

**FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE TO INNOCENCE:
THE PROTAGONIST OF HENRY JAMES' *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY***

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Abstract

Henry James is one of the most important 19th Century American novelists, who has an intrinsic approach towards life. It qualifies him to be a serious thinker or a moralist with deep respect for life. In *The Portrait of a Lady* his moral concern finds its expression in the study of Isabel Archer's idealism. By testing her theories upon her own life, Isabel Archer, the innocent American girl, discovers the most serious flaws in her theories about freedom of life. In his delicate shadings of human behavior in the character of Isabel James shows a deep understanding of the way the human mind works. After experiencing life Isabel, whose destiny is to grow or suffer, fulfills her destiny by accepting suffering and renunciation as the logical consequences of the wrong choice of marrying Gilbert. Thus she stands as a symbol of her country through her innocence, morality and positive values.

Key words: American innocence, European sophistication, idealism, experience.

Introduction

The Portrait of a Lady is a masterpiece of Henry James's literary works. It is rightly said in the words of Clark "The *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is the first of the list of 'great' novels produced by Henry James" (1991:191). In this novel Isabel Archer, the protagonist, decides to travel and live in Europe and adopt herself to European style of living. Thus she seeks experience of life in Europe. In the process she transforms from innocence and gains experience by her extensive travels, by her marriage to Osmond Gilbert and going back to innocence on realizing her mistaken idealism. The focus of this article is on Isabel's innocence to experience and her final going back to innocence.

Discussion

One finds in James' writings characters from different worlds mainly from Europe and United States and conflict between protagonists and their hard environments. His secretary Theodora Bosanquet observed in her monograph *Henry James at Work*:

When he walked out of the refuge of his study and into the world and looked around his, he saw a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of doomed, defenseless children of light. . . . His novels are a repeated exposure of this wickedness, a reiterated and passionate plea for the fullest freedom of development, unimpered by reckless and barbarous stupidity.

James was a migrant living in Europe for the major part of his life. Being an American in Europe was a frequent theme in his books. It brought difference between American innocence with European sophistication which we can find in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* James begins his book telling that he is trying to sketch an English picture on a mellow summer afternoon. Thus the novel is a portrait, a painting, or a sketch. The lady whose portrait James' novel paints is Isabel Archer, a charming young American girl. According to Margaret G. Holland in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*—

. . . In *Portrait*, in other words, James reaches for what is to become his hallmark contributions to American letters: the collapse between the act of narration and that of interpretation, the insistence on the importance of perspective and perception in the making of meaning, and the conjunction between all of these ideas in the reshaping of literary form. All of these are perceptions that we might associate with subsequent fiction-making—with that of the modernist or even the postmodern novel. And all are notions that circulated in James's own moment. (295)

Isabel, a dreamer and a romantic, young American girl fond of German philosophy and European literature, who come to Europe with the hope of living better life and gaining knowledge, is enraptured by the serene beauty of Garden Court. She is intelligent and beautiful and sympathetic. Louis Auchincloss speaks of Isabel in *Reading of Henry James*—

She is the loveliest and most appealing of all James's heroines. She is very fine, very straight, totally honest, and candid to a fault, and she has a charm which captivates every other character as well as reader. Isabel has a high sense that she must be prepared for her destiny—whatever that destiny may be. (63)

Her innocence charms Daniel, Ralph and Lord Warburton. Among them Lord Warburton is mostly attracted by Isabel's charm and he invites her to Lockleigh to meet his aristocratic sister. He proposes to Isabel but she promptly rejects his proposal. On the advice of Ralph, Daniel Touchett leaves a legacy of seventy thousand pounds for Isabel in his will and testament. Ralph waits to see what a buoyant young girl like Isabel is going to do with all the money.

Isabel is greatly impressed by Gilbert Osmond's artistic taste. They both travel to Rome, where Gilbert Osmond shows Isabel around the historical monuments. Isabel begins to see more and more of Gilbert Osmond as they exchange their views freely. Gilbert proposes to Isabel.

Isabel travels extensively first in France and then in Greece, Turkey and Egypt. After a year of travel she decides to marry Gilbert. On learning of her decision Caspar Goodwood pays her a visit in Florence. The news also surprises Mrs. Touchett Stackpole and Ralph and all of them try to dissuade Isabel from marrying Gilbert, which they think is wrong. Isabel does not heed their advice as she is a woman of strong will. She begins to understand the true nature of Osmond after the marriage. Isabel comes to know the bitter truth of the close relationship between Mem. Merle and Osmond from his sister and also learns that Pansy is the daughter of Gilbert Osmond and Mem. Merle. The quarrel between Isabel and Osmond rises its peak regarding Pansy's marriage and also Ralph coming to Rome.

It would be more correct to say that her idea of freedom is too romantic and narrow and that for a girl of her ideas, it would be very easy to walk into a trap of somebody who presents a surface, charms her approval. Isabel time and again refuses to look at the ill seamier side of Osmond's relationship with Mem. Merle. She can never stoop so low as to think bad of other people. This is the pure mind of Isabel. It is this particular quality of hers that Isabel represents the innocence of the American. Tony Tanner says—

Thus, she views the world as a benevolent sphere, which will be plastic to her theories of 'free expansion' and 'irresistible action.' She seems unprepared for any harsh encounter with all that indifferent otherness which is not the self, which is not amenable to the self, and which may prove cruel and hostile to the self. (Tanner 74)

And her childlike innocence is clearly expressed by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition*.

... I like places in which things have happened," says Isabel, "Even if they're sad things. A great many people have died here; the place had been full of life." And to Mrs. Toughett's query "Is that what you call being full of life?" she replies, "I mean full of experience—of people's feelings and sorrows. And nor of theirs sorrows only, for I've been happy here as a child. (122)

In the famous Chapter 42 of the novel, Isabel sits down to examine her life and for the first time, she seriously realizes her mistake to marrying Gilbert Osmond where the relationship between husband and wife reached to a breaking point on knowing the duplicity of Gilbert Osmond who married her for her money. Her choice condemns her to a sterile and unhappy marriage in which there is a clash of wills between her and Osmond. Her marriage with Osmond is the consequence of her idealism. She wants to accept Osmond because the choice is hers and hers only.

Isabel's bird like spirit descends into the world of experience. Her knowledge of the actual world cannot be gained without a price, and she has to pay the price for her knowledge. Ralph laments in Chapter 54:

You wanted to look at life for yourself—but you were not allowed, you were punished for your wish. You are ground in the very mill of the conventional. (488)

Isabel comes to know that Ralph is on the verge of death at Garden Court and goes to see him. She realizes that Ralph gave her so much money and that is the root cause of all her troubles. Ralph also laments on his experiment in making the legacy available to Isabel and in a very moving scene both realize the true nature of their mutual feeling. After the death of Ralph, Isabel is benumbed and she spends vacant days at Garden Court. Casper

Goodwood visits her and tries to go away with him and in the extremity of his passion he kisses her, Isabel breaks away from him and runs toward the house. On his next visit he learns that Isabel has returned to Rome.

Thus Henry James leaves the end open to the imagination of the readers. At the end Isabel realizes that she did not reach a better life or knowledge in Europe but was deceived there completely.

Isabel realizes her commitment to the civilized value of the sacrament of marriage maintaining the marriage even at the cost of honesty and personal integrity. Her returning to Rome is observed by Dorothea Krook in these words “In her pointed return to Rome, she has vindicated her moral consistency that springs so naturally, it seems, from her moral seriousness”(358).She adds, “What she finds in the end is that though she repudiates his reasons as blasphemous sophistry, the fact he insists on commands her most inward assent; and it is the fact that finally compels her to go back to him in spite of the reasons”(358).

James portrays Isabel as the symbol of her country through her innocence, morality and positive values.

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