

Henry James - The Europeans - Views and Values.

The views and values presented by Henry James through his female protagonist in The Europeans, show clear criticism of both American and European cultures. James shows the restrictions of being a woman in the 1840's in America, chiefly by the arrival of the European Eugenia, who encounters the restrictions within a patriarchal society. Simultaneously, Eugenia's arrival reflects upon the European restrictions.

James uses Eugenia to demonstrate a European woman's dependence on wealth. As she comes to America in search for her "fortune,"¹ or to marry a rich man in order to gain monetary freedom. Europeans view wealth as a method of establishing "position"² and freedom in society. James clearly disapproves of Eugenia holding wealth in such high regard, as he tries to make her views seem extreme. James does this by showing us that money is repeatedly in Eugenia's thoughts.

Conversely, Gertrude Wentworth demonstrates that American women undervalue wealth. Felix asks if Mr. Brand has any "property"³ or wealth to offer her. Gertrude replies "that has nothing to do with it,"⁴ suggesting a naive view of money as Gertrude does not consider how Felix might support her after they are married. The Americans "thought and talked very little about money,"⁵ by using this stark comparison, James through implication criticises American women. James shows that they have a frivolous attitude towards wealth, which is the opposite extreme to the Europeans.

James depicts European women as being vain but self-confident. Eugenia refuses to be restricted by her lack of beauty. Eugenia's self-assurance is evident in the remark, "she carries her head like a pretty woman"⁶ and her vanity is demonstrated as she forgets her "melancholy"⁷ when she inspects herself in a mirror. James speaks directly to his readers, when he says "You may imagine ...[after being told she's not beautiful, that she might have]

¹Henry James, *The Europeans*, London, Penguin Group, 1995, p.16

²Ibid., p.68

³Ibid., p.102

⁴Ibid., p.102

⁵Ibid., p.52

⁶Ibid., p.7

⁷Ibid., p.6

carried her head less becomingly.”⁸ James uses both ironic humour to illustrate her self-assurance and gentle mocking to criticise Eugenia’s lack of modesty.

In a direct contrast to Eugenia, both Wentworth girls are “very pretty.”⁹ However they have become so restricted by American Puritan beliefs, that they are unable to acknowledge their own beauty and self-worth. Charlotte is a vehicle for James to demonstrate an American woman’s modesty as she says with “extreme gravity, I don’t think one should ever try to look pretty.”¹⁰ Charlotte’s grave tone reflects James’ criticism of American society, that their women take modesty too seriously. James’ descriptions expose the insecurities and self-doubt plagues American women. Gertrude is “a little awkward”¹¹ and when Eugenia pays her a compliment, she is in “disbelief.”¹² James wants us to realise that American women are too modest and lack self-esteem which intellectually restricts their liberty.

Unmarried European women and men do not have the freedom to socialise with each other. James explores this through Felix who is delighted to find that in America he is allowed to spend hours in young women’s company unchaperoned and it would remain “a minor affair.”¹³ Felix comes to the conclusion that “his relations with [unmarried women], had been [like] looking at pictures under glass. ...The glass had been... [a nuisance],”¹⁴ this metaphor, serves to confirm James’ criticism of European restrictions.

Conversely, Americans disapprove of married women flirting with any man. This restriction is evident through Boston society’s view of Eugenia, “it was not to be conceived that the Baroness was a possible party to any flirtation whatever; for she was undoubtedly a married lady.”¹⁵ James employs a high moral tone, to be critical of the Americans. He indicates to us that American women are restricted because they have to take every flirtation “seriously.”¹⁶

⁸Ibid., p.7

⁹Ibid., p.37

¹⁰Ibid., p.22

¹¹Ibid., p.19

¹²Ibid., p.38

¹³Ibid., p.56

¹⁴Ibid., p.56

¹⁵Ibid., p. 80

¹⁶Ibid., p.103

James shows that Americans view life as a “discipline.”¹⁷ This view of life restricts Gertrude’s ability to be happy, as it is her duty to put the happiness of others above her own. Gertrude’s unhappiness and restricted life can be seen in her boredom, “There must be a thousand ways of being dreary, and sometimes I think we make use of them all.”¹⁸ James often chooses words like “dreary”¹⁹ and “unhappy too easily”²⁰ to describe American women as he desires his readers to feel sympathy for them.

In a contrast to American women, Eugenia only pleases herself. She lives only for her own amusement and fears the “alarming possibility”²¹ of boredom. Eugenia is motivated by personal gain and James uses a metaphor to reflect this “what fish did she expect to land out of these very stagnant waters?”²² A selfish nature is clear as she advises Felix, “you must choose between pleasing yourself and pleasing him”²³ thus James is criticising the self-serving nature of European women.

Eugenia controls “almost illimitable power,”²⁴ but she becomes restricted by her European views and values. In the presence of Eugenia, Robert Acton “was not quite so relax as he pretended,”²⁵ Mr. Wentworth wonders if he has been impolite to not offer her his arm and Clifford blushes. This power however does not last, as Eugenia is left waiting for Acton to visit her, but he does not go to her. Eugenia’s refusal to give Acton the pleasure of thinking she would pursuit him²⁶ holds her back from her freedom. James illustrates Eugenia’s helplessness in her anger, as she cannot get Acton to visit her, but his sister, “a little girl makes him do what he wishes.”²⁷

As a women, Gertrude is restricted and powerless in American society. However, when Gertrude realises that she is unhappy, she is willing to oppose the views and values that she has been brought up to believe. Gertrude demands control of her own future, “Why discuss it?

¹⁷Ibid., p.69

¹⁸Ibid., p.67

¹⁹Ibid., p.67

²⁰Ibid., p.68

²¹Ibid., p.57

²²Ibid., p.53

²³Ibid., p.136

²⁴Ibid., p. 57

²⁵Ibid., p. 77

²⁶Ibid., p. 151

²⁷Ibid., p. 154

Leave it to me,”²⁸ thus showing that with courage, women are able to escape the restrictions of a patriarchal society. Whilst Eugenia who is unwilling to pursuit her desires is left without power or control over her freedom. Therefore James concludes by showing that women have the ability to gain freedom.

Word count: 988

²⁸Ibid., p. 167

In The Europeans, James explores the differing attitudes of men to women. Felix has consistently reflected a European man's respect for women, "I believe greatly in the influence of a woman."²⁹ In Europe, women are looked up to as educators of men, this view however is not shared by the Americans. Gertrude feels strange on her first meeting with Felix, because their conversation seem to recognise "her wisdom and dignity"³⁰. Showing by implication, that all the American men speak down to her. Later as Felix reports to Eugenia about their cousins, he says the Americans have a "primitive" and "patriarchal"³¹ society, this choice of words, suggest James feels that the Americans have not developed as far as the Europeans. In America, men feel that they should be the educators and protecting the women, this is reflected as Robert Acton tells Eugenia, "Your brother ought to have stayed with you and keep you from putting your trust in princes."³²

²⁹Ibid., p. 95

³⁰Ibid., p. 31

³¹Ibid., p. 33

³²Ibid., p. 84