



## Dual Visions: Henry James, Edith Wharton, and America's National Narrative

### Dual Visions : Henry James, Edith Wharton et le récit national américain

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**Abstract:** In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American literary figures explored complex questions of national identity during social transformation. This study examines how Henry James and Edith Wharton's non-fiction works articulate and critique American cultural identity. Through critical discourse analysis, the investigation reveals how their direct commentary illuminates the relationship between American and European cultural traditions. Their non-fictional writings demonstrate three key patterns: a critique of American exceptionalism, an evolving perspective on racial and social hierarchies, and a nuanced examination of transatlantic cultural exchange. By analyzing their personal correspondence, travel writings, and cultural criticism, this research argues that James and Wharton's works offer unique insights into the formation of American national identity, revealing tensions between cosmopolitan ideals and nationalist impulses that resonate in contemporary discussions of cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Transatlantic Identity, Cultural Critique, American Exceptionalism, Racial Discourse, Cosmopolitanism

**Résumé :** À la fin du XIXe et au début du XXe siècle, des figures littéraires américaines ont exploré l'identité nationale durant une transformation sociale rapide. Cette étude examine comment les œuvres non-fictionnelles de Henry James et Edith Wharton articulent et critiquent l'identité culturelle américaine. Par une analyse critique du discours, l'investigation révèle comment leurs commentaires directs éclairent la relation entre les traditions culturelles américaine et européenne. Leurs écrits non-fictionnels démontrent trois schémas clés : une critique de l'exceptionnalisme américain, une perspective évolutive sur les hiérarchies raciales et sociales, et un examen nuancé de l'échange culturel transatlantique. En analysant leur correspondance, leurs récits de voyage et leurs critiques culturelles, cette recherche soutient que leurs œuvres offrent des perspectives uniques sur la formation de l'identité nationale américaine, révélant les tensions entre idéaux cosmopolites et impulsions nationalistes.

**Mots-clés :** Identité transatlantique, Critique culturelle, Exceptionnalisme américain, Discours racial, Cosmopolitisme



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Henry James and Edith Wharton, renowned for their critical views on American culture and their strong affinity towards European traditions, present a complex articulation of American identity through a distinctly European lens. Their perspectives on America often oscillate between acceptance and rejection, demonstrating a love-hate dynamic that reflects the ever-evolving and contradictory nature of American society. This paper aims to illustrate how James and Wharton crafted narratives of their nation by navigating the demands of nation-building and racial ideologies, while simultaneously embracing and disavowing various cultural and political visions put forth by prominent figures in American history.

The study is structured along two main axes: 1) *Between Imperial Enthusiasm and Discontent: The Polarized Discourse of America's Imperial Venture*, and 2) *The "Inconceivable Alien" and American Identity: Ambivalent Race Constructions*. Through these lenses, we explore how both authors perceived and documented the tensions inherent in the official narratives propagated within nationalist discourse and its contestations.

Methodologically, this research strategically decenters canonical fictional texts, instead privileging primary source materials such as epistolary correspondence, travelogues, critical essays, and biographical and autobiographical inscriptions. By interrogating these liminal textual spaces, the study enables a hermeneutic excavation of the authors' discursive formations, thereby generating polymorphic epistemological insights into their complex negotiations of national identity, cultural alterity, and socio-historical transformation.

The theoretical framework of this study draws from various disciplines. Starting from Claire Kramsch's observation that "culture both liberates and constrains" (1998: 6) to explore the the authors' relationship with culture and their oscillations between love and hate regarding their own identities within shifting racial and national discourses. To elucidate the authors' national and racial ideas, the paper utilizes historical and biographical information, particularly focusing on America's imperial ambitions and the role of political figures like Theodore Roosevelt in shaping narratives of national grandeur.

In examining racial constructions, the paper utilizes Tzvetan Todorov's definition of race in its relation to culture and nation, as well as David Theo Goldberg's concept of "racial knowledge" (2000: 154). Etienne Balibar's definition of racism and Zygmunt Bauman's explanations of exclusionary practices provide a framework for understanding James's and Wharton's

attitudes towards racial and cultural difference. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's dissipation of the concept of strangeness is used to clarify James's stance towards "aliens," framing his expressions as "heterophobia" rather than outright racism.

By analyzing these authors' engagement with debates surrounding the essence of Americanness amidst racial diversity, this paper uncovers an underlying unease emanating from larger narratives controlling their stories. It contributes to our understanding of how influential literary figures grappled with and shaped America's national narrative during a period of significant cultural and political change.

### **1. Contested Patriotism: James, Wharton, and Roosevelt's Competing Narratives of American Exceptionalism**

The re-election of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 marked a defining period in American history, a time when the nation's imperial ambitions soared and its martial ethos was cemented. Roosevelt, an advocate of imperialistic endeavors, castigated American anti-imperialists as traitors, "liars," and "slanderers" (qtd. in Beisner, 1968: 237), categorically dismissing their opposition to the nation's expanding role on the global stage. With an almost deterministic zeal and an aggressive foreign policy agenda, he viewed America's trajectory in the world as preordained. Yet, while Roosevelt embodied the exaltation of American imperialism, James apprehended the notion of the "imperial" presidency and disclaimed the American aggression in the Spanish-American War (Kaplan, 1992: 520). According to biographer Leon Edel (1985), James considered Roosevelt "a dangerous and ominous jingo," highlighting a palpable disdain for the president and his policies. Roosevelt, in turn, dismissed James as "effete" and "a miserable little snob" (qtd. in Edel: 604), underscoring the profound divide between the two men.

In her analysis of this contentious relationship, Martha Banta (1998) identifies a fundamental clash of ideologies. James, epitomizing the "Anglophiliac" and "mere artist" in Roosevelt's eyes, found himself at odds with the latter's vision of the quintessential American man—a figure steeped in militaristic virtues and an unwavering dedication to the nation. Roosevelt's scorn for expatriates, whom he saw as embodying a decadent and degenerate form of American masculinity, was evident in his dismissal of James and others like him (24).

For Roosevelt, the imperial project was inextricably linked with notions of masculine vigor and national identity. The Civil War, to him, was a defining

moment in American history and a testament to the masculine virtues of courage and heroism, traits he believed were essential for the preservation and expansion of American greatness. James, on the other hand, embraced a different kind of battle—the battle of the imagination. His empire was not one of territorial conquest, but rather, the realm of art and literature (Kaplan, 1992: 3).

The contrasting perspectives of Roosevelt and James on America's imperial ambitions reflect a broader epistemological divide—a divide between those who viewed imperialism as a symbol of national strength and those who saw it as a betrayal of America's core values. The tension between exaltation and aversion towards America's imperial venture remains a complex and enduring theme in American history and literature.

The evolution of James's perspective on America's imperial ambitions vividly illustrates a wavering standpoint. Initially repulsed by the concept of "U.S. remote colonies run by bosses," James gradually softened his stance as a result of diplomatic justifications from American political acquaintances, acknowledging that America was essentially emulating the successful and benevolent imperial model set forth by Britain (Edel, 1985: 473). This "conversion," as it were, was not sudden but gradual, culminating in a growing tolerance as expressed in a letter to John Hay in 1904. James ended up contemplating becoming a "special ward" of the Department of State, suggesting a willingness henceforth to contribute to America's international standing (Monteiro, 1965: 121- 133).

Unlike James, Wharton, who maintained a lasting friendship with Roosevelt, admired his political ideals and staunchly defended him against his detractors<sup>1</sup>. She even tried to overturn the skepticism of Charles Eliot Norton, her mentor and friend, who considered Roosevelt "the good cowboy become president" (Price, 2000 : 208). R.W.B. Lewis (1975), her biographer, concludes emphatically that her regard for Roosevelt as "the model statesman" signifies her unwavering support for U.S. expansionist policies (139; 6). Indeed, Wharton internalized and promoted Roosevelt's vision of bold imperial action, aligning with discourses around Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. In 1919, she enthusiastically echoed such sentiments, proclaiming, "We are a new people, a pioneer people, a people destined by fate to break up new continents and experiment in new social

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<sup>1</sup> In his biography of Wharton, R.W.B. Lewis (1975) highlights her enduring acquaintance with Roosevelt and her admiration for his public persona (139 - 145).

conditions” (1919: 17-18). Furthermore, Wharton's affinity for imperialism was also discernible through her publication choices, which predominantly featured mainstream magazines and journals espousing pro-imperial perspectives such as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Century*, *Lippincott*, and *McClure's* (Ammons, 1995: 74).

Both James and Wharton<sup>1</sup> expressed unease regarding the delayed entry of the United States into World War I. This situation prompted James to make a paramount decision after a lifetime of contemplation on his national identity. He renounced his American citizenship just one year before his death, a decision characterized by some as “a national apostasy” (Kaplan, 1992: 591). Interestingly, Wharton's frustration with America's inaction led her to anticipate James's renunciation of American citizenship. She expressed her disdain, stating,

[...] the whole thing makes me so sick with shame that if I had time—and it mattered—I'd run round to the Préfecture de Police & get myself naturalized, almost anything rather than continue to be an American. (qtd. in Dwight, 1994: 287)

Thus, Wharton shared James's perspective but opted for a different course, believing Americans should “make every sacrifice to atone for the cowardice of their government” ” (qtd. in Price, 2000: 212) by generously supporting charity organizations in France. Viewing German civilization as “rotten” (Lewis, 1975: 212), she urged fellow novelist Robert Grant to disseminate the potential repercussions of England and France succumbing to Prussianism, emphasizing the grave implications for cherished American values. She affirmed the veracity of reports on purported “atrocities,” asserting that such accounts were not only true but also “understated” in their portrayal of reality (qtd. in Benert, 1996: 322).

## 2. Alien Encounters: Race, Identity, and the Transformation of American Nationhood

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<sup>1</sup> As an expatriate during the wartime, Wharton bore witness to the horrors of the war firsthand, which, in the words of Carol Singley, left her “fearing for the demise of civilization itself” (1995: 8). Her dismay over the United States' reluctance to engage in World War I was evident, a sentiment encapsulated in her highly critical stance towards her country's neutrality. Despite her already public war-relief efforts in France and Belgium, Wharton's disapproval was mainly expressed in private correspondence. In a letter to Bernard Berenson dated August 22, 1914, she lamented America's absence from the conflict while “other nations” demonstrated their moral readiness. With an air of exasperation, she expressed her wish to include the U.S., but she found it difficult to reconcile the country's prominent role in peace treaties and the Hague Convention with its inaction during this critical time. She concluded the letter with a poignant observation on the “smugness” that seemed to prevail among Americans at the time (qtd. in Lewis, 1975: 334).

The emergence of America as a global power marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of American identity. The phenomenon of imperialism cast a cosmopolitan veil over this identity, while simultaneously fostering a heightened sense of Anglo-Saxon nativism. This era also saw the figure of the Jew emerge as a significant, even contentious, symbol of difference within American culture, intersecting with broader anxieties surrounding selfhood and national identity.

At the turn of the 20th century, America experienced unprecedented transformations, solidifying its position as a dominant imperial, industrial, and commercial force on the world stage. This period was marked by a substantial influx of immigrants, primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe. Between 1890 and 1914 alone, an estimated 16,516,081 immigrants arrived in America, with more than 10 percent of them being of Jewish descent (Dinnerstein, 1987: 58). The massive influx of immigrants raised concerns among Anglo-Saxon nativists, who viewed their race as imperiled by these newcomers, many of whom struggled to speak English. This alarm was voiced by Anglo-supremacists, including Roosevelt, who coined the term “race suicide”<sup>1</sup> to describe his fears of racial dilution. Even the Boston Brahmins<sup>2</sup>, an intellectual and social elite with whom both James and Wharton were closely associated, openly expressed their concerns about the potential consequences of unregulated immigration.

The restrictive political climate of the 1890s gave rise to figures like Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who championed the idea that American democracy was a unique attribute of the Anglo-Saxon race. Lodge sought to “bring under national control something that had never been controlled by public policy: mass migration” (Graham, 2000: 116). To this end, he advocated for the implementation of a literacy test for prospective immigrants, aiming to limit the influx of illiterate individuals from Eastern and Southern Europe. While President Grover Cleveland vetoed the bill in 1896, it laid the groundwork for future legislation aimed at controlling immigration (Graham, 2000: 116).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Dyer explains how Roosevelt “became the most forceful and articulate of race suicide propagandizers” throughout his “advocacy of increased breeding by old-stock Americans” (155). See his *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (1980). Louisiana State UP Baton Rouge, especially chapter VII: “Race Suicide,” pp. 143-167.

<sup>2</sup> “Brahmin” refers to the highest priestly caste in Hindu society and is teasingly used to refer to the members of upper-class New England families, especially Boston families. The most prominent intellectual friends of James were Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton. See Edel, pp. 67-68. His lifelong friend Lowell, for example, believed that Jews were conspiring to monopolize power over the whole world (Dinnerstein, 1987: 16).

The policymakers of the time were driven by what David Sibley (1995) terms “exclusionary psychology” (45), a mindset that propelled them to develop spatial policies and practices aimed at limiting the presence of what they perceived as “aliens.” Sibley refers to these as “geographies of exclusion” (69), a concept Matthew Hannah (2001) further elaborates on, designating it “spatial prophylaxis” (215). “Exclusionary psychology” stems from feelings of insecurity concerning territory, status, and power, ultimately fueling a desire for boundary construction and the rejection of alleged threats. Both James and Wharton shared these feelings with the policymakers, often expressing high-cultural nativism and even racism in their attitudes towards others. Meyer Weinberg suggests that their attitudes were readily aligned with anti-Semitism, a sentiment echoed in James’s description of his return to the United States in 1904, after a 21-year absence, as akin to encountering “an apparition” or “seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house” (*The American Scene*: 66). James was challenged by the profound changes that had taken place in his absence, prompting him to adopt an analytical and critical stance<sup>1</sup> toward the evolving socio-political landscape of his homeland. Wharton, too, was profoundly unsettled by the erosion of traditional racial hierarchies in America, a sentiment reflected in her letters and recounted by her biographers and critics who all acknowledge her deep-seated race-consciousness.

Shari Benstock and Susan Goodman (1994) have pointed out that Wharton’s closest friends were nativists and anti-Semites (46). Elizabeth Ammons (1995) has reported that R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis meticulously edited Wharton’s letters, opting to exclude those containing racist or anti-Semitic content in what they referred to as “protective editing” (70). In a conference on Wharton’s letters, the Lewises acknowledged that she had expressed “prejudices” they wished she did not have. They also revealed that they had initially planned to include a letter with “some vilely anti-Semitic comments,” but the publisher persuaded them not to include it, fearing it would “distort the public view of Wharton” (qtd. in Ammons, 1995: 84). Benstock (1994) reports how Wharton openly expressed alarm at the rise of Jewish intellectuals in America and, when solicited to fund a scholarship for college education in New York in 1923, she disdainfully referred to the recipients as “female Yids” (qtd. in Benstock, 1994: 387). Additionally, Wharton’s dismissal encompassed not only Jews but also what Roosevelt referred to as “hyphenated Americans” (Bentley, 2003: 119). Over time, she became even

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<sup>1</sup> James repeatedly describes himself as “a brooding critic” and a “restless analyst” throughout *The American scene*.

more convinced that “the intermingling of customs” and “the overthrow of traditions could bear no rich cultural fruit” (Benstock, 1994: 388).

Moreover, Wharton shared anti-Semitic jokes with her banker, John Hugh Smith, who perpetuated the notion that Jews wielded significant control over the international monetary system, leveraging it for their sustained prosperity (Benstock, 1994: 388). In a 1905 letter to Morgan Dix, the Rector of Trinity Church in New York, Wharton observed that the new social conditions, characterized by a sudden acquisition of wealth, and devoid of “inherited obligations” or any traditional sense of class solidarity, presented a vast and compelling field for the novelist to explore (*Letters*, 1988: 99). She lamented that:

[...] a handful of vulgar people, bent on spending and enjoying, may seem a negligible factor in the social development of the race, but they become an engine of destruction through the illusions they kill and the generous ardors they turn to despair. (*The Uncollected Critical Writings*, 1996: 110)

According to Wharton, such “vulgar groups” always rest upon a foundation of “wasted human possibilities” (266)<sup>1</sup>.

Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of race in its relation to culture and nation is useful in better comprehending Wharton’s racial ideology. Todorov (2000) suggests that racism can both be behavioral and ideological, that is, an outright expression of revulsion and disdain towards racial others, or a latent doctrine bred by an accumulated knowledge of race theories (64). Todorov coins the term “racialism” to designate the ideological sidepiece of racism. He proposes that the most significant remodeling of the concept of race in the late nineteenth century is “its transposition from the physical to the cultural plane,” notably as an outcome of the work of Hippolyte Taine and Ernest Renan (67). These academics have supplanted “race” by the more fitting idiom of “culture” (70). Taine had deployed considerable efforts to “translate race theory into an explicit force in [nineteenth-century] literature” (Gossett, 1964: 199). Most importantly, he tends, in Todorov’s terms, “to identify race with nation” to the point of using “‘nationality’ as a synonym for race” (68). Wharton praised Taine as “one of the formative influences of my youth—the greatest after Darwin, Spencer & Lecky” (*Letters*, 1988: 136). Although Wharton does not mention Joseph Ernest Renan in her list of favorite philosophical inspirers, the French scholar actually stands amongst the most important of her intellectual preceptors. Carol Singley registers the fact that Wharton had read Renan’s controversial book *Life of*

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Wharton wrote this in her 1936 preface to *The House of Mirth*.

*Jesus* (1863). This book is a historical rather than a theological study of Jesus and Christianity and powerfully rebuts the fact that Jesus was a Jew. Such rebuttal, Singley (2003) explains, further fuelled anti-Semitism and stirred Wharton and her contemporaries to more manifest expressions of Jew-hatred in their writings (34). On the basis of Singley's affirmation that Wharton's personal library counted six books by Renan (1863: 32), it is also possible to speculate that Wharton was somehow inclined to espouse Renan's Orientalist belief that the Semites are "une combinaison inférieure de la nature humaine [an inferior combination of human nature]" (4).

In "Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit," Singley (1995) explores Darwin's profound influence on Wharton, noting him as one of her "awakeners" and as

[...] the figure most often associated with her due to his monumental position in the nineteenth century and the strong determinist strain in her fiction. Wharton considered theories of evolution and the processes of reason accompanying them to be of paramount importance, avidly following all current scientific developments (56).

Darwin and Herbert Spencer pioneered the concept of evolution and gave precedence to biologism over cultural factors. William Edward Hartpole Lecky embraced utilitarian empiricism and positivism, which was the inspiration behind his agnosticism and opposition to Christianity. Wharton's acknowledged indebtedness to these thinkers explains why in 1905 she confidently asserted that "far-sighted altruism savors of the romantic northern races; beneath a hot sun there is less weighing of remote contingencies" (1996: 112). This is an example of a racist ideology, where racists make "judgments of preference" disguised as "aesthetic appreciation" (Todorov, 2000: 66) toward their own race, which they deem superior in intellect and beauty.

It is no surprise, too, that elsewhere she laments the fact that Americans are deficient in "the blind sense in the blood of [their country's] racial power" (1908: 178). The fact that Wharton describes herself as a student of the "wonder world of nineteenth-century science" (1934: 94) underscores the depth of her absorption of knowledge from nineteenth-century race theorists. Such knowledge, in Foucault's sense, is "brought into play in the construction of the least fragment of discourse" (377) which, by necessity, takes racial theories to be axiomatic epistemologies.

These race theorists have conferred on Wharton what David Theo Goldberg (2000) calls "racial knowledge" (154). Defined by a "dual movement," such

racial knowledge in turn seizes the contemporary discourses of science and biology as its own privileged idiom. The “scientific cloak of racial knowledge,” along with “its formal character and seeming universality, imparts authority and legitimation to it” (154). It will be interesting to see how this racial knowledge, enveloped with scientism, will contribute to “the making of difference” (154) in Wharton’s novels.

In contrast to Wharton’s distant engagement with foreignness, James’s encounter with the “alien” in *The American Scene* unfolds in a vividly embodied and direct manner. His travelogue chronicles his impressions and visceral reactions to the dramatic changes that happened during his prolonged absence from the United States. Upper New York Bay becomes the stage for a poignant encounter with the immigrant masses processing through Ellis Island, the “terrible Ellis Island,” a “first harbor of refuge” tinged with the anxieties of assimilation. He portrays the immigrants as a spectacle, “lined up in their pitiable state,” their patient wait a “drama that goes on, without a pause, day by day and year by year”. For James, this influx represents “an ingurgitation on the part of our body politic and social” - a phenomenon as astonishing as any circus act. His metaphor of a clock “ticking some louder hour of our national fate than usual” further underscores the gravity of this historical moment, where the influx of immigrants fundamentally reshapes the contours of national identity. This encounter, James argues, serves as an “initiatory passage” for any “sensitive citizen,” transitioning from ignorance to a stark awareness of the shared fate binding them to the “inconceivable alien”. Having “eaten of the tree of knowledge,” he now recognizes the necessity to share his “American consciousness” and “patriotism” with this previously unimaginable other (*The American Scene*, 1907: 66).

James’s reaction to the immigrants is unmistakably marked by a potent blend of hostility and resentment. Though he may often present his feelings as mere psychological fears, they occasionally veer into a form of rationalized, “tertiary” level of racism, supported and legitimized by biological arguments that justify exclusion and even extermination. His persistent portrayal of the “alien” as wayward and menacing hints at profound anxieties regarding the perceived decline or extinction of the Anglo-Saxon race. An illustrative example of this is his visit to the “Yiddish quarter” of East Side New York, where he takes note of “a Jewry that had burst all bounds” with a “celestial serenity of multiplication” in this “New Jerusalem on earth” (*The American Scene*, 1907: 100-101). James’s language seems to resonate with biological theories of reproduction and extinction as he describes the Jewish quarter as a place where:

[...] multiplication, multiplication of everything, was the dominant note, at the bottom of some vast shallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of overdeveloped proboscis, were to bump together, for ever, amid heaped spoils of the sea. (100)

Observing the children, he notes that “here was multiplication with a vengeance.” The number of old people is equally staggering, to the extent that, along with the children, they “are using the street for overflow” (100). James muses that:

[...] the unsurpassed strength of the race permits of the chopping into myriads of fine fragments without loss of race-quality... There are small strange animals, known to natural history, snakes or worms, I believe, who, when cut into pieces, wriggle away contentedly and live in the snippet as completely as in the whole. (100).

James’s use of insectival and animal imagery has attracted significant criticism. While he may have been reflecting the prevailing belief that Jews have historically exhibited an “obstinate survival despite relentless discrimination and persecution” (Christie, 1998: 124), his choice of such metaphors raises concerns about his awareness and potential influence by biological undertones in his assessment of immigrants.

According to F.O. Matthiessen, James was “concerned about the new aliens in a way that brought him dangerously near to a doctrine of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority” in *The American Scene* (646). Maxwell Geismer (1965) goes even further, characterizing James as “an unbearable and odious social snob” (350). Geismer’s distinctive perspective extends to drawing a provocative parallel between James’s attitude toward the Jews and that of Adolf Hitler, suggesting a shared effort to suppress the same “alien” presence (350).

Considering Etienne Balibar’s definition of racism as practices inspired by “intellectual elaborations of the phantasm of prophylaxis or segregation” (1991: 17), and Bauman’s explanation that racism “requires that the offending category is physically exterminated” (2000: 215), it is not accurate to classify any of James’s pronouncements as exclusionary. James acknowledges the necessity for himself and his compatriots to engage with the presence of the “alien.” Therefore, James’s expressions might be described as “heterophobia,” or fear of otherness, rather than racism.

Bauman’s concept of “heterophobia” offers a lens to understand the anxieties underlying James’s encounter with immigrants in *The American Scene*. Bauman (2000) defines it as “unease, discomfort, or anxiety that people experience when confronted with unfamiliar ‘human ingredients’ of their

situation” (214). This anxiety, rooted in a perceived loss of control, aligns with James’s reaction to the influx of immigrants, whom he considers “aliens” within his familiar New York.

Bauman argues that modernity amplifies such anxieties due to the frequent “occasions for the ‘no control’ experience” (214). James’s observations on the city’s rapid transformation reflect this sentiment. He describes skyscrapers as “giants of the mere market,” lamenting the prioritization of commerce over aesthetics and tradition (*The American Scene*, 1907: 102). His critique of “the terrible town” suggests a mourning for the past and a resistance to modernity’s influence.

On the other hand, modernity’s inclination toward nurturing individual aspirations for self-governance and self-guidance also heightens exclusionary perspectives toward those perceived as resistant to improvement and beyond control (Bauman, 2000: 215). Discussing the “dark, foul, stifling Ghettoes,” James singles out the omnipresent fire escapes in the “poor” areas (101), evocative of modernization and suggestive of “the distance achieved from the old Jerusalem” (101-102). Drawing what he terms an “irresistible analogy,” he likens these fire escapes to a “spaciously organized cage for the nimbler class of animals in some great zoological garden” (101-102). James laments that “the very name of architecture perishes” due to these fire escapes, which provide “a little world of bars and perches and swings for human squirrels and monkeys” (102). This use of animal imagery is particularly noteworthy when James links it to the disregard for aesthetic considerations by the inhabitants of this New Jerusalem who lead “like the squirrels and monkeys all the merrier life” (102). James’s metaphor reveals an intriguing ambivalence: is he expressing sympathy or repulsion? His choice of words suggests a complex response; while he seems to critique the aesthetic degradation brought by modernity, he also acknowledges the immigrants’ adaptation and vitality. Thus, his use of animal imagery could be seen as both a lament for lost beauty and a recognition of the resilience and joy in immigrant life.

To the extent that expressing discontent with the changes wrought by modernity is one of modernism’s exertions, James’s observations about the neglect of old values in the immigrant context exemplify the alienated self in the urban jungle of the twentieth century. It is correct that *The American Scene* interchangeably reflects James’s concerns regarding race and ethnicity and those of his social class. However, labeling James as a racist oversimplifies the complexities inherent in his views on race, which oscillate between rejection and acceptance. As John Higham (1975) suggests, “Most of

the anti-Semitism in native American circles in the late nineteenth century was entangled with persistent sympathy” (103). Similarly, Ross Posnock (1991) observes that James “complicates his snobbery with sympathy” (227). These nuanced perspectives indicate that James’s attitudes were not purely exclusionary but were instead marked by a tension between prejudice and empathy.

Building on this understanding of James’s ambivalent views, we can see how the pervasive presence of the alien in American society forces him to confront deeper questions about the very nature of American identity. The “ubiquity” of the alien leads him to pose a crucial question regarding the elusive nature of the American identity:

Which is the American, by these scant measures?—which is not the alien, over a large part of the country at least, and where does one put a finger on the dividing line, or, for that matter, ‘spot’ and identify any particular phase of the conversion? (*The American Scene*, 1907: 95).

In confronting this pressing question of identity and demarcation, James grapples with the realization that America, in Julia Kristeva’s words, is a “paradoxical community” where heterogeneity is fundamental to the nation’s makeup, where identity remains in a constant state of flux, and where the notion of subjective wholeness is a fallacy. James’s introspective designations of “restored absentee,” “reinstated absentee,” “repatriated absentee,” and “the subject long-expatriated” (*The American Scene*, 1907: 266, 281, 224) indicate his acknowledgment that “The foreigner is within us” (Kristeva, 1991: 191)<sup>1</sup>. At one juncture, he even reconsiders the term “alien” itself, questioning its precise connotation:

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<sup>1</sup> My analysis of this point builds on that of Ross Posnock (1991), but with a psychoanalytical, Kristevan perspective. I am using Kristeva as the major theoretical exponent of the postmodern project of toleration and tolerance which are both generated by the recognition of the stranger within one’s self. The Kristevan analysis is permeated with psychoanalysis in its concern with the subject and its construction, transcending the understanding of the subject in a purely structuralist sense, and favoring one who is always in “process” or in “crisis.” Posnock argues that *The American Scene* “exemplifies a distinct, if underrated, interracial tradition that interrogates the cultural pluralism with which it is often misleadingly aligned” and proposes to call this tradition “pragmatist pluralism” on account of the established influence of William James’s criticism of “the logic of identity” (225). Posnock also rightly notes that James “hopes to disrupt our propensity to arrest meaning in identity, an arrest made possible by ignoring or dismissing the remainder or residue that escapes the concept’s grasp” (225). Posnock also points to the fact that critics have generally dwelt on James’s apprehension and revulsion from the alien presences while ignoring that such feelings occur “within a frame of acceptance founded on an uneasy but unflinching sense of affinity with the alien” (227).

Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history?—peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and urgently required (95).

His own foreignness manifests in a dual manner; he is both the descendant of those “recent” and “traceable” immigrants, and, simultaneously, a visitor “attuned, from far back, to ‘European’ importances” (103).

James’s winding paths ultimately lead him to subvert his own individualism. His undermining of the notion of the “alien” stems from his acknowledgment and acceptance of his own “strangenesses,” thereby recognizing the “togetherness” that binds him and his fellow Americans with those considered “foreign.”<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno’s aphorism that “retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement” (94) provides a useful perspective. Indeed, James’s persistent retraction of the absoluteness of the concept foreignness serves to demystify the concept of a unified self and dismantles the prejudiced racial attributions that pervade his discourse.

James’s disquiet concerning “aliens” recalls Freud’s notion of the uncanny, a concept endorsed by Kristeva as a strategy for cohabitation with “strangers.” This idea is rooted in the reassuring realization that the self is intrinsically mercurial and fragmented, thus making it amenable to “welcom[ing] strangers to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours” (1991: 191-192). James’s inquiry, “which is not the alien,” suggests an acknowledgment that claiming nativeness in America is arduous. In Kristeva’s words, the stranger represents “the hidden face of our identity”; “By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself” (1). Kristeva reinforces her stance by nullifying the peculiarity of strangeness: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1). This is precisely the path that James traverses throughout *The American Scene*. Despite the commonly held perception that he is a cultural elitist, he nonetheless accepts the inevitability of engaging with the presence of aliens on his native soil through a process of self-identification and empathy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the dialogues of James and Wharton with national narratives weave a rich tapestry of perspectives on American imperialism and identity. Their debates not only reflect the intellectual and moral struggles of their

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<sup>1</sup> These are Julia Kristeva’s terms. See her *Strangers to Ourselves*, pp. 2-3.

time but also encapsulate the broader existential questions that America faced as it embraced its burgeoning role on the global stage. Through their works, James and Wharton expose the nation's internal conflict, torn between the seductive allure of expansionism and the foundational principles of democracy and moral integrity. This tension highlights the enduring paradoxes inherent in the American experience.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century thus emerges as a pivotal epoch in American history, a time when the nation's values were tested against the realities of power and influence. James and Wharton, through their literary engagement, provide profound insights into the complexities of national identity and the moral dilemmas associated with imperial ambition. Their reflections serve as a lens through which we can examine the perennial challenges of defining a national ethos amidst global ambitions.

As a result, they offer enduring lessons on the quandary of power and principle, revealing the multifaceted nature of the human condition. By grappling with these themes, James and Wharton contribute to a deeper understanding of the American national narrative, one that continues to reverberate and inform contemporary discussions about identity, morality, and the role of the United States in the world.

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