

The Experience from Innocence to Reality in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*

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ABSTRACT

Henry James is one of the most prominent and towering personalities among the nineteenth century novelists who is always pre-occupied with the concept of morality in his fictional works. Like his other novels, Henry James' novel, The Portrait of a Lady is also a powerful delineation of the concept of morality which has been presented through the central protagonist, Isabel Archer, who never wants any restriction on her freedom. Isabel Archer is, of course, the lady of the novel's title. Isabel is presented as a young American woman from Albany who travels to Europe with her aunt, Mrs. Touchett. What happens to her in Europe in terms of being proposed to by an English Lord, inheriting a fortune, and then is victim of a plot to marry her to the villainous Gilbert Osmond, force her at every stage to face her own internal conflict of having to choose between her desire for independence and being able to do what she wants and then commitment to social norms and values.

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When Henry James considered Tolstoy superior to Flaubert, he besides analyzing these novelists, also expressed his concept of fiction and, also the views of art. That means, according to Henry James, a moral vision must be an integral part of the thematic fabric of a novel where the artist imposes an order on the chaos of life by selecting the most important and essential aspects of life. This is what Joseph Conrad means when he calls James "as a historian of fine conscience"

So, whether it *The European*, or *The Ambassadors*, or *The Portrait of a Lady*, we find a strong streak of moral vision incorporated or even integrated in the main themes of the novel. Since, James was an American, but he became a citizen of England in 1915, so his intimate acquaintance with both the cultures fascinated him to give a cosmopolitan range and international face to his themes. That is why, all the characters in *The portrait of a Lady* are an expatriate of America who have come to

settle in the different parts of Europe in search of new postures, of new visits, of knowledge or new visions. James's first idea for *The Portrait of a Lady* was simple: a young American woman confronting her destiny, whatever it might be. Only then did he begin to form a plot to bring out the character of his central figure. This was the uncompromising story of the free-spirited Isabel losing her freedom—despite (or because of) suddenly coming into a great deal of money—and getting "ground in the very mill of the conventional"¹ It is a rather [existentialist novel](#) as Isabel is very committed to living with the consequences of her choice with both integrity and a sort of stubbornness.

Miss Isabel Archer is such a person who, being the central consciousness of the novel, is also a young, charming, and idealistic girl endowed with inflated ideals, high ambitions and confidence, at once is innocent and dogmatic, who wants to understand life more through books than through her experiences of life. With her meager knowledge and sensitive but sovereign nature, she wants to soar high in the sky like a bird with learning to fly. That is why, she considers marriage to be a check on the freedom of herself as well as an obstruction in

the fulfillment of her ideals. That is the main reason why she rejects the proposal of marriage, first from Goodwood and , then from Lord Warburton at the Garden Court.

Ralph, being the central intelligence of the novel, advises her not only to see and understand, but feel as well which involves active participation and healthy communication with the people all around. The actual tale of suffering and misery for Isabel Archer starts with her inheritance of ten pounds bequeathed to her by her uncle Daniel Touchett which brings her in contact with an expatriate, Madame Merle, who is in league with a sterile person like Gilbert Osmond.

In fact, Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle are a notable study in modern perversity where Osmond is responsible for a Cardinal Jamesian sin for misusing the human beings for personal selfish gains. For Osmond, Isabel is a source of comfort and wealth, and even his daughter, Pansy is just like a sheet of blank paper to be written as per his own desires.

Even Isabel's daughter to have a general impression of life to which she could add her foot notes later on in the form of her meeting with Gilbert Osmond, she is taken in by the pseudo-aestheticism and external glitters of man so much so that she decides to cultivate

only a small piece of land instead of the whole world, but Isabel's experiences after the marriage forces her to change her attitude towards life as well as to realize her mistake.

Within a span of two and half years, which is not mentioned in the story, we find Isabel very gloomy and grave, interested more in indifference and alienation than in the romance of life, as is shown in chapter forty-two of the story of the novel which, according to Henry James, is the best part of the story. In her stock taking, we find Isabel as an assiduous analyst and a wise spectator of her past which is dread in retrospection.

It is further accentuated by her discovery of an illicit relationship between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle resulting in to the birth of Pansy which is revealed by Countess Gemini and her seeking of permission to visit ailing and dying Ralph at Garden Court, and his firm refusal and, therefore, she adopts defiant attitude and leave for London to meet Dying Ralph. It is here that Ralph confesses his deep love for Isabel first and last time which is a kind of opportunity strangled and lost.

However, after the death of Ralph, Caspar Goodwood renews his proposal of Marriage and tries to kiss her, but when he goes to the house

of Henrietta to meet Isabel, he is informed by her that Isabel has gone back to the ruins of Rome, but she advises Goodwood to wait hopefully. So, this intriguing conclusion which is shown as an inevitable extension of the international theme, becomes a natural corollary to Isabel's quest for knowledge and her self-realization. Critic like Alfred Habegger has written that the main character of *Portrait* was inspired by Christie Archer, the protagonist from [Anne Moncure Crane's](#) novel, *Reginald Archer* (1871). Crane (1838–1872) may have influenced James, who Habegger considers was interested in Crane's female characters.²

Critics like Leon Edel and some others mention that Isabel is not exactly an amiable, but in reality, she is as much as an egoist as Gilbert Osmond is. She is proud of her morality and in the sameway, several critics also note a close connection between her pride and integrity, and her frigidity and physical passion.

Although she is modeled on Minny Temple, but she is more rounded and finished who, in juxtaposition with Ralph, constitutes the central thrust of the book. Like the three acts of a tragedy, *The Portrait of a Lady* is also a powerful tragic expression *Cambridge University Press* of Isabel Archer who suffers not for the worst, but

for the best in her due to which a dynamic, vibrant and vivacious girl is framed through her experiences of life in to a portrait to be hung in the museum of Gilbert Osmond and hence, the title of the novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*.

REFERENCES:

1. Henry James (1961). *The Portrait of a Lady*. Dell Publishing Co., Inc. p. 530.
2. Alfred Habegger(2004). *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* Cambridge University Press. p..186