

HENRY JAMES' *AMERICAN* AND *AMERICAN* MILLIONAIRES

Critics have long been fond of describing Henry James' novel, *The American*, as a fairy tale. A myth, Leon Edel calls it, that critic who has become one of the authorities on Henry James. Edel begins his discussion of the myth by finding a special significance in the name of Christopher Newman, the protagonist, who is an American millionaire in his late thirties¹ who woos but does not win a high-born lady in Paris. Says Edel:

The last name explains itself, the first requires very little historical knowledge to be identified. The novelist was intertwining two related myths the — myth of a Columbus, the explorer, or of a Gulliver, studying strange countries and comparing their customs with those of his own, that myth which had become mixed up with Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo and the Indians. The second myth was that of the new egalitarian society where there were (as Goethe had said in his poem about America) no castles and no ruins, no symbols of serfdom and feudalism.²

Edel then adds to the myth of which Christopher Newman is the protagonist.

¹ See Henry James, *The American*, With an Afterword by Leon Edel, a Signet Classic published by the New American Library of World Literature, New York, 1963, p. 21. In the 1879 edition used here, Newman was in his late thirties. In his 1905 edition, James made Newman slightly older — in his early forties.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 326 — 7.

To the myth of the traveller and of the utopia James joined still another myth as old as literature itself. This was the tale told in ballad and fairy story of the lady of high estate living in castle and hall, wooed by the humble lover. Out of these materials, long familiar to readers of adventure and romance, James wrote his novel of *an American in Paris*.³

Naturally, if the tale is a myth, a fairy story, the hero must be mythological, and Edel very carefully makes note of this fact. "A strange American," Edel says of Christopher Newman, "who has made a fortune within three years of the end of the Civil War and then, in the most un-American fashion possible, has stopped his empire building in order to pursue culture in Europe."⁴

But if Edel considers the protagonist and the circumstances he finds himself in a myth, a fairy tale, what do we make of the fact that Henry James thought of himself as producing a piece of realism in writing *The American*? "Ironic," Leon Edel said of it:

...ironic was the biographical anomaly that entered into play: for Henry James, writing a story of high romance, replete with duel, skeleton in the closet, and a grand lady taking refuge in a nunnery, thought of himself nevertheless as writing a piece of "realism." He fancied himself doing the sort of thing Balzac had done when he brought his heroes from the provinces and embarked them on fantastic adventures in the "great world," but portrayed that world with minute reality. Newman too comes from the provinces — those across the Atlantic — but unlike Balzac's heroes his fortune is already earned. He is a conqueror bent on new conquests. This is the drama of *The American* — and it leads James to the confrontation of American and European social values.⁵

At this point I should like to take exception to Edel's arguments and come to the defense of Henry James. If America represents a new

³ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

egalitarian society where there are no castles and no ruins, no symbols of serfdom and feudalism, there are, and there always have been, the rich and the poor. And men like John Jacob Astor, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller, in an earlier day, and a whole host of budding young millionaires of our own day depicted in a recent article in *Time* Magazine,⁶ could hardly be called "humble lovers" if they set out to woo a lady, even a high born lady of France.

Also if we follow this *Time* article entitled "Millionaires: How They Do It," which was carefully researched, we find that James drew such an amazingly accurate portrait of an American millionaire. Newman has practically all of the characteristics of the real young men interviewed for the article, even if Newman did make his fortune right after the Civil War.

Let us take James' description of how Newman made his way up from rags to riches and then lay it beside how the young men of the *Time* article did it. Here is James' description:

Newman had come out of the war with a brevet of brigadiergeneral, an honor which in this case... had lighted upon shoulders amply competent to bear it. But... Newman heartily disliked the business... and he had addressed to the pursuits of peace with passionate zest and energy. He was of course as penniless when he plucked off his shoulderstraps as when he put them on, and the only capital at his disposal was his dogged resolution and his lively perception of ends and means. Exertion and action were as natural to him as respiration; a more completely healthy mortal had never trod the elastic soil of the West. His experience, moreover, was as wide as his capacity; when he was fourteen years old, necessity had taken him by his slim young shoulders and pushed him into the street to earn that night's, supper. He had not earned it; but he had earned the next night's, and afterwards, whenever he had none, it was because he had gone without it to use the money for something else, a keener pleasure or a finer profit. He had turned his hand, with his brain in it to many things; he had been

⁶ "Millionaires: How They Do It," *Time*, Dec. 3, 1965, pp. 56-61.

enterprising in an eminent use of the term; he had been adventurous and even rockless, and he had known bitter failure as well as brilliant success; but he was a born experimentalist, and he had always found something to enjoy in the pressure of necessity, even when it was as irritating as the haircloth shirt of the medieval monk. At one time failure seemed inexorably his portion... and whatever he touched he turned, not to gold, but to ashes... He had known what it was to have utterly exhausted his credit, to be unable to raise a dollar, and to find himself at nightfall in a strange city, without a penny to mitigate its strangeness... In his darkest days he had had but one... impulse the desire, as he would have phrased it, to see the thing through. He did so at last,... and made money largely. It must be admitted, rather nakedly, that Christopher Newman's sole aim in life had been to make money; what he had been placed in the world for was, to his own perception, simply to wrest a fortune, the bigger the better, from defiant opportunity. This idea completely filled his horizon and satisfied his imagination. Upon the uses of money, upon what one might do with a life into which one had succeeded in injecting the golden stream, he had up to his thirty-fifth year very scantily reflected. Life had been for him an open game, and he had played for high stakes. He had won at last and carried off his winnings...⁷

And now let us look at our young, present-day American millionaires, as represented in the *Time* article. All of those selected for this real life profile were under forty, the Christopher Newman age. All of them, also like Newman, were self-made men; "all began with little or no capital."⁸ Furthermore,

Howeve they make their money, the self-made millonaires have many traits in common. Almost all of them decided early in life to be their own bosses. Most of them started earning money while still children: by the time he was 13, Arthur Carlsberg had been a caddy, gardener, seed salesman

⁷ James, pp. 20 — 21.

⁸ "Millionaires," p. 56.

and fruit trader. (Newman started out at fourteen.) Many of them like Merlyn Michelson, never went to college; (Newman was also collegeless.) Others, like Arthur Decio and Charles Bluhdorn, impatiently dropped out of college in order to study in the marketplace. At the beginning of their careers, they lived lean, often taking shoestring salaries in order to pump profits back into their enterprises. (See James' statement about Newman: "He had known what it was to have utterly exhausted his credit, to be in a strange city, without a penny to mitigate its strangeness.")

In his first plant, Mickelson doubled as a floor-sweeping janitor. Many of them suffered at least one jarring failure in business (Newman had known many.) but showed a capacity to bound back unfazed.

(To repeat, James says of Newman: "He had turned his hand, with his brain in it to many things; he had been enterprising, in an eminent use of the term; he had been adventurous and even reckless, and he had known bitter failure as well as brilliant success; but he was a born experimentalist, and he had always found something to enjoy in the pressure of necessity, even when it was as irritating as the haircloth shirt of the medieval monk.")⁹

Another trait the American millionaires have in common with Newman is the ability to work very hard at the job. As the *Time* article says:

They work like galley slaves, have little time for recreation or exercise (Arthur Carlsberg every morning does 15 minutes of push-ups, sit-ups and squats — "while I listen to stock market reports on the radio"). Usually they put in ten or twelve hours at the office, then spend their nights and weekends pondering reports or burning up the long-distance lines. Practically everything they do is somehow devoted to building the business. (Of Newman, James pointed out:.. Christopher Newman's sole aim in life had been to make money; what he had been placed in the world for was, to his own perception, simply to wrest a fortune, the bigger the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

better, from defiant opportunity. This idea completely filled his horizon and (satisfied his imagination.)¹⁰

Why did Christopher Newman wait until he was in his late thirties to think about getting married? For the same reason that the young millionaires of the *Time* article have an extremely high divorce rate:

Typical is the lament of Del Coleman, 40, a tavernkeeper's son who bought and sold a succession of sickly companies and gained control of Chicago's Seeburg Corp. (jukeboxes and vending machines). Says Coleman, whose 14-year marriage cracked up recently: "Our worlds just grew apart. Work is a jealous mistress."

The men at the top tend to have few trusted friends... They also have little time for their families. Arthur Carlsberg, of example, is so busy that he rarely sees his three sons; he takes off one week a year to spend with them, also leaves the office to be with them on their birthdays — and that's about it.¹¹

Further on in his argument that in writing *The American*, James was not writing realism, but a modern fairy tale, Leon Edel says of Christopher Newman, that he is "a strange American who has made a fortune within three years of the end of the Civil War and then, in the most un-American fashion possible, has stopped his empire building in order to pursue culture in Europe."¹²

The first point, I believe, we have already disposed of by showing that Newman had all the characteristics of our real American millionaires, including the ability to work like a "galley slave." Newman is therefore not strange in making a fortune within three years; any one of our real millionaires, circumstances having been similar, might have done the same thing.

The second point, however, that Newman "in the most un-American fashion possible, has stopped his empire building in order to

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 59

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹² James, p. 328.

pursue culture in Europe," is a little harder to get around. But here again, our young millionaires supply an answer. Says Fletcher Jones, who is now worth \$20 million: "Money allows me to do some of the things I want to do. Still, I don't have time to do most of them — travel, for example..."¹³

But if Fletcher Jones doesn't have time for travel, there are other American millionaires who build it into their lives, by seek-opportunities abroad. They know that:

The Europeans, for example, hanker for more and more U.S.-type goods and services. Recently, Americans abroad have begun to launch everything from "heel bars" for Europeans with worn-down shoes to recruiting firms for U.S. businesses seeking European managers overseas. In many parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the risk-taking businessmen will find waiting markets for housing and manufactured goods, can get attractive investment guarantees from the U.S. Agency for International Development.¹⁴

Leon Edel and those who agree with him, however, might find this last argument only a partial refutation. The culmination of James *The American* leaves Christopher Newman at loose ends, they might well argue. After Claire goes into the convent, Newman returns to San Francisco, where he can take no interest in anything, not even his old business. So he goes back to Paris, still nursing the mental wounds the Bellegardes have given him, still harboring the idea of revenge. But as he stands in the Rue d'Enfer, looking at the grim blank wall of the Carmelites, where Claire is entombed, both his grief and his wish for revenge start to slip away. Then later in the Cathedral of Notre Dame,

The most unpleasant thing that had ever happened to him had reached its formal conclusion, as it were; he could close the book and put it away. He leaned his head for a long time on the chair in front of him; when he took it up he felt he was himself again. Somewhere in his mind, a tight

¹³ "Millionaires," p. 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

knot seemed to have loosened. He thought of the Bellegardes; he had almost forgotten them.¹⁵

And what does Newman do after this? He says goodbye to his friends and leaves Paris forever, presumably going back to San Francisco, and his business. Where, we might add, Newman's being Newman, and a quite typical millionaire, he will eventually become absorbed again in his business.

Even if the reader cannot accept the premise that Newman finally became interested in his business in San Francisco again because such a final chapter has been left out of James' novel, the rest of the arguments still stand.

To sum them up, Leon Edel in presenting Christopher Newman as a "strange American", a mythological hero of a fairy story is not only going counter to Henry James' statement that he was writing realism in this novel, but is also contradicting the conclusions of an article which has made an extensive study of actual American millionaires. Early poverty, drive, wanting to be their own bosses, not caring for college, being willing to take desperate chances, being undaunted by failure, becoming millionaires before they are 40, not succeeding well in love and marriages, these are all traits that Newman shares with a group of present-day American millionaires.

And let no one argue that since Newman made his money just after the Civil War and the young men of the *Time* article made their money in the 1960's, the case is different. The case is more than ever the same. Or to put it another way, in 1875, when James wrote *The American*, he produced a hero so soundly realistic that he has most of the characteristics of a typical group of American millionaires of today.¹⁶

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¹⁵ James, p. 321.

¹⁶ I believe that I can also prove that all the Bellegardes are realistic. But that will have to be the subject of another paper.