The Effective Characterization of Christopher Newman in Henry James’s *The American*

By

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In his novel, *The American*, Henry James brings to life the main character and hero of the story, Christopher Newman, in a way that not only demonstrates James’s mastery of characterization but a deep understanding of the American persona. James further shows Newman’s ignorance of the culture of Europe through many examples of misunderstanding and the resulting conflict. Newman’s positive and negative personality traits provide a platform for the reader to understand and connect with him. While realizing there are many “qualities” and “peculiarities” of characterization, the subsequent paragraphs will focus on the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics describing Newman (“Characterization”). Another aspect of characterization is the growth and change exhibited by the person throughout the story. Newman’s growth will be broken up into four different stages: 1) arrival in Paris, 2) introduction to Claire, 3) the courtship period, and 4) the rejection and the revelation of the Bellegarde secret. Finally, by comparing and contrasting Newman with other prominent characters in the account the superior characterization of Newman will become very apparent. All of these discussions will serve to demonstrate the effectiveness of James in his characterization of Newman.
The first area of effective characterization is the description of the character. In his novel James provides the reader with a very descriptive account of the character, Newman. Throughout the narrative James gives the impression of an authentic person by showing the many diverse aspects of Newman. Not only does James explain Newman’s physical characteristics but furthermore the emotional, relational, and even religious side of the character.

Physically James gives the reader a portrait of a “long, lean, and muscular” man (1). Adding to the humanness of the character, James gives details such as “his complexion was brown” and “his eye was of a clear, cold grey” (3). James further uses the physical description of Newman to demonstrate his American heritage with “the flat jaw and the firm, dry neck which are frequent in the American type” (3). All these descriptions provide the reader, even those lacking in imagination, with an image of the physique of Newman.

In addition to the physical characteristics James provides a glance at the emotional and relational aspects of Newman. One of the personality traits of Newman that makes the character so life-like is the contrast between his strengths and weaknesses. Newman is portrayed as
“frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrewd yet credulous, positive yet skeptical, confident yet shy, extremely intelligent and extremely good-humoured” (James 4). Human nature is constantly experiencing this inner struggle between good and bad. As the Apostle Paul states in the book of Romans, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (New International Version Rom. 7:15,19). The balance between positive and negative characteristics in an individual enables the reader to understand and connect with that character in a very authentic way.

In order to develop love and empathy for Newman, James bestows Newman with many positive qualities. Newman possesses “intelligence, wit, curiosity, skepticism, and above all an infallible intuitive faculty” (Vaid 254). Royal Gettmann also sees this “awareness of the attitudes and motives of others” in the character of Newman. This interesting quality of intuition is especially seen in Newman’s dealings with Mademoiselle Noemie.

Newman considered (Noemie) in some perplexity. In spite of the blunder of which he stood convicted he was very far from being a simpleton, and he had a
lively suspicion that her burst of confidence was not essentially more honest than her original pretence. She was playing a great game; she was not simply taking pity on the bloom of his barbarism. (James 81-82)

Newman understands even if not fully the inner workings of Noemie and other characters in the novel.

An additional strength seen throughout the events of the novel is Newman’s determination. After proposing to Claire and being refused he commences arguing with her (James 172). This perseverance holds true until the final chapter of the novel when Newman resigns himself and “has no impulse to scale the walls” of the convent (Edgar 326).

One of Newman’s greatest weaknesses of character is his tendency “to carry with (him) the unexamined values and norms of (his) own culture and to judge foreign cultures in light of those habits of belief, thus establishing a kind of control over them” (Blanton 7). “For Newman the shrewd, successful, American businessman is accustomed to gaining his ends by rapid, straightforward means” instead of through patience (Bowden 32). Another critic Russell Reising also sees this common weakness in Newman who “approaches Paris alive with the dream of accumulation hoping to acquire a wife and assuming that Parisian
standards and strategies are roughly compatible with those of America in which he amassed a fortune” (Reising). This weakness, however, only furthers to strengthen the humanness of the character as it is a common trait among Americans traveling abroad.

Another quality that demonstrates James’s proficient ability to create the character of Newman is his focus on the characters and their development rather than on the setting of the novel. This writing technique according to Casey Blanton, Associate Professor of English at Daytona Beach, is a common one among travel literature after the eighteenth century (15). Furthermore the emphasis on characterization increased and “by the early nineteenth century, travel writing had clearly become a matter of self-discovery as well as a record of the discovery of others” (Blanton 15). The importance of this self-discovery is clearly seen in the character of Newman who is forced to make several life-altering decisions and must change to adjust to the consequences.

More evidence of James’s excellent characterization of Newman is seen in the stages of growth Newman advances through during the course of the novel. From the beginning of the novel the changes going on in the mind and actions of Newman are evident.
The first stage of character transformation is seen after Newman first arrives in Paris. James shows the reader how Newman has already undergone radical transformations in his actions and attitudes. Gettmann believes “Newman after long experience in the workaday world of money-making had reached the age of reflection”. All he wanted before was to obtain money, but now he has come to Europe in hopes of other more lasting achievements. According to Donald Mull “money is no longer something to be acquired as sheer possession, but to be used in developing the possibilities of the self” (41).

Another stage of change in the character of Newman follows his first meeting with Claire. He is progressing from a realist to somewhat of a romantic. Newman “abstained from professing any especial interest in Madame de Cintre… this was a little of a false note in his usual distinctness, and may perhaps be regarded as characteristic of the incipient stage of that passion which is more particularly known as the romantic one” (James 85). While spending the summer traveling around Europe Newman discovers his ardent interest in Claire. Furthermore, during this period of self-discovery and change, Newman thinks “of his past life and the long array of years… during which he had had nothing in his head but his
possible ‘haul’. They seemed far away now, for his present attitude was more than a holiday, it was almost a repudiation” (James 101). Newman’s focus is no longer on the materialistic aspects of life but rather is slowly becoming consumed with Claire and romantic aspirations. The feelings of romance become even more apparent on his return to France.

Upon arriving back in Paris and continuing his courtship of Madame de Cintre a marked change is seen again in the character of Newman. Despite all encouragement to the contrary from Valentin, Newman seems to be trying to change himself to fit in with Bellegarde society. This is most clearly seen in the new house Newman lives in. The grandeur and ridiculousness of it all strikes Valentin as especially humorous (James 127). Though Newman, himself, wonders at having to “claim a social standing and hang out (his) sign”, he nonetheless follows the preconceived ideas (James 158). Newman’s willingness to change his personality and lifestyle shows his ardent devotion to Claire but contrasts with what Reising sees as Newman’s “naïve democratic individualism”. Another change noted in the character throughout this stage of the novel is the decrease in his previous inhibitions. Before meeting Claire, Newman “was always circumspect, conjectural,
contemplative” (James 145). As the novel progresses, the reader perceives a shift in his personality from a more shy and business-like gentleman to a bold man willing to fight for what he wants.

The fourth and final stage of development in Newman’s character takes place following the broken engagement to Claire and the subsequent discovery of the Bellegarde’s evil secret. After his rage subsides and he threatens the Bellegardes with exposure, Newman enters a period of depression and apathy.

He took no interest in discussing business and showed no desire to go into anything whatever...He not only puzzled all the prominent men, but was himself surprised at the extent of his indifference...A hopeless, helpless loafer, useful to no one and detestable to himself—this was what the treachery of the Bellegardes had made of him. (James 528-29)

Collin Meissner, a literary critic, believes “Christopher Newman ends his European experience ricocheting back and forth between Paris and New York, unable to settle down in either” (150). The character has taken a dramatic and downward turn through all of the tragedies and misfortunes he has suffered. In spite of his problems, Newman in the end after a “heroic struggle against tyranny” releases his
anger by burning the note implicating Madame Bellegarde in her husband’s death (Reising).

In contrasting the characterization of Newman with other characters in the story a marked difference is found. For reasons only known to him, James used very stereotypical and flat characters as the supporting members of the novel. This contrast with the fullness of the Newman character further emphasizes how effective James was in his characterization of Newman.

The heroine of the story, Madame de Cintre, is an example of James’s lack of description and details for some of the characters in the novel. Mull sees “the vagueness of her characterization as one of the book’s major shortcomings. We do not know her as a character because she is forever muffled in those traditions which have produced her” (43). Madame de Cintre is described in the novel as beautiful and possessing “subtle shyness” (James 165). Her character however is rarely touched on, and it seems as if she is a mere puppet pulled around by strings with her mother and older brother on the subsequent ends.

Another main character in the novel is Valentin de Bellegarde. His character provides a sharp contrast and is not “as pragmatic as Christopher Newman” (Edel 161). Valentin envies Newman’s liberty and freedom due to his
belief that everything in the world is forbidden for him (Reising). While at times showing personality traits such as a fun-loving spirit Valentin fails to demonstrate growth of character throughout the novel. This lack of change in Valentin along with his early death prevents his character from reaching the high level of authenticity found in the character of Newman.

Two of the most stereotypical characters in the novel are Madame Bellegarde and the Marquis, Claire’s oldest brother. Both of their personalities are extremely flat, and James offers only a one-sided view of these personages. They are seen “as authoritarian guardians of decrepit aristocratic traditions” (Reising).

Their lives involve the subtlest nuances of thought and emotion, and they are capable of the most minute distinctions in problems of conduct. On the other hand, the clearest moral issues are often clouded for them, and they sometimes act with a perversity that can scarcely be accounted for. (Hicks 256)

No sign of compassion or any kind of sympathy is seen in their actions giving them the appearance of absolute evil with no goodness. The lack of balance in these characters further shows the effectiveness of characterization in the person of Christopher Newman.
The one and only area where James fails in his excellent characterization of the hero, Christopher Newman, is the ending. After all of the change and growth seen in the character, James leaves the reader with no adequate explanation for the change seen in the actions of Newman. Lewis in his analysis of *The American* thinks that “James leaves open a mystery about the nature of the unconscious forces that cause Newman’s various conversions” including his resignation and subsequent destruction of the evidence (324). No longer is his bitterness and anger brewing at the surface ready to explode, instead an attitude of sorrowful resignation is observed.

To close this discussion the main character of the novel *The American* provides an opportunity to analyze and reflect on the literary component of characterization. The components necessary to form a character that is “just as exactly real as anybody we have ever met” (Hueffer 246) are clearly shown. Through the writing of James, Newman becomes an authentic person, and James’s goal “to make his work conform as closely as possible to the actual conditions of life” becomes a reality in the novel’s hero (McCarthy 38). With this new perspective on the character of Newman, individuals traveling abroad will better understand their own personality changes brought about by encountering and
interacting with a diverse culture. Now not only can
travelers appreciate the novel and Newman but can pursue an
even deeper understanding of differing cultures and people
through their experiences.

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