witty games that are characterized by selfish motives.

The resolute nature of women in the novel has made the proud American to give up his pursuit for a wife; the women smartly thwart his threats and intimidation tactics. Finally, the movie portrays gender roles as changing. Women in the novel have championed for their rights and equality with men. They are eager to assume leadership positions and renounce their silence.

Work cited

James, Henry. *The American*. Teddington: Echo Library publishers, 2007