

Trinity Hawkins

E 349S

James and Wharton

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Art for Henry James' Sake

Art is often regarded as a reflection of life; whether it is realism or modernism, dadaism or neoclassicism, the goal of the finished result is to create something that is in conversation with the world that is experienced by the creator, whether directly or indirectly. It is not unreasonable to consider how this relates to the literary form, a genre so intertwined with everything that exists that entire movements are committed to examining how it might transcend earthly planes of existence. Artists such as painters, writers, dancers, and musicians are all afflicted by the urge to translate their ideas into something tangible. One such writer is Henry James, whose endless verbiage very nearly creates his own language; it's as if much of his writing was a kind of Etch-À-Sketch, where he shapes his characters and ideas through the sands of his words. This kind of writerly determination and molding has never been as clear as in *The Portrait of a Lady*, James's seminal novel that is, at its most distilled, the story of a woman's interiority. As the title suggests, the novel is a large-scale portrait, but it aims to go beyond the form. The narrator is nearly enveloped within the characters, the environment around them is hazy and out of focus, and the primary character, Isobel, is painstakingly detailed, with entire sections dedicated to depicting her internal world as a rolling, deep entity. It is a feat of literary genius and artistic imagination, much like the kind of portraiture it often references, and yet it also is its own thing, so rooted into the desire to show through words how artistic impulse is disparate from morality, and how those with artistic temperaments flock to each other and run up against each other and

the conventions of the world around them. When examining *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is evident how Henry James's creative instincts enable him to depict reality with broad brushstrokes that provide a more comprehensive image of the story he sought to tell.

The most clearly crafted character is Isabel Archer, the protagonist and the centerpiece of this literary tableau. As if he were creating her with clay, James molds Isabel as the story goes on; never has seismic shift of a young woman moving from naivety to self-actualization been so well displayed than it is done by James with Miss Archer. She starts the beginning of the novel being a specter who looms within the minds of the characters. She parrots out quotes like "I am very fond of my liberty" and is described as "being written in a foreign tongue". The readers don't know who Isabel is because she doesn't know herself; we only know who she isn't and what she ought not be. She's not a mother, she's not a housewife, she's not poor, she shouldn't marry a foreigner, she's not married to Caspar Goodwood or Lord Warburton. She becomes what befalls many young people, which is to say that she becomes a bundle of inconstants. And then she meets Gilbert Osmond, and James shapes her into becoming the one singular thing that allows her to figure the rest out - his wife. It is through this that the color is added by James to the story, and he takes times in displaying how Isabel's internal actualization allows her to see more clearly the external reality around her. As the marriage becomes less of a castle and more of a cage, the story begins to shrink into Isabel, the portrait becoming smaller.

James' main demonstration of this is in Chapter 42. Prior to this evolution that Isabel experiences, nothing was made of her interiority. As audience members, we are meant to be sold the idea that she is a woman with a great deal transpiring psychologically. This perspective is expressed by James not just through the quotes cited above, but also through what Isabel does not say. This heightens the impact of her speaking on her thoughts when James provides us with

insight in Chapter 42. This is the chapter that Henry James was most proud of, as I learned in lectures, and as a reader, I can see why. It is the most clear, concise, and complete in terms of the thoughts that James wishes to convey Isabel having. Due to the fact that it takes place completely in her mind, her internal processing laid bare, James is able to take the time to display to audience how crafted his portrait of Isabel truly is. As the author of her story, James is acutely aware of this: one of the more on the nose lines in the chapter details how “her soul was haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them” (pg. 447). As the narrator James blends into the folds of who Isobel is, so much so that it becomes continually impossible to decipher what is narration and what are the meant to be the first person thoughts of Isabel. He continues to toe this narrow line till the end of the chapter, at which the realization dawns that the whole chapter has been inside Isabel’s brain, with no exterior movement, as if you were looking at a tablaeu in a gallery and stepped back from viewing the smaller image, a bit fuzzy, to see yourself looking at a larger, more intricate image.

This sort of intricacy is not merely bestowed upon Isabel. Throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James’s aspiration to craft a painterly novel is further evident in the world around Isabel that he creates. Though limited, Isabel’s intimate interactions with the significant male and female characters of the story, such as Caspar Goodwood, Gilbert Osmond, and Madame Merle, all reflexively work to display how Isabel herself operates internally. The landscape around her that James paints makes her more real; almost as if in an modernist version of the reality effect, the people that James chooses to place around Isabel create the affect of seeming her seeming more real. This is fairly early in her relationships with men. Lord Warburton appears as both a caricature and an amalgamation of ideas of the type of bachelor that he might be had this been another novel. He is well-intentioned, wealthy, noble, and an Englishman - the question begets

the reader of “shouldn’t this be enough” ? And yet, Isabel turns him down, the first in a line of “no”s that say more about the woman herself than the men she is turning down. For the question shouldn’t be of what’s wrong with Isabel for not wanting Warburton or Goodwood, rather the inquisition is shifted towards the men. In rejecting both Warburton and Goodwood, James as the auteur guides the reader through understanding what kind of woman Isabel hopes to be. She will not be an noble Englishman’s wife, nor will she be an upstanding American lady married to a self-made man. She seeks instead to be something of her own creation, so sure of a third path outside of convention that when she meets Gilbert Osmond, he seems at once the answer to all of her questions and the beginning of a whole new, intriguing, and fulfilling set of them. However, James makes it evident to the reader that this will not be the end of the story that ties everything together.

Isabel meeting Osmond is the beginning of another chapter in Isabel’s life, a true coming of age. It is a feat of literary and artistic genius to see how James displays this aspect of the human experience: what it is like to make mistakes that set you on the wrong path. He makes Isabel an expert at mistakes and not an object of pity. Instead, he imbues her with agency; even her decision to stay with Osmond and the path she has forked for herself is a show of agency. She is not forced into staying or coerced like she was into the marriage; James even gives her a way in which she can ostensibly escape her situation and be free, through Goodwood. But she actively chooses to stay, and it is this active decision that creates the final painterly touch of the novel. She’s not merely a toy through which James can service his own desires and ideas about womanhood, marriage and convention; instead he creates something in service of the desire to make something real, and crafts a story through this desire that feels true to real life. In the end, she becomes more than “the picture of a gracious lady” (366).