

HENRY ADAMS'S *ESTHER*:
INDIVIDUALITY AND INDEPENDENCE
OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN WOMAN

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Since Henry Adams's *Esther* (1884)¹⁾ has attracted several different interpretations from critics, it is worth repeating the essential story line here. The story is about a young girl's love affair with a clergyman. It might be generally considered a romance, but the novel is too philosophical and problematic to be taken only as such, for it deals with her futile attempt to reconcile his faith with her agnosticism. Her lover, a clergyman, wishes her to believe in his religion, since religiosity is a fundamental qualification for a clergyman's wife. But agnosticism has already become a part of her life. She is torn between agnosticism and the desire for marriage with him. Finally, in despair, she gives up convincing herself of the good of his religion and decides to maintain celibacy for the rest of her life.

Some critics interpreted the novel as exploring a new philosophy to replace the Christianity.²⁾ When it was published, Darwinism was hotly debated among intellectuals, and Adams, by no means a devout Christian, appreciated this new theory. They thought that he tried to find a solution to the metaphysical problem of being through his heroine's struggle with Christianity.³⁾ Another critic focused on her struggle itself, rather than the attempted philosophical solution. She considered it a liberated woman's pursuit of the self in nineteenth-century American society.⁴⁾ Still others saw greater importance in the similarities between the heroine and the author's wife, Marian, concluding that *Esther's* religious experience was modeled on her own real-life experience.⁵⁾ Furthermore, they attributed the tragic failure of love to the

assumed unhappiness of their married life. This biographical approach was “confirmed” by the tragic suicide of Marian a year after publication of the novel. They assumed that she, already suffering from depression, could not survive the shock when he openly revealed to the public her private life without approval.

Yet the presumption that Marian’s suicide resulted from her unhappy marriage, and more directly from the publication of Henry’s novel has been strongly challenged. Edward Chalfant, in his recent thoroughgoing biography of Adams, *Better in Darkness: A Biography of Henry Adams, His Second Life, 1862–1891*, insists that the widely accepted assumption about her suicide is unfounded.⁶⁾ According to Chalfant, neither her physical weakness nor hereditary depression ever became a serious problem in their marriage until her death. He was satisfied with her as an ideal partner to his sophisticated life and she never regretted the marriage. Chalfant argues that she knew of his novel *Esther* from the very beginning since he consulted her about the plan and that she herself encouraged him to finish it for publication.

Despite Chalfant’s convincing arguments, a biographical approach to the novel itself most persuasively explains the author’s intention. *Esther* reflects Henry’s fascination with the nature of the Adams women and his wife following other woman-centered works, “Primitive Rights of Women” and *Democracy*.⁷⁾ He developed this interest from his acquaintance with the Adams women since childhood. Henry’s marriage with Marian was a strong impetus for him to publish the three works. Marriage to Marian simply reinforced his curiosity in women’s talents. Henry’s works were all published during their marriage from 1872 to 1885, at even interval of four years—“Primitive Rights of Women” in 1876, *Democracy* in 1880, and *Esther* in 1884. Among them, the heroine of *Esther* has apparent similarities with his wife. Moreover, Henry appears to explore his wife’s innate talents by means of the heroine modeled after her. His fascination with her culminates in the novel.

Henry Adams’s first recognition of gender difference, seemingly attributable to nature, occurred when he was young.⁸⁾ Dominated by the

traditional political elitism, the Adams family had a clear division between men's sphere and women's sphere. Men's life as outstanding politicians was outside of home while women's life as homemakers was inside, with the former having priority over the latter. The achievements of the successive Adams men were indeed remarkable. His great grandfather, John, was the second president of the United States, his grandfather, John Quincy, the sixth, and his father, Charles Francis, a successful diplomat who could have been elected as president in 1868 and 1872.

Though not indifferent to the woman's part in the political success of the Adams male, Henry esteemed the Adams women for abilities to overcome their allotted hardship as a wife or a daughter of the distinguished Adams men. In particular, he was most impressed with two Louisas—Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams (1775–1852), Henry's grandmother, and Louisa Adams Kuhn (1831–1870), his elder sister.⁹⁾ Although Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams was physically delicate, her courage and ability to manage the household were remarkable. Louisa Catherine's courageous journey in winter of 1815 was astounding. She traveled by sleigh from St. Petersburg to Paris during the Napoleonic Wars. Only her eight-year-old son, a maid, and two menservants accompanied her. She directed all the travel by herself since her husband had already departed alone. In addition to the mental and physical strength, she was gifted with the talents of music and literature which particularly endeared her to her grandson. As a child, her sophisticated parents had given her every encouragement to develop her interest in them.

Henry's fascination in his grandmother Louisa Catherine reveals his ambivalent attitude toward the Adams family. Her independence and strength were essential traits as a respectable Adams woman. His fascination in them was greatly influenced by the family standard. He rather appreciated them as an Adams man. However, his appreciation of her artistic talents was irrelevant to the family tradition. The pragmatic Adamses were not eager to appreciate the artistic sensibilities at all. She

was obliged to live in a dignified solitude within the unadmiring family atmosphere until her death. He could not help being sympathetic to her unappreciated talents and solitude because of his own artistic inclination. He was even less understood by the family than his grandmother because he was male. He wished to observe the Adams tradition and to be free from it at the same time.

Such ambivalence becomes more conspicuous in his sister's case. Louisa Adams Kuhn was gifted with talents which would have made her successful if she had been male. She was bright and energetic. But the Adamses lamented her gender, and obliged her to stay in the women's sphere. Her parents' stubborn retention of the family tradition made it difficult to manage her as a child. She always needed flattering attentions from others to soothe her anger and frustration for the wrongs of life. After she grew up, she was not as lucky as her grandmother, who had trying but rewarding opportunities as a wife of John Quincy Adams. Instead she married an undistinguished merchant from a prominent family, with whom she shared no mutual concerns. The marriage was disastrous and only aggravated her rebellious frustration. Finally she left for Europe to use herself up in endless frivolous diversions and died a tragic death by tetanus in Italy.

Adams remained sympathetic to her misdirected talents while their parents' were dismayed and anguished. Since childhood, Henry appreciated his seven-year elder sister's brilliance and energy. Even her rebelliousness, which was never aimed at her younger brother, seemed in Henry's eyes admirable because it raised the possibility of liberation from the suffocating family tradition. His admiration of her was not disappointed even at her deathbed. Louisa courageously and even cheerfully bore the tremendous fear of her coming death. But her death brought relief together with a terrible sorrow. Despite Henry's fascination with her talents, he did not know how to save her from the unhappiness caused by those very talents. Henry was bound to the Adams tradition just as the women were tied to their sphere. His helplessness is obvious in a letter to mother, in which he defended his

sister's life as an expatriate in Italy. Henry attributed the apparent failure of her life to her birth and education and claimed that she should have been born as an English aristocrat if she were to satisfy her pride and talents in a happier way.

Henry's ambivalent admiration for his grandmother and sister mirrored his attitude towards the Adams family tradition. He expressed his willingness to observe family tradition through an appreciation of their courage and strength but also his own rebelliousness towards conformity through an appreciation of their rebellious behavior. But Henry's rebellious challenge was never a serious threat to family tradition. He was sympathetic to their rebelliousness only because it never significantly altered their lives. Henry shared with them their inclination for art and frivolities in contrast to reason and sobriety of the Adams males. But his sympathy did not force him to give up male privileges in the family tradition. One might say that he chose patriarchy. In the end, he offered too little to relieve the Adams women's frustrated solitude.

Thus, Henry basically favored the hierarchical gender division of spheres of the Adams family. Belief in this division was common and collaborative science further solidified his conviction about it. Scientists and intellectuals attributed reason or intellect to men, and lack of reason or emotionality to women. Such an idea defended men's patriarchal authority over women. Compared to men's reason which had a vital importance for the society, women's emotionality was generally associated with subordinate genre of human activity expressed in art and literature.

Henry found in Marian's talents a comforting confirmation of his chauvinistic understanding of women's talents. He was attracted to her independence and brilliance, both of which were not enough to challenge men's authority. He discussed her character in the letters he wrote to a close friend when they engaged. His description of her independence was humorous and playful and showed his happiest satisfaction with their engagement. In a letter, he pointed out her adamant will of doing her own way and explained why their unconventional arrange-

ment of wedding made no commotion among the relatives.¹⁰⁾ He reported that the relatives agreed to “submit like lambs,” and discretely added that the couple were “treated beautifully by every one” to make sure her such independence was by no means offensive. And in another letter, Henry wrote, “She rules me as only American women rule men, and I cower before her. Lord! How she would lash me if she read the above description about her!”¹¹⁾ He was so excited that he felt like teasing the conservative taste of women of his aristocratic English friend. Marian’s independence also satisfied his patriotism. Compared with the boring gentility of English ladies, she seemed to him to represent the democratic quintessence of America.¹²⁾ But his love for democracy did not mean the denial of gender hierarchy. In the same letter, Henry downplayed Marian’s dominion over him, saying she was so “open to instruction” that he and his friend could “improve her” together. Their superiority to her as man was a shared premise between them. Henry took for granted condescending inequality. He did not even consider the hierarchy as unequal.

Henry’s observation of Marian’s mind was in accord with the prejudices common in society. He ignored most of the reasoning functions of her mind. Yet he also appreciated the inferiority of her mind. In a letter to the same friend, Henry generalized that woman’s mind was “a queer mixture of odds and ends, poorly mastered and utterly unconnected.”¹³⁾ And he concluded he could love it all the more for its harmless inferiority. Although Henry was one of the most well-known intellectual elite of his day, his ingrained prejudices and confidence in his own intellect distorted his observations. Perhaps it was a deliberate distortion; he wanted to find in the mind of the opposite sex a pleasant tenderness which would alleviate the rigidity and seriousness of the male mind.

Moreover, Marian helped to confirm Henry’s view of her submissiveness to his patriarchal sentiments. He reported that she “[laughed] at the idea of being thought a blue.”¹⁴⁾ She did not resent his intellectual superiority which confined her mind to a subordinate place. Her ability was appreciated as a splendid hostess in their small and

exclusive circle at Lafayette Square in Washington. Henry James admired her "touch of genius" and called her "a perfect Voltaire in petticoats." Her life as his wife was successful and satisfactory.¹⁵⁾ Adams's married life and his observation of women, then, were in perfect accord with each other. And his attitude toward her was always compassionate and sincere in his works.

His published women-centered works are a confirmation of his understanding of women through his wife. The marriage gave him inexhaustible opportunities for observing her nature closely.¹⁶⁾ But his observation only reinforced his belief in the hierarchy within the family.

"Primitive Rights of Women" is Henry's first public statement about women.¹⁷⁾ It was a lecture he made to the public audience by the arrangement of the Lowell Institute of Boston. In the lecture, he deals with the strength of women's will. The main theme of the lecture is his challenge to a theory of contemporary social sciences about women, which placed them in the status of slave in the ancient society. He felt indignant toward the theory because of his sympathy with the neglected strength of the will of women. He argues that they were highly esteemed until the Christian Church deprived them of independence. Until then they could marry or divorce on their own, and even own property. He insists they enjoyed near equality with men in the family. He stresses one of the reasons for their equality in strength of will was to protect their own independence. The hard-willed women he selected from history as examples are Penelope of *Odyssey* and Hallgerda of *Njalsaga*. Penelope keeps her celibacy against the threatening suitors until her long lost husband comes home to revenge them during his absence. Hallgerda marries three times by killing each husband and prospers herself with their inheritances. It should be noted that all of the rights concerned in his argument belongs to the family law. His sympathetic concern for women is limited to those within the boundary of the family which is their only rightful place.

In *Democracy*, Adams reiterates that women belong in the home. Adams teaches Madeleine Lee, the heroine of the novel, a severe lesson

on women's sphere, who, widowed at age 31, aspires power in Washington.¹⁸⁾ She is one of those women he would admire, with the same qualities as those he found in his wife. She is sophisticated and strong-willed. Troubled with the ennui and loneliness of her premature widowhood, she wills herself to acquire power as compensation. For a woman, the easiest way to acquire power in the city of politics is to marry a powerful politician. She quickly meets a powerful but corrupt senator who proposes marriage. A hint of his depravity annoys her sense of virtue all the time. But her weak mind, already clouded by ambition, succumbs to his charm. Nevertheless she narrowly avoids marriage by an intuitive revelation that his vice will irrevocably contaminate her. By the heroine's relinquishment of the pursuit of power, Henry reaffirms that women can not find true happiness nor self-fulfillment outside of the home.

Henry suggests that women possess the absolute intuition in *Democracy*. With it, the heroine protects herself from a deceitful senator. In *Esther*, Henry further probes into the intuitive power of women. Women's intuitiveness is generally attributed to their emotionality and sensibility, which are essential traits for a writer or an artist. Esther Dudley, a talented amateur painter, has abundant artistic sensibility, and then intuitiveness. He also explores the possibility of her self-fulfillment as an artist.¹⁹⁾

Wharton, a professional painter and her teacher, gives an excellent analysis of Esther's uniqueness. Except for her dying father, he is the only man around her who has the insight to understand the peculiarities of her nature. He speaks about her as a substitute for Henry:

"Miss Dudley interests me. I want to know what she can make of life. She gives one the idea of lightly-sparred yacht in mid-ocean; unexpected; you ask yourself what the devil she is doing there. She sails gaily along, though there is no land in sight and plenty of rough weather coming. She never read a book, I believe, in her life. She tried to paint, but she is a second rate amateur and will never be anything more, though she has done one or two things

which I give you my word I would like to have done myself. She picks up all she knows without an effort and knows nothing well, yet she seems to understand whatever is said. Her mind is as irregular as her face, and both have the same peculiarity. I notice that the lines of her eyebrows, nose and mouth all end with a slight upward curve like a yacht's sails, which gives a kind of hopefulness and self-confidence to her expression. Mind and face have the same curves."²⁰⁾

Wharton's comments on Esther are a mixture of male reasoning and artistic insights. On the one hand, he is basically critical of her bold independence and her reckless behavior with lightly-sparred yacht in the face of coming bad weather. Wharton notes that a change of weather should be expected by anyone at sea, but because of Esther's lack of logic she cannot take precautions against weather changes nor properly equip herself, both of which are necessary for steering herself to safe passage. With these conditions in mind, a logical thing for her to do is to stay home. On the other hand, Wharton sees some "hopefulness" in her recklessness. He even visualizes the hope in the artistic irregularity of her face, suggesting a possibility that she might be an artist. His overall estimate of her is apparently not so positive. Yet he generally regards every artist except himself as a second rate amateur. Thus his remark that he wished he did a few of her work himself should be considered Wharton's and then Henry's highest commentation.

While Wharton recognizes her possibility as an artist, she is not fully equipped with the indispensable qualities. His ideal artist is endowed with men's reason and women's intuitive sensibility. The rigidity of men's reasoning is essential for a firm handling of the subject. He dislikes any sentimentality or weakness brought into the picture. These traits as well as intuitive sensibility belong to women's confused mind. But he differentiates these from the sensibility which is an important source of "feeling for art" of an artist. He knows by insight women's sentimentality and weakness are not necessarily their innate nature but their disguised self-consciousness and self-protection against

men's reasoning. On the other hand, sensibility is considered their genuine nature and is entitled to be the counterpart of reason. Their sensibility can reach the truth without the help of men's reasoning. But it only feels the truth, then men's reason gives shape to the truth in place of it in the ideal artist. She is rich in the "feeling for art," but she is fatally deficient in men's reasoning.

Logically considered, as long as she is a woman, she can not attain the rigidity of reason. Indeed, she has never been successful in creating the male-like firmness he requires, except once when she drew her father, and Wharton attributes its success to the manliness of the subject. But, if she lacks reason, then, he should be deficient in sensibility, which is an essential quality of women. Neither he nor she is aware of this contradiction. She is unaware for two reasons—her poor logic prevents her from perceiving the contradiction and she accepts the idea that men can feel like women while retaining reason. In fact, male artists are generally considered exceptional as a man with female-like sensibility. But it is because he is a man that Adams and the society allows the intertexture of these traits in him. Men's trespass on women's sphere will not damage men's authority, but the reverse is dangerous—it might destroy the gender hierarchy on which the society is founded.

Despite such negative prospects, Wharton is still hopeful of her possibility. He cannot disregard the idea of her becoming a different type of artist whose intuition would dominate her art. He sometimes staggers before her intact sensibility because his is irrevocably damaged by the feverish passion of the degenerated woman he married. She is a Bohemian actress who is addicted to all of the excitement and vices of Paris, and in abject disgust with life, repeatedly attempts suicide. He is stricken with the fear and feverish attraction toward her and marries her. Since then, any life takes form as a passion in his art and he is deprived of a way to the innocence he yearns to recover. And her sensibility makes her much nearer to the innocence than he.

Wharton gave a little snort of wrath: "I want you to be above your

subject, whatever it is. Don't you see? You are trying to keep down on a level with it. That is not the path to Paradise. Put heaven in Miss Brooke's eyes! Heaven is not there now; only earth. She is a flower, if you like. You are the real saint. It is your own paradise that St. Cecilia is singing about. I want to make St. Cecilia glow with your soul, not with Miss Brooke's. Miss Brooke has got no soul yet."

"Neither have I," groaned Esther, making up a little face at Wharton's vehemence.

"No," said Wharton, seized with a gravity as sudden as his outbreak. "I suppose not. A soul is like a bird, and needs a sharp tap on its shell to open it. Never mind! One who has as much feeling for art as you have, must have soul somewhere."²¹⁾

But she is too young and immature to understand his sincere but somewhat desperate hope for her development. She does not understand what he means and obstinately prefers her own way of painting with all her women-like qualities. He orders her to give up her sentimentality because he believes the surest way to his ideal paradise is not her self-conscious sentimentality but her simple intuitive power. But because of an utter lack of men's reasoning, she cannot be convinced of such analysis in her mind and she complains that her whole self is not separable. She feels men's cold reason is incongruous with her St. Cecilia and objects to his traditional interpretation as male-like. She hardly pays any attention to the disharmony her martyr will have with the other medieval martyrs. They are being painted by other artists according to his restrictive orders. She seems to resist any easy reconciliation with what she does not feel right.

Wharton, not Esther, finally gives up. Her confidence in her intuitive knowledge is so strong that he hesitates to further interfere with her picture. His yearning for ideal art is too sincere for him to obstinately hold on to his own understanding. It also reminds him of her hopefulness. A possibility is always there that she might be correct. But he does not see her self-conscious weakness hidden behind her boldness. Wharton's high regard for her intuitive straightforwardness is replaced

by the weakness as soon as she violates his orders, and she staggers under the heavy weight of sole responsibility of her job. Without men's solid assurance she can never be sure whether her intuition is right. Until then, she is never entrusted with a matter of such social importance as the decoration of the famous church. Moreover, the comfortable life protected by her father has prevented her from learning confidence and responsibility as an independent person. Her attainment of true independence is a key to her success.

The death of her father is a great opportunity for change. Her relation with her father is stronger than ordinary relation between father and daughter. They have lived by themselves for fifteen years since the premature death of her mother. In addition, as he early retires from the profession thanks to a handsome inheritance, he has spent most of the time with her. Then the influence he has over her is tremendous. Her agnosticism and aloofness tainted by a hint of cynicism are the result of his indulgent education. He has spoiled her by giving freedom to choose whatever she fancies from his intellectual life. What has grown in her is the destabilizing pull on the self between male-like independence on the one hand, and female-like recoiling weakness on the other. She is placed between men and women like Wharton, though in a different sense. The ambiguity would have never been a problem for her as long as her father was alive since he understands her disoriented self and protects her from the unsympathetic world. But he dies, and she loses at once affirmation of her self and protection. The tremendous vacancy she feels at his deathbed shows how dependent she is on her father. She feels as if she would hereafter "see no tie more human than that which bound her to Andromeda and Orion" in life.²²⁾

She might achieve the independence without any further ordeal if only she recovers from the solitude by herself. But Hazard is there to ask for her hand in marriage, and her agony is much deepened by the proposal. She, in such a state of mind, cannot resist a prospect of a happier life although the problem of religion still remains unsolved between them.

In addition to religion, the couple suffers from another problem of Hazard's authoritativeness against Esther's independence. When he enthusiastically helps her with useful advice on her St. Cecilia, his patronizing expectation of her submissiveness is mostly submerged. He appreciates her idea and does not push his own on her. Without his orthodox religion, he is an agreeable intellectual gentleman, "with a talent of drawing and quick imagination, gentle with children, pleasant with women, and fond of humor."²³) On the other hand, Esther's independent assertiveness, softened by her recoiling weakness, never offends Hazard. His condescending kindness based on the belief in his superiority also helps him to appreciate her uniqueness. Initially, her ambiguous independence and unique irregularity of mind remains only secondary to him, no matter how much they enhances her attractiveness. He appreciates more the women-like tenderness as she shows in the difficult care of her dying father or in the charitable visit to a children's hospital. He expects her charitable tenderness will help him with his ambition to unite the church and the world as one. But his understanding of her being at his convenience is distorting Esther's sense of self. The antagonism between them becomes visible when he asks her to believe his religion to meet his requirement for a clergyman's wife.

Then Esther resists both of Hazard's faith and patronizing authority to order her submission. These are closely connected from the beginning in her eyes. She realizes when she goes to his first sermon that his authority owes much to the Church. He insists in the sermon his right of property to people's souls and bodies, being a representative of the Church, and indirectly of God. He takes the undisputed authority of the Church as his own to satisfy his egoistic desire for social prominence. She discerns a self-satisfied argument and doubts the purity of his religiosity. Indeed, his egoism is rightly congruent with the nature which is supposed to be innate to men in his contemporary society. His pursuit of power and self-establishment is not to be blamed, should it be done outside of religion. But he pursues them in the wrong place.

Spirituality and power are inconsistent. Religion which accommodates his secular ambition is also depraved. And women are the severest judge of the purity of mind since the virtue belongs to women's nature. She cannot overlook the fraudulence of Hazard's religion and must maintain her nature's sincerity.

In addition to the innate righteousness, she has an inclination to repudiate any interference from the outside no matter how rightful it seems. His authoritative confidence in her acquirement of religion is an absolute trespass upon her being. She is more than repulsive to such condescension. Nonetheless, she wishes a marriage with him despite her misgivings. She is torn between her desire to protect her purity and independence and another to marry him. Her desperate plunge into theology is an intermediate solution. Since theology belongs to men's reason, it does not hamper neither of her female desires. If it can convince her mind at all, her purity will be left intact and the marriage with him will also realize. But her mind is still too weak to accept its complicated logic.

Under the tremendous pressure of colliding selves, she realizes her desperate struggle is against impurity of human being. Hazard's religiousness is hopelessly tainted by his male ambition for dominance. And her purity is also on the verge of degradation because of her stubborn female wish to marry the morally tainted clergyman. Both of them are struggling for their own egos based on the gender division. Then, her absolute denial of gender as the sources of their anguish is not unexpected.

Niagara Falls confirm her absolutism. She visits the cataract to ease the agony of broken love after sending a brief note of breakup to Hazard. To her tired mind, it symbolizes an eternal equilibrium of the universe, having nothing to do with egocentrism of human being nor with the gender. She can purge her whole self and any impurity before its grandeur.²⁴⁾ The fall sounds to her more convincing than any sermon that has ever been preached in the Church.

To have Niagara for a rival is no joke. Hazard spoke with no such authority; and Esther's next idea was one of wonder how, after listening here, any preacher could have the confidence to preach again. "What do they know about it?" she asked herself. "Which of them can tell a story like this, or a millionth part of it?" To dilute it in words and translate bits of it for school-girls, or to patronize it by defense or praise, was somewhat as though Esther herself should paint a row of her saints on the cliff under Table Rock. Even to fret about her own love affairs in such company was an impertinence. When eternity, infinity and omnipotence seem to be laughing and dancing in one's face, it is well to treat such visitors civilly, for they come rarely in such a humor.²⁵⁾

Hazard, unable to believe her deserting him, comes after her to the cataract to confront her. Her last argument with him is an articulated confirmation of her absolutism which is strengthened at Niagara Falls. She does not bring a direct accusation against his selfishness but blames his Church. She argues that the Church's doctrinal resurrection of the body is only to please the selfishness of secular people against her aversion to the impure self. He is still ignorant of his own unreligious selfishness and totally insensitive to how deep her anguish is. He considers her submission to the religion as merely a matter of will. And he tries to convince her and refers to the weakness of "the natural instincts of [her] sex" which he believes will not stand a future without any hope of seeing her family again. For the self-righteous men like Hazard and weak-willed women, resurrection is a hope. But for Esther, who yearns for selflessness, it is a nightmare. Her response to his pretentious reference to women's weakness is violent.

Hazard's condescending attitudes towards Esther becomes most obvious in the argument. He once admires her strength when she gently declines his offer of help at her father's deathbed. He attributes it to her mystic sympathy with nature. But the reason for her refusal is the romantic strength as he assumes. The death of her father is too divine and personal to ask a clergyman's interference. She is rather terrified with death coming but she has to stand the fear since her father needs

her. He never appreciates her strength as that of an independent human being. And as the result, he keeps misunderstanding her to the end.

“Why must the church always appeal to my weakness and never to my strength! I ask for spiritual life and you send me back to my flesh and blood as though I were a tigress you were sending back to the cubs. What is the use of appealing to my sex? The atheists at least show me respect enough not to do that!”²⁶⁾

After Hazard leaves, she refuses an easy happiness which might be brought by a marriage with her cousin. He is deeply impressed by her heroic strength with which she holds the tragic fight with Hazard and makes her a sudden proposal of marriage. That is only a comedy inserted by the author to soften the tragic effects of their broken love. But her instant and definite refusal of his proposal is rather symbolic. She resigns all hope of realization of love in marriage for the rest of her life. Her love for Hazard is still alive in her as a platonic love. She only abandons the gender desire in her love, and she becomes herself a sexless martyr for her absolute love.

The tragic love affair with Hazard gives a solution to her ambiguous attitudes towards the metaphysical Being. She is already attracted to absolute eternity when her father dies. Her solitude and helplessness is so extreme that she imagines herself as being alone in eternal space. The super-human serenity has given her comfort in place of her father. She has almost forgotten the comfort until she meets the omnipotence again at Niagara Falls. She has learned through the struggle with Hazard how impure the desires of human beings can be, and has abandoned her depraved humanity. At this point, her unity with the omnipotence seems strengthened by her resignation of marriage with Hazard. Yet she does not wish to complete the unity by the abandonment of love itself. No matter how much she detests the sexuality, Adams believes a complete resignation of love is not in the choices of any women. She can never be nihilistic as some critics suggested. If she denied love at all, she would plunge herself in the cataract before she

fighters with Hazard. Without any love in her, she would be much closer to death than when his father died.

The platonic love becomes her only faith she lives with for the rest of her life. It is incorporated into her self as its center just as Christianity is for Hazard's self. She finally achieves self-confident autonomy and her qualification for a true artist is complete. Her intuitiveness also sharpens through the abandonment of physical passion and close association with the metaphysical Being. Her serene but strong art is to be situated opposite of Wharton's passionate art. The originality based on women's nature never intimidates men's authority.

At the base of *Esther*, as well as his former women-centered works, "Primitive Rights of Women" and *Democracy*, is Henry Adams's concept of gender hierarchy. But his patriarchal attitude toward women is less conspicuous in *Esther*. "Primitive Rights of Women" is an expression of Adams's condescending chivalry to emancipate women from the ordeal of slavery. In *Democracy*, the heroine is obliged to give up political power by a sudden revelation of her sin. In the end, she is directed by the author, through a letter from her sister, to go home and marry her honest cousin. In contrast, Adams liberates the heroine of *Esther* from home as long as she remains within the boundary of the womanhood which his favorite women never violate. However, freedom is limited to art because women's talents are deficient. Through the agonizing experience, *Esther* finally succeeds in achieving her independence necessary for a woman artist and she no longer recoils before men's authority. Most other aspects of her life is still dominated by men's established authority but she has created a small but independent niche for herself. *Esther*'s small step forward as an artist reflects a slight shift of the author toward gender equality, and Marian's influence over him caused this slight change.

Notes

- 1) *Esther* was published under the pseudonym of Francis Snow Compton according to Adams's wish: Frances Snow Compton [Henry Adams],

Esther: A Novel, An American Novel Series, no. 3 (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1884). The publisher tried to persuade Adams to publish it with his name since the publicity of his name would increase the sales of the book. But he never agreed, calling the book an experiment to see if the American readers would find a book worth reading without any guidance. The experience failed. In this article, I refer to the Library of America edition: Henry Adams, *Novels, Mont Saint Michel, The Education*, ed. Ernest Samuels and Jayne N. Samuels (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1983).

- 2) Ernest Samuels focused on a theme of collision between science and religion as seen in *Esther* in his classical biography on Adams. See Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams: The Middle Years* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958) chapter 7. David S. Barber discussed that *Esther's* problem was her desire to unite herself with something immortal. See David S. Barber, "Henry Adams' *Esther*: The Nature of Individuality and Immortality," *New England Quarterly* 45 (June, 1972): 227-240.
- 3) The heroines of Adams's former women-centered works, "Primitive Rights of Women" (1876) and *Democracy* (1880) were repugnant to Christianity as well. In "Primitive Rights of Women," Adams argued that women were deprived by the Christian Church of several rights they had been endowed with in the ancient society and that it tracked them towards deplorable submission. The heroine of *Democracy* abandoned her faith when she knew God was arrogant enough to pay no heed to the sorrow of woman who would suffer from the successive losses of husband and child.
- 4) Jane Brown Gillette, "Medusa/Muse: Women as Images of Chaos and Order in the Writings of Henry Adams and Henry James" (Ph. D. diss., Yale University, 1972).
- 5) Katharine Simonds was the first to assume association between *Esther* and tragic suicide of Marian. She wrongly blamed Adams for her death. See Katharine Simonds, "The Tragedy of Mrs. Henry Adams," *New England Quarterly* 9 (December 1936) 564-582.
- 6) Edward Chalfant, *Better in Darkness: A Biography of Henry Adams, His Second Life, 1862-1891* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1994).
- 7) Henry Adams, letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, June 23, 1872, Letters of Henry Adams, ed. J. C. Levenson et al., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1982) 139-141.
- 8) In addition to *The Education of Henry Adams*, Henry's associations with generations of the Adams women were closely discussed in Paul C. Nagel's *The Adams Women: Abigail and Louisa Adams, Their Sisters and Daughters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and the same author's *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- 9) For his relationship with Adams women, see Miho Yoneyama, "Henry Adams and Women: The Meaning of 'Primitive Rights of Women' in

- Nineteenth-Century American Society" *Essays and Studies* (Tokyo Woman's Christian University) 45 (March 1995) 137-56.
- 10) Adams, letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, March 26, 1872, *Letters*, vol. 2, 133-134.
 - 11) Adams, letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, March 26, 1872, *Letters*, vol. 2, 133-134.
 - 12) Adams's partiality towards Marian's individuality might be enhanced by his American patriotism. He considered individuality a quality of America. See Chalfant, *Better in Darkness* 284-285. Henry James, who himself was an expatriate in England, appreciated her quality calling her "the genius of my beloved country." See Henry James, letter to Grace Norton, May 20, 1870, *Henry James Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974-84) 240, quoted in Chalfant, *Better in Darkness* 751.
 - 13) Adams, letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, May 30, 1872, *Letters*, vol. 2, 137.
 - 14) Adams, letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, May 30, 1872, *Letters*, vol. 2, 137.
 - 15) Henry James, letter to Grace Norton, September 1880, *Henry James Letters*, vol. 2, 307, quoted in *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877-1914*, ed. George Monteiro (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) 6.
 - 16) Adams's pride in his knowledge of women could be seen in a letter to John Hay dated September 24, 1883. He boasted of his respectable knowledge compared to that of Henry James who seemed to him "[knew] almost nothing of women but mere outside" without the experience of marriage. See Adams, letter to John Hay, September 24, 1883, *Letters*, vol. 2, 512-513.
 - 17) See Yoneyama, "Primitive Rights" 142-52.
 - 18) See Miho Yoneyama, "Henry Adams's *Democracy*: A Story of A Nineteenth-Century American Woman" *Essays and Studies* (Tokyo Woman's Christian University) 46 (September 1995) 103-20.
 - 19) While Adams confines Madeleine in home, he permits Esther to pursue her talent. He can not permit Madeleine to pursue power since it belongs to men's sphere. However, Esther's art belongs to both spheres. It is one of men's professions, but artistic sensibility is women's nature. The ambiguity makes possible women's participation in the profession without undercutting their domesticity. In addition, a professional artist works in the studio at home, which makes art feasible for women.
 - 20) Adams, *Esther* 199-200.
 - 21) Adams, *Esther* 224.
 - 22) Adams, *Esther* 264.
 - 23) Adams, *Esther* 214.
 - 24) Esther insists Niagara Falls are a man, contradicting Catherine's assertion that they are a self-conscious woman. See Adams, *Esther* 318. It is a problem of comparison. Esther cannot tolerate Catherine's association of women's treacherous coquetry with such a super-human existence. Then she contradicts Catherine with the other sex she considers better than her

own. She does not think that the convincing voice with which the Falls talk to her belongs to her own sex.

25) Adams, *Esther* 315.

26) Adams, *Esther* 333.