

## Penetrating Character Studies in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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### Abstract

The Portrait of a Lady was considered one of Henry James' best works and it was his first large commercial success. At the center of the novel stands a very American heroine. She is shown to be very American in that she has "freedom of choice", rather than being confined to her social status (as determined by marriage or birth). The novel is about a desire for freedom, and the difficulties and illusions one may fall prey to in the attempt to assert one's own individuality. It is about the social interdependence of people on one another, and the need to understand one's actions as related to the actions and desires of others.

**KEYWORDS:** society, Freedom, Love, Individuality.

Usually regarded as the major achievement of Henry James' early period of fiction writing, **The Portrait of a Lady** is one of the greatest novels of modern literature. James clearly knew how to use a single character that shapes the work and is seen throughout in relationship to various other characters. He advances in **The Portrait of a Lady** in minimizing his own authorial comments and analysis and permitting his heroine to be seen through her own tardily awakening self-realisation and also through the consciousness of the men and women who are closest to her. His "Portrait" of a lady is one which slowly grows stroke by stroke as touches are added that bring out both highlights and shadows, until Isabel Archer stands at the end of the novel as a woman whose experiences have brought her excitement, joy, pain and knowledge and have given her an enduring beauty and dignity.

Isabel is one of James' finest creations and one of the most memorable women in the history of the novel. She grew from James's original "conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny", as he later wrote in his Preface to the novel. Because of her presumptions that Isabel knew more than she did about herself and the world, she was to make mistakes, including the tragic error of misjudging the nature of Gilbert Osmond. But her intelligence, though it was not sufficient to save her from suffering, would enable her to achieve a moral triumph in the end.

Of the four men in Isabel's life, three love her, and one uses her innocence to gain for himself what he would not otherwise have had. She refuses to marry with Lord Warburton, she turns down Casper Goodwood, who also offers wealth but she is frightened by his aggressiveness. Her cousin, Ralph Touchett does not propose because he does not wish her to be tied to a man who daily faces death. She accepts Gilbert Osmond because she is deceived by his calculated charm. Half of the novel is given over to Isabel's living with, adjusting to, and, finally, triumphing over the disastrous choice she has made.

Much of what occurs in the novel does so in or near a series of houses, each of which relates significantly to Isabel or to other characters. The action begins at Gardencourt, the

English country house of Daniel Touchett which Isabel finds more beautiful than anything she has ever seen. Mrs. Touchett taking Isabel from the Albany house to Gardencourt is a first step in her plan to "introduce her to the world ". Isabel is first seen at Gardencourt on her visit with Mrs. Touchett , and it is here that she turns down the first of three proposals of marriage.

It is fitting that she should be last seen here by turns with each of the three men who have loved her. Asserting the independence on which she has long prided herself, she has defied her imperious husband by going to England to see the dying Ralph, whose last words tell her that if she has been hated by Osmond, she has been adored by her cousin. In a brief conversation with Lord Warburton after Ralph's death, Isabel turns down an invitation to visit him and his sisters to Lockleigh. Shortly afterward, a scene six years earlier is reversed. Then she had sat on a rustic bench at Gardencourt and looked up from reading Casper Goodwood's letter implying that she would come to England and propose to her -- only to see and hear Warburton preparing to offer his own proposal.

Casper surprises her by appearing just after she has dismissed Warburton. There follows the one passionate scene in the novel. In it Isabel has "an immense desire to appear to resist "the force of Casper's argument that she should leave Osmond and turns to him. She pleads with streaming tears, "As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!" Defying her plea, Casper kisses her: ... It was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity...

Casper had possessed Isabel for a moment only. " But when darkness returned she was free " and she flees into the house---- and thence to Rome, as Casper learns in the brief scene in London with Henrietta Stackpole that closes the novel. Isabel orphaned at an early age and an heiress uses her freedom to go to Europe to be educated in the arts of life lacking in her own country. She draws the interest and adoration of many people, all of whom feel that they can make a contribution to her growth, or at least can use her.

Isabel is somewhat unworldly at the time of her marriage to Gilbert Osmond. After three years of resisting the social mold imposed on her by Osmond, she faces a dilemma in which her intelligence and honesty vie with her sense of obligation. Sensitive to her own needs, she is aware of the complicated future she faces.

After her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, Isabel and her husband established their home in Rome, in a setting completely expressive of Osmond's tastes. Before 3 years had passed, Isabel began to realize that her friends had not been completely wrong in their objections to her marriage. She feels that Osmond will fulfill her desire of self-development but it never happens. Osmond's ceaseless effort to press his wife into a mold, to make her a reflection of his own ideas, had not made their marriage one of the happiest.

What Isabel wants is: " The life of experience, what she gets from their marriage is the cold life of cultivation ". Osmond pretends to be independent of the evaluations and conventions of his world but deep down, he is a hypocrite. Osmond had succeeded in destroying a romance between Pansy and Edward Rosier, who had visited the girl's step-mother and found the daughter attractive. He had not succeeded, however, in contracting the match he desired between Pansy and Lord Warburton. Another character is Countess Gemini who knew the situation between her brother and Isabel. To comfort Isabel, she told her the story of Gilbert's past. After his first wife had died, he and Madam Merle had an affair that lasted six or seven years. During that time, Madam Merle, a widow, had

borne him a child, Pansy. With this news fresh in her mind she is determined to go to England. At Garden court, the scene between her and Ralph is full of tragic pathos. She identifies the spiritual death of her own youth and happiness with the death of Ralph. She stayed on briefly at Garden court after the funeral long enough to bid good bye to Lord Warburton, who had come to offer condolences to her aunt and to reject a third offer from Casper Goodwood, who knew of her husband's treatment. When she left to start her journey back to Italy, Isabel knew what she must do. She did not want Pansy's life to be spoilt by Osmond, as he had ruined her own life. Her first duty was not to herself, but to put her house in order.

The characters are repeatedly seen as isolated and rootless. The Touchett marriage has ended in separation; the first marriage of both Madam Merle and Gilbert Osmond have ended in death, and their own affair never results in marriage; Ralph, of course, never marries; and we suspect that Lord Warburton has made the sort of 'convenient' , marriage which will never be able to offer him any deep personal fulfillment. Only Henrietta and the pliable, colourless Mr Bantling seem to have the hope of anything like happy personal relationship. The failure to communicate is imaged by Mrs.Touchett's inscrutable telegrams; she communicates clearly only once- and that is with the news that Ralph is dying. The female characters in the novel introduce a different aspect of the problem and offers a different solution, thereby providing a term of comparison against which to measure the protagonist's personal guest. Mrs.Touchett has cut out a space for her autonomy within marriage by living separately from her husband, but at the cost of emotional detachment as well; while Madam Merle, who has found her own autonomous social function as mistress of conventions and manipulator of appearances, is also a slave to this very role and must sacrifice her feelings to it. Henrietta is the emancipated American type, while Pansy allows her personality to disappear under the shadow of her father's will. After all, we can read Isabel's story in an almost infinite number of ways, as the myriad critical interpretations of the novel indicate. For instance, much has been written about the peculiarity American characteristics of the protagonist and her outlook on life. Her story is an initiation story--an extremely fruitful theme in American literature--which takes on a typically Jamesian quality because of its International character.

The melodramatic underpinning of the story is handled with the novelist's characteristic realism. James knew that he could make the reader accept almost any story if his people were truly drawn; and the series of portraits of the characters surrounding Isabel--no less than Isabel herself give the novel—its remarkable force and intensity. Few "psychological" villains have ever been sketched with greater power than Gilbert Osmond, the pretentious and cynical husband, whose egotism surpasses Isabel's ; and his scheming yet sympathetic mistress, Madam Merle, is one of the James's most completely realized characters. The "Portrait" of the lady-- her private history, her illusions and her disillusionment the clash of ego with ego-- is an essence a psychological portrait. Isabel confronts her destiny with courage and determination: but James shows us that behind her egotistical boldness there are fears and uncertainties.

What is dramatized in the novel is New World ignorance foundering upon hard realities long known to the Old World. The novel's success lies in its brilliant projection of the American girl, the delineation of her character. James views her as an ideal representative of American democracy in search of her identity.

The novel shows that female protagonist like Isabel Archer has to struggle very hard and she confronts the complex reality of life intelligently and boldly. James's interest in the deeper psychology of his characters is the primary factor behind the impression of realism he creates in the novel. Henry James clearly explores the conflict between the individual and society by examining the life of Isabel Archer who must choose between the independent spirit and the demands of social convention.

The main focus of the novel is on presenting, explaining, and developing her character. James uses all his creative powers to ensure that Isabel's conflict is the natural product of a believable mind, and not merely an abstract philosophical consideration. Isabel's natural intelligence has always ensured that she is at least as quick as anyone around her, and in Albany, New York, she has the reputation of being a formidable intellect. However it becomes clear that Isabel has a woefully unstructured imagination, as well as a romantic streak that suits her position as an optimistic innocent American. Isabel often considers her like as though it were a novel. She also has a tendency to think about herself obsessively and has a vast faith in her own moral strength- in fact, recognizing that she has never faced hardship, Isabel actually wishes that she might be made to suffer, so that she could prove her ability to overcome suffering without betraying her principles. Her marriage to Osmond effectively stifles Isabel's independent spirit, as her husband treats her as an object and tries to force her to share his opinions and abandon her own.

James skillfully intertwines the novel's psychological and thematic elements. Isabel's downfall, for instance, enables the book's most trenchant exploration of the conflict between her desire to conform to social convention and her fiercely independent mind. The novel gives a harrowing picture of emotional spoliation and spiritual travail in married life. Isabel Archer has a shattering experience in marriage, it is in marriage too that she grows rich in suffering, graduates to a higher consciousness, and discovers her true self. It's the paradox of marriage that it releases the spirit even as it constrains life. Her controversial return from Garden court to "the house of death and suffocation ", represents the principle of health, sanity and sunshine. This high-solved, tight-lipped, crucified woman who seeks to graduate to a clear vision remains a redeeming agent in this dusty world of contaminating and compulsive evil.

James leaves the reader to conclude that Isabel's love for Pansy Osmond has principally determined her decision to continue enduring a marriage that she had freely -- though so ignorantly and foolishly chosen. This is how in this novel, James explores the ramifications of a young, high-minded American girl's first exposure to the traditions of an older European culture. The Portrait of a Lady is an excellence example of the Jamesian subtle and penetrating character studies.

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