

## Moral Disagreement and an Unsuccessful Relationship in Henry James's *The American*

Yuko Yamasaki

Henry James's *The American* (1877) presents a picture of a man and a woman who fail to establish a successful relationship. Though there are various aspects and causes which contributed to the unsuccessful relationship of Christopher Newman, an American businessman in Paris, and Claire de Cintré, a French aristocrat widow, their difference in morality plays a great part. A psychological study of women's moral development by Carol Gilligan is crucial in understanding their disagreement. Even though Gilligan's idea on morality is not the absolute explanation of human moral situation, what Henry James presents in *The American* is the very picture of what Gilligan's research reveals. Thus, firstly, I will clarify what moral aspects are under discussion. Secondly, I will report Gilligan's original study on morality along with the recent criticism against it. In the third part of this essay, I will look into the particular conversations in the novel and explain why Christopher and Claire's relationship turns out to be a failure.

In my discussion, I differentiate the following terms: moral concept is an idea which is held by an individual and serves as a foundation for making moral judgment; moral perspective is what Gilligan has found in the overall view of human moral experience — there are “justice perspective” and “care perspective.” The last and longest conversation of Christopher and Claire contains the essence of emotion and thought derived from their incompatibility of morality. The analysis of their conversation through Gilligan's study on morality will bring a new reading of Claire. Though she seems totally submissive to her environmental forces, she will be proved to be self-decisive.

### I

As for the morality in *The American*, traditionally there is one way to look at it: “the moral triumph of American good nature over European treachery” (Spengemann 8). In

F. R. Leavis's words, Christopher Newman is "unworldly, and finely sensitive to moral values; and because of this is at a disadvantage in dealing with the corrupt and subtle French aristocrats who victimize him" (142). Newman is too puritanically morally upright to blackmail and revenge himself upon the Bellegardes who treated him unfairly and had their daughter reject him at the last moment.

This traditional view of morality that is related to *The American*, however, oversimplifies the moral aspect in the novel. Morality, by definition, is "conduct of the individual which conforms to the standards set by the community, particularly those standards which deal with right and wrong [often believed to rest upon a more absolute authority than mere convention, an authority such as the public conscience, the categorical imperative, natural or divine law]" ("Morality"). The traditional view described above is the moral judgment by American standards. As Christopher and Claire belong to communities dissimilar in many aspects, the set standards for their conduct also distinctly differ. In this paper, I will show more than a traditional view of morality.

The major differing aspects between Christopher and Claire that influence their moral concepts are culture, social status and gender. As for cultural difference, we find, in the novel, a national culture as well as a family culture of Claire's submissiveness to her mother and brother. Christopher expresses his perplexity with Claire's attitude in his conversation with Mrs. Tristram, the wife of his friend living in Paris:

"Why does she [Claire] let them [her family] bully her? Is she not her own mistress?"

"Legally, yes, I suppose; but morally, no. In France you must never say Nay to your mother, whatever she requires of you. . . ."

"Can't she at least make her brother leave off?"

"Her brother is the *chef de la famille*, as they say; he is the head of the clan. With those people the family is everything; you must act, not for your own pleasure, but for the advantage of the family." (120)

In this way, cultural difference is indicated as a barrier for their marriage.

In addition, social status is presented as a barrier. Henry James admits in his letter to William Dean Howells that he intended to present the strength of the barrier:

. . . the interest of the subject as . . . its exemplification of one of those insuperable difficulties which present themselves in people's lives and from which the only issue is by forfeiture — by losing something. . . . We are each

the product of circumstances and there are tall stone walls which fatally divide us. (44)

Although Christopher believes that he can overcome the difference in social status, Claire believes it cannot be. Social status, thus, serves as the opposing force for their marriage.

Gender difference is the most decisive factor that influences their moral concepts. The cultural enforcement of submissiveness and the requirement to stabilize social structure on Claire's side will prove to be, as a matter of fact, derived from what Carol Gilligan calls the "care perspective." Therefore, I will discuss Gilligan's psychological study of morality in the following section before I discuss the relationship of Christopher and Claire.

## II

The psychologist Carol Gilligan's research of men and women illuminated the neglected aspect in human moral development. She states in *In a Different Voice*:

. . . I began to hear . . . two ways of speaking about moral problems, two modes of describing the relationship between other and self. . . .

The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex. (1-2)

During her discussion, Gilligan points out the preceding studies of moral development have been derived from male children and adults. For example, she reports Kohlberg's study (1958, 1981) of moral development finds conception of goodness is equated with supporting and pleasing others. She adds that Kohlberg and Kramer (1969) implies that women will recognize their inadequacy to acquire higher stages and progress like men only if they enter the area of male activity (*In a Different Voice* 18).

Gilligan, however, casts doubt on the women's seeming inferiority. She hypothesizes the new perspective of morality mainly through women's actions and voices, which is different from the perspective of justice. *In a Different Voice*, she introduces the perspective of care:

Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and include in their judgment other points of view. (16-7)

Furthermore, she affirms that there is gender difference in the moral imperative:

The moral imperative . . . with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the “real and recognizable trouble” of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment. (100)

Gilligan describes “care and justice as two moral perspectives that organize both thinking and feelings and empower the self to take different kinds of action in public as well as private life” (“Reply” 326). The care perspective is a moral perspective different from the justice perspective prevalent in current psychological theories and measures.

Since the publication of *In a Different Voice* in 1982, challenges have been made to Gilligan's work on moral development. For example, a social psychologist Carol Tavis, even though she admits that Gilligan's work expanded the “vision of the importance of an ethic of care in moral reasoning” (83), reports that recent studies find “no average differences in the kind of moral reasoning that men and women apply” (85). In addition, as early as in the 1970's, studies of men and women in corporations by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a sociologist, shows that “women and men who are in dead-end, low-paying, unstimulating jobs tend to focus on the aspects of the job that are, by default, the most pleasurable: namely, relationship with others” (161). What is implied here is that emphasis on care and relationship with others is not necessarily derived from gender difference but from social structure or the imbalance of power (Tavis 298). Furthermore, Carol B. Stack finds that by studying African-American migrants returning to the rural south, their moral development is an alternative to Gilligan's model (323). She finds no gender difference among them in their belief in the relationship of the family. She cautions that gender construction is not the same in all societies (324), suggesting Gilligan's work to be racially white.

As I have demonstrated above, it is debatable to relate the justice perspective of morality only to men and the care perspective only to women. Yet Henry James's *The American* shows these two perspectives in a way that confirms Gilligan's findings. In the next section, I will investigate in detail the conversations of Christopher and Claire and find out how these two different perspectives in morality serve as destructive force for

their relationship. The cultural difference and the enforcement of social stability seem to be destructive forces for their relationship, but their different moral perspectives, characterized by gender, actually lie at the foundation of their moral concepts.

### III

Claire de Cintré has been criticized as an incomprehensible character. In James's own words, "with this lady [Claire], . . . , I recognize, a light plank, . . . , is laid the reader over a dark psychological abyss" (*The Art of the Novel* 39). By a contemporary critic of Henry James, she was regarded as "the least successful figure in the book," being "so colorless as to seem somewhat inconsistent with the part she has to play" (Burlingame 39). A critic of twenty-five years later also points out Claire "as a vague figure" ("The American: Twenty-five Years Later" 42). Another view of Claire is that she is a victim. A review in *Scribner's Monthly* states, "Madame de Cintré quailing before her fiendish mother, and her stone-hearted older brother, cowered away into her Carmelite novitiate" (48). She is vague and weak. She is "portrayed as inexplicable and motiveless, and her powerlessness in relation to both Newman and the Bellegardes consistently levels the power balance between the two cultures to sets of different yet predatory impulses, with Claire as prey" (Allen 49). Claire's vagueness and powerlessness that they all criticize, however, are derived from her own moral concept. I find, by closely investigating the conversations of Christopher and Claire according to Gilligan's moral perspectives of justice and care, that Christopher's moral concept is characterized by the justice perspective and his rule for justice is autonomy. On the other hand, Claire's moral concept is care-based and her care for others emphasizes her relationship to those outside the dyad of the couple.

In the novel, the differences between Christopher's and Claire's moral concepts are easily recognizable. He judges what is right according to the idea of autonomy. Thus, he always tries to persuade Claire of the importance of autonomy. It is morally right for Christopher to pursue individual happiness. This aspect is shown in his following words to Claire:

Give me a reason — A decent reason. You are not a child — you are not a minor, nor an idiot. You are not obliged to drop me because your mother told you to. Such a reason isn't worthy of you. (348)

What have you to do with any others but me? Besides, you said just now that you

wanted happiness, and that you should find it by obeying your mother. You contradict yourself. (350)

It is morally right for Christopher to pursue personal happiness because his criteria for moral judgment is to be his own master and make his way by himself.

However, Christopher's belief in autonomy is incompatible with Claire's belief in relationship. The following examples distinguish the care perspective in Claire's moral concept:

I am afraid of being uncomfortable. It is not marrying you; it is doing all that would go with it. It's the rupture, the defiance, the insisting upon being happy in my own way. What right have I to be happy when — when — When others have been most unhappy. (350)

She is afraid of destroying her relationship with her family by her marriage to Christopher. In addition, at Christopher's first proposal to her, she says, "I am seeing you because I promised my brother I would" (167). Claire is not at all willing to listen to what Christopher will say, but she does listen to him for her brother's sake. Furthermore, when they get into an argument over Claire's mother's attitude toward their engagement, Claire just withdraws what she has to say. She says, "I will keep it to myself," in order to avoid conflict with Christopher and she makes him, this time, feel uncomfortable (250). Unlike Christopher, who presses her his idea of autonomy, Claire chooses to withhold her belief or desire in order to keep the relationship. I find this trait of Claire's conduct to be similar to the conduct of girls in game playing which Gilligan concluded from other studies: "boys in their games are more concerned with rules while girls are more concerned with relationships, often at the expense of the game itself" (*In a Different Voice* 16). Claire neither submits to a fiat nor grabs the chance of happiness but avoids conflicts with others. Her seeming submissiveness is not cultural but results from her care perspective.

The different moral perspectives of Christopher and Claire give a totally different outlook toward the existing problem of social status between them. Christopher is aware that the difference of their social standing can be a barrier, but he believes, when Claire comes to believe in autonomy just as he does, this disadvantage will be overcome. To Christopher's understanding, the choice to marry is strictly a matter of individual rights: "I will wait as long as you desire. Meanwhile you can see more of me and know me better, look at me as a possible husband — as a candidate — and make up your mind" (170). Thus, his goodness of character should be able to overcome the social dis-

advantage on his side. Christopher even critically reacts to Claire's concern for her family's feeling toward her engagement: "That's a mistake" (250). Christopher is furious because her family interferes her autonomy:

Why do you try to shield them [Claire's family]? Why do you sacrifice me to them? I'm not false; I'm not cruel. (349)

They have bullied you, I say; they have tortured you. It's an outrage, and I insist upon saving you from the extravagance of your own generosity. Would you chop off your hand if your mother requested it? (351)

He cannot comprehend her rejection of him is not from blindly obeying but from caring for her family. Claire even affirms to Christopher that she is her own mistress but her conscience makes her feel her mother's thoughts. Christopher, unable to interpret her seeming obedience as a matter of morality, returns: "Your conscience is rather mixed!" (351). He only blames her for her illogic here. From Christopher's view of autonomy, the relationship with Claire shows his autonomy and making his own way. At the same time, he also feels, by establishing the relationship with Claire, he helps Claire become independent.

To Claire, their difference in social standing is the problem because it destroys her family relationship. Claire says to Christopher, "To you everything seems so simple, but things are not so. . . . There are a great many things to think about. . . . I should be very glad to think of nothing, not to think at all; only to shut my eyes and give myself up" (242-43). Moreover, Claire even adds that Christopher does not represent her ideal husband: "When I used to think, as a girl, of what I should do if I were to marry freely by my own choice, I thought of a very different man from you" (243). For Claire, social status exists so strongly that it is beyond her capacity to overcome: "I am not made for boldness and defiance. I was made to be happy in a quiet natural way. I was made to do gladly and gratefully what is expected of me" (354). What bothers Claire is that her desire and care for Christopher is incompatible with her care for her family. Unlike Christopher, who sweeps everything away under the name of individual rights and autonomy, Claire's concern for others keeps her aware of her responsibility for the real and recognizable trouble around her.

The care perspective of Claire's morality presents her with a complicated moral dilemma. To begin with, her desire for Christopher conflicts with her care for her family. She indicates that the relationship with Christopher is immoral: "I have been too selfish; I wanted to escape from it. You offered me a great chance. . . . It seemed good to change

completely, to break, to go away. And then I admired you” (353). She admits that it is selfish that she is attracted by what he gives her at first. She is still more selfish because she admires him against the needs of others. Moreover, Claire's ethic of care also tells her to care for Christopher, but she must betray it when she emphasizes too much her care for her family:

I know how I have deceived and injured you, I know how cruel and cowardly I have been. I see it as vividly as you do — I feel it to the ends of my fingers. . . . Anything that you may have said of me in your angriest passion is nothing to what I have said to myself. (347-8)

Why is it given to me to choose, to decide, in a case so hard and so terrible as this? I am not meant for that. . . . (353-4)

Her care-based moral concept tells her to keep the relationship with others, but she cannot keep her relationship both with her family and with Christopher. Christopher's moral justice perspective, i.e., to follow one's personal belief and rules of rightful justice regardless of the ensuing destruction of prior or other relationships, is unbearable for Claire. At the same time, Claire cannot submissively obey her family's expectation because it will leave Christopher in distress. Whichever her choice is, she hurts either her family or Christopher and destroys both of the relationships.

The resolution she makes to solve her moral dilemma is to take the third possibility of denying her family, Christopher and herself. She decides to go into a convent. In Claire's words, going into a convent is denying herself: “I don't give you up for any worldly advantage or for any worldly happiness” (351). This self-denying aspect can be seen as “the moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice” (*In a Different Voice* 70). Claire cannot leave her family for her own happiness. She sees the pursuit of her personal happiness as a moral wrong when her choice destroys the harmonious relationship. However, she can destroy the relationship by sacrificing herself for a moral right. Her choice of action is not at all submissive, but is her own poignant resolution, being faithful to her ethic of care.

## IV

I have investigated the relationship of Christopher and Claire under the light of Gilligan's study of morality. It explains Claire's seeming vagueness of action; it is derived from her psychological struggles and her consequent choice of action. In my reading,



she chooses her action according to her womanly belief. Her moral decision on her marriage illuminates the care perspective in her moral concept. Christopher, on the other hand, is strictly oriented by justice-based morality. Thus, their desire to marry must have been tested by these two incompatible moral concepts. As each moral concept reasons totally differently, their marriage is morally good for Christopher while it is morally unacceptable for Claire. They are so wholly placed in their own frame of moral concept throughout their courtship that it is inevitable that Christopher and Claire fail to establish a successful relationship. As I have proved, the relationship of Christopher and Claire fails not because of the cultural difference and the enforcement of social stability but because of their different moral perspectives. They are unable to overcome moral disagreement of justice and care.

### Works Cited

- Allen, Elizabeth. *A Women's Place in the Novels of Henry James*. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Rev. of *The American*, by Henry James. *Scribner's Monthly* 14 (July 1877): 406-7. Rpt. in *Henry James: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Roger Gard. London: Routledge, 1968. 47-8.
- "The American: Twenty-five Years Later." *The Edinburgh Review* 197 (Jan. 1903): 59-85. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Henry James: The Early Novels*. Ed. James W. Gargano. Boston: Hall, 1987. 42.
- Burlingame, Edward L. "The American: An Intellectual Novel." *North American Review* 125 (Sept. 1877): 309-15. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Henry James: The Early Novels*. Ed. James W. Gargano. Boston: Hall, 1987. 37-40.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.
- . "Reply by Carol Gilligan." "On *In a Different Voice*: An Interdisciplinary Forum." *Signs* 11 (1986): 324-33.
- James, Henry. *The American*. 1877. Ed. William Spengemann. London: Penguin, 1981.
- . *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*. 1934. New York: Scribner's, 1953.
- . "To William Dean Howells." 30 March 1877. Letter 44 of *Henry James Selected Letters*. Ed. Leon Edel. Cambridge: Belknap, 1987.
- Kanter, Rosabeth M. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic, 1977.
- Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto, 1948.
- "Morality." *Dictionary of Psychology*. Ed. Howard C. Warren. Boston: Houghton, 1934.
- Spengemann, William. Introduction. *The American*. By Henry James. London: Penguin, 1981. 7-25.
- Stack, Carol B. "The Culture of Gender: Women and Men of Color." "On *In a Different Voice*: An Interdisciplinary Forum." *Signs* 11 (1986): 321-24.
- Tavris, Carol. *The Mismeasure of Woman*. New York: Simon, 1992.

( 2001年12月14日受理 )