Adams, Henry (1838–1918)

Although he was known as a historian during his lifetime, Henry Adams—like Henry James—is often seen as an American precursor to modernism. This is mainly due to his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, which not only registers an aristocratic intellectual’s despair at the loss of ideals in the transformation of American society but, written in the third person, also secures a distance from that despair in order to observe it self-consciously and ironically. After his death, in fact, Adams’ literary significance was appreciated by such New Critics as Yvor Winters and R. P. Blackmur.

Adams, born in 1838, was a great grandson of the second President of the United States, John Adams, and a grandson of the sixth, John Quincy Adams. He was educated at Harvard University and later in Germany. During the American Civil War he served in London as a private secretary for his father. After teaching history at Harvard and editing the *North American Review*, he settled in Washington D.C., researching American history (which led to *The Life of Albert Gallatin* and *History of the United States of America*), and making his house a salon of politicians and intellectuals. Works of this period include two novels—*Democracy* and *Esther*, both of which portray the vicissitudes of ideals in contemporary America through the heroines’ adventures. Throughout his life, Adams struggled to conceptualize the major transformations of American society; this latter, he argued, was losing touch with its republican ideals as a result of capitalism’s increasing social and economic dominance. *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, major works that address these questions, were his attempts at a new theory to account for the matrix of history in which these transformations occurred—from the unity of the Middle Ages to the chaos of the twentieth century—but not without an ironical gesture of his own ignorance.

List of Major Woks

*The Life of Albert Gallatin*, 1879.

*Democracy: An American Novel*, 1880.

*Esther: A Novel*, 1884.

*History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, 1889­–91.

*Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, 1913.

*The Education of Henry Adams*, 1918.

*The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, 1919.

Popular Editions

Samuels, E. and Samuels, J. N. (eds.) (1983) *Democracy, Esther, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, The Education of Henry Adams, Poems,* New York: Library of America.

Harbet, E. N. (ed.) (1986) *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson,* New York: Library of America.

———. (1986) *History of the United States during the Administration of James Madison*,New York: Library of America.

Suggested Reading

Bush, C. (1991) *Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James and Gertrude Stein*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lears, T. J. J. (1981) *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920*, New York: Pantheon.

Rowe, J. C. (1976) *Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.