



# The International Theme: The Conflict of National Types in the Tales of Henry James

*Marcus Münch*

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Seminar paper from the year 1999 in the subject American Studies - Literature, grade: 1,0, University of Dusseldorf "Heinrich Heine" (Anglistik II (American Studies)), course: The Tales of Henry James, 15 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: Among the central motifs that can be traced throughout Henry James's career as a writer is his concern with the social and moral differences between the New World and Europe (mainly represented by England, Italy and France), which he called the "Americano-European legend" and is otherwise frequently referred to as the "international theme". It reflects the mutual misunderstandings of Americans and Europeans, often by following the same basic pattern, i.e. the innocent and naive American girl who journeys to the Old Country and encounters a corrupt, mostly rigid set of values which its advocates attempt to subjugate her to. Usually the heroine struggles to protect her integrity, her individualism and personal freedom against a society that strikes her as oppressive, anti-democratic or, as is the case with Madame de Mauves, as immoral, and undergoes a changing process in which she abandons her romantic vision and nostalgic longing for a quaint and picturesque Europe.

Although in his exploration of the international conflict 'innocence' is invariably associated with the American side, whereas 'knowledge' is mostly to be found on the European, the satire and irony in the study of national characters is aimed at both. Sometimes showing sympathy for the helpless American outsider abroad, who is not at all prepared to deal with the complexity of cultural life in Europe, James at other times sympathizes with the European facing the uncultivated, socially ignorant and traditionless American (of which Daisy Miller's mother seems to be the representative model), thus giving us an all in all tremendously balanced and superb portrayal of the idiosyncratic manners of both sides of the Atlantic.

I have selected three early 'tales', as James called them, which I am going to examine - in chronological order - with regard to the question of how the "international theme" manifests itself in them, focussing on the different codes of conduct pertaining to America and the respective European country where the story is set, as well as the characters' inherent traits as far as they are relevant of the 'type' James wished to illustrate. The tales I have chosen are "Madame de Mauves", "Daisy Miller" and "An International Episode". All quotes referring to either one of these stories are indicated in brackets in the text of this essay.

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