

A Study of Christopher Newman's Initiation in Henry James's The American

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Abstract

In Henry James's early work *The American*, the hero, Christopher Newman's various experiences in Europe are the processes of initiation. Newman's tours in Europe are tours of cultural pilgrimage, tours of identity quest and tours of spiritual initiation. His experiences of initiation make him rationally treat the differences between Europeans and Americans, find his identity and get American's cultural confidence.

Key Words: Henry James; *The American*; Cultural pilgrim; Identity quest; Spiritual initiation

In his early novel *The American*, Henry James has created a typical character, Christopher Newman, based on the stereotype of Americans. Influenced by Puritanism, Newman is hardworking, kind-hearted, shrewd and competent. He has earned huge wealth in business. He travels to Europe with great confidence, trying to conquer Europe with money and marry Madame de Cintre, a widow from a noble family. However, the social status disparity between the American businessman and European aristocrats, and the huge cultural differences between Europeans and Americans have finally caused Newman's dream of marrying a wife to vanish. In *The American*, Newman's experience in Europe has witnessed his growth. His purpose to Europe is clear: on the one hand, he wants to be educated in the "high-level" European civilization and improve his cultural accomplishment; on the other hand, he wants to search his own identity, hoping that his "businessman" status can be accepted by the European aristocracy. Therefore, Newman's journey to Europe is not only a cultural pilgrimage, but also a journey of identity exploration. Apart from that, through conflicts and contradictions with European aristocrats, Newman has re-understood Europe and the United States, as well as Europeans and Americans. He has gained new understandings of his identity as a "businessman", and achieved spiritual growth. This article intends to interpret the growth experience of Christopher Newman from the perspective of personal growth.

1. Journey of Cultural Pilgrimage

Bakhtin once said, "...the growth of a man... is no longer his personal business. He grows up with the world, and he himself reflects the historical growth of the world itself" (Bakhtin, 2009, p.228). Newman's growth experience is closely related to the historical background of the United States at the end of the 19th century when the American economy had developed rapidly after the Civil War, and people worshiped and yearned for traditional European culture. By the end of the 19th century, the United States had phased out the British hegemony in economy, and become the largest economy in the world. Nevertheless, the improvement of economic status could not make up for its backward culture. In this context, "wealthy businessmen and their families regard a journey to Europe as a marvelous journey that can cling to 'elegant' culture" (Wang, 2008,

p.20). Newman, who has started from scratch, is also one of them. After success in business, he decides to travel to Europe to enjoy his leisure time and improve his cultural accomplishment.

The first stop of Newman in Europe is the Louvre in Paris. In this museum filled with European classical paintings and sculptures, he has experienced the "aesthetic headache" for the first time in his life. The classical paintings of Raphael, Tiziano and Rubens are like new kinds of arithmetic that arouses a sense of distrust of himself. He cannot distinguish genuine versions from counterfeits, and even feels that the counterfeits were better. Newman, who lacks artistic appreciation, is not content to appreciate paintings. He is also keen on collecting paintings and funding unknown painters. These behaviors fully reflect the economic strength of Newman and also indicate that "Americans have shown a greedy interest in European culture" (Zheng, 1997, p.101). The rich Americans believe that "with money, they can fill the pale history of the United States and form a new and rich cultural identity (ibid, 1997, p.101)." However, money is not omnipotent. The action of purchasing paintings and subsidizing painters cannot improve Newman's cultural accomplishment.

In addition to visiting the Louvre, Newman has also traveled around Europe. The commercial success achieved in the United States and rich personal financial resources have made Newman quite confident. He arrogantly thinks that "Europe is built for him, rather than that he was born for Europe" (James, 2005, p.60). In the Grand Tour of Europe, Newman has fully demonstrated his nature as a businessman. He believes that Europe is like a big fair, where people can wander around and buy their favorite goods at will. During the journey, Newman is in a relaxed and happy mood. He wanders around Europe to have fun. Unlike Babcock, an American pastor who has aesthetic ability and is critical of European culture, Newman has low taste and lacks appreciation for European culture. He is not able to distinguish between beautiful and inferior architectures. He likes what he sees and enjoys himself. For him, traveling is killing time. Norman travels in Europe without thinking, discriminating and questioning what he sees, and this way naturally leads to his inability to understand the essence of European culture and to improve his own cultural accomplishment.

During this cultural pilgrimage, Newman is unable to properly understand European culture and art due to his lack of good education and artistic appreciation skills. Therefore, he cannot improve his cultural accomplishment. However, the journey to Europe has broadened his horizon and widened his experience; and in the process of interacting with Europeans, he has increased his knowledge of Europe and Europeans. For him, he has been completely reborn and become mature.

2. Journey of Identity Exploration

In general, a novel about growth tells a story of "the process of the hero and heroine from childhood or youth to adulthood, during which he or she experiences the confusion of finding identity (Baldick, 2000, p.24). "It is "not only a story about adventure, but more importantly, it describes the moral and psychological development of characters" (Liu, 2005, p.143). One of the themes of growth novels is "the search for self, identity and a meaningful life" (ibid, 2005, p.145). In *The American*, Newman's trip to Europe is a journey of identity search, that is, the process of exploring his own "businessman" identity and hoping to be accepted by Europeans.

Newman is a "new man" from the New World. His experience is "a western story" (James, 2005, p.18). Newman was born from a humble background. His family was poor, so he dropped out of school. He participated in the Civil War and served as a Brigadier General in the Marine Corps, but he was still impoverished when he retired from the military. With his diligence and shrewdness, Newman operated various industries, earned huge wealth and became a millionaire. However, commercial success cannot make up for his lack of cultural appreciation, which also reflects the cultural gap between Europe and the United States at the

end of the 19th century, that is, the economically powerful Americans still has a huge cultural gap with Europeans. The trip to Europe has provided this American "newcomer" with an opportunity to know himself. As Leon Edel said, "for Americans, this represents their identity. This is a clear image that has never been seen in the changes and expansion. They have taken possession of the New World and have an indomitable spirit to conquer the New World. Meanwhile, they have no time to look at their images in the mirror "(Edel, 1960, p.360). In his interactions with Europeans, Newman has fully demonstrated his nature as a "businessman" and his pragmatism principles also pursued by others Americans. He hopes to be accepted by Europeans.

Paul Gilbert pointed out, "a person's identity is how an individual confirms his relationship with others or how another person confirms his relationship with the person himself " (Gilbert, 2010, p.6). Newman has explored his identity in the "Old World". He tries to use money to conquer Europe and buy his own identity. The golden mansion on Housman Avenue is not only a symbol of Newman's wealth and social status, but also a powerful testimony of vulgar taste. This mansion is bought by Newman's American friend Tom Tristram based on his "social status". It is spacious, bright, and extremely luxurious. However, Newman does not know anything about its decoration. It is "gilded from floor to ceiling a foot thick, draped in various light shades of satin, and chiefly furnished with mirrors and clocks (James, 2005, p.74)." This gives a sense of vulgarity. Newman's new house is in stark contrast to the old house of Bellegardes. The old house of Bellegardes is a rococo-style architecture with a long history. It was built in 1627. The interior decoration is elegant and exquisite, which fully demonstrates the prominent status and taste of the French aristocracy. Due to the decline of the family, the house has lost its former glory and become dim. On the one hand, the comparison of those two houses highlights the image of Newman as the new rich and shows that he is trying to narrow the gap with Europeans by showing off his wealth; on the other hand, it shows that although the Bellegardes has fallen, the family background is strong and the cultural connotation is profound, which is exactly what Newman lacks.

Moreover, Newman has also tried to fit in the European society through various ways, such as learning French, going to theaters, and participating in "Western club", etc. His greatest wish is to marry the French noblewoman, Madame de Cintre. Marrying a noble lady is a metaphor: on the one hand, for Newman, Madame de Cintre is not only a "precious commodity" in the European market, but also a symbol of European elegant culture, which has unlimited attraction to Newman; on the other hand, it embodies Newman's vanity and ambition to conquer Europe. He wants to enter the upper class of Paris through marriage and hopes that the French aristocracy can accept his status as a businessman.

To marry Madame de Cintre, Newman has spent a lot of money, trying to use his huge wealth to open the door of European aristocracy. He has regarded Madame de Cintre as a commodity for sale. When visiting the house of Bellegardes for the first time, Newman talks eloquently about his family background and occupation, not knowing the contemptuous attitude of the French aristocracy. He was completely unaware that he was "funded"(James, 2005, p.131). In order to show his economic strength to Madame de Cintre, Newman has "thrown a pile of banknotes on the side of the balance" (ibid, p.131). When Newman's proposal was rejected by Madame de Cintre, he quickly stated his income status as if he had exchanged plenty of dollars for francs. This has made Madame de Cintre, who is greedy and eager to change the family's financial situation, change her attitude and agree to Newman's proposal. In this transaction of marriage, the social status disparity between the American businessman and the French aristocracy is huge, and the cultural differences are also obvious. However, Newman has only temporarily conquered the declining Bellegardes with his wealth and obtained the ticket to enter the aristocratic society.

Money cannot bridge the gap between social status and culture. The American businessman and French aristocrats have completely different attitudes towards this marriage. Newman believes that being able to marry a French lady is a great success and the recognition of his status as a businessman. So he cannot wait to

announce the good news in the newspapers of several major cities in the United States. However, Mrs. Bellegarde believes that marrying her daughter to an American businessman who has neither aristocratic title nor cultural education is a shame, and she does not want to make a statement. Therefore, she arranges the engagement banquet at ten o'clock in the evening, hoping that fewer people will know it. Newman does not realize that this marriage is a shame for the Bellegardes, and a helpless act for the family's decline. At the engagement banquet, Newman's rudeness and ignorance have resulted in the contempt and ridicule of the nobles present, which has deepened Mrs. Bellegarde's sense of frustration and shame. She cannot tolerate any more. Before the banquet ends, she plans to abandon Newman, and implies to her distant relative that Lord Deepmere is to marry Madame de Cintre. Dupreme. Thought the coxcomb, Deepmere, does not agree, Mrs. Bellegarde forces Madame de Cintre to enter the monastery, so as to maintain the honor of the family. This has led to the failure of Newman's marriage. This indicates that money cannot bridge the gap between the American businessman and the French aristocracy. As a millionaire, Newman could not enter the upper class of France through marriage. His status as a businessman could not be accepted by the French aristocracy. Therefore, he could not buy his identity through money.

3. Journey of Spiritual Growth

Gu Yu puts forward that growth novels "not only emphasize the cultivation of an individual, his or her inner and spiritual world, but also the cultivation of an individual in social and public life" (Gu, 2013, p.1). Sun Shengzhong believes that "bildung" emphasizes the improvement of a protagonist's spiritual world (Sun,2014, p84), and growth is a process of self-awareness and realization (ibdi,2014, p.235). In *The American*, Newman's various experiences in Europe have enabled him to obtain spiritual growth. Therefore, his trip to Europe is also a journey of spiritual growth. Rui Yuping concludes that "from the perspective of structure, the narrative structure of growth novels is quite stereotype: from innocence, temptation, running away, perplexity, testing, losing innocence, epiphany, to knowing life and oneself" (Rui,2004, p.8). The growth experience of Newman fits this paradigm: the innocent American comes to Europe after success in business; then, he experienced success and failure; he went through the process of self-doubt and self-denial; he underwent revenge and epiphany; finally, he re-understood himself.

The spiritual growth of Newman is mainly reflected in the process of revenge. When his engagement is canceled and Madame de Cintre is forced to enter the monastery, Newman feels angry and humiliated. He has tried every possible means to revenge. Before the Count Valentin died, Newman has learned that Mrs. Bread knows a secret that can destroy this noble family. So, Newman finds the old servant and wants to spend a million dollars to buy the secret. However, he finds that Mrs. Bread is unmoved by his money. Then, he cleverly changes his strategy. He takes advantage of her affection for Valentin and Madame de Cintre, and her personal grievances with Mrs. Bellegarde and entices her to tell the secret step by step. When he knows that Mrs. Bread is worried about her livelihood after betraying her old master, Newman immediately hires her as his housekeeper and provides her with an annuity to solve her worries. In this way, Newman has successfully obtained the note written by Mr. Bellegarde before his death, which is the evidence of the murder by Mrs. Bellegarde and her son.

After receiving this note, Newman does not immediately make it public. His heart is full of contradictions. On the one hand, he is immersed in the joy of revenge because he has mastered the initiative to threaten Mrs. Bellegarde; on the other hand, Newman is unhappy and hesitated about whether to disclose the secret to punish the Bellegarde family. However, when he learns that Madame de Cintre has refused the last chance to leave the monastery and may never be able to return to him, Newman is in great pain and still decides to revenge. Outside

the monastery, Newman meets Mrs. Bellegarde and Urbain. He cannot hide his anger and directly tells them that he has a note written by the old marquis himself, which is the proof of their sins. When he sees the pale faces out of fear, Newman feels the joy of success. Therefore, he further threatens to disclose the secret to the relatives and friends of the Bellegarde family, completely destroying the reputation of this ancient family.

However, when communicating with the Duchess, Newman has gained an epiphany. He intended to tell the Duchess this secret, but the pleasant atmosphere created by the Duchess' graceful, friendly and witty remarks makes Newman feel that it is inappropriate to expose Mrs. Bellegarde at such a beautiful moment. In addition, in front of the Duchess, Newman is still an outsider. He cannot really understand her words and intentions. The cultural wall built by the Duchess' conversation makes it difficult for Newman to cross over. Newman realizes that the Duchess and the Bellegardes belong to the same interest class. When faced with difficulties, they will definitely support each other. His accusation against the Bellegarde family will only become their conversation topic after dinner, and he will be despised and ridiculed by those arrogant nobles. The most important thing is that he cannot receive any benefit from revenge. After careful consideration, Newman gives up his plan to tell the Duchess the secret. Edel points out: "this American has a chance for revenge. But he realizes that paying a tooth for a tooth would not help, and he finally gives up. Therefore, he considers himself more noble and more like a Christian gentleman than those aristocrats (James, 2005, p.19)." Although Newman has shortcomings, he is kind by nature. The purpose of his revenge is simple. He just wants the Bellegarde family to know his power and to save Madame de Cintre. To some extent, Newman's hatred comes from his wounded self-esteem and the humiliation of being unacceptable as a businessman. Business success through sincere labor in the United States is regarded as an honor, but in Europe, "family is the only 'noble' symbol", and earning a living by working is inferior anyway (Dai, 2007, p.73). It can be concluded that Newman's thinking has undergone tremendous changes in the process of revenge. He has a new understanding of Europeans, and he also achieves spiritual growth.

His experience in Europe makes Newman realize the arrogance and hypocrisy of Europeans. Unlike the view of the American compatriot Tom Tristram that "Paris is the only place where white people live" (James, 2005, p.357). Newman has strong national consciousness. He loves the United States deeply and is unwilling to surrender to Europeans. Due to lack of knowledge, Newman is unable to gain significant improvement in cultural accomplishment. However, his trip to Europe has broadened his horizon and made him more mature. Although the European aristocracy still could not accept Newman's identity as a "businessman", he has developed a sense of recognition with his own identity and felt fortunate for his success in business. In the process of revenge, Newman is able to reflect on himself, look at the differences between Americans and Europeans rationally, find his own identity and gain spiritual growth. Newman finds the cultural self-confidence of Americans. He no longer blindly worships Europeans, and decides to return to the United States to continue his business.

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Biography

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