

A sin worth seeing

American travelers and their perception of Paris



Fig. 1: Paris, capital of the 19th century. Source: Brown University Library Center, <https://bit.ly/38U5k-CB>.

Midas Urlings

In this article, Midas Urlings examines how nineteenth-century American travelers perceived the city of Paris. Particularly, he looks at mechanisms of ‘othering’ found in the travel accounts of two American men: how did these men define their country in contrast to their image of Paris? Urlings concludes that these travelers saw Paris as a beautiful, yet shallow and sinful escape, in contrast to a more profound, powerful and virtuous America.

In 1867, the American author Mark Twain took a trip to Europe and the Middle East with his friends. Together, they sailed across the Atlantic, visited

the Paris Exhibition, explored Italian cities, and saw the pyramids in Egypt. The trip was immortalized in Twain’s book *The Innocents Abroad*, published

in 1869. In the conclusion of his book, Twain remarks: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”¹ With those lines, Twain phrased the sentiment of his century. Travel as a means of self-development has long been a popular idea. Like Mark Twain, many of these travelers left behind published records of their trip. Two of these men are Cardenio Flournoy King Jr. and James Newson Matthews. Their published works on their trips to Europe, found in the online Library of Congress, are filled with descriptions, personal comments and observations.

Would the meteor of Paris have flown past the American travelers?

In this article, I will look into these documents and reach conclusions on how these two travelers perceived the Old World. These documents were chosen because of their online accessibility, as well as their relevance for this research. They describe the travels of American men to Paris in a diary-style manner. This personal narrative is of great use for this research. These documents are comparable to each other in the sense that they are both written by upper-class,

¹ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1869), 650, http://archive.org/details/innocentsabroad0000twai_q5o4.

East Coast men who visited Europe. But the documents also enclose differences. There is a forty-year difference in time between the trips, during which Paris changed considerably. There also exists an age difference of about thirty years between the men. This should be considered while making the comparisons. But these differences also make for a broader representation of American perceptions that embody a broader timeframe as well as a broader age-class. The documents were meant for publishing, and therefore are not reliable for deducing the true personal opinions of the authors. They were probably concerned with their reputation and how they were viewed by society. That does not negatively impact this research, however, for it is very helpful to read how the authors wanted to portray Europe. This research shall focus on their visits to the city of Paris. Paris is one of the European cities that spoke to the imagination of the visitors, and there exists a decent body of literature about American tourism in Paris.

The research will focus on American upper-class travel accounts and look for mechanisms of ‘othering’. Othering is defined as defining yourself by creating a contrasting image, idea, personality and experience.² ‘Othering’ mostly comes in the form of vast generalizations, and assumptions about deep cultural and national characters. ‘Othering’ is also found in multiple international relations in history, also between America and Europe. This article expands on this by focusing

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Vintage books edition (New York: Vintage, 1979), 1–2, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=842875&site=ehost-live>.

on the mechanisms of ‘othering’ within the frame of tourism. The central question is: How did American travelers of rank perceive Paris as a contrasted image?

Mark Twain summarized his stay in Paris as follows: “It flashed upon us a splendid meteor, and was gone again, we hardly knew how or where.”³ Would the meteor of Paris have flown past the American travelers or did it impact their perception of the Old World?

Historical Context – The Sweet Smell of Paris

Whilst in Paris, Mark Twain saw a glimpse of Emperor Napoleon III. Seeing the proud emperor in his recently renewed capital, Twain wrote: “Napoleon has augmented the commercial prosperity of France, in ten years, to such a degree that figures can hardly compute it. [...] He has rebuilt Paris. [...] He condemns a whole street at a time, assesses the damages, pays them and rebuilds superbly.”⁴ Paris indeed changed during the ‘long nineteenth century’. In his book *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age*, American historian Harvey Levenstein describes the transformation of France and its tourist industry. Regimes changed, the touristic industry professionalized and the tourists it attracted differed. But no matter how much Paris changed, it always kept its seductive power.

Since a coup d’état in 1852, France was ruled by the autocratic emperor Napoleon III. Although American views on the monarch were negative at first, a



Fig. 2: Napoleon III. Photograph by Mayer & Pierson. Source: Wellcome Collection gallery, <https://bit.ly/3t3VjcS>.

more positive outlook developed rapidly in the 1850s. Levenstein argues that this change was due to a combination of America’s struggles with republicanism, a general weak spot for monarchs, and Napoleon III’s liberal views on the economy.⁵ In 1853, Napoleon III appointed George Eugène Haussmann as prefect of Paris. Under Haussmann, Paris modernized with astonishing speed. Electric city lights, boulevards,

⁵ Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 85–86, geraadpleegd 11 januari 2022, <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3641922.html>.

³ Twain, *Innocents abroad*, 651.

⁴ Ibidem, 128.

apartment complexes and public spaces were built. Haussman also made sure to restore Paris' historic buildings to their former glory. The outcome of the great transformation offered exactly what the modern tourist sought: a combination of comfortable modernity and dreamy nostalgia.

In 1870, disaster struck the Parisian tourist sector. War had broken out between France and the German states. Between 1870 and 1871, Paris was besieged, shelled, and home to a short-lived anarchist commune. But, as Levenstein states, the city bounced back quickly, although it now attracted different types of tourists.⁶ With the fall of Napoleon III's empire, the upper-class socialites left along with the fading French aristocracy. But the new republican regime attracted a large range of new tourists, from the upper middle class to the religiously marginalized to female tourists. The city was rebuilt and by the 1890s, numbers rose from 50,000 to 125,000 American tourists per year.⁷ The tourist sector was rebuilt and expanded. It seemed that between the smoky air of a shattered empire, the stench of war, and the fresh smell of republicanism, the sweet odor of seduction could still be smelled on the other side of the Atlantic.

Cardenio King Jr. – A boy's first trip abroad

Cardenio King Jr. was seventeen when he embarked on the *Arabic* with his father, brother, and teachers to visit Europe. The trip had the character of a Grand Tour as described by British

historian Michele Cohen in *The Grand Tour. Language, National Identity and Masculinity* (1992). Cohen defines a Grand Tour as: "The travel of the young man of rank often in his teens, undertaken as the 'crown' of his liberal education."⁸ The trip was indeed very much focused on education. For example, twenty teachers accompanied King Jr. on his trip.⁹ The party mostly visited museums and historical sites. Staying at the Elysee Palace Hotel, the group made multiple trips around Paris and one to the Palace of Versailles.

King Jr. makes multiple personal comments that can be read through the lens of 'othering'. First of all, he is impressed by the beauty of the city. He writes: "My first impression was the lack of hansoms and the great number of victorias, the handsome buildings and broad avenues, and the sidewalk cafes."¹⁰ It contrasted the crowded streets of the East Coast cities in the United States.

The sweet odor of seduction could still be smelled overseas

Although Cohen states that boys would be sent to France to learn about civil

8 Michèle Cohen, "The Grand Tour. Language, National Identity and Masculinity," *Changing English* 8, no. 2 (1 oktober 2001): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13586840120085685>.

9 Cohen, "The Grand Tour. Language, National Identity and Masculinity," 129.

10 C. F. King, jr., *A boy's vacation abroad; an American boy's diary of his first trip to Europe*, 54.

6 Ibidem, 141.

7 Ibidem, 129.

manners and *liberté du corps*, King Jr. is shocked by French behavior. On his first day in Paris, King Jr. visits a French theater.¹¹ He writes about a large number of “drinking tables” and the wealthy demi-monde women, who display a flamboyant and hedonistic lifestyle. It seems that King Jr. is astounded by the public display of pleasure in Paris. After the theater, the group visits a tavern which was, according to King Jr., “the resort of carousing men and women”.¹² Back in his hotel, King Jr. reflects on the events by writing: “On turning into my bed tonight after seeing for the first time some of the sights of Paris, there comes over me a feeling of gladness that I am an American.”¹³ Visiting a can-can dancing a few days later, King Jr. remarks “these dancers would be arrested if they were in America”.¹⁴ King Jr. contrasts the perceived loose morals of Paris with the ‘virtuous’ morals of his own country. By describing Paris as loose and hedonistic, he implies that he, as an American, is morally superior: he ‘others’ the city in contrast with America.

Finally, King Jr. also displays a great admiration for Napoleon I. At the Hotel des Invalides, King Jr. buys a bust of Napoleon. And describing the Louvre, King Jr. writes “it was built by the great Napoleon”.¹⁵ Although Napoleon, a despotic and warmongering monarch, stands in contrast to many of the Ame-

rican virtues, it seems that the myth and grandeur surrounding the figure had an impact on the American traveler.

James Newson Matthews – My summer and how I spent it

In 1866, James Newson Matthews set out for a trip through Europe on his own. Matthew’s trip differs from the trip that King Jr. took. Matthews, born in 1828, was already in his forties when he left for Europe. And so, the trip took less the form of a Grand Tour and more of a cultural vacation to the Old World. His letters were published by the local newspaper *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*. During his two-week stay in the city, Matthews visited many of the important sites of Paris. He also made two day trips to Fontainebleau and Versailles.

Similar to the descriptions of King Jr., Matthews also is stunned by the beauty of the city. The sites are described as “magnificent”, “beautiful” and “perfect”. Matthews calls Paris a “bewildering metropolis”.¹⁶ He contrasts it with the grey and chaotic streets of industrial New York.

Matthews is impressed by the order and cleanliness of the city. He writes: “There is less squalid poverty, less begging, less apparent misery to be found in a week in the streets of Paris than can be seen without much search any day in New York. This may be owing to the strictness and efficiency of the police arrangements, yet I have never seen any

11 Cohen, “The Grand Tour. Language, National Identity and Masculinity,” 131.

12 King, *A boy’s vacation abroad*, 55.

13 Ibidem, 55.

14 Ibidem, 70.

15 Ibidem, 65.

16 James Newson Matthews, *My holiday; how I spent it: being some rough notes of a trip to Europe and back, in the summer of 1866*. (Buffalo, New York: M. Taylor; Hurd & Houghton, 1867), 95, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008643185>.



Fig. 3: Black and White photo of the Eiffel Tower. Source: pxhere, <https://bit.ly/3wU88HJ>.

attempt on the part of the police to interfere with the people.”¹⁷ Here, Matthews contrasts a disorganized America with the strictness of Imperial France. In later pages, Matthews writes that he thinks of Napoleon III as a natural ruler. He states: “If there is a throne in Europe which looks secure today it is that occupied by Louis Napoleon.”¹⁸ It is a stark contrast with an America that in 1866 dealt with the aftermath of the Civil War.

Matthews also describes the looser moral standards in Paris, although less negatively than King Jr.. He describes how the Parisians publicly display the pleasures of life. Matthews writes: “The foreigner is amused to observe the per-

fect nonchalance with which the eating, drinking and flirting is thus carried on upon the open streets”.¹⁹ Matthews seems amazed by the numerous cafés, boldly placed in the public eye, where the drinking and dining is done. It contrasts with a more virtuous America. An America where pleasures are confined to the households.

Matthews also expands on the financial practices of the Parisians. Although he notes that the French are highly civilized, stating that “the French are the politest of all the wanderers from Babel”, he distrusts the Parisian shops.²⁰ According to Matthews, the Parisian shopkeepers take advantage of the foreign

17 Ibidem, 106.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem, 108–9.

20 Ibidem, 107.

tourists' lack of understanding of the French language to sell their merchandise. This seems to indicate that Paris is only polite and civilized on the outside, but has submitted to human sins beneath the surface.

Conclusions – A sin worth seeing

Having analyzed the accounts of both King Jr. and Matthews, conclusions can be drawn about the methods of 'othering' that are used in these sources. I have deduced three main themes in the perception of Paris.

Both travelers were amazed by the number of highly decorated buildings, grand monuments, and broad boulevards. This depiction of Paris conveys a sense of superficiality. It skips over the character and history of the city, exclusively mentioning the eye-pleasing results of her past. The Americans imply a clear distinction between a beautiful but superficial Paris and a sober but profound America.

The second important perception is that of the public display of pleasure and loss of morals in Paris. King Jr. especially describes the hedonism that is apparent in the theaters and cafés of Paris. Matthews also notes the nonchalance with which the Parisians display their pleasures. Shocking to King Jr. and amusing to Matthews, the implication is the same and adds to a picture of an inferior Paris. It is implied that the Parisians are unable to contain their primitive habits. By contrast, this means that America is seen as more virtuous.

Finally, another important conclusion is drawn when analyzing the views on the French government. Especial-

ly in Matthews' account, written when the authoritarian regime of Napoleon III still reigned, we see admiration for the efficiency and order that the regime produced. King Jr. writes little about the French republican government, but he is charmed by the figure of Napoleon I. The image of glorious and strong leaders seems to have a positive impact on American travelers. According to Levenstein, the admiration for authoritarian royals stemmed from the problems caused by American republicanism. The chaos caused by democratic debates could have triggered a longing for the order that the European monarchs could provide.

Paris was a sin worth visiting

Thus, the travelers painted Paris as a largely inferior place to their home country. With these perceptions, a clear distinction is made between America and Paris. In constructing Paris as a 'hollow' image, America seems the more profound and powerful country. The constructed division by American travelers also painted Paris as an ideal destination, a temporary escape from the moral commitment that is being an American. Inferior, but amusing: the sin worth visiting.

Midas Urlings is a third-year student of History at Utrecht University. He followed the specialisation Political Conflict in Modern Europe as well as the minor Transatlantic Studies. This paper was written for the course Imagining Europe: Perceptions of the Old World as part of that minor.