Chapter IX

L’Américaine in Paris

Le Divorce

Paris affects the American visitors, but it does not seem they affect Paris very much.

(Diane Johnson, Into a Paris Quartier, 172)

What facilitated the transfer to the new celebratory mood in the French intelligentsia’s perception of the United States [in the 1970s] was that the phenomena taking place on the shores of the Pacific did not contradict the prevalent opinion among the French literati that American culture was unacceptable.

(Jean-Philippe Mathy, Extrême-Occident, 198)

Our American [expatriate] world is, as it always has been, a world within a world, more or less invisible to the real inhabitants.

(Diane Johnson, Into a Paris Quartier, 180)

Versailles tend à devenir le lieu principal du culte monarchique.

(Jean-Marie Apostolidès, Le Roi-machine, 137)

Isabel Walker, the main character in Diane Johnson’s Le Divorce (1997), represents a tentative effort to project a different American attitude toward
France and the French. This change will develop slowly over the course of a novel, whose principal irony is that as Isabel's openness increases, the French attitude toward Americans, relatively positive at the beginning of Le Divorce, begins to regress until, toward the end, it appears to be an updated version of what Mme Bellegarde and her older son thought about Christopher Newman in The American.

L'Américaine à Paris is the French translation of Diane Johnson's bestseller, which deals with the travails, triumphs, and disappointments of a young American woman in contemporary France. Part of the novel's appeal stems from Johnson's skill at showing, with considerable humor, how French and Americans’ perceptions of each other are largely filtered through longstanding clichés. Thus, Americans like Paris but are somewhat distrustful of the French, whereas a Frenchman might be charmed by a young woman's “Americanness,” without being able to explain what it is (124). Americans tend to be uncultivated, while the French are sophisticated, yet fearful that their traditional way of life has been imperiled by the changes wrought by the influx of Americans: “The end of la civilisation française? ... I suppose when it became ‘fromage ou dessert’ instead of ‘fromage et dessert’” (41; emphasis original). Johnson even adds a more sophisticated dimension to the bandying about of old saws when she has Charles-Henri, who has left his American wife for a Yugoslav woman who has left her American husband, displays his Cartesian heritage when he notes the neat rationality and balance of the arrangement: “The Tellmans are separated, we're separated. So symmetrical a situation” (56).

Le Divorce can be approached from a variety of critical perspectives. The heroine, Isabel Walker, is a film school drop-out, and she makes perfectly clear from the beginning that “I think of my story as a sort of film” (1). References to framing scenes with cinematic techniques abound in the novel, and in Understanding Diane Johnson Carolyn Durham sketches a reading of the novel as a detailed draft of a film scenario (75–78).

Another approach, one which interests me more, explores the relationship between Le Divorce and Henry James's fiction. Quite aside from Johnson's longstanding interest in James, her heroine's name, Isabel Walker, would appear to be an overt allusion to Isabel Archer, the main character in Portrait of a Lady (1882), another attractive young woman who experiences life-changing events in Europe. For Carolyn Durham, “Analogies of name and of situation make Isabel Walker the contemporary counterpart of Isabel Archer” (82). While Durham does not develop in great
detail the possible similarities between the two novels, she does, with some hesitancy, suggest a possible parallel between the ways in which Johnson's Oncle Edgar and James's Gilbert Osmond treat their respective Isabels.

While the text certainly encourages the reader to associate Isabel Walker and Isabel Archer, I think this invitation is misleading. The crucial part of the women's identities is not their given names, but their surnames, “Archer” versus “Walker.” Isabel Archer is an idealist and something of a romantic; like an arrow, her imagination soars in Europe, where at first she believes she will discover cultural treasures for which the States has no equivalent, as well as a suave, cultivated lover who will make her happy forever. Yet the arrow eventually crashes to earth. James's novel ends unhappily with Isabel's dreams shattered. In contrast, Isabel Walker is a pragmatist who proceeds slowly and cautiously, one step at a time. She is at first more suspicious of Paris and its seductions than she is in awe of the place: “Even as a little girl, I lacked the endearing property of female credulousness” (20). If she falls in love with Oncle Edgar, she does so somewhat unwillingly and with a rather clearheaded premonition of how it will turn out: “I have met the love of my life, but it is a grotesque and doomed situation” (36). At the end of Le Divorce, this Isabel is confused and unhappy but, unlike her Jamesian counterpart, she is hardly broken. While Edgar is certainly cold to Isabel in their final meeting, his behavior is benign next to Osmond's consistently cruel and exploitive treatment of Isabel Archer.

To dismiss Isabel Archer as a serious model for Isabel Walker is not to deny the strong Jamesian presence in Johnson's text, one that is much more pervasive than an occasional allusion. I believe that the Henry James novel that has the most affinities with Le Divorce in terms of content and detail is The American. In what follows I will argue that Le Divorce is a contemporary version of The American, one that explores the experiences of an American in Paris from the perspective of the closing decade of the twentieth century, just as James’s novel did for the second half of the nineteenth.

The novels are similar in a variety of ways, while their differences reflect the passage of time and changing social mores. Neither the French nor the Americans of 1997 are the same people they were in 1868, and the level of misunderstanding and suspicion is not as total in Le Divorce as it was in The American. Still, the main characters in both novels share certain salient attributes; the French families in the two novels embody traditional French values, albeit modified by time; the cultural geography of Paris
and the mastering of the French language also play important roles in the unfolding of the plot. The expatriate community assumes a somewhat greater significance in *Le Divorce*, but its isolation from everyday French life is comparable to *The American*. Unlike the one-sided financial concerns which prevailed in James’s novel, money is initially not an issue for either the French or the Americans in Johnson’s text, although it does become so later in the novel. A night at the opera and the actions of a smitten young Frenchman prove crucial in both works. Finally, the modernity of France, represented by the Parc Monceau in *The American*, is replaced in *Le Divorce* by EuroDisney, the symbol of the successful American cultural invasion of contemporary Europe.

The main difference between the two protagonists is their gender. An obvious, albeit superficial explanation would claim that Johnson made her main character a young woman to encourage the rather misleading comparison with Isabel Archer. Another, simpler one, but also perfectly plausible, is that Diane Johnson simply wanted her main character to be a woman. While both interpretations have degrees of merit, it is equally apparent that the choice of a heroine rather than a hero has significant thematic value. In making his main character a man, James endowed Christopher Newman with a great deal of freedom. He could go where he wanted, say what he wished, and make decisions about his life and future. In the 1990s Isabel Walker enjoys comparable liberty. She could decide what she wished to study in college, then leave university when she felt the need. In aspiring to be involved in film production, she may be attempting to enter what has largely been a man’s world, but such considerations never cross her mind. She pretty much says what she wants to say, and lives with the consequences. All of this would appear to suggest that this young woman of the late twentieth century has much the same freedom of action as a contemporary male, not to mention that of a man in the late nineteenth.

But this is not the case. Although Isabel can and will do what she wishes and then accept responsibility for her actions, there remains one area where she is forever courting social disapproval: the control of her body. When she lived in California, her family was uncomfortable with the sexual freedom she displayed; she was at ease with sex and in charge of when and with whom she would indulge her desires. She encounters comparable short-sightedness in the French in Paris. Edgar is a married man, so when they have an affair, Isabel and he try to be as
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discrete as possible. Eventually word leaks out, and Isabel has the rather
embarrassing experience of meeting her lover’s wife, who treats her with
mild condescension. This attitude prevails among the other French family
members. She is the silly little American who is making a fool out of herself
with an older Frenchman. No such opprobrium is cast upon Edgar; his
success with a much younger woman simply adds to his reputation. In Le
Divorce, Isabel Walker represents in many ways the progress women have
made in freeing themselves from longstanding social constraints, but her
experience is also indicative of the fact that hypocritical social barriers
remain for women. Isabel Walker is a modern woman, not simply for her
willingness to assert herself, but also for her awareness that her desired
independence of decision and action has yet to receive full toleration in
what passes for enlightened society.

In The American, Christopher Newman was almost constantly in
motion, a characteristic which James highlighted by frequent references
to his character’s legs. When the Bellegarde family was hesitating over
whether to allow the American to marry Claire, and she was unavailable
for visits, Newman did not idle away his time in Paris. Instead, he set out
on a whirlwind tour of Europe. Isabel undertakes no such journey, but
she too makes abundant use of her legs. As her name indicates, she is a
walker, someone who moves forward at a steady pace. Of course, while
accompanying children on little strolls at family gatherings, or walking an
expatriate’s dog is hardly comparable to a European tour, Isabel is quite
active and curious about her environment. Due in large measure to Edgar’s
help and encouragement, she explores Paris much more thoroughly than
Newman ever did. She does not waste her time; like her nineteenth-century
counterpart, she seeks to learn from her experiences. Above all she, like
him, detests idleness, a condition only once forced upon Newman when
he waited helplessly outside the convent in the rue d’Enfer where Claire
had entombed herself. Frustrated with her dog-walking activities and her
position as a “half-time girlfriend,” Isabel: “hated the passivity of this life”
(181). But this frustration, this idleness is the exception rather than the rule.

Both Christopher and Izzy, as her family calls her, are pragmatic in their
approach to French culture. Newman is interested because he has been
informed that it is the best product on the market, and Isabel is in Paris
rather by chance, on a family mission. Both eventually come to respect
their new surroundings, but Isabel signals her similarity to Newman, and
her difference from her sister, Roxy, when she remarks, “I don’t share
her unqualified admiration for all things European” (21). Although Paris becomes an attractive place for both Americans, perhaps more so for Isabel, neither ever becomes, or wishes to become, an unabashed Francophile. However their feelings about the French evolve or devolve in the course of their stories, they never lose their critical perspective. They are Americans in Paris, a condition which will always maintain them at a slight separation from their environment and from the French they encounter.

They are also to a degree different from other Americans in the French capital. James hints that Christopher’s Civil War experiences affected him more than he realized, and were perhaps the catalyst for his sudden decision to come to Europe in search of more than a trophy wife and artifacts of European culture. Isabel’s family lives on the West Coast, and that is where she spent most of her young life. Yet she is actually from the Midwest, and this difference is reflected in her long, black hair, which contrasts with the blondness of her Californian contemporaries. In California she fitted in, but was never exactly the same as the young people around her. Both Christopher and Isabel are in many ways typical of their historical moment, yet factors of admittedly very dissimilar importance set them apart from their peers. Although a possible war trauma is vastly more serious than a hair color, in each case these elements function to suggest there is something different about these characters. Isabel and Christopher are quite at ease with themselves as Americans, but both novels imply that in subtle ways something is lacking in their lives, and that in Paris they are searching, albeit unconsciously, for whatever they could not find in the States.

Neither Christopher nor Izzy gives the impression of being a particularly gifted linguist, but their presence in a Francophone country puts some pressure on them to contend with the French language. Newman’s approach is casual; he acts as if learning French would be a lark at best. He makes some effort with M. Nioche, but the limited knowledge he displays in the novel suggests he still has a long way to go. As a result, when the French seek to communicate with him, it must be in English. As discussed in the first chapter, the question in *The American* of English versus French reflects the relative importance of the two nations. The United States being very much the present and the future, and France already beginning its decline, English is the language of power destined to dominate in the modern world.

Things are slightly different in *Le Divorce*. The status of English has only been enhanced; it is now the principal language of commerce, travel, and diplomacy. Where Newman was content with his halting grasp of French,
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after an initial indifference, Izzy becomes quite frustrated with her slow progress in speaking and understanding. Her interest in mastering French was doubtless sparked by her affair with Edgar, but it extends beyond that. During her time in France she becomes aware that the language is much more than a facilitator for making purchases in shops, asking directions on the street, and engaging in rudimentary conversations; she comes to realize that, to some degree, it is a path to a better understanding of herself, but more significantly of a complex society and those who live in it. In this respect, Isabel is quite different from Christopher Newman. Partly through her growing facility with French, she learns more about France and its inhabitants than Newman ever did. If Christopher had been the new American for the 1860s, Izzy is the new American for the late twentieth century, someone whose sense of herself as an American and a foreigner in France is never in doubt, but who eventually comes to understand that her knowledge of the world can be enhanced by serious engagement with another culture.

Within the American expatriate community in Paris, only Mrs. Olivia Pace and Roxy appear to have any facility in French. Mrs. Pace is an established, active writer who has chosen to live in Paris. She befriends Isabel and frequently corrects her errors in French. Roxy appears quite fluent in the language, more than any other American in the novel, in part because of her marriage to Charles-Henri, but also thanks to her effort at total immersion in all things French. It is unclear how much French, if any, the other expatriates possess.

The image of the expatriates that emerges in Le Divorce is not substantially different from what was seen in The American and even more so in The Custom of the Country (1913), where the American community engages in what I termed “urban colonization” by creating in the middle of Paris an alternative universe from which the French were largely excluded. Johnson’s novel presents something comparable. At the center of expatriate life in Le Divorce is the Pace apartment, which is located on the top floor of a building in the rue Bonaparte: “Everyone in the American community hopes to be asked there” (12). Mrs. Pace is something of a matriarchal figure who reigns over a group of Americans who appear ill at ease in their foreign surroundings. Isabel admires Mrs. Pace, but senses “among all the rest of the Americans in Paris ... a clinging together in the face of a foreign culture – one that we all had chosen, however temporarily, but felt to be alien all the same” (11).
Although Mrs. Pace and her husband certainly seem to enjoy Paris, the location of their apartment suggests that the Paris they live in is not precisely the city located in France. The placement of their apartment suggests a certain distancing from the French. They live in a trendy section of Paris, but high above the streets and the everyday world of the city; while they have some French friends, the bulk of their acquaintances are Americans who are anxious to be invited into their home; in a more concentrated fashion, theirs is the alternative universe Edith Wharton captured in her novel, a place in a central part of the city, but removed from Parisian daily life. The Parisian expatriates might occasionally encounter French people of their social class or slightly higher with whom they would presumably converse in English, but dealings with the average French person would be rare. As Johnson noted in Into a Paris Quartier: “Our American world [in Paris] is, as it always has been, a world within a world, more or less invisible to the real inhabitants” (180). Johnson’s sense of an American enclave in Paris, largely demarcated from the city the French know, is also reflected in Le Divorce.

Paris provides the expatriates with a blasé sophistication, which is most often expressed in questionable profundities: “Every American in Paris is running away from something” (34). The speaker is Ames Everett, an adept at self-pity and one of Isabel's employers (she walks his dog), who discovers in Paris the supposed difficulty, not of living abroad, but of being American: “It isn’t easy being American ... That is the final reality. It is hard. It is a moral obligation we come here to escape. We are too sensitive – I speak of us expatriates” (35). The expatriates to whom Everett is referring would not include Izzy or Christopher Newman, who are fleeing nothing. They both have a purpose for being in Paris. Very personal reasons brought them to Paris; they are searching for something, not trying to escape.

Paris, for the more typical expatriates in the novel, as it was for their predecessors in The American, is the past;² it is art of earlier eras (never contemporary works) and antiques that interest them. In The American, a crime was committed by French people. In Le Divorce, the opposite is true. An antique tureen is stolen by an American art historian's British lover. The extent to which the American was involved remains unclear, but the act itself, ridiculous in comparison to the murder in James's novel, is nevertheless symptomatic of the expatriates’ activities in France: with exceptions such as the Paces and Roxy, they take from the country, steal
from its heritage, be it objects or an aura of sophistication associated with living in Paris, and contribute nothing in return.

The Paces live in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The French family, Roxy's in-laws, have their Parisian home in the Avenue de Wagram. Saint-Germain is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Paris; it is where the Bellegardes lived in *The American*. The Avenue de Wagram was in part renovated in the nineteenth century during the transformation of Paris by Baron Haussmann. At that time, the Avenue de Wagram was considered one of the new sections of Paris. It in the area where Christopher Newman lived. Thus, it would appear that the Parisian neighborhoods chosen in *Le Divorce* and *The American* are direct opposites.

This is not the case, however. In the nineteenth century, the streets affected by Haussmann's renovations were associated with a new, modern Paris. Living there was expensive, but trendy for foreigners anxious to display their wealth. For the well-healed Christopher Newman, the cost was no obstacle, and was more than balanced by the space and light offered by the apartment he rented in the boulevard Haussmann. By the end of the twentieth century, the *quartiers* associated with Haussmann's changes were still considered wealthy neighborhoods, but were no longer particularly trendy. Over approximately the last half-century that honor has belonged to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which became the stylish address for well-to-do foreigners, notably Americans. Between the 1860s and the present, the aura associated with different *quartiers* has changed, but in *Le Divorce* the areas occupied by French and Americans reflect the same status as they had in *The American*. The French live in the area of old money and tradition, an oasis of *la vieille France*, while the Americans are in the flashier section associated with the present.

Roxy's in-laws, the Persand family, display neither the dishonesty nor the hypocrisy of the Bellegardes, but they do maintain a firm sense of tradition. While the matriarch, Suzanne de Persand, lives in the Avenue de Wagram during the week, on Sundays her children and their offspring are expected to come to the family *château* near Chartres for lunch; even though no Persand family member seems particularly religious, they are, as is appropriate in their social circle, Catholic, and seem to appreciate Roxy's conversion to their faith. Yet, although the Persands appear to genuinely like Roxanne, and make an effort to integrate her into their midst, she remains *l'américaine* (23).

Unlike the Bellegardes, the Persands' finances appear stable. They may
not be very rich – Izzy rather cattily notes that in the Avenue de Wagram apartment the Louis Quinze furniture was “covered in faded brocade or fraying needlepoint” (23) – but they are certainly well-off, and appear to have no pressing financial issues. In contrast with the Bellegardes, all the Persands seem quite active, “tall and good at sports” (22). The embodiment of the family’s vitality is Oncle Edgar. In his late sixties or early seventies, Edgar impresses Izzy with his sexual prowess, but his importance in the novel goes well beyond that. A man who has held important positions in the government, Edgar is very much involved in political discussions concerning the role France ought to be playing in the contemporary world, notably in the Bosnian crisis. His principles are conservative, and they clearly resonate with the French public since he is a frequent guest on talk shows. Edgar draws his positions from his knowledge of French political history and thought as well as from his experiences in government and the military. He distills what he believes is a fundamentally French perspective. In an era where cynicism, or at least pragmatism, is usually the order of the day, Edgar continues to think that moral considerations should play a significant role in politics. For him, France, no matter the extent to which its prestige might have diminished, can still be a powerful ethical voice on the international scene.

If French culture and politics appeared moribund in *The American*, and certainly irrelevant to the present, this is not the case in *Le Divorce*. As exemplified by Oncle Edgar, France’s reputation might well have been weakened in today’s world, symbolized by Edgar’s age and particularly his limp, probably the result of a war wound. However, the country, like the septuagenarian, remains intellectually strong and capable of having a positive influence on current events. Edgar is old as his nation is old but, as *Le Divorce* suggests, the activity and contributions of each are far from coming to an end.

In addition to the Avenue de Wagram and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a third Parisian location merits attention. That is the rue Maître-Albert where Roxy lives, a rather narrow passage whose curious history is reflective of Izzy’s sister’s situation in France. This street is in the fifth *arrondissement*, one of the oldest sections of Paris. Yet the rue Maître-Albert has not been the rue Maître-Albert for all that long. While the street was created in the fourteenth century, the original name was the rue Perdue. Over time the name went through several permutations until 1844, when it became the rue Maître-Albert.
The street is named after Albert the Great (1193–1280), one of the foremost medieval philosophers and theologians. Albert was probably born in Germany and eventually died there. He was largely educated in Italy; between 1241 and 1254, he was at the University of Paris. Except for a brief return to Paris toward the end of his life in a vain effort to settle a dispute at the university, his time in France was relatively limited, perhaps ten or twelve years in a long life.

Albert the Great possessed a powerful intellect; he was one of his era’s most gifted commentators on Aristotle, but he certainly was not of French origin. He did, however, eventually achieve notoriety in France, even though Gallic recognition, at least in terms of naming a street after him, was rather late. Nevertheless, he was a foreigner who eventually gained fame in France. In these respects, Albert’s life and accomplishments become a parodic model of what Roxy hopes to achieve. While there are some surface similarities between Roxy and Albert (both are foreigners, both intellectuals with limited experience living in Paris), these are far outweighed by the differences. Albert’s achievements are based on a life of hard work; Roxy’s aspirations are based on some modest success placing poems in small journals.

Both Roxy and Albert went to France for specific reasons; he to work, and she as a new bride with fantasies about her talent and the greatness of her new country. Roxy is an American trying to shed her national identity and become famous as a poet in France, even if French recognition of her achievements might only come in the distant future. She sees herself primarily as an artist and an intellectual whose talent will be nourished by her environment. Albert was certainly an intellectual, but probably indifferent to being in France, since national identity did not yet exist during his era. More generally, it is hard to imagine him believing that the life of the mind had any geographical parameters.

Roxy’s devotion to culture and art, and her name, associate her with a much more central French cultural figure. Roxy’s full first name is Roxeanne; anyone moderately acquainted with French literature will immediately associate Roxy with Roxane, the beautiful young woman smitten with the handsome but inarticulate Christian de Neuvillette in Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). Roxane is one of the great heroines of French theater, but she is also a *précieuse*, a blue stocking, an impressionable young woman whose love of the aesthetic and contempt for the mundane enable her to live, at least until Act V, in a make-believe world dominated
by art, poetry, and the memory of a sensitive, poetic young man who never really existed. Love and beauty mark the parameters of her existence.

The parallels between Roxeanne and Roxane are apparent. Like her French counterpart, the American is enamored of a man, Charles-Henri, who is not what she thinks; Roxy, like Roxane, strives to live in an enclosed aesthetic universe to which the vagaries of daily life have no access. Both women prefer illusion to reality. Yet there are differences between them. Roxane is more fortunate in being able to maintain her fantasy existence longer, and even in Act V her realization of her love for Cyrano makes the revelations about Christian's artistic and intellectual limitations more palatable. Roxy is not so lucky. Reality imposes when she is forced to confront Charles-Henri's passion for another woman, his subsequent demands for a divorce, and then to deal with the trauma of his murder.

The street where Roxy lives, and her association with Albert the Great and Roxane, reveal something else about Izzy's sister. Although she is in many ways different from the American expatriates, the references surrounding her link her to the past, and in that respect make her similar to most of the other Americans in Paris. Roxeanne's cultural framework turns her away from the present. She mentions no contemporary painters or writers, and the only French artwork she feels strongly about, a picture of St. Ursula, dates from the seventeenth century. The France she loves, the one in which she wishes to live, requires a nostalgic evocation of a country which probably never existed as she imagines it.

Although Isabel and Roxeanne are related by blood, their personalities and aspirations are diametrically opposed, and their differences are given a particularly literary dimension through references to the Biblical account of Martha and Mary, and Izzy's reaction to Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. According to the gospel of Saint Luke (10:38–42), sisters Martha and Mary receive Christ into their home. Mary forgets her chores and just sits at the feet of Jesus taking in what he says. The ever-practical Martha, on the other hand, busies herself with household tasks. In a moment of pique, she complains to Christ about her sister accomplishing nothing, but is rebuked and told that Mary is doing the right thing by listening to him.

In the Biblical context Mary is clearly right and Martha wrong, but Izzy does not see it that way. Luke's account was for her "one of the many Biblical stories from which I had drawn a moral the opposite of the one intended" (305). While Isabel knew she was "supposed to be Mary," Roxy "was Mary" (305). The moral Izzy drew, and for which she feels some guilt, is that trying
to accomplish something in the real world is preferable to idling about with one's head in the clouds. Whatever the worth of Isabel's Biblical exegesis, it accurately reflects the American half-sisters' natures and values. Roxeanne is the contemplative one, prone to passivity concerning the practical world around her, while Izzy has little time for abstractions, no matter how sublime. Roxy's world is one of beauty and truth, while her sister's is that of the waning years of the twentieth century.

Just as Izzy provides a very personal reading of the Biblical passage, her interpretation of Maria Stuarda is equally idiosyncratic, yet once again illuminating about her half-sister and herself. In The American, the scene at the opera was important because it served to contrast the great passions displayed in Don Giovanni with two young men's ridiculous and ultimately tragic quarrel over a courtesan. The experience of the opera in Le Divorce, at the elegant Opéra de Bastille with an audience in formal dress, becomes a catalyst that sharpens Izzy's sense of herself as a pragmatist living in the present and wanting to be involved with current events.

In Maria Stuarda, the clash between Elizabeth I of England and Mary Queen of Scots centers on whether the English queen will heed the advice of her counselors and have her cousin executed as a possible rival for the throne. Although the story has strong political overtones, in Donizetti's version the clash between is more personal than political, at least on Elizabeth's part, since she signs Mary's death warrant largely because the Scottish queen has stolen the affections of her lover, Leicester.

This is not, however, how Izzy understands the story. Her senses heightened by her stylish surroundings and the beautiful music, she imagines herself as cool-headed Elizabeth, dealing with a politically complex issue which she must nonetheless resolve. Roxy is the beautiful, impractical Queen of Scots whose tumultuous love life costs her a crown and ultimately her life. This is the path of unbridled emotions that Isabel could never take. What excites her, and what she would choose instead, is "the immediacy of power, this richness not of money but of significance, of opulent testimony to politics. My spine warmed ... the music made my throat catch" (184).

In the excitement due to the combination of the music and ambiance at the opera house, Izzy seems to have a personal epiphany concerning who she is and what her priorities are. Yet in one respect she overstates her position. The "richness ... of money" will be very important to her, as it will be to everyone in the novel, with the possible exception of Roxeanne.
Isabel introduces the financial motif early in the novel when she rephrases the opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which begins, “It is a truth universally acknowledged ...” (33). Austen continues, “that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” While these words might apply perfectly to Christopher Newman, the world has greatly changed since his era, most certainly in gender relations, as is reflected in the way Izzy reformulates Jane Austen's famous sentence to read: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young American person not fully matriculated must be in want of a job” (33). Izzy's version no longer centers on a male blessed with a fortune, but concerns young Americans of either sex who may well be interested in falling in love and marrying, but for whom these are secondary considerations. The primary task is making money. For her and her contemporaries, of which Roxy is not one, money is the basis of modern life. Its presence provides the possibility of happiness, while its absence pretty much insures frustration. She sees this most clearly in relation to Roxy: “Say what you like about money, that it's disgusting or a taint, it would make all the difference for Roxy between grimness and a life of art” (255). Isabel's words are not cynical; they are realistic, and not at all reflective of a single age group. Money is at least as much of a concern to the older generation as it is to the younger in this novel.

In *The American*, the financial disparity between Newman and the Bellegardes was quite simple; he had money and they did not. This is not at all the case in *Le Divorce*. Both the Walkers and the Persands are relatively well-to-do families, but they are both modern families, aware that one never has enough money. A tension between the two families, who share the same financial values, emerges concerning the painting of Saint Ursula, a probably fictitious young woman of the fourth century who allegedly led eleven thousand other virgins on a pilgrimage that ended in Cologne, where they were all massacred by Huns.

For years this painting had been in the possession of the Walkers. It was particularly beloved by Roxy, who brought it to Paris when she married Charles-Henri. At the time it was believed to have been the work of a minor master or at best a student of Georges de La Tour, the seventeenth-century French painter. As such, it was supposed to have a modest financial value. All this changed when the painting was declared to be an original de La Tour. Its value skyrocketed, as did the interest of the Persends and the Walkers in possessing the recently declared masterpiece. The French
family claimed that since it was part of the marriage and was currently in France, they had a right to it, whereas the Americans insisted it had always been theirs. French lawyers supported the Presends, while their American counterparts defended the interests of their fellow countrymen.

Although Jane Austen never wrote anything to this effect, it may also be a truth universally acknowledged that money never brings out the best in people. This is certainly the case in *Le Divorce*. The dispute over the painting’s ownership severely tries the semblance of friendship and intercultural understanding. No one illustrates this strain more than Oncle Edgar, otherwise one of the most intelligent and tolerant characters in the novel.

While Izzy has the revelation about her priorities at the opera house, the process leading to it begins with her relationship with Oncle Edgar. In addition to his sexual rapport with her, Edgar was instrumental in her cultural and political education. He introduced her to fine food, had an influence on her clothing and appearances in public, and presented her to prominent members of Parisian society. Isabel has no hesitation about recognizing that she “was changing ... and it had to do with Edgar” (141). He was also at the origin of her growing awareness of “the excitement of political consciousness” (141). Yet, despite Edgar’s fine qualities, he makes no effort to intervene in the inter-family financial squabble to inject a modicum of reason and common sense. In this instance, his loyalty is not to an ideal, but to his blood.

As a result of money matters, the bond between Isabel and Edgar begins to weaken, and eventually reaches the breaking point with the murder of Charles-Henri, who is killed by an American with a handgun. Edgar’s reaction to this tragedy, his understandable grief, leads him to abandon his otherwise nuanced view of Americans and revert to well-known French criticisms and clichés concerning the inhabitants of the United States.

In his *Ce pays qui aime les idées*, Sudhir Hazareesingh proposes that “la pensée française est réputée pour son amour des notions générales” (16). Edgar had always displayed a tendency in this direction, and this proclivity emerges with brutal force when he addresses what he takes to be the American mentality:

You Americans seem to believe that only Americans are unequivocally blessed. That all other nations are constrained by the feebleness of their moral energy or the benightedness of their
institutions ... You Americans have the conviction – perhaps because you have been endlessly told it – that you are the freest nation in the world, which is hardly true. (293)

Edgar then goes on to refer to the high American murder rate and concludes: "Freedom to walk safely down the street is not a freedom you have" (293). In response, Isabel does not deny the gist of what he says but insists she does not think the way he describes Americans as thinking, and hopes that he does not include her in his sweeping reproach. To which he curtly replies: “You are very American, Isabel” (293).

Obviously there is truth in Edgar’s remarks concerning the plethora of guns possessed by Americans and, to a lesser degree, with regard to the American tendency to see themselves and their nation primarily in positive superlatives. Yet, by saying what he does, to whom he does, Edgar is confirming one of Izzy’s more negative judgments, that Europeans are always lumping Americans together (138). Edgar’s generalizations are rather facile, and this otherwise courtly man is quite cruel, not just to include Isabel, a woman he knows very well, in his blanket condemnation, but to turn her into the representative of her nation: “I perceived I was being held responsible for all the deficiencies of my tribe” (293).

In a novel which, unlike The American, attempts to offer a more nuanced approach to Franco-American conceptions of one another, this scene illustrates just how fragile is the progress toward the development of mutual understanding. Under extreme pressure, Edgar loses his better, more understanding, self, and can only utter commonplaces. The Americans are hardly any better. In fact, in this novel they are worse, since while one has the right to imagine that Edgar is reacting somewhat uncharacteristically due to painful circumstances, few Americans in the novel display any real openness to the French. The expatriates exist largely in their own world, and some newly arrived Americans come to Paris with their views of the French and their culture already formed. Chester and Margeeve Walker, Izzy and Roxy’s parents, “seemed prepared to like the city, but to disapprove of the French” (215). These otherwise intelligent people would probably feel more at home in The American, where national stereotypes are quite simplistic: the Americans are disingenuous and the French duplicitous. Isabel makes explicit the connection to James’s fictional universe, specifically to Portrait of a Lady when she mentions that her parents “had been intimating that Roxy had fallen into the hands
of impoverished European fortune hunters, like a victim out of Henry James" (228).

Nothing in *Le Divorce* would appear to illustrate the cultural divide between the French and the Americans better than the presence of EuroDisney, renamed Disneyland Paris after the publication of this novel. In *The American*, the Louvre was the symbol of France’s unrivaled position at the center of nineteenth-century European high culture and the nation’s political prestige. EuroDisney represents in *Le Divorce* the dominance of American popular culture in the twentieth century. It also reflects the United States’ ability to impose its presence anywhere in the world.

EuroDisney is a gigantic theme park extending over twenty-two kilometers; a place where, for the price of a ticket, one can savor the delights of fantasy and make-believe created by the strength of the American imagination. Cartoon characters like Mickey, Donald, and Goofy roam the grounds; they can be addressed, and even touched, by visitors who often wish to have their picture taken with them. The various rides and attractions provide versions so compelling of an “idealized America” (263) that even the normally hardheaded Isabel succumbs to the daydreams these sights and sounds create: “I had to admit it was nice to be back in America, especially America refined to its ideal essence of gingerbread porches and Tiffany glass” (263). Compared to the Louvre, the notion of a theme park can seem to be a terrible cultural devolution, a passage from the sublime to the ridiculous, and anathema to everything France has traditionally represented. However, such a judgment, as self-evident as it may seem, would be hasty. Baudrillard’s words were truer than he probably intended when he proclaimed, “La Californie n’a rien inventé” (205). The use of a theme park to project and enhance national heroic images has a long history in France. In fact, the first theme park in modern times was French.3

The *château* of Versailles was constructed in the seventeenth century at the height of France’s power and prestige. It was completed in 1683. Its purpose was to celebrate France, in general, and the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV in particular. According to Jean-Marie Apostolidès, in the seventeenth century the image of Louis XIV was such that “La France s’est définie comme une nation à travers l’imaginaire du corps symbolique du roi” (*Le roi machine*, 7). In 1683, Louis’s reign was at its peak, and the *château’s* symbolism enhanced his greatness to the extent that “L’image solaire de Louis XIV ... sera ... fixée à Versailles” (86).
In the Hall of Mirrors, the king is represented in the figure of a Roman Emperor; he is Apollo in the Great Apartment, and in Versailles’s Chapel, Louis’s place was under a large picture of the Holy Spirit descending upon the divinely chosen person (one of Louis's baptismal names was “Dieudonné”) in order to impart wisdom.4

The château and its gardens were very beautiful, but the main attraction was undoubtedly the king himself. Each day he was surrounded and admired by a large audience of courtiers who had paid a price to be present at Versailles. They had chosen to leave their châteaux forts, more often than not to accept less-than-ideal lodging in the palace, and conform to the strict protocol governing daily life at court, a protocol that emphasized the priority of the king. Louis XIV was not first among equals; he was the absolute monarch, clearly superior to all who surrounded him. The nobles would have to sacrifice their personal comfort and freedom for the pleasure of proximity to the royal presence and access to the splendor of the surroundings which they were permitted to visit. The king, like the Disney stars, was a spectacle; if the latter were creations of pure fantasy, the king was also, to some degree, a fantasy figure to his subjects, and his presence at Versailles, amid so many elements exalting his stature, only enhanced that image.

EuroDisney is not simply a French success; it attracts people from all over Europe and visitors from other continents as well. The Disneyland theme park concept, centering largely on escapist fantasies, dates back at least to 1955, when the first park was opened in California. Since then it has inspired many imitations throughout the world.5 Versailles achieved much the same renown. It became the model for royal residences throughout Europe, where efforts were made to imitate the architecture and the elaborate protocol associated with the Roi Soleil, with varying degrees of success.

Versailles in its heyday was a vibrant image of French absolutism and power. It also was a reflection of the country’s exemplary achievements in architecture, painting, landscaping, and literature associated with the century of Louis XIV. The fact that Versailles is essentially a museum today indicates that the particular version of France it glorified has passed into history, whereas EuroDisney’s current success illustrates the United States’ continuing dominance on the world stage. Yet saying that the sort of theme park Versailles represented, a melding of social and cultural achievement associated with the presence of a powerful individual or individuals, is no
longer alive in France is contradicted by a reading of *Le Divorce*. EuroDisney is not the only theme park in the novel. In keeping with France’s diminished importance, it is smaller than the American version but, proportions aside, the second park continues to attract visitors from around the world.

The *quartier* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés appears in *Le Divorce* as a contemporary theme park, a place where a slightly imagined past encounters a fantasy-seeking present, a neighborhood where full access to the delights offered by this world requires that money change hands.

Immediately after the end of World War II the Saint-Germain-des-Prés area of Paris became the intellectual center of France and, for a brief period, of Europe. Boris Vian details its parameters: “1. Au nord: quais Malaquais et Conti, 2. Au sud: rues de Vieux-Colomier et Saint-Sulpice, 3. À l’est: rue de Saints-Pères, 4. À l’ouest: rue Dauphine et de l’Ancienne Comédie” (14). The massive destruction wrought by the war had destroyed or severely hampered the functioning of many European cities, while Paris emerged relatively unscathed since shortly before the French defeat in 1940 it was declared an open city. As a result, at the war’s end Parisian buildings were still intact, public utilities and transportation were more or less operational, and finding lodging was a possibility if not a certainty. For these reasons refugees from all over the continent were attracted to Paris. Something of an artistic haven in the pre-war era, Saint-Germain had by 1947 developed a certain cachet which made it “un des pôles d'attraction du ‘monde intellectuel’ (sic) ou plus simplement du public” (Vian, 7; emphasis original).

An artistic and intellectual clientele frequented the Café Flore, the Café Deux Magots, the Brasserie Lipp, or all three, but in the postwar era the *quartier* became particularly celebrated because of the frequent presence of France’s most prominent intellectuals, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, who spent most of their day in the Flore. Albert Camus was often there, as were the coterie of admirers and acolytes whom these superstar intellectuals attracted. Certainly Saint-Germain was a place of intense intellectual activities. Many of the discussions/arguments found in *Les Mandarins* were supposed to have taken place in one of these cafés. The influential Marxist journal *Les Temps modernes*, founded by Sartre and de Beauvoir, emerged from some of these encounters, as did the once-trendy philosophy known as existentialism. When American tourists again began to return to Europe, Saint-Germain was something of a mecca for the intellectually minded or simply the celebrity gawkers. They would frequent
the Deux Magots, the Lipp, or the Flore in the hope of spotting one of these luminaries or even some of their lesser counterparts. According to Boris Vian, however, even by the time the first onslaught of tourists descended on the grands cafés, it was already too late: “On se rua au Flore, aux Deux Magots, au Lipp, à la Rhumerie pour voir les hommes célèbres. Eux n’y étaient déjà plus” (91).

By the time the story of Le Divorce unfolds, the postwar Saint-Germain-des-Prés is long gone. The principal attractions are dead, and the number of bookstores in the area is in the process of declining, often to be replaced by high-end boutiques. The cafés remain, and those seated on the terrace have the curious pleasure of hearing street musicians play and sing, with various degrees of success, songs associated with Edith Piaf, Boris Vian, and Juliette Greco, all representatives of the putative golden age of the great French thinkers. Yet the fact that Saint-Germain is now a very different place does little to deter tourists. As Diane Johnson observes in Into a Paris Quartier: “The quarter of Saint-Germain-des-Prés may be the most visited and written about of all the Parisian neighborhoods” (7). What draws the tourists, many of whom are American, is “the recent past [the postwar era], the heyday that comes to people’s minds when you say ‘St.-Germain-des-Prés’” (7).

The merchants of this quartier seek to exploit this quasi-intellectual mystique. First of all, by attempting to give the impression that not all that much has changed since the late 1940s. The Lipp and Deux Magots continue to award literary prizes, a practice initiated in the 1930s, and the Flore got in on the act by creating the Prix de Flore in 1994. Cultural events still take place in the area, and while not exactly of the popular sort that would feature Mickey or Donald, they tend to emphasize art of the well-known and well-loved variety. Once again, Diane Johnson: “La Place St.-Germain-des-Prés: Concer tes are held in the church many nights of the week, heavily emphasizing Vivaldi’s Four Seasons” (75).

Yet the real business of Saint-Germain, as of any theme park, is commerce. While tourists are invited to absorb the area’s intellectual atmosphere while sipping a drink at the Deux Magots or the Flore, should they look across the street, they will see in the space where Le Drugstore used to stand an Emporio Armani boutique. Farther to the right is a Sonia Rykiel, and to the south at the Place Saint-Sulpice is an Yves Saint-Laurent store which itself is not far from Christian Lacroix’s boutique. In addition to these name brand operations, there are many smaller clothes and shoe stores seeking to appeal to the foreign visitors. An area which once had
considerable intellectual distinction, is now distinguished in a different manner, having become a “glossy consumer paradise” (Johnson, 9).

There is, of course, nothing wrong with neighborhoods changing and one type of commerce replacing another. The point I wish to make is that in terms of *Le Divorce*, and in the broader context of contemporary Paris, Saint-Germain-des-Prés functions as a theme park: it is an outdoor shopping mall whose attractiveness depends to a significant extent on the exploitation of the area’s earlier history. It provides the fantasy that the past is very much alive, while its real focus is on contemporary consumerism. Just as at EuroDisney visitors can stroll freely about and marvel at what they see, in Saint-Germain-des-Prés they can wander through some of the narrow streets, pay homage to departed icons at Place Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir (between the Deux Magots and the church of Saint-Germain), and explore the merchandise proposed in boutiques large and small. In their attempts to relive the past, to delve more deeply into French culture while nonetheless enjoying the offerings of the present, these people are abetted in their efforts by English-speaking guides, the waiters, and sales people of the quartier Saint-Germain.

The ending of *The American* is a model of clarity and decisiveness; the same cannot be said for the final pages of *Le Divorce*, yet these hint at a significant change in American attitudes toward France. In one of Christopher Newman’s rare emotional moments, he initially decides to stay in Paris and maintain a vigil before the convent Claire has entered in the hope that she would soon change her mind and return to the secular world. However, with the passage of time he begins to accept the foolishness of this gesture. Sadly, but calmly, Christopher determines that he is wasting his time, so cuts his losses and returns to the United States, presumably never to return to France.

At the end of *Le Divorce*, Isabel, rather like Newman, is in a quandary, but one that she cannot yet resolve. Her relationship with Edgar, as with the entire Persand family, is strained and perhaps irretrievably broken. Even if it is not, and she can manage some sort of reconciliation with Edgar, the age difference will eventually exact its toll. She remains in shock over Charles-Henri’s murder and upset by the continuing legal wrangling over the portrait of Saint Ursula. A sensible option for her would be to get out of Paris and return to California, having experienced for the most part a very worthwhile, albeit uncanonical, version of a junior year abroad. She might then re-enroll in film school and in time make a film of her French
L'Américaine in Paris

experiences based on her narrative (the novel), which she has already framed as a scenario.

Yet Isabel appears inclined to move in a different direction, one which might involve staying in France. It is, however, a measure of her highly emotional state that her language, in mulling this possibility, is uncharacteristically hyperbolic and even melodramatic. She begins with the sort of false profundity favored by her expatriate acquaintance, Ames Everett: “Are Americans still Americans when they are transplanted?” (309). The obvious, indeed banal response is that everyone is to a degree affected by a radical change in environment, but the extent and the duration depends upon the individual. Yet what makes this hypothetical question even sillier is that she implies that it might be applicable to Lieutenant William Calley and herself (309), two people with remarkably dissimilar experiences abroad. Izzy is not Roxy; at no point in the novel has she expressed the slightest desire to abandon her American identity for a French one. Obviously, an extended stay in France will change her, and the degree of that change will depend in large measure on whether she engages more actively with the American expatriate community or ventures instead further into French society. But for the French and herself, she will always be “l’Américaine.”

Izzy moves from hyperbole to melodrama when in emotionally fraught terms she imagines herself as a person “without a country, planning to go to Zagreb, planning to lunch with an under-minister of culture, planning to drink a lot of orange tisane, planning to really buckle down to study French” (309).

The crucial word here is “planning”; Isabel remains quite uncertain about what she really will do. Going to Zagreb would combine her personal and professional wishes: to be with Edgar and help out with the refugee situation, but whether either aspiration could be realized remains uncertain. Attempting to perfect her French is admirable, while drinking tea and dating a man closer to her age are activities she could engage in anywhere in the world, although spending time with a French man would help improve her language skills. “Planning” is not, however, “doing,” and at the novel’s end the normally self-confident and decisive Isabel Walker finds herself in a state of extreme indecision.

This uncertainty is nevertheless the mark of her achievement in France. She has learned to function in French and has begun to develop a knowledge of the country’s society and culture that goes beyond what guidebooks normally provide. Christopher Newman had specific goals in
Frères Ennemis

going to France; when they were not met, he simply returned to his native country. Isabel has no specific goals when she arrives in Paris besides the vague desire to help her half-sister. She develops intellectual interests and a personal involvement with an older French man there, yet nothing suggests that she is satisfied with what she has achieved in either area. Her political development is far from completed, and her interest in dating a young French diplomat implies that, if needed, there will be an après Edgar. So remaining in France is a positive, albeit more complicated option than would be returning to California and finishing her formal education. While Le Divorce lacks the closure and self-assurance of The American, it provides something much more modern: the portrait of an American young woman willing to enter into a different culture to such an extent as to occasionally lose her way in it, yet refusing to abandon her efforts to understand different manners of thinking and behaving. None of which is to say that Isabel Walker will choose to stay in France and pursue her informal education. Readers of her story can simply appreciate the parameters of her options as well as the extent to which she departs from earlier portrayals of Americans in France. One can merely hope that such a woman would make the choice that is right for her.

Notes

1 Throughout the novel Edgar is referred to by the French “Oncle,” rather than the English “Uncle.”
2 Here again, Mrs. Pace is the exception. She lives in the present and that is what she prefers to think about (133).
3 I want to express my gratitude to Professor Robert Neuman, my friend and colleague at Florida State University, for first suggesting to me that Versailles could be viewed as the first modern theme park.
4 Apostolidès provides a very practical example of Louis XIV’s alleged wisdom which underscores the symbolic nature of Versailles, while at the same time enhancing the king’s special role at the château: “Versailles se présente tout entier comme une immense piste: chaque statue possède un sens qu’il faut retrouver. L’ensemble du jardin compose un texte dont le roi possède la signification et qu’il déchiffre pour les visiteurs qu’il désire honorer” (56).
5 A short, arbitrary list of such places would include Puy du Fou (1978), Futuroscope (1987), Parc Astérix (1989), and France Miniature (1991), but theme parks have become legion in France and Europe.
For Boris Vian, these two were the undisputed stars of the intellectual life in this area of Paris: “le lancement récent de Saint-Germain-des-Prés est en grande partie dû à leur renom littéraire, et que si les tôliers du coin avaient trois sous d’honnêteté, Simone de Beauvoir et Sartre devraient consommer gratis dans tous les bistrots qu’ils ont lancés” (123). Vian declares that “Saint-Germain-des-Prés a retrouvé sa splendeur d’antan” thanks to Jean-Paul Sartre (36).

Sartre and Albert Camus T-shirts are available but can only be purchased online.