

# Unconsciousness of Henry James? : Allegorical Reading of Dynamic of Human Relationship in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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## Abstract

Many critics have been bothered at the controversial ending of Henry James's masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), when Isabel Archer decides to return to Rome where her husband, Gilbert Osmond, is waiting for her despite their miserable, dysfunctional married life. To account for Isabel's incomprehensible decision, I aim to explicate the transformation of her notion of independence. Her notion of independence before her marriage is too optimistic, naïve, unpractical and even romanticized. On the other hand, the new notion that is modified after she realizes her husband's true motive of marrying her is much more solid and realistic. This modified notion of independence entails her own responsibility for consequences of her actions, driving Isabel to venture to rescue Pansy, her daughter-in-law, from being miserably obedient to her father as Isabel herself. In this sense, her return to Rome implies that Isabel becomes able to commit herself to others' well-being.

Allegorical reading of symbolism that the main characters connote enables the reader to grasp the author's intention to depict "impossible" marriage between Isabel and Osmond: the former embodies American ideals and traits while the latter the dark side of American history/society that saw the European immigrants and their descendants who have manipulated and even abused others (non-white minorities in particular) under American ideals. James seems to suggest how important it is for the two sides of America to confront each other in order to create better or more mature American society in the future.

## Introduction

A number of critics writing on Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) have in general concluded Isabel Archer's marriage with Mr. Gilbert Osmond to be a dismal, or even tragic, failure<sup>1</sup>. This is absolutely the case, especially in terms of her doggedly-determined resolution to be happy (PL 119).<sup>2</sup> In these criticisms, the primal emphasis is laid upon Isabel's innocence and ignorance of reality, both of which no doubt serve to construct a large part of her unique personality. However, if one considers her evolving course through the entire story as some kind of variation of hero story or "an initiation story – an extremely fruitful theme in American literature" (Izzo 39), I would like to argue that there must be a more crucial characteristic related to it that symbolical reading allows one to discern.

In my view, Henry James scrupulously projects radical and intrinsic American ideals that had created American traits throughout the 18th and 19th centuries into the heroine of this novel. Of all American characteristics inherent in this young American lady, her concept of independence is seemingly the chief factor that intensely affects her psychological development or transition. As far

as the notion of independence is concerned, the reader ought to see at least two phases of her notion of it: the first phase is when Isabel has a misunderstanding about being independent, and the second when she empirically learns the integral elements of true meanings of being independent, especially through her miserable married life with Osmond.

The purpose of this paper is, by focusing on the changing of Isabel's notion of self-independence, to cast light on symbolism in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Pursuing symbolic signification of main characters in the novel enables one to explicate how essential her psychological transformation is in revealing what James intends to present in the narrative.

## I

As the title of the novel and the author himself suggest, careful character-analysis of a protagonist is most adequate for a critique of this novel.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Isabel Archer is an "intellectual" with her own "originality" (PL 37), she possesses a childlike vision which influences largely her early notion of independence. Her very aspiration is "to see as much of the world as possible" (PL 40) as her

late father wished. Therefore, Isabel

had a great desires for knowledge, but she *really preferred almost any source of information to the printed pages*; she had an *immense curiosity about life*, and was constantly *staring and wondering*. She carried within herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to *feel the continuity between the movements of her own heart and the agitations of the world*. (PL 41, my italics)

The above passage clearly exhibits the superficiality of her knowledge of life and world. Without attempting to ponder the substance or nature of life, she stares, wonders and feels almost intuitively and superficially. In other words, to try to fully comprehend the world and life as she wishes, what she relies on at this moment is her emotional senses and to much lesser a degree her intellectuality. Her view of perceiving the world and life is literally two-dimensional: no depth or no breadth. In this respect, her most naïve action mirroring this impercipience is marrying Osmond after rejection of other suitors' proposals. Let me cite Tony Tanner's remark on her decision to marry him:

She [Isabel] idealizes herself, her motives for marrying, her ambitions, and Osmond himself . . . . Looking at him in her own way – romantically, the oretically . . . , consulting her yearning for a life lived on the ideal level – Osmond seems perfectly suited to Isabel's needs. Among other things, then, her mistake is the result of a radical failure of vision: idealizing too much, she perceived all too little. (Tanner 70)

Her inclination toward idealization is also apparent to great extent in her characteristics and perspective about life. One can tell that this idealization reveals the fact that she is exclusively anxious to see the positive, beautiful and bright side of life and world even though there exists the dark and harsh side of the reality Isabel simply seems to disregard (PL 54). Because of her too “great passion for knowledge” (PL 50) and “an immense curiosity about life” (PL 41), “her imagination was by habit ridiculously active” (PL 39)

far beyond common sense.

This almost too optimistic aspect naturally leads Isabel toward a false notion of independence: the notion that one should depend on nothing but oneself. Unfortunately enough, this notion is unpractical or too ideal insofar as one lives in any human society involving numerous problems which restrict individual freedom or free will. In the early stage of the novel, she seems likely to believe that nothing but ultimate independence is capable of providing people with true liberty. Then an inevitable question manifests itself; is it actually feasible to attain such independence? Or, more strictly speaking, is there such independence in reality? Focusing on egotism in this story, Leon Edel points out that “certain remarkable elements of a national [American] myth: an ideal freedom and equality hedged with historical blindness and pride” are “woven into the novel” (Edel 111). In the case of Isabel, she highly esteems the idea of self-independence, which reflects fundamental American values, without trying to grasp its true meanings.

It is, thus, apparent that her esteem for this notion is based solely upon the blind belief in American values and mythology sustaining the former.

Hence, Isabel, perhaps unconsciously, strives for absolute independence that she believes promises spiritual freedom she desires. Isabel contends that “I like my liberty too much, If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of, . . . it's my personal independence” (PL 142). Consistently, the notion affects both her thoughts and acts so influentially that to some people her ideas are prone to be a little too unrealistic. For instance, Lord Warburton gets quite confused by her rejection of his proposal despite the fact that she appears to honestly respect and be very fond of him (PL 99). Furthermore, Mr. Ralph Touchett, her cousin, is so perplexed with her deeds and words that he declares to Isabel “you accept nothing” (PL 131). In fact, she seems seldom to listen to others, not because she trusts no one except herself but precisely because her idea of being independent is too immense to allow her to accept others' ideas. Richard Chase summarizes Isabel's idea of self: “She [Isabel] is very far from believing that the ordinary vulgar circumstances of one's life have anything to do with one's self. She finds it inconceivable and rather degrading that anyone should

suppose the self to be in any sort of dialectic with the mere things one is surrounded by” (Chase 161). Chase’s analysis is also true to one’s independence and accounts for Isabel’s extreme idea of self-independence; she simply retains a belief that true independence neither requires support from others nor is influenced by anything except oneself. In short, this propensity makes her rely exclusively on her decision more than she realizes.

Isabel’s independent mind also plays an important role in her marriage with Osmond. Although she may love him enough to marry, she decides to marry because she feels that there is room for her to give something meaningful to Osmond instead of asking him to do something for her. She explains her feelings to Lord Warburton: “It is not what I [Isabel] ask; it is what I can give” (PL 99). She appears proud of herself when she rationalizes her marriage with Osmond to Mr. Casper Goodwood, another suitor she rejects, saying “I am marrying a perfect nonentity” (PL 279). She explicitly seeks a specific identity as a woman who she supposes can be established by attaining spiritual and social independence, women’s new identity differentiated from the traditional women’s roles in the Occidental society and history, with the resolute belief: “She [Isabel] held that a woman ought to be able to make up her life in single-ness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex” (PL 55). With this intense will, she is anxious to assist Osmond and interested in her empowerment to do so. Her attempt to contribute to him as wife sounds plausible in order to maintain and enrich their married life. Nevertheless, her intention proves to be contradictory more or less to her very notion that one must be independent without any kind of outer intervention at any levels. It should be noted that she sometimes possibly interferes in Osmond’s independence, liberty and free will with her sincere supports. Consequently, she cannot tell what she is supposed to do so as to ameliorate her miserable married life with him insofar as she complies strictly with her notion of absolute independence. As Adeline R. Tintner keenly perceives, it can be said that Isabel is “a woman trapped by her own ideals” (Tintner 115).

## II

The second phase of Isabel’s notion of independence begins to take place when Countess Gemini unveils the truth that Osmond has been on intimate terms with Madame Merle. From this very moment when she perceives the appalling fact that Madam Merle maneuvered Isabel into her marriage with Osmond, Isabel seems to begin to modify her notion of independence and freedom. Against her husband’s order, she goes back to London to meet Ralph on verge of death at the Gardencourt. It is clearly one example of what her independent spirit stimulates her to do. However, her returning to Rome to Osmond after Ralph’s decease is certainly more significant to a reader’s grasping the transition of her independent spirit.

Isabel is now determined to give her hand to another person, namely to save her step-daughter, Pansy, under the threat of ruining her own life. Quentin Anderson insists on Isabel’s incapability of saving Pansy since she will “remain a hopeless sacrifice to Osmond’s respect for appearance” (Anderson 52). More aptly, John Carlos Rowe argues that “saving Pansy is much harder work than James knows how to articulate; it can be left only a prospect for Isabel at the very end of the novel. Pansy’s prison extends well beyond the convent” (Rowe 21, italics mine). Although it is difficult to surmise whether or not Isabel can rescue Pansy from her father, one of the primary reasons for her to return to Rome is to prevent Osmond from making Pansy into what he wants his daughter to be against her own will. The worst thing, as Henrietta Stockpole worries, is that Isabel’s peculiar “character gets spoiled” (PL 418): the character that preserves innocent and pure mentality Isabel can share with Pansy. That is, Isabel sees her own “double” in Pansy. Stephanie A. Smith illustrates analogy between the two women: “what is far more compelling about Pansy’s misfortune is that Isabel’s story . . . has a trajectory that eerily parallels her step-daughter’s. Isabel is, according to James and his critics, a tragic heroine, as Pansy is, at least in Isabel’s eyes. *Indeed, Isabel’s fate is repeatedly linked to Pansy’s tale*” (Smith 584, italics mine). In a broad sense, Isabel can be said to be expecting that women can be free as equally as men by breaking down the certain boundary of the old establishment and historical and social customs against

women's rights and freedom. She wants to secure Pansy, hoping that Pansy will get strong enough to carry an independent spirit.

Therefore, her returning to Rome is by no means for her pride or vanity, to keep up appearances for the conduct and actions she has taken so far, nor is she concerned about disgrace she would receive by virtue of divorce. It precisely signifies definitive idea acting upon her resolution to take responsibility for what she has done and will do. In this sense only, Robert Weisbuch makes a quite convincing argument by proclaiming that "Isabel's final choice, to return to her marriage, is her triumph, as this choice to marry in the first place is her utter defeat; Isabel must return to Osmond . . . to affirm her identity" (Weisbuch 115-16). At this very moment, she seems able to prepare herself spiritually to be independent at last in a true sense.

At the end of the novel, Isabel, who certainly inherits the American spirit and ideals, cannot thus remain with Mr. Goodwood; as the narrator suggests, "Isabel recognized, as it passed before her eyes, the quick, vague shadow of a long future. *She should never escape; she should last to the end*" (PL 466, Italics mine). Isabel cannot, therefore, die as Ralph dies before her: nor can she simply seek other kind of life by marrying other than Osmond. What she needs to do is to survive and make great efforts to change the "things" surrounding herself by overcoming the problems she encounters. In this respect, she is juxtaposed to Madame Merle, who goes back to America (PL 464); if her returning to America so as to "make a convenience of America" (PL 475) symbolically refers to looking back to the past/history/tradition, Isabel's remaining in Europe is undoubtedly inevitable in order to create her own future.

### III

Henry James earns a reputation for describing Americans who are misused or appropriated by sophisticated Europeans. In the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*, however, it is important to note that Madame Merle and Osmond, both of whom skillfully appropriate Isabel, are originally Americans who came to live in Europe. This setting has the crucial import that serves to disclose James' view on his native country, America, and accounts for Isabel's rejection

of a proposal from Lord Warburton, a great European aristocrat. Isabel cannot marry Lord Warburton, who "has to offer only the system her instinct tells her to resist" (de Sousa Santos 303).

To James's mind, Isabel, who, in an allegorical sense, embodies America, functions to justify American ideals and notions by trying to correct the corrupt and grim side of its history ever since the first settlement of Whites from the Old World. Both Madame Merle and Osmond, on the other hand, allegorically represent the other side of America<sup>4</sup> whose prosperity had been established never by God's Will (Manifest Destiny or Promised Land) but by the unrelenting abuse of the native inhabitants, American Indians, and millions of black people as slaves taken from Africa. In other words, their abuse of Isabel is congeneric with the land-exploitation from Indians by force and with trampling down of human dignity black people should have. For example, Osmond marries Isabel in effect for her great wealth she inherits from Mr. Touchett. Likewise, he does not accept Edward Roiser, a young expatriate American, as Pansy's future husband but prefers Lord Warburton precisely because the latter is wealthy as the exchange between Isabel and Roiser expressly shows at the end of the chapter 37 (PL 316).

Despite a reader's deep sympathy for Isabel, Osmond can be a sadly sympathetic figure, too, exactly as his daughter says that her father "has not much pleasure; he's rather a sad man" (PL 269). A sad Osmond reflects a typical American scene where money is what has sustained American values and simultaneously what has degraded American society or ideals: pecuniary power has in effect established a "class" system in a politically free country. James can, therefore, be said to use as a rhetorical device one of baleful influences of American capitalism upon American society.

Marriage between Isabel and Osmond symbolizes an almost impossible "marriage" of the bright and dark sides of American society and mentality. Yet, this confrontation of two opposite sides must be inevitable for America to create better and more mature society. In this respect, Isabel's marriage with Casper Goodwood is also unlikely to take place in such a narrative for he simply represents all-

American aspects and spirits both of which Isabel is given a certain role to criticize. It is crucial to note that it is in America that she first declined his marriage proposal. To James, Isabel (and any American in general) must leave America to have broader scope of perceiving true nature of American society as he himself did. She would still remain blind to it unless she left her country.

At the end of the novel emerges her capacity to transform herself into a new woman with a stronger sense of responsibility. Through her unhappy marriage to Osmond, she learns what she has been unconscious of and eventually realizes that there is neither absolute independence nor freedom as she envisages early in the novel. Finally, Isabel becomes a new representative of America itself, outgrowing its naiveté and vulnerability.

Despite the depiction of the abuse of the innocent Americans by the shrewd Americans, James respects the American notions and ideals both of which in his novels the main characters almost always possess. Yet he seems to comprehend, at the same time, these American notions and ideals are not complete or absolute in the least. More important, he still appreciates the values and significance of these American ideals even though fully recognizing the limits of these ideals. It can be said that, as Ruth Bernard Yeazell puts it, the novel provides “a typically Jamesian mixture of satire [on] and sympathy” (Yeazell 677) for American nationality. The transformation of Isabel Archer reflects James’s ambivalent feelings about and complex perspective on America and its mythology. That is, a realization of complex, conflicting reality to which it is quite difficult to apply the beautiful American ideals enables Isabel to create or develop the mature ideas of self-independence. Tony Tanner speculates that Isabel’s “error is also discovery. Isabel has to close with Osmond in order to arrive at a deeper knowledge of her self, of her distorted values, of her egotism, and of the real pain and cruelty of life” (Tanner 74). Acquiring empirical knowledge or education through the errors she has made, Isabel grows capable not only of altering mistakes into precious lessons but of transforming herself from a vulnerable victim to at least a challenger who grasps real American spirits and ideals.

## Conclusion

At the first phase of her notion of independence, what Isabel in fact longs to achieve is neither independence nor self-reliance but individuality or identity as a new woman. Therefore, in reshaping or shifting her notion of independence correctly, she will finally be able to win independent spirit and self-reliance not merely as an American ideology but as an American principle, which implicitly signifies expansionism of American ideals into the Old World, historied / traditionary Europe.

In conclusion, it is widely known that Henry James expressed that America had no “thick” culture or tradition to produce its own literature so that he was eventually naturalized as an English citizen. At least at this point in his literary career, however, his unconsciousness concerning America and its society is seemingly reflected in *The Portrait of a Lady* in a very subtle fashion of valuing and impugning American ideals and spirits that European society had lost or never acquired in the first place. This novel reflects, de Sousa Santos argues,

its author’s latent social preoccupations, or his sensitivity to the changing times, precisely in his heroine’s quest for freedom, i.e. in her control, or lack of control, of her own destiny. Whether James actually wanted it so ornate, . . . James made of Isabel’s consciousness . . . the very arena upon which the structure of society is questioned through the young woman’s “searching [self] criticism.” (de Sousa Santos 304)

Isabel’s spiritual evolution throughout the novel should, therefore, be conceived of as that of American society which James longed for his native country to achieve in future. James implies with an innuendo that America cannot evolve without “affronting” the concealed past and suffering a great deal through self-criticism rather than from ignorance.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Critics regard her marriage with Osmond as “a miserable marriage” (Esch 151), “painful marriage” (Niemtzow 111), “a mistaken marriage” (Bell 754) and “disastrous marriage” (Meissner 81; Wagenknecht 44; Holland 701).
- <sup>2</sup> Subsequent references to the text, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Henry James. [A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edition]. Ed. Robert D. Bamberg. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.), are cited with page numbers and an Italic abbreviation *PL* parenthetically.
- <sup>3</sup> See Preface to the 1907 edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* by James himself in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction* (Eds. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 286-299). He explains in it that the development of the story’s plot results precisely from the single character, Isabel Archer.
- <sup>4</sup> As for what Osmond and Madame Merle symbolically represent, Louis Auchincloss cleverly suggests that “the evil that confronts. . . [and] captures her [Isabel]” is not European. “Madame Merle and Osmond represent integral parts of the American psycho” (Auchincloss 726).

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## ヘンリー・ジェームズの無意識？ — 『ある夫人の肖像』における人間関係の寓話的読解 —

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### 要 約

ヘンリー・ジェームズ (1843-1916) の長編小説『ある夫人の肖像』(1881) の結末シーンは、これまで多くの批評家を悩ませてきた。それは、アメリカ人の若い女性主人公イザベル・アーチャーが、結婚生活が破綻しているにもかかわらず、夫ギルバート・オズモンドが待つイタリア・ローマへと帰還することを決意する場面である。小論では、イザベルの理解しがたい決定を説明するものとして、彼女が抱く独立(自立)の概念を検討する。イザベルの独立の概念は、当初、経験が浅く、非実用的で、理想化されているが、オズモンドとの悲惨な結婚生活の経験を通して、また、オズモンドの結婚の目的を知ることによって、真の独立とは、自分自身の行動・結果に責任を持つことであるという新たな独立の概念を構築することになる。この修正された新しい独立・自立の概念が、オズモンドとの対決を決意させ、さらに、義理の娘であるパンジーを彼女の父親オズモンドから救済する目的でローマに戻る。彼女のローマへの帰還は、イザベルが他者の幸福に献身的にかかわることができるようになったことを示唆している。

寓話的な読みを採用して主要登場人物に帯びている象徴性を解釈すると、イザベルはアメリカの理念と特性を体現し、オズモンドは、そのアメリカの理念に背後にあるアメリカの闇の部分を体現しており、二人の「あり得ない結婚」は、アメリカ社会の肯定的な面と否定的な面の対峙を意味している。作者ジェームズにとって、イザベルのオズモンドとの結婚生活の継続は、19世紀アメリカ社会が成熟していく過程には不可避的な文化・社会的な衝突を象徴していると結論付けた。