

# Henry James' Character Traits and Carding of His Pessimistic Feminist Works

Jie Chen\*

College of Foreign Languages, Bohai University, Jinzhou, China  
547831259@qq.com  
\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** Henry James is a great novelist in the history of British and American literature. This paper is based on the relevant theories of literary criticism. Character traits are the key factors leading to success. To study James' character traits, including the influence of back injury, father, European and American culture on his character, explore the formation of James' character psychology, and provide guidance for studying James' works. James is close to women's ideas, understands women's needs, sympathizes with women's fate, and understands women's choices. Represented by the three works of "The Tragic Muse", "The Wings of the Dove" and "The Golden Bowl", research and analysis James' pessimistic feminist works, and abandon the trite and empty ethical preaching and narrow patriarchal thoughts that wrap women. The James-style view of women and moral standards are used to guide women's literary creation.

**Keywords:** Henry James; character traits; pessimistic feminism; carding of works.

## 1. Introduction

Henry James is a British and American writer who was born in an upper-class intellectual family in New York. Due to his wealthy family, he was well educated and mastered multiple languages. James has lived in Europe for a long time and has an in-depth understanding of upper-class life in the United States and Europe at the end of the 19th century. James maintained a long-term friendship with the contemporary American female writer Edith Wharton. James' main works are novels, and he has also written many literary reviews, travel notes, biographies and scripts. His novels often write about the communication between Americans and Europeans; how adult crimes affect and destroy pure and intelligent children; the contradiction between material and spirit; the loneliness and life of artists, etc. From the early European and American cultural conflicts to the later gradual exploration of the integration of European and American cultures, they successfully portrayed all kinds of female images, their pursuit of knowledge, desire for love, rebellion and subversion of traditional female images, and their influence on the patriarchal society. Questions and challenges represent the new female image in the social transformation period at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Most of James' novels revolve around the issues of love and marriage between male and female protagonists. They challenged traditional concepts of love, marriage and family, and described the tragedies of marriage and love of many women. The reality of being a woman is thoroughly experienced and spied on. James is close to women's ideas, understands women's needs, sympathizes with women's fate, and understands women's choices. Created a group of typical female group portraits, lifelike, as if real people "live" in the world of novels. As the American dramatist Eugene O'Neill said: "Tragedy constitutes the meaning of life and hope. The noblest is always the most tragic. Only tragedy has that profound beauty." Study and analysis James' pessimistic feminist works, promote factors that are conducive to women's own rights and do not violate the overall harmony of the family and society, abandon the trite and empty ethical preaching and narrow patriarchal thoughts that wrap women, and then better come out of a line based on women. The road is to the future of independent character, communication and mutual assistance, and healthy balance.

## 2. Henry James' Character Traits

James' artistic achievements and exploration spirit have established his literary status as the founder of psychological realism. "Character is the relatively stable and unique mental behavior pattern formed

by individual based on hereditary qualities through interaction with the acquired environment." Through the analysis of James' family background, education experience and back injury, it explores the formation of James' character psychology, as well as his unique view of marriage and literary ideals.

### ***2.1. Back Injury Influence on Henry James' Character***

James returned to the United States with his family in 1860. In November of that year, Lincoln's election as president triggered a long-standing political crisis. The Civil War broke out in 1961, and it was also the largest civil war in American history. At the beginning of the war, it was to maintain the unity of the country, but later evolved into a revolutionary war for the freedom of black slaves. The Civil War destroyed slavery, solved the peasant's land problem, and safeguarded national unity. It cleared the way for the accelerated development of American capitalism and laid the foundation for the United States to become one of the world's powers. James' two younger brothers participated in the war and contributed to the victory of the Northern Army. In the spring of 1961, a fire caused James' back injury. As he described in "Notes of Son and Brother", although he did not give an obvious indication of the injury, he suffered from back injuries for the rest of his life[1]. From the perspective of James' character, the accidental injury was not only physical damage, but also mental loneliness. James could not participate in the war and developed the attitude of life as a bystander, rather than an active participant.

### ***2.2. Father's Influence on Henry James' Character***

James was born in a wealthy family in New York. His father was an informed philosopher and theologian. He was open-minded, paid attention to personal values, advocated independence and self-reliance, and was extremely concerned about the growth of his children. James' father once declared: "I love my parents, brothers and sisters, but I refuse them to have me unconditionally. I don't want to be an accessory to anyone, and I will not treat anyone as an accessory to me." It is based on this belief that he took the "four fat boys" to various places in Europe to allow them to receive the wide range of global education. James' interest in culture originated from his father's enlightened education. The sensitive James learned many languages and read many literary works. The early travels broadened James' horizons. The sculpture art and arenas of ancient Rome, the Louvre in Paris, the museums in London, and the ancient civilization exuded by many places of interest gradually merged into his body and mind. His father also made friends with celebrities in the world. Many famous European and American writers and scholars, such as Emerson, Carlisle, Hawthorne, Thackeray, Thoreau, etc., were all guests of his family. The James family has almost become the center of American culture and thoughts[2]. James was exposed to such a strong cultural atmosphere, and he was nurtured in cultural cultivation and temperament, which laid a good foundation for his literary creation in the future.

### ***2.3. European and American Culture Influence on Henry James' Character***

In history, the United States was a British colony, and American culture was the first product of European culture. After the victory of the American War of Independence, the whole society was permeated with a pragmatic spirit of truth-seeking and innovation. Despite the rapid development in economic and social aspects, it was still at a disadvantage in the cultural field and faced the anxiety of trying to find identity and confirm oneself in culture. Europe has a long history of thousands of years and a strong cultural atmosphere, especially concentrated in the middle and upper classes, forming the elegant cultural circle. In the 19th century, under the influence of the Enlightenment in European culture, a large number of American intellectuals set foot on the ancient land of Europe one after another during the romantic period of cultural prosperity. James spent his childhood in New York City. At the age of 12, he went to Europe with his parents and lived in Europe for a long time. James is a humanist with high aesthetics. He cares about the relationship between people and tries to discover the traditional cultural consciousness hidden behind people's behavior. In his special life across the two continents, he found that Europe represents one civilization and the United States represents another civilization. Americans living in the New World are honest, frank, generous, and have a strong moral consciousness. They have not been contaminated by hypocrisy and snobbery, but behind their honesty is ignorance[3]. Europe has a splendid culture. Europeans are educated and tasteful, but they are respectable and full of traditional prejudices such as hierarchies, vanity and arrogance. Through the comparison of the two civilizations, James tried to discover and interpret a new civilization so that humans can live in harmony on a higher level. James's exploration and pursuit of this ideal civilized

society is consistent in his main works and throughout his life. Faced with the conflict between two cultures, James intentionally or unconsciously kept a distance from culture and life, forming unique characters as a writer, and affecting his future thinking and artistic creation.

### **3. Analysis of Henry James's Pessimistic Feminist Works**

The international theme is the unchanging theme of James's works. It portrays the images of a large number of Americans living in Europe, describes the various experiences. Americans have experienced while living in Europe, and reveals the cultural conflict between the United States and Europe. In his earlier works, the Americans in the novel often experience ups and downs because of this conflict, which eventually leads to death. But in his later works, although the protagonist still experienced various hardships, he finally successfully integrated into European culture, and to a certain extent injected new American elements into European culture. There are many pessimistic feminist works of James, so I choose the following representative works to analysis.

#### **3.1. "The Tragic Muse"**

Miriam Rooth, the hostess of "The Tragic Muse", is young and beautiful, and is considered the incarnation of Muse. She dreams of becoming an excellent actress. Her beauty and talent have attracted the attention of congressman son Nick Dormer and diplomat Peter Sherringham, and triggered a series of love and hatred between the three. The tragedy has already been foreseen in the title of the book "The Tragic Muse", and the symbolic meaning of the tragedy goddess Melpomene is also contained in it. Miriam Rooth is mentioned many times in the work as the incarnation of Muse. She continues to give to the painter Nick and the drama fan Peter like Muse Bring inspiration[4]. In order to realize the dream, Miriam Rooth stood nervously in front of a large group of artists, accepting their scrutiny, and waiting for their referee. James adopts a method of alternating the consciousness centers of multiple characters. The narrative angle of the novel switches between the consciousness of the two main characters, Nick and Peter, presenting a high degree of drama. Nick's interest in Miriam Rooth is conditional. At first, she felt that she was just a "poor working woman", lacking artistic temperament. One year later, Miriam Rooth made great progress in theatrical performance. Nick recalled her first impression of her: "A year ago she was beautiful and moving, but she was associated with an indecent residence, bread and cheese, which was unbearable tragedy and tears". At the home of the famous actor Mrs. Cary, Peter told Nick that Miriam Rooth reminds people of the image of "The Tragic Muse"[5]. When Nazi expressed the hope that Nick would draw a picture for Miriam Rooth to show her "some good things", Nazi also used "The Tragic Muse" to refer to Miriam Rooth. Due to Miriam Rooth insisted on her acting career, she was abandoned by Peter and lost the opportunity to become the diplomat's wife. After marrying Basil Dashwood, who is also an actor, she felt a bit sad in her heart.

#### **3.2. "The Wings of the Dove"**

"The Wings of the Dove" is a masterpiece of James' later period. In this work, James focused on portraying two main female characters, Millie and Kate. The two have very different life backgrounds and survival experiences, and have different personalities, but they both have a strong sense of self and free will. They are unwilling to be manipulated or follow the crowd, and are eager to control their own destiny. However, in James's hypocritical and sophisticated British upper class, their fate is tragic. They strive for their own happiness in different ways, but they are doomed to fail[6]. Compared with Kate's sophistication and sleekness, Millie represents the American spirit respected by James, innocent and simple, full of vigor, frank and sincere, elegant and refined. She is passionate and unrestrained, embraces life actively, and faces life bravely and freely. But on the stage of life, Millie can only play the role of a weak person, spreading her wings and flying away like a dove[7]. In terms of moral quality, she is a strong man and an angel. In order to have a lasting moral influence on others, she chose to sacrifice herself. In the journey of life, Millie has experienced the spiritual sublimation of going from negativity to silence, from silence to death, and gaining immortality from death, which confirms James' extraordinary creative skills of psychological realism.

#### **3.3. "The Golden Bowl"**

"The Golden Bowl" is James' last novel and represents his highest artistic achievement. The author cleverly materializes marriage and complex relationship between characters into "The Golden Bowl"

and integrates it into the novel, which complements the plot of the novel. The internal rift in "The Golden Bowl" implies that the improper relationship under legal marriage has become a hidden danger of marriage; "The Golden Bowl" is hypocritical, reflecting that people are in various entanglements for their own interests, and appear to be harmonious, complicated and contradictory interpersonal relationships; "The Golden Bowl" once again accelerates the development of contradictions, marriage enters the crisis state, and eventually contradictions intensify. "The Golden Bowl" was crushed by force, leaving only unhealable fragments, but the wounds in people's hearts are difficult to heal[8]. The abnormal father-daughter relationship in "The Golden Bowl", the attachment to the father, and the excessive intimacy with the father severely hindered the heroine's character development. The confusion of her identity caused her to fall into the quagmire of the "lost of love" and was buried in the crisis of marriage under the root of evil. Although he was married as a wife, he did not change his identity with the change of the family structure, which is the main cause of the marital crisis[9]. The novel's arrangement of the heroine's life dilemma implies James's in-depth thinking on imperfect life and the way of dealing with romantic legends. In "The Golden Bowl", it tells a terrible scapegoat story and exposes the barbaric part of modern culture, showing that women are bound to the patriarchal culture and eventually become commodities and sacrificed. The works show complex views on women. On the one hand, they care about and appreciate women; on the other hand, they place feminism on the edge of patriarchy. James seems to be telling people: the status of women in a "civilized" society is the same as that of a "primitive" society, being commoditized and sacrificed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The specific social and historical transition period of James's life has a significant impact on the formation of his tragic feminism. Although society is changing, the disadvantages of American women in all aspects have not undergone substantial changes. Young American girls who love freedom, love independence, and are beginning to awaken their female consciousness, are destined to be frustrated everywhere in such a social situation. Another source of James' pessimistic feminism is the influence of the family environment, especially the influence of his father James, who has ambiguous views on women. As a well-known American novelist, dramatist and critic, James is deeply loved by readers. The heroine in the novel has also become the focus of research by many experts and scholars. This topic is based on literary criticism theory and comparative literature theory, and comprehensively uses literature research method, psychological research method, close text method, comparative research method and "three theory" research method to deeply interpret and understand the cultural connotation of female images in novels. James' view of women and moral standards, exploring the path of women's development.

#### Acknowledgements

This work is supported by social science fund project of Liaoning province (L20BWW009): Interpretation and Value Charm of Pessimistic Feminism in Henry James' Psychological Realism Novels.

#### References

- [1] Y. Lin, K. F. Zhang, "Personality Psychology's Influences on Henry James and His Works," *Journal of Yellow River Conservancy Technical Institute*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 102-104, 2006.
- [2] C. Y. Wu, "On the Cultural Psychology of Henry James' Creation," *Journal of Soochow University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, vol. 95, no. 4, pp. 120-123, 2000.
- [3] W. L. Xiao, "Henry James' Sacred Quest for High Civilization," *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 47-50, 2002.
- [4] P. P. Liu, Y. H. Wang, "The Monomyth Evolution Models in *The Tragic Muse* by Henry James," *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 366-369, 2014.
- [5] L. Y. Wang, "Gender and Colonialism in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*," *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 72-79, 2002.
- [6] L. Zhang, "Flying Over the Abyss: An Interpretation of the Free Will and Moral Significance in *The Wings of the Dove*," *Anhui Literature*, vol. 6, no. 12, pp. 57-59, 2011.
- [7] X. J. Wei, "Silence, Death and Eternity: Interpretation of the Themes in *The Wings of the Dove*,"

*English Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 15-18, 2013.

[8] S. Wang, "'The Golden Bowl' by Henry James: The Allegory of Marriage," *Foreign Literature*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 88-92, 2004.

[9] Z. Y. Chen, "On the Degradation of Maggie in the GOLDEN BOWL," *Journal of Anhui University of Technology(Social Sciences)*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 62-64, 2011.