

# The american in the american



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The American by Henry James is a masterly crafted novel that explores the differences between the American and European cultures. Through the main character, Christopher Newman, the author is able to articulate a clear and distinct criticism of American culture in that Americans have no ability to separate reality from their ideals and the Americans in the novel must alter their perceived reality in order to match up with their beliefs.

For Newman, the clash between his fantasies and reality becomes apparent with the clash between the commercial language with the more romantic language. His reality is business and his ideal is represented by his romantic fantasies about being a knight in shining armor, ready to save the beautiful Claire. In Christopher Newman, the romantic and the businessman are one.

At the end, when Newman is contemplating about his situation in England, he finally “[attempts] to read the moral of his strange misadventure” (438). Here is one of the only times in which Newman questions whether being commercial was interfering with his pleasantness. The narrator has to hint that it is in Newman’s capability to recognize the truth. However, Newman isn’t willing “to flap his wings very hard to rise to the idea” (439). Even if he was willing to make that admission, the narrator remarks that he wouldn’t at all feel shameful and indeed, after all this contemplation, the final conclusion that Newman reaches is that he is still glad to be rich and that becoming a businessman was worth it. All of his previous musings are immediately rejected as his mind tries to come to terms with his misfortune.

The problem with his attempt at assessing what had happened was that he still couldn’t disentangle business from affection. At the start of his train of

thought, he says that he has “company in his thoughts” (438), which is a pun off the two meanings of company. On one hand, company could mean people, more specifically Claire, but it can also mean an actual financial business. Also, later when he is reflecting on his numbered days with Madame de Cintré, Newman still uses a financial metaphor, referring to them as a “silver chain” (438).

Another instance of Newman’s business mindset interfering with his thoughts is with the dinner. Newman still finishes the “expensively poor dinner” (439), even though it is characterized as poor. Even with the food, the price overshadows and alters Newman’s judgment.

Newman’s reality and what he holds as ideal are the same and he doesn’t seem to see the negative consequences of his naivety. Valentin is a personification of what Newman wants and another vehicle with which Henry James demonstrates the dangers of Newman’s flaw. Aptly named, Valentin represents a true romance, one with proper forms and ceremonies, and he fits Newman’s ideal of a proper Frenchman. As Valentin spends more and more time with Newman, he soon falls under his American influence and Newman introduces him to the manipulative Noémie, a behavior that isn’t European, but rather an effect of a businessman’s habits of making connections for an ulterior motive. Because of certain ceremonies that he still must abide by, Valentin is eventually driven to challenge another one of Noémie’s admirers to a duel in order to protect his honor and compete for her affection. The consequences of intermixing romance and Newman’s business mentality are fatal as the harsh reality set in.

This crucial flaw is also seen in the other American, Mrs. Tristram. However, her ideal is manipulating people and situations just for intellectual diversion. After first planning the match between Newman and Claire out of her curiosity to see what would happen, she is surprised to find that she “ had succeeded too well; she had played her game too cleverly, and she wished to mix up the cards” (175). She therefore becomes critical of Claire’s nature just to see what Newman will do in response. After Claire breaks off the engagement with Newman, Mrs. Tristram continues to play her game by advising him to plead with his former fiancée once more out of her curiosity to see how far loyalty to tradition will go. She has no regard for Newman’s feelings, and like Newman, she cannot separate her game from reality to tragic consequences.

In the novel, both Americans, Newman and Mrs. Tristram, demonstrate this same flaw. However, they manifest it in different ways. These two characters convey the overall idealistic and delusional nature of Americans due to their inability to separate their ideals from reality.