

Brief Study of the Portrait of a Lady

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Abstract – *The Portrait of a Lady is the finest and perhaps, the most consummate novel of Henry James' earlier period. It is the first novel by an American that made, within the limits of its subject, full use of the novel form. In his introduction to the novel in the New York Edition, James himself has expressed the view that he considered it "the most proportioned of his productions after The Ambassadors."*[1] *James tells us that the starting point was "the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny."*[2] *This young woman is Isabel Archer, the heroine of the novel. The action of the novel covers the growth and development of this young heroine from innocence to experience. It is her search for freedom or struggle for the affirmation and defence of her identity which constitutes the morality of the plot in the novel.*

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Paul B. Armstrong in *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (1983), begins with a question similar to those we have been dealing with: "What is the relationship between our will and our fate, our possibilities and their limits, our freedom and the demands of necessity? These are questions James is forever posing in his fiction as he probes this paradoxical aspect of experience." [3] Armstrong admits: "Almost every critic who has written about Isabel has done so in terms of freedom and necessity." [4] He mentions specifically Dorothy Van Ghent and others like Arnold Kettle as foremost among such critics; then he adds this explanation: "My reading of the *Portrait* will try to bare the experimental underpinnings of the issue - the origins of the dialectic of freedom and in the basic structure of existence as James understands it." [5] These origins are the writings of existential phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Maurice Merleau, Ponty and Paul Ricoeur and also of William James, elder brother of Henry James. The relevant ideas, and the terms typically used to express them, are: that at birth we find ourselves "cast" into a world that is already decided for us; that the limitations of the "ground" upon which we are "cast" are simply present at birth and our "field of possibility" is thus restricted. That is not cause for gloom, however: "We always have the freedom to take a critical posture towards our ground and thereby to accept it as a field that allows the option of trying to change it ... But if, in what Ricoeur calls a "dream of innocence," we refuse to "consent to necessity," we not only delude ourselves about our possibilities but, even worse, actually sacrifice our freedom by fleeing from its condition of possibility." [6]

The road to satisfactory maturity - escaping from that dream of innocence, consenting to the restrictions of "necessity", enjoying that true freedom results in consequence - is described helpfully in related terms offered by William James. First the "healthy minded," "once - born" individual - living the dream of innocence - is naively confident of possessing the power to realize limitless potential, sees the world as good and full of readily achievable objectives. That soul has to recognize the tragic fact of human existence, inescapable limitations, intervening evil. Second, that recognition produces a condition of near despair, the "sick soul" who almost loses faith in any sort of freedom, in the existence of any realizable possibilities at all. Third, the "twice-born" persevere, reflecting on actual conditions and yet realizable potential within them, and achieve that freedom which results, paradoxically, from the recognition of necessity and that is more profound, more mature and more exalted freedom, of course, that was dreamed of in the state of innocence and morality. On that paradoxical achievement Armstrong comments, "Ricoeur summarizes this reciprocity between freedom and necessity in what he calls 'the paradox of the servile will.' Servitude and the will go hand in hand." [7] Even such a simplified sketch as this readily indicates the applicability of this system of belief to the career of Isabel Archer and Armstrong's application of it attempts to reveal "how Isabel's story dramatizes the paradox of the servile will." [8]

Isabel's desire for freedom and her quest for morality are, in fact, central concerns of her personality. As Arnold Kettle has rightly pointed

out, "The independence of Isabel is the quality about her most often emphasized".[9] No doubt, it is her independence which she values most in her life. When she comes to Gardencourt with her aunt she is the very embodiment of the 'healthy-minded' creature, William James describes. The novel carefully alerts us, from the outset, to the serious omissions from Isabel's experience. When Mrs. Touchett visited her in Albany, the young Isabel "had the best of everything" and had already discovered that "it was an advantage never to have known anything particularly unpleasant. It appeared to, Isabel that the unpleasant had been too absent from her knowledge." [10] Again from the opening line of chapter-4, James exposes Isabel's inexperience, naiveté, and ill-founded satisfaction with herself and focuses especially on the signal lack of knowledge of the unpleasant, of evil: "It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel; she had seen women who had tried to hurt each other" (PL, 54). Her knowledge of evil, like her idea of liberty, is "theoretic" (PL, 145). She is introduced as "the independent young lady". (PL, 64) A little later she says, "I am very fond of my liberty" (PL, 74). She tells Caspar Goodwood, "If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of ...it's my personal independence" (PL, 213). The reputation for independence has preceded her to Gardencourt, and once arrived, she demonstrates her naive confidence in herself and her right to virtually limitless freedom and unrestricted choice at every turn. She rejects the marriage proposals of Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood as threats to her freedom.

Isabel makes a strong impression on all those whom she meets at Gardencourt. Her sparkling wit, her genial and vivacious nature and her mental agility endear her to everyone. Daniel Touchett, her uncle, likes her even more than the aunt. Ralph Touchett, her cousin, finds in her a strong desire to live life in its fullness. Lord Warburton, the charming and exquisitely refined aristocratic friend of Ralph, falls in love with her at first sight and captivated by her extraordinary charm and beauty, proposes to her with an unusual promptness. He is immediately rejected in that marriage with him would mean a life of convention and constraint for her and a betrayal of the ideal of freedom and inquiry she cherished so much. In fact Isabel likes him as an individual but he does not strike her as having a sufficiently individualized personality. The fear lurking in her mind is that she will lose her identity by becoming a part of the system of life which he represents. To Richard Poirior, "Isabel's rejection of him is a repudiation of constituted society in the interests of an idealism of the self and of its sufficiency". [11] As she tells Ralph, "I refused him because he was too perfect then. I'm not perfect myself, and he's too good for me. Besides his perfection would irritate me" (PL, 202). It would appear that by rejecting Warburton, she is rejecting a life of security and contentment. Her marriage with him should have led to happiness and fulfillment only by conventional standards not for an independently minded, spirited

individual who wants to chalk out a course of life for herself entirely in terms of her own choices.

Another persistent and ardent suitor of Isabel, Caspar Goodwood, travels all the way from America in pursuit of her, only to be rejected by her. In this case too, the argument for rejection is that his rigidity, his abstract moralism and his narrow range of interests in life would put unjustifiably heavy constraints on her desire for taking life in its fullness. Accepting him as a husband would mean a decision on Isabel Archer's part to cut herself out from much that is positive and beautiful in this world and being trapped into a philistinism from which she had wanted to liberate herself by coming away from America to Europe. Caspar is a successful businessman who represents the excessively limited possibilities of a meaningful life associated in James' mind with American manhood. Edwin T. Bowden, for example, says "Casper Goodwood represents all that Isabel has left behind, a life of honesty, of directness, of tangible purpose".¹³ Isabel is always afraid of Caspar's manhood which has compelled critic Oscar Cargill to comment that, "Isabel is afraid of the instinctual energy of sexual passion." [12] A reference is generally made in this context to Caspar's 'lightning kiss' in the last chapter which frightens Isabel so much and which in a way precipitates her decision to go back to Rome. In her heart, Isabel, it is assumed, cares for Caspar Goodwood and feels that she has wronged him by rejecting his offer but she is afraid of his tough, muscular strength and runs away from Caspar because of her weak stomach for physical enjoyment.

It might seem that old Mr. Touchett's bequest of £70,000 has truly enabled Isabel to exercise something like the absolute freedom and morality she claims. In Chapter 31 she has the distinct sense that "the world lay before her-she could do whatever she chose" (PL, 274) Consequently she and Madame Merle set off on an extended tour: "Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining the cup after cup" (PL, 274). But the key word "recklessly" and the interjected "like" combine to tell a different story. The imagery of draining the cup is reminiscent of that used when Ralph urges her to "see life" at the close of chapter 15: "there, we recall, he suggests that she wants "to drain the cup of experience"; she denies this firmly: "it's a poisoned drink. I only want to see for myself; Ralph's quiet comment makes the point: "you want to see but not to feel" (PL, 134). Innocent freedom indeed ! Isabel's actually seeing for herself is done rapidly and recklessly that is heedlessly, inattentively, unhelpfully; she evidently learns from the tour. We love Isabel Archer and "are made to share the zest with which she wants to taste life," where "the pain of existence" has been turned by the novelist "into a tragically decor." [13]

Garden stands for Isabel's Eve-like innocence. Thus Isabel is akin not only to the heroines of George Eliot, such as Hetty Sorrel, Maggie Tulliver, Rosamund Vincy and Harleth, with whom James compares her in his preface; nor is she akin only to Shakespeare's Portia, with whom James also compares Isabel, calling Portia "the very type and model of the young person intelligent and presumptuous." Isabel also resembles the strong-minded Rosalind in *As you like it* and the innocent and expectant Miranda in *The Tempest*. And the particular charm of these girls is that they are "real", that they make positive demands on life, but that they are at the same time figures of romance. In chapter 42, James was able to achieve supremely the "circuit" of the real and ideal, of action and fantasy, and thus to capture along with the realistic substance of the story the wonder and beauty of romance.

Undoubtedly, Isabel is a victim of certain delusions and inflated ideals. Isabel Archer is an abstract idealist who runs away from life because she is baffled by it and does not know how to cope with its challenges, but in her own mind she gives it the colouring of a pursuit of an exalted good. She is terribly mistaken in her belief that she knows a great deal about the world and its people. She is, in fact, "liable to the sin of self-esteem"(PL,104). Henrietta judges her character truly when she says: "The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your dreams You're too fastidious; you are too many graceful illusions" (PL, 267-268). Her infinite hope that she will never do anything wrong coupled with her ignorance of the ways of the world as it was constituted ultimately leads her into the trap laid down by Gilbert Osmond believing him to be a paragon of virtue and rare embodiment of wisdom and refinement. This crucial step gives Isabel ample opportunity to discover the evil of the world in all its dreadful entirety and with all its most restrictive limitations.

Isabel's conception of the self and her views of the assertion of freedom of this self are revealed in a philosophical discussion she has with Madame Merle. Madame Merle views self as something which is defined by the external circumstances of life. But Isabel feels that the –self-morality is totally intrinsic having no meaning in terms of things and circumstances. She says, "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (PL, 253). She thinks that the self can exist on its own terms, irrespective of the pressures exerted by the environment. It does not need any outward help to express itself. For her the self is autonomous and is not affected by external things. This idea of self as something intrinsic is deep-rooted in Isabel Archer's mind, and although James understands the limitations of such an abstract idea of the self, he is himself largely in sympathy with it. When it is carried too far in terms of interiorization and total withdrawal

a from the affairs of normal life, he may feel uneasy about it, but he cannot consider it very wrong and even feels tempted to offer weak and largely unconvincing rationalizations for it. It is Isabel's erroneous conception of the self that makes her reject lord Warburton, who, she feels, is only "a collection of attributes and powers"(PL, 156) and is limited by his social position. Caspar Goodwood's possessive nature also seems to pose a threat to her identity.

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