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THE SONG OF THE LARK CORA UNASHAMED THE AMERICAN THE PONDER HEART

THE LATE, UNLAMENTED HENRY JAMES

*And Why He Still Belongs In the
Classroom*
By Dan Sanders

To many educators, “The American” is the classroom equivalent of jungle warfare. Its prose terrain is dense and lush, and makes for slow, arduous going. Many teachers can’t so much as say “Henry James” without their lips curling up, for there is nothing easy about teaching psyche-driven art in a sensation-driven world. To sell James’ writing to modern, Nintendo-calloused kids seemingly approaches a divine act, like making water run uphill.

Yet there is more behind this distaste than James’ literary complexity. Christopher Newman, “our hero,” is rich, white, and lucky — all diminishing characteristics in the America we know. Not only is it permissible to look askance at

men like this in our day, it’s downright fashionable. Newman belongs to one of the of the last American demographics that is fair game for ridicule, and today’s media, running out of permissible targets, has taken eager aim. In television commercials depicting a husband and wife disagreeing, the man is *always* wrong. Fathers on sitcoms are either weak or stupid -- Ward Cleaver is dead; long live Al Bundy. It’s *okay* to make sport of a man like this.



Perhaps if the plot of “The American” commenced a few years earlier, Christopher Newman might elicit more affection from a reader living in our austere, contentious era. People who manage to glide above storms, however, vaguely trouble us. We don’t see Newman struggling to make his fortune, only lounging about Paris trying to think of ways to spend it. If a man with hard-won millions quit the treadmill so easily today, others would think him strange. In our work-mad society, where a man is defined all but exclusively by how he makes a buck, where the mere admission that he likes an afternoon nap draws fishy looks, the message is: you quit when you die. Christopher Newman would have been an aberration in his own day as well. How could he be so unscathed, just three years removed from the pandemic horror of the Civil War? The answer, of course, is that he



Christopher Newman (Matthew Modine) – the earnest face of the New World.

was the invention of a novelist who spent the war years snug at Harvard. One of his classmates there was Abraham Lincoln's eldest son, who drew wide criticism for his less-than-martial ways. Failing to "do your bit" in America's great conflicts does not sit well with its modern citizens, either: Muhammad Ali, Frank Sinatra and Bill Clinton each found this out, and in his day Henry James might well have, too. In a deeply patriotic time, patriotism was lost on him. By the time James' first novel saw print he didn't want to live in America, and he died not an American at all, becoming a British citizen in 1915.

All this makes for a glibness of tone that makes James' work a little hard for us to take, and it may explain his inability to infiltrate French high society in the 1870s as well. Newman manages to steer clear of many qualities that make Europeans loathe Americans, but condescension is not one of them. There is something uneasily grating about the vast sums he tosses to the old Nioche and his emptyheaded, emptyhearted daughter as casually as an orange. Even when a man like Newman is kind, he can be aggravating. Today, we can watch guys like this only in small doses, such as those the movies offer us; and even then, only when we know they're going to sail on a big ship without enough lifeboats -- *then* we all go to see it eight times.



Madame de Bellegarde (Dame Diana Rigg): hardball, Old World style.



AN AMERICAN IN PARIS

"You will see a great many of the best people in France, I mean the long pedigrees and the high noses, and all that. Some of them are awful idiots; I advise you to take them up cautiously."

-- Valentin de Bellegarde,
on his crowd

At the book's end, when Tom Tristram gushes to Newman about Paris, "You know it's really the only place for a white man to live," how can anyone else feel welcome there? The answer, of course, is that many of us do not: the Paris of "The American" is a hostile, alien world to many a contemporary student.

By the novel's midpoint, the Parisian aristocracy begins to chafe our American ideals: how dare they sit around, carping about nothing at all. By the time Claire rejects Newman's suit for her hand, it is plain that the Bellegardes never intended for the marriage to take place. It's their idea of fun to toy with Newman, fattening him up for the slaughter. Bright as he is, Newman is the last to see the closing jaws: at the Bellegarde's party, James warns us that "Everyone looked at him with that soft hardness of good society which puts out its hand but keeps its fingers closed over the coin." The coin in question, needless to say, is Claire. The French elite's victim is an American, and their brutal joke almost seems as if it is on all of us.

Yet the very point where the French turn their ugliest is when the novel's most profound observations begin. Yes, the

Bellegardes are perfect bastards, but if they weren't they wouldn't survive in their urban jungle. Their effete ghoulishness might repel us, but to them it is an essential occupational skill. The battle arenas of the Bellegardes are Paris' plush drawing rooms and opera boxes, but the stakes are life and death nonetheless. To James' aristocrats, a shunned life is death, and the contestants behave accordingly. These people live in a world without therapy, fair courts of law, Welfare, drug rehab, cosmetic surgery, the insanity defense, Amnesty International, *Judge Judy*, or any of our other refuges. The hapless Valentin's death by duel is as savage as any drive-by in our own urban nightmares. For all its machinations to put up genteel appearances, there is nothing gentle about this Paris and these people. The crime of Valentin's mother is a stupendous one: she visits death upon a man she once stood with before family and friends inside the Lord's House, vowing before all to honor and cherish him.

In *The American*, James shows us the inherent, inexorable corruption of nobility, and makes it plain that it is part of every era, including our own. Look at the behavior of the Royals we know today; the proof of his wisdom is omnipresent. We can, in fact, look within our shores and find pertinence, for this most democratic of nations has a royal class of its own: celebrity. Entire television channels and magazines slavishly obsess over their behavior. It has even become, increasingly, a hereditary circumstance — as the offspring of Bob Dylan, Kirk Douglas, John F. Kennedy, and scores of others enjoy, however slender their talent. Writing of a Paris gripped by nobility behaving ignobly, James is presciently imparting the early symptoms of a dying culture decreasingly able to bear its own weight. Seventy years after the novel's

publication, France would be a thoroughly marginalized nation, forced to come hat in hand twice during the twentieth century for bailing-out by the detested Americans. In our middle class, who takes the time to learn France's language, go to their films, or pay attention to their fashions anymore? Forty years ago, it seemed everyone did. By the time "The American" was finished by James in 1876, *he* had given up on Paris too, abandoning it for London.

The novel offers other lessons of immense value to a classroom -- in particular to those children whose classroom days are drawing to a close. Above all is its consummate moral problem: should Christopher Newman take revenge on those who have so grievously wronged him? Newman finally discerns that the ministrations of such justice is beyond his ken, something best left to Another. When he burns the evidence of murder he bests the Bellegardes, all the vindication one should need. Along the story's way, he also learns that some men, such as sad old Nioche, are poor for very good reasons. And James writes of Newman, "He believed that Europe was made for him, and not he for Europe," warning other Yanks against seeing the world "across the pond" as a mere franchise of America's National Park System. Finally, Newman discovers what almost everyone does at great cost: just how dangerous falling in love can be.

All this is very hard to squash onto celluloid of course, and the list of successful attempts is short. It is no less difficult to bring to life in a classroom. But we must try. Like most who wrote in the centuries before our own, Henry James asked much more of his audience than our writers do. His readers were captives to their times. Lacking our myriad

“conveniences” and distractions, they were more suited for patiently observing, more free to go poring over details of place and personality. Today, “The American” seems passé, a baseball consciousness in a football age. Our dominant medium of cinema coaxes its writers to describe every character, even “leads,” in five lines or less. Henry James, though, was hunting bigger game. What he does with even his most fleeting players constitutes highly precise character engineering, and it demands an attention span our species has largely lost. Our modern cast of characters has been no less rich, but how could one reduce the epic essence of Martin Luther King into five lines? Or Richard Nixon, or Pete Rose, or Marilyn Monroe, or Albert Einstein, or Orenthal Simpson, or Mahatma Gandhi? James is utterly patient in his peoplewatching, seeking to know everything about his characters while making sure the reader does, too. In a disposable culture, this is literature of eminent durability. If readers will only sit still and watch, a rare thing will alight on their shoulders -- and it will bestow deeply penetrating, timeless insights into human nature. It’s not just what “The American” tells us about ourselves, it’s what James asks us to do in order to grasp it. The treasure hunt eclipses the treasure.

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Class Discussion Questions:

- 1.) Why does Newman destroy the evidence of the Bellegarde's murder at the end of the book? Is he doing the right thing? What are the specific advantages of what he does when he destroys the evidence, and of what he chooses not to do -- making their crime public?
- 2.) Why does Valentin choose to risk his life by dueling Stanislas Kapp? Compare and contrast it to disputes you have witnessed at school and elsewhere. Consider both in light of the following observation of the party in the novel by James: "Everyone looked at him with that soft hardness of good society which puts out its hand but keeps its fingers closed over the coin."
- 3.) Consider the party that the Bellegardes throw for Newman and the Parisian nobility. In what ways is it like parties you have attended with acquaintances from your school? In what ways is it different?
- 4.) Why does Claire enter the convent? What are some of the problems from which she is fleeing? Specify examples from her family life, Newman's wishes for her, and how she views herself.

Other Activities:

ESSAY — Answer the following: if you were to be given the dilemma facing Newman, of deciding whether or not to make the Bellegardes accountable for the murder, what would you have done, and why?

PRESENTATION — Have teams of 6-8 research the following topics and relate their findings to the class: historical events in Europe in the 1860s; historical events in the United States in the same decade; the function of dueling in nineteenth century European society; the Louvre artworks specified in the text, in particular those that Newman hires the Nioche girl to copy; the function and power of one society figure to attack another by use of purchased newspaper advertisements and notices in the era; convents in nineteenth century Europe.

ARTWORK — Using the medium of your choice, reproduce one of the artworks specified in the Louvre of the novel. Present the work to the class, commenting on what aspects of such work are particularly difficult to copy as does Noemie Nioche in the book.

IMPROVISATION — Have several students take the roles of Christopher and Claire. Imagine Newman is able to break into the convent and find Claire. In improvisational form, "reenact" their conversation. Newman's "superobjective" is to convince Claire to leave the convent with him; Claire's is to find peace with herself.