

ANALYSIS

The Portrait of a Lady (1881)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“Isabel Archer, thought to be modeled on James’ memory of his cousin Minnie Temple, is the heroine of the novel; her character determines the action that gives it form.... Isabel is one of James’ most finely realized characters, and *The Portrait* is a highly unified novel. The action begins when Isabel rejects the proposal of Lord Warburton, a wealthy and cultivated Englishman. Isabel, a relatively poor but spiritually independent American girl, inherits a large sum of money from her uncle largely as a result of her rejection of Warburton, and, financially independent, is at liberty to make further choices. Feeling that she wants a man for whom she can do something, she chooses to marry Gilbert Osmond, a superficially attractive but weak man enslaved by poverty and by his former mistress, Madame Merle, by whom he has had a child, Pansy. Isabel realizes, too late, that she cannot help Osmond, but chooses to remain with him for the sake of the child when Caspar Goodwood, an old admirer, begs her to flee with him and escape from Osmond. By sacrificing her own freedom of action in order to make freedom of choice possible to Pansy, Isabel asserts her inner freedom from material and emotional states of dependence.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Mrs. Touchett, estranged wife of an expatriated American banker, brings to England her penniless niece, Isabel Archer, in her early twenties, intelligent and beautiful, who immediately attracts old Mr. Touchett, his invalid son Ralph, and their wealthy neighbor, Lord Warburton. The nobleman proposes marriage, but Isabel refuses him, and her courage and independence win the admiration of the Touchetts. Casper Goodwood, a sincere persistent suitor, comes from America to renew his proposal, but Isabel tells him that her personal independence is her most valued possession and that she must have two years before giving him her answer. Ralph is also in love with her, but realizes that they cannot marry and arranges for her financial security by persuading his father to make her his heir.

At the old man’s death, Isabel becomes wealthy and goes to Florence with Mrs. Touchett. There Madame Merle, a gracious expatriate, introduces her to Gilbert Osmond, an American dilettante and widower. Incapable of perceiving that he desires her fortune, Isabel is won by Osmond’s taste and intellectual detachment, despite the protests of Casper and her other friends. During the following years, she becomes aware of her husband’s shallow aestheticism and lack of moral depth, but decides against a separation because of her pride, determination to fulfill her obligations, and sympathy for Pansy, Osmond’s frail young daughter. Warburton, who still loves her, becomes a constant visitor and seeks to marry Pansy. Madame Merle is active in this new matchmaking, and she and Osmond urge Isabel to use her influence with Warburton, but Isabel withdraws when Pansy shows that she does not desire the marriage. This widens the breach between Isabel and her husband, who accuses her of an affair with Warburton. Summoned to England, where Ralph is dying, Isabel feels that she may never return to Italy, especially when she learns that Pansy’s mother is Madame Merle. After comforting Ralph on his deathbed, she is joined by Casper, for whom she finally admits her affection. Conscience and her duty to Pansy dominate her desires, however, and she dismisses Caspar and returns to her unhappy home.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Beginning in October, 1880, *The Portrait of a Lady* ran almost simultaneously in the *Atlantic* and *Macmillan’s Magazine* and was a considerable success in both countries from the start. Twice the length of anything James had so far attempted, the novel is well named; it is supremely devoted to portraiture. There are some ten major characters as well as many minor ones; and just as Isabel is James’s American girl

raised to a new power, so Osmond, the Touchetts, Lord Warburton and the rest are familiar Jamesian types elaborated now to the last degree. His increasing command of narrative appears in his easy shifting from the epic spirit of the first half--in which Isabel invades and conquers the old world--to the dramatic spirit of the second half, where she writhes in an old world that has turned into a sort of Hell. And all this is laid before the reader in a prose that is at once flexible and stately, alert equally to the lyrical and the humorous implications of what is going on--such a prose as had rarely been known before in fiction in English....

Isabel herself, for all her kinship to the Anglo-Saxon heroine, is clearly a tribute to the memory of Minny Temple, and so thorough a one that Minny's ghost was laid for years to come. An orphan like Minny, Isabel sails serenely out of what is unmistakably the ancestral Albany house of the James family; and what Minny had dreamed of doing Isabel actually does: journeys to Europe, encounters experience, lives. Among the men who surround her, two could clearly have been related to James himself. Her cousin Ralph Touchett, between whom and Isabel there is more love than he in his invalid state and resigned detachment knows what to do with, was perhaps James's idea of what he had actually been to Minny Temple; while the terrible Osmond, aesthete and snob, on whose too refined nerves Isabel preys in spite of herself, represented the kind of husband he fearfully fancied he might have made had he actually married Minny....

'The idea of the whole thing,' James wrote in his notebook, 'is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes, a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing [in refusing Warburton], finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional.' By way of a Mme. Merle, her aunt's ancient friend, she passes from the amiable security of the Touchett-Warburton circle into the company of adventurers. She at first thinks them merely *adventurous*, and this is what recommends them to her. Mme. Merle, whom Ralph sees as a too accomplished parasite, is admired by Isabel as an instance of the fine art of living, as a true woman of the world. And Isabel is even more terribly mistaken in Gilbert Osmond, to whom Mme. Merle introduces her, and whom she marries. With Osmond it is *Pride and Prejudice* in reverse; Isabel begins with a predilection in his favor, and only in time discovers that he is a monster, infinitely more cynical than Ralph, infinitely more conventional than Warburton."

F.W. Dupee
Henry James
(William Morrow 1974) 97-98, 100-01

"A careful reading of the revision of *The Portrait of a Lady* will reveal that there are two *Portraits*, not one, and that each is a different literary experience. The Isabel Archer who faces her destiny is not the same girl in both versions.... Not merely a matter of heightened consciousness...separates the two Isabels. They are disunited by the degree of freedom and vulnerability possessed by the later Isabel who, in addition, tends to view her vulnerability more clearly as an adjunct of marriage but who is only dimly aware--unlike the first Isabel who is not aware at all--that the basis of her anxiety is a fear that the freedom constituted by the clear conduct of her consciousness may be annihilated by sexual possession. We have, then, in the later Isabel a presence of fears which emanate from, and return to, her remarkable consciousness, thus making the act of 'affronting her destiny' a study--sometimes tragic and ironic--of the life of the mind for the later Isabel whereas it was frequently an uneven portrait of a girl's caprice for her predecessor. Because she exists on a compelling level of mind, the later Isabel does what she does. But her distant predecessor does what she does for reasons perhaps best ascribed to the folly of her youth and the aesthetics of her incompleteness."

Anthony J. Mazzella
"The New Isabel"
The Portrait of a Lady
(Norton Critical Edition 1975) 597, 619

"In his wonderful preface...he compares *The Portrait of a Lady* several times to a building, and it is as a great, leisurely built cathedral that one thinks of it... The plot in the case of this novel is far from being an original one: it is as if James, looking round for the events which were to bring his young woman, Isabel Archer, into play, had taken the first to hand: a fortune-hunter, the fortune-hunter's unscrupulous mistress, and a young American heiress caught in the meshes of a loveless marriage. (He was to use almost

identically the same plot but with deeper implications and more elaborate undertones in *The Wings of the Dove*.)...

The first question is the least important and we have the answer in Isabel Archer's relationship to Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*: it is not only their predicament which is the same, or nearly so (Milly's fortune-hunter, Merton Densher, was enriched by the later James with a conscience, a depth of character, a dignity in his corruption that Gilbert Osmond lacks: indeed in the later book it is the fortune-hunter who steals the tragedy, for Milly dies and it is the living whom we pity): the two women are identical. Milly Theale, if it had not been for her fatal sickness, would have affronted the same destiny and met the same fate as Isabel Archer: the courage, the generosity, the confidence, and inexperience belong to the same character, and James has disclosed to us the source of the later portrait--his young and much-loved cousin Minny Temple, who died of tuberculosis at twenty-four....

It is part of the permanent fascination of his style that he never does all the work for us, and there will be careless mathematicians prepared to argue the meaning of that other ambiguous ending, when Merton Densher, having gained a fortune with Milly Theale's death, is left alone with his mistress Kate Croy, who had planned it all, just as Mme. Merle had planned Isabel's betrayal.... Isabel Archer was betrayed by little more than an acquaintance; Milly Theale by her dearest friend; until we reach the complicated culmination of treacheries in *The Golden Bowl*."

Graham Greene
Collected Essays
(Viking 1951)

"It is one of the great novels in the language.... The phase when his genius functioned with freest and fullest vitality is represented by *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), together with *The Bostonians* (1885).... *The Portrait of a Lady* is a great novel, and we can't ask for a finer exhibition of James's peculiar gifts than we get there and in *The Bostonians* (they seem to me the two most brilliant novels in the language).... *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, not to speak of the shorter things--how can this magnificent group of classics have missed being acclaimed as placing the novelist in established pre-eminence with Jane Austen and George Eliot?...

The 'new man,' being without the refinements of European culture, is to be also without its corruptions; he is to represent energy, uncompromising moral vitality and straightforward will. We meet him again as Caspar Goodwood in *The Portrait of a Lady*; we find him in the extremely sophisticated later art, and he culminates in Adam Verver of *The Golden Bowl*.... In *Isabel Archer* we have again the supremacy of the American girl....even if, pondering it critically, we judge it to depend on a large measure of idealization. Her freedom in the face of English conventions appears--and she is a firmly realized presence for us--as a true emancipation of spirit. Unlike Daisy Miller she has her own superior code, in her scruple, her self-respect and her sensitiveness; she is educated and highly intelligent.... The admirableness of Lord Warburton and the impressiveness of his world, as we are made to feel them, are essential to the significance of Isabel's negative choice. That her rejection of them doesn't strike us as the least capricious, but as an act of radically ethical judgment, is a tribute to the reality with which James has invested her."

F. R. Leavis
The Great Tradition
(New York U 1963) 126-27, 142, 147, 152-53

"Written when James was at the height of his powers in his early, 'direct' mode, *The Portrait of a Lady* may indeed be taken as his grand definitive statement of the international theme in that mode, which he was to surpass only in the great works of his later period... It is not until she meets Gilbert Osmond that she perceives how fundamentally uninteresting were the other men she had known--Lord Warburton, Cousin Ralph, Caspar Goodwood....

Some modern critics of *The Portrait of a Lady*...have seen in Isabel Archer nothing but a half-educated American girl with a head stuffed full of sentimental nonsense about life and art and Europe and gracious living--the sort of 'sentimental idealism' which, as everyone knows, is the weaker side of the American

national character, and therefore needs to be exposed rather than condoned as (according to these critics) James condones it in *The Portrait of a Lady*.... What pre-eminently draws Isabel to Osmond is his sovereign personal distinction--the single quality that for her subsumes all his other qualities. But to this power of his to satisfy the requirements of her imagination must be added two vital elements of her own nature. The first is her ardent desire to develop her mind and her sensibilities: her need, that is, to give direction and form to her vague aspiration after knowledge and virtue--'experience' in the largest, noblest sense of the word. This, James desires us to understand, is one of the most engaging characteristics of his engaging young woman Isabel Archer; and for the reason chiefly that it argues the presence of that intellectual energy and moral spontaneity, so lamentably lacking in the English and Europeans, which James had already remarked as one of the most inspiring features of the American national character....

The comic emphasis lies nearest the surface. It is to be detected in the many references to the vanity, self-centeredness, even arrogance of his engaging young woman, which James exposes with so much pleasant wit in the earlier portions of the book. Even here, however, the irony is not directed so much against the vanity, self-centeredness, arrogance as such, but is intended rather to direct our amused attention to the perpetual struggle in Isabel between these frailties of her all too feminine nature and the high moral principles to which she is, both by temperament and training, wholeheartedly committed....

Returning to Isabel's reasons for marrying Gilbert Osmond; the first, as we saw, is her ardent desire to enlarge and enrich her experience of life, to grow in wisdom and virtue under the guidance of this most superior of men. The second is her desire, equally ardent, to serve. More specifically, to use her money in the service of someone she loves. These are the two fundamental needs of her nature; and in Gilbert Osmond she believes she has found someone who will satisfy both. Osmond, she believes, is a man to whom her fortune will be of real service, whose enjoyment of it she can intimately share.... What first emerges from Isabel's analysis of the failure of her marriage is the real character of Gilbert Osmond. He has indeed turned out to be a man very different from Isabel's first conception of him. He has indeed turned out to be a brute: morally coarse, to the last fibre; cold-hearted; appallingly egotistical; and capable of acts of calculated violence--'mental cruelty,' as it is now technically called--that have a power to terrify far exceeding that of mere physical acts of violence. This is the man in whom Isabel Archer had believed herself to see the perfection of delicate feeling and moral refinement...

It is her ideas that Osmond does not like, and in particular (we soon come to realize) the moral emphasis of her ideas. These he sees as the regrettable product of her provincial upbringing in her native town of Albany; and to a man of developed aesthetic sensibility there is nothing more distasteful than moral ideas in a charming woman.... It is impossible for her not to express her opinions about the degenerate morals of the fashionable Roman society in which her husband chooses to live; and since he identifies himself with the values of that society, it is unavoidable that her criticisms should by implication be directed also against him personally. And this is what Gilbert Osmond cannot bear: that her criticisms should be directed against *him*--against his standards, his attitudes, his 'assumptions.' This is an assault upon his vanity and egotism for which nothing can compensate; and it is perhaps not surprising that it should lead him in the end to hate his wife with a cold, implacable hatred. This expresses the final tragic horror of Isabel Archer's situation: that she should be hated not for what is worst but for what is best in her--for her free inquiring mind, for her moral purity, for her desire to uphold, to her capacity, what she believes to be right and good. And this, we are meant to see, is indeed one of the profoundest of the tragic ironies of life: to be rejected and despised--hated, as Osmond comes to hate Isabel--for what is best in one, and by those in whom one had placed one's most loving trust....

She recognizes that she herself had encouraged Osmond before their marriage to suppose that her free inquiring mind and her moral ideas were not a serious matter, and had to this extent positively deceived him, or at any rate helped him in his self-deception.... Of course there is every excuse, one is tempted to say. If she deceived him, if she was 'hypocritical,' it was out of love and for the sake of love; and who, remembering Osmond's sovereign power over her, could hold her morally culpable for thus deceiving him?... Isabel has to suffer because she had not the courage to be *herself*, completely and uncompromisingly, against all temptations. Because for the sake of love she lapsed from truth, the love for which she lapsed failed her; and this is one truth about the human condition that the central story of *The Portrait of a Lady* presses upon our attention.... We have already noted James's early references, with all

the necessary mitigations, to her vanity, her self-centeredness, her tendency to self-dramatization--all functions, as we saw, of her desire to appear good as well as be good, and therefore also the first signs of her growing commitment to the aesthetic view of things. The important sign is her tremendous enthusiasm for Madame Merle...

Isabel herself never becomes fully conscious of this taint in herself; she does not to the end see it face to face, she knows it only by its effects. But the reader is expected to see it, and to give it the weight that is due to it. The sense of beauty is one thing, aestheticism, the 'touchstone of taste' (as James is to call it in a later work), is quite another thing. For aestheticism seeks always to substitute the appearance for the reality, the surface for the substance, the touchstone of taste for the touchstone of truth: that truth which in the life of man (Henry James comes more and more to insist) is in the first instance moral and only secondarily and derivatively aesthetic. Isabel Archer is too susceptible--just that shade too susceptible--to fine appearances, to a brilliant surface, to the appeal, in short, of the merely aesthetic, to be morally altogether sound.... This conflict of the aesthetic and the moral in a highly civilized society is to emerge in James's later novels as one of his great themes, perhaps his very greatest. In *The Portrait of a Lady* it receives only its first and more or less tentative statement. We may judge the tentativeness, even the inconclusiveness, from the course of the fable itself. Nothing 'happens' as a result of this discovery; neither Isabel herself nor Osmond is significantly affected by it; neither is altered by it."

Dorothea Krook
The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James
(Cambridge U 1962) 26-27, 39-60

"It is to the tutelage of the European memory that Isabel Archer passionately surrenders herself in her campaign to live, that is, to become conscious; for, in James's world, the highest affirmation of life is the development of the subtlest and most various consciousness.... In terms of the Jamesian 'myth,' American wealth is now able to buy up the whole museum of Europe, all its visible 'point' of art objects and culture prestige, to take back home and set up in the front yard... James's characteristic thematic contrasts, here as in other novels, are those of surface against depth, inspection against experience, buying power against living power, the American tourist's cultural balcony against the European abyss of history and memory and involved motive where he perilously teeters. In *The Portrait* the American heroine's pilgrimage in Europe becomes a fatally serious spiritual investment...

It is the very bounty of her fortune...that activates at once, as if chemically, the proclivity to evil in the world of privilege that her wealth allows her to enter--it is her money that draws Madame Merle and Osmond to her; so that her 'freedom' is actualized as imprisonment, in a peculiarly ashen and claustal, because peculiarly refined, suburb of hell. Isabel's quest had, at the earliest, been a quest for happiness--the naively egoistic American quest; it converts into a problem of spiritual salvation, that is, into a quest of 'life'; and again the Biblical archetype shadows forth the problem. After eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, how is one to regain access to the tree of life?... *The Portrait* identifies life with the most probing, dangerous, responsible awareness--identifies, as it were, the two 'trees,' the tree of the Fall and the tree of the Resurrection. The heroine's voluntary search for fuller consciousness leads her, in an illusion of perfect freedom to choose only 'the best' in experience, to choose an evil...

It is only the process of the learning that the portrait frame itself holds. The title, *The Portrait*, asks the eye to see. And the handling of the book is in terms of seeing. The informing and strengthening of the eye of the mind is the theme--the ultimate knowledge, the thing finally 'seen,' having only the contingent importance of stimulating a more subtle and various activity of perception.... The theme of 'seeing' (the theme of the developing consciousness) is fertile with ironies and ambiguities that arise from the natural symbolism of the act of seeing, upon which so vastly many of the human responses and decisions are dependent.... His exploration of that ideal identity involves cognizance of failed integration, cognizance of the many varieties of one-sidedness or one-eyedness or blindness that go by the name of the moral or the aesthetic, and of the destructive potentialities of the human consciousness when it is one-sided either way....

Madame Merle and Osmond use their cultivated aestheticism for utility purposes--Madame Merle, to further her ambition for place and power; Osmond, to make himself separate and envied. Their debasement

of the meaning of the aesthetic becomes symbolically vicious when it shows itself in their relationships with people--with Isabel, for instance, who is for them an object of virtue that differs from other objects of virtue in that it bestows money rather than costs it.... Isabel finally realizes that she has been for [Osmond] 'an applied handled hung-up tool.' Morally dead himself, incapable of reverence for the human quality in others, Osmond necessarily tries to duplicate his death in them, for it is by killing their volition that he can make them useful; dead, they are alone 'beautiful.' He urges upon Isabel the obscene suggestion that she, in turn, 'use' Lord Warburton by exploiting Warburton's old love for herself in order to get him to marry Pansy; and Osmond can find no excuse for her refusal except that she has her private designs for 'using' the Englishman. But it is in Osmond's use of Pansy, his daughter, that he is most subtly and horribly effective. He has made her into a work of art...and he has almost succeeded in reducing her will to an echo of his own....

Henrietta is the made-up consciousness, the pseudo consciousness, that is not a process but a content hopelessly once and for all given, able to refract light but not to take it in. (We can understand Henrietta's importance, caricatural as she is, by the fact that she is the primitive form of the pseudo consciousness which Madame Merle and Osmond, in their so much more sophisticated ways, exhibit: theirs too is the made-up consciousness, a rigidified content, impervious and uncreative.)...

Architectural images, and metaphors whose vehicle (like doors and windows) is associated with architecture, subtend the most various and complex of the book's meanings; and the reason for their particular richness of significance seems to be that, of all forms that are offered to sight and interpretation, buildings are the most natural symbols of civilized life, the most diverse also as to what their fronts and interiors can imply of man's relations with himself and with the outer world.... But while Osmond's world suggests depth, it is, ironically, a world of surfaces only, for Osmond has merely borrowed it....

Isabel, still seeking that freedom which is growth, goes back to Osmond's claustal house, for it is there, in the ruin where Pansy has been left, that she has placed roots, found a crevice in which to grow straightly and freshly, found a fertilizing, civilizing relationship between consciousness and circumstances."

Dorothy Van Ghent
The English Novel: Form and Function
(Holt 1953)

"It is the particular achievement of Henry James that he was able to transform the moral color of his personal vision into the hues of his famous figure in the carpet; that he found a form for his awareness of moral issues, an awareness that was so pervasive it invaded furniture and walls and ornamental gardens and perched upon the shoulders of his people a dove for spirit, beating its wings with the violence of all Protestant history, so that of this feeling, of the moving wing itself, he could make a style....

Henry James was certainly aware that one is always on the market, but as he grew as an artist he grew as a moralist and his use of the commercial matrix of analogy became markedly satirical or ironic and his investigation of the human trade more self-conscious and profound until in nearly all the works of his maturity his theme is the evil of manipulation, a theme best summarized by the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative: 'So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only.'

Nothing further from pragmatism can be imagined, and if we first entertain the aphorism that though William was the superior thinker, Henry had the superior thought, we may be led to consider the final effect of their rivalry, for the novels and stories of Henry James constitute the most searching criticism available of the pragmatic ideal of the proper treatment and ultimate worth of man. That this criticism was embodied in Henry James's style, William James was one of the first to recognize. 'Your methods and my ideals seem the reverse, the one of the other,' he wrote to Henry in a letter complaining about the 'interminable elaboration' of *The Golden Bowl*. Couldn't we have, he asks, a 'book with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigour and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries and absolute straightness in the style?'...

The Portrait of a Lady, for one who is familiar with James, opens on rich sounds. None of his major motifs is missing. The talk at tea provides us with five, the composition of the company constitutes a sixth, and his treatment of the setting satisfies the full and holy seven. The talk moves in a desultory fashion ('desultory' is the repetitive word) and in joking tones ('That's a sort of joke' is the repetitive phrase) from health and illness, and the ambiguity of its value, to boredom, considered as a kind of sickness, and the ambiguity of its production. Wealth is suggested as a cause of boredom, then marriage is proposed as a cure. The elder Touchett warns Lord Warburton not to fall in love with his niece, a young lady recently captured by his wife to be exhibited abroad. The questions about her are: Has she money? Is she interesting? The jokes are: Is she marriageable? Is she engaged? Isabel is the fifth thing, then--the young, spirited material. Lord Warburton is English, of course, while the Touchetts are Americans. Isabel's coming will sharpen the contrast, dramatize the confrontation. Lastly, James dwells lovingly on the ancient red brick house, emphasizing its esthetic appeal, its traditions, its status as a work of art. In describing the grounds he indicates, too, what an American man of money may do: fall in love with a history not his own and allow it, slowly, to civilize him....

In *The Portrait* James begins his movement toward the theory of the point-of-view. The phrase itself occurs incessantly. Its acceptance as a canon of method means the loss of a single, universally objective reality. He is committed, henceforth, to a standpoint philosophy, and it would seem, then, that the best world would be that observed from the most sensitive, catholic, yet discriminating standpoint.... [Isabel] refuses Warburton, not because he seeks his own salvation in her, his cure by 'interest,' but rather because marriage to him would not satisfy her greed for experience, her freedom to see and feel and do. Neither Warburton nor Goodwood appeals as a person to Isabel's vanity. She is a great subject. She will make a great portrait. She knows it. Nevertheless Isabel's ambitions are at first naive and inarticulate. It is Ralph who sees the chance, in her, for the really fine thing; who sees in her his own chance, too, the chance at life denied him. It is Ralph finally, who empowers her flight and in doing so draws the attention of the hunters.

Ralph and Osmond represent two types of the artist. Osmond regards Isabel as an opportunity to create a work which will flatter himself and be the test testimony to his taste.... But Ralph obeys the strictures *The Art of Fiction* was later to lay down. He works rather with the medium itself and respects the given. His desire is to exhibit it, make it whole, refulgent, round. He wants, in short, to make an image or to see one made--a portrait. He demands of the work only that it be 'interesting.' He effaces himself. The 'case' is his concern."

William H. Gass
"The High Brutality of Good Intentions"
Accent XVIII (Winter 1958) 62-71

"In *The Portrait of a Lady* the chief difficulty resides in the feelings inspired by Osmond in the latter part of the book, and in Isabel's final decision... Osmond is a kind of neurotic aesthete, self-centered, unscrupulous within the limits of safety, and thoroughly unpleasant, but the species of terror which Isabel comes to feel in regard to him is absolutely unexplained by any of his actions or by any characteristic described. He betrayed Isabel in regard to his marriage with her, but this betrayal is scarcely a motive for the particular feeling which Isabel comes to experience. Furthermore, the same feeling is experienced by the daughter Pansy, who was presumably unaware of the deception: Pansy is confined in a convent to break off her attachment to her young and unsuitable admirer; the convent is the one in which she went to school throughout childhood and is wholly familiar, and the nuns are devoted and kind; but Pansy after a brief period there can endure no more and surrenders abjectly and in fear. The influence of Osmond here is of the same obscure type as the influence of the Bellegardes. And at the end, though Isabel returns to her husband because of an intense moral sense... James seems to fear the inadequacy of this sense as a sole motive, and bolsters it up by her desire and promise to stand by Pansy in the trials ahead of her. The power and influence thus obscurely wielded by Osmond provide the dramatic crisis of the book."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-43) 332

"Compared with this the English novels which precede it, except perhaps those of Jane Austen, all seem a trifle crude. There is a habit of perfection here, a certainty and a poise, which is quite different from the

merits and power of *Oliver Twist* or *Wuthering Heights* or even *Middlemarch*. The quality has something to do with the full consciousness of Henry James's art. Nothing in *The Portrait of a Lady* is unconscious, nothing is there by chance, no ungathered wayward strands, no clumsiness. No novelist is so absorbed as James in what he himself might call his 'game.' But it is not an empty or superficial concern with 'form' that gives *The Portrait of a Lady* its quality.... The beauty of texture derives immediately from two qualities, which are ultimately inseparable. One is James's ability to make us know his characters more richly, though not necessarily more vividly, than we know the characters of other novelists; the other is the subtlety of his own standpoint....

The way Henry James introduces his characters to us depends entirely on the kind of function they are to have in his story. The main characters are never described as they are (i.e. as the author knows them to be) but--by and large--as Isabel Archer sees them. We get to know them at first only by the first impression that they make. We get to know people better through acquaintance. And just as in life we are seldom, if ever, quite certain what another person is like, so in a Henry James novel we are often pretty much at sea about particular characters for considerable portions of the book. In *The Portrait of a Lady* the person whom at first we inevitably know least about is Madame Merle. Henry James lets us know right from the start that there is something sinister about her; we are made quickly to feel that Isabel's reaction to her is less than adequate, but the precise nature of her character is not revealed until fairly far into the book.

It is not quite true to say that everything in *The Portrait of a Lady* is revealed through Isabel's consciousness. We know, from the start, certain things that Isabel does not know. We know, for instance--and twice Henry James explicitly reminds us of it--more about Ralph Touchett's feeling for Isabel than she herself perceives. Indeed, there is a sense in which the novel is revealed to us through Ralph's consciousness, for his is the 'finest,' the fullest intelligence in the book and therefore he sees things--about Madame Merle, about Osmond, about Isabel herself--which Isabel does not see and inevitably such perceptions are transmitted to the reader. Again, we are offered important scenes--between Madame Merle and Osmond, between the Countess and Madame Merle--which reveal to us not the whole truth but enough of the truth about Madame Merle's stratagems to put us at an advantage over Isabel.

The truth is that Henry James's purpose in this novel is not to put Isabel between the reader and the situation (in the way that Strether's consciousness is used in *The Ambassadors*) but to reveal to the reader the full implications of Isabel's consciousness. For this to happen we must see Isabel not merely from the inside...but from the outside too. The method is, in fact, precisely the method of *Emma*, except that Jane Austen is rather more scrupulously consistent than Henry James.... We cannot understand Isabel Archer, he implies, unless we feel as she feels. And it is, indeed, because he succeeds in this attempt that *The Portrait of a Lady* though not a greater novel than *Middlemarch* is a more moving one....

And *The Portrait of a Lady* is indeed a novel of the widest scope and relevance. Though it is in the line of Jane Austen it has a quality which it is not misleading to call symbolic... *The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel about destiny. Or, to use a concept rather more in tone with the language of the book itself, it is a novel about freedom. It would not be outrageous, though it might be misleading, to call it a nineteenth-century *Paradise Lost*.... There was a time when James's novels apparently were regarded as 'comedies of manners' (cf. Trollope) and even so superbly intelligent a reader as E. M. Forster seems to have missed the point of them almost completely....

The launching of *The Portrait of a Lady* is beautifully done. Gardencourt, the house in Albany, upper-class London: they are called up with magnificent certainty and solidity. So too are the people of the book: the Touchetts, Caspar Goodwood, Henrietta Stackpole, Lord Warburton, Isabel herself. If these characters are to contribute to a central pattern it will not be, it is clear, in the manner of anything approaching allegory. They are all too 'round,' too 'free' to be felt, for even a moment, simply to be 'standing for' anything.... Henry James does not allow us, charming creature as she is, to idealize Isabel: 'Altogether, with her meager knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent...' *The Portrait of a Lady* is the revelation of the inadequacy of Isabel's view of freedom....

The Portrait of a Lady is far from allegory yet one is permitted to feel, in the symbolic quality of the novel, that the characters though unmistakably individuals, are more than individuals. Thus, in her rejection of Caspar Goodwood, Isabel is rejecting America, or at least that part of America that Goodwood represents, young, strong, go-ahead, uninhibited, hard.... The rejection of Lord Warburton has, similarly, a symbolic quality--though, again, one must insist that this is not an allegory. Warburton is a liberal aristocrat. He embodies the aristocratic culture of Europe (that has so attracted Isabel at Gardencourt) and adds his own reforming ideas--a combination which Henry James, had he been the kind of aesthetic snob he is often held to be, might have found irresistible.... Goodwood and Warburton rejected (almost like two temptations), Isabel is now 'free' to affront her destiny. But she is not free because she is poor. She has never, we are told early on, known anything about money, and it is typical of this novel that this fine, romantic indifference to wealth should be one of the basic factors in Isabel's tragedy....

It is Ralph's one supreme mistake in intelligence and it is the mistake that ruins Isabel. For it is her wealth that arouses Madame Merle's realization that she can use her and leads directly to the disastrous, tragic marriage with Osmond.... Isabel, then, imagining herself free, has in fact delivered herself into bondage. And the bondage has come about not casually but out of the very force and fortune of her own aspirations to freedom. She has sought life and because she has sought it in this way she has found death. Freedom to Isabel and to Ralph (for he has been as much concerned in the issue as she), has been an idealized freedom. They have sought to be free not through a recognition of, but by an escape from, necessity. And in so doing they have delivered Isabel over to an exploitation as crude and more corrupting than the exploitation that would have been her fate if Mrs. Touchett had never visited Albany....

It seems to me inescapable that what Isabel finally chooses is something represented by a high cold word like duty or resignation, the duty of an empty vow, the resignation of the defeated, and that in making her choice she is paying a final sacrificial tribute to her own ruined conception of freedom. For Henry James, though he sees the tragedy implicit in the Victorian ruling-class view of freedom, is himself so deeply involved in that illusion that he cannot escape from it. His books are tragedies precisely because their subject is the smashing of the bourgeois illusion of freedom in the consciousness of characters who are unable to conceive of freedom in any other way. His 'innocent' persons have therefore always the characters of victims; they are at the mercy of the vulgar and the corrupt, and the more finely conscious they become of their situation the more unable they are to cope with it in positive terms. Hence the contradiction of Fleda Vetch whose superior consciousness (and conscience) leads her in effect to reject life in favor of death. This is a favorite, almost an archetypal situation, in James's novels. It achieves its most striking expression in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* in which another rich American girl meets, even more powerfully and more exquisitely, the fate of Isabel Archer....

But there can be no doubt that what the bourgeois world did for James was to turn him into a moral idealist chasing a chimera of ideal conduct divorced from reality.... His picture of European bourgeois life is in its objective aspect as realistic as that of Balzac or Flaubert or Proust. No, if we are to isolate in James's novels the quality that is ultimately their limitation, it is to the core of his point of view, his philosophy, that we are led. The limiting factor in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the failure of James in the last analysis to dissociate from Isabel's errors of understanding.... His 'good' characters, in their unswerving effort to live finely, turn out to be, in the full implication of the phrase, too good for this world. Their sensibility becomes an end in itself, not a response to the actual issues of life. The freedom they seek turns out to be an idealized freedom; it ends, therefore, can only end, in a desire not merely to be free in this world but to be free of this world.... Better death than a surrender of the illusion which the novel has so richly and magnificently and tragically illuminated."

Arnold Kettle
An Introduction to the English Novel II
(London: Hutchinson's U Library; Harper & Row 1953) 13-34

"One might say that James had arrived at a position to which Isabel Archer...aspires: to be released from any provincialities of response, to have access to a number of alternatives from which to choose and on which to base judgments, and to be able to take an abundantly large and imaginative view of human experience. Her choice is carried out in defiance of everything that can be called society, a choice thus

characteristic of a peculiarly American and romantic conception of 'freedom.' One finds it in *Huckleberry Finn*, in *Walden*, above all in Emerson....

According to Emerson we are indebted to Kant for the very term 'transcendentalist' which Emerson was to make famous. Isabel, like many of the heroines of English fiction, is an orphan, a kind of Becky Sharp; but the specifically American quality of this novel is that by virtue of the nature of her ambitions she is better called an Emersonian Becky Sharp.... With brilliant daring James even allows [Osmond] to lay claim to the Jamesian (and Emersonian) virtue of renunciation, of giving up practical social ambitions and advantages in the interests of some presumably higher ideal. James thus indicates in yet another way how Isabel's imagination responds to the same possibilities in life to which his own is romantically but altogether more critically, more despairingly attracted....

Emerson had come to see James in his crib, had read with great admiration James's letters from Europe to the elder James, and in the year before *The Portrait* he had met James both in Europe and in Concord. Though in his essay on Emerson James praises the Emersonian vision 'of what we require and what we are capable of in the way of aspiration and independence,' he had a patronizing conception of the narrowness of Emerson's intelligence, especially its lack of social sophistication. And in Osmond one can find, if not a further critique of Emerson, then at least an ironic extension of his ideas into areas where they serve as a 'front' for vulgarity and ambition. Osmond is a mock version of the transcendentalist, fitting Emerson's characterization almost perfectly.... To be aware of Osmond as a corrupt transcendentalist makes it less surprising that Isabel, whose mental processes are authentically Emersonian, should see an image of herself in the man she marries....

To *listen* to the way Ralph treats Isabel is to hear the way James also treats her. We catch in Ralph's style James's own intention to allow Isabel the full liberty of self-expression and discovery.... Isabel reveals her incapacity to recognize the significance of Ralph's playfulness. No wonder she can mistakenly see in Osmond the virtues that belong only to Ralph. The superficial similarity between the two men is another instance of James's insistence on the complexity of moral choice by showing a correspondence between the admirable and the corrupt. Osmond is made into Ralph Touchett *in extremis*... In stressing the autobiographical elements in *The Portrait* I have dealt with the way in which it comments on James's heritage of Emersonian 'self-reliance,' the way in which Isabel's vague ambition is represented as an achieved and more subtle condition in Ralph, were she able to see it, and, in James's own style...

When he speaks...of the world as the subject of the novelist's attention, his language is often noticeably similar to Isabel's when she is theorizing about her repeated ambition to take 'a large human view of her opportunities and obligations'... Isabel has faith in exactly those ideals that James wants the novelist to pursue in his writing. When he is talking about fiction his vocabulary is often like Isabel's when she is describing her hopes and ambitions. Isabel's career shows us what happens when an ideal of freedom that is a governing principle in James's art also becomes a defining principle of life. In his relation to Isabel as artist, James is much like Ralph in his relation to her as spectator....

As if to show Isabel's uniqueness James surrounds her in this novel with relatively conventionalized figures like Henrietta, Madame Gemini, Osmond's sister, or like Osmond himself and Madame Merle. By these contrasts to Isabel he ensures that we will not mistakenly apply to her some of the limiting definitions that are relevant to most novels. By the very fact that both Isabel and Henrietta say that they want to investigate the 'inner life' of Europe, for instance, the reader is forced into an acceptance of at least the comparative seriousness of Isabel's intention. In this and other ways James is everywhere protecting Isabel from the kinds of definition a reader is customarily allowed to make of an orphaned heroine suddenly exposed to a world of wealth and glamour. In the interest of preventing us from placing her in any particular category James even commits what was for him a cardinal sin in earlier writers. Quite early in the book he begins to intrude into the narrative, begging us not to 'smile' critically at Isabel and even giving away his plot in the warning that 'those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity'....

And yet James is fully aware that if Isabel's motives become too expressly sexual in the final scenes, then all of her previous acts of high principle might equally be explained as evasions of sexual confrontation. The search for freedom would thereby become little more than a rationalization of Isabel's attempt to escape the 'common passions' she so strongly criticizes in the marriage of Bantling and Henrietta. Critics have never been able adequately to adjust the final scenes to the rest of the novel. Most of them work on the principle that if they discover anything covert, especially if it is sexual, they can then forget everything else that the novel has made obvious. Still, the whole literary effort of this novel is designed to keep the reader from finding any merely psychological explanation wholly satisfactory. James strives even at the end to make us see Isabel as a girl genuinely motivated by those ideals which are often his own....

Ralph's death, seen in the context of his having been in a relation to Isabel which is much like James's relation to her, is an astounding illustration of how the drama in the action of this novel is an imitation of the drama of creative effort that went into the writing. Ralph's death can be taken as a metaphor for the fact that Isabel's freedom can no longer be imagined. It can no longer sustain the life of the imagination—Ralph's or James's.... He dies because her life no longer allows him to imagine the possibility that freedom and the life of the world are compatible.... Isabel's action at the end is fully consistent with everything she does earlier. Now, however, she asserts her idealism of self, not in innocence but in full knowledge of the world. For that reason, freedom, which was the condition of self-creation, becomes a form of indifference to the fact that returning to Rome will, as Caspar admonishes, cost her life."

Richard Poirier

The American Novel, Wallace Stegner, ed.

(Basic Books 1965) 47-52, 54-60

originally published in *The Comic Sense of Henry James*

"Ralph Touchett's plan is founded on renouncing prospects of marriage with Isabel and on translating his affection into something paternal and fraternal instead. And it is founded on actions in which both the renunciation and the use of his inherited wealth are fused. If he is, as one character claims, 'Prospero enough to make [Isabel] what she has become,' he is nonetheless like the plotter Iago in wanting to put money in her purse so that he might and she might, 'meet the requirements of their imagination.' With his permissive and playful imagination, he has, as he remarks, 'amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you,' and after her disastrous marriage to Osmond he spends what time he can watching her, entertained in trying to see through the mask of tranquil satisfaction she has assumed.

He presses the limits of their 'tacit convention' not to discuss Osmond's conduct openly, for he is so involved in her predicament that he feels 'an almost savage desire to hear her complain of her husband,' longing 'for his own satisfaction more than for hers,' to show that he understood her situation, trying again and again 'to make her betray Osmond' though 'he felt cold-blooded, cruel, dishonourable almost, in doing so.' He is turning about in pained fascination the figure detained in the imagination's shop. It is an anguished entertainment, founded on money and imagination, love and sacrifice, and when Isabel later disobeys her husband to rush to Ralph's deathbed, his affection for his cousin becomes adoration in his final declaration....

So intimately is James implicated in the action of his novel that letters he was writing while working on the *Portrait* are echoed in the passages where Osmond's mind and feelings are stirred by the workings of the plot and he proposes marriage to Isabel.... Within the context of the *Portrait*, the marriages of the Countess and much later of Warburton image the institution reduced to its most factiously conventional status, while Daniel Touchett's hopes for Ralph's and Isabel's marriage, and earlier for Warburton's, and Isabel's hopes for Pansy's, view the institution as a form of aspiration and commitment, with the Touchetts' marriage (and Henrietta Stackpole's) falling in between."

Laurence B. Holland

The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James

(Princeton 1964) 28-42

"The conscious assimilation of romance into the novelistic substance of *The Portrait* took place in two different ways. It was assimilated into the language of the book and produced a general enrichment of

metaphor. It was also brought in for the character of Isabel Archer, the heroine, who is to a considerable extent our point of view as we read. Isabel tends to see things as a romancer does, whereas the author sees things with the firmer, more comprehensive, and more disillusioned vision of the novelist. Thus James brings the element of romance into the novel in such a way that he can both share in the romantic point of view of his heroine and separate himself from it by taking an objective view of it....

The idea of leaving and entering a house, the contrast of different kinds of houses, the question of whether a house is a prison or the scene of liberation and fulfillment--these are the substance of the metaphors in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Figuratively speaking, the story told in the novel is of Isabel's leaving an American house--a way of life, that is--for a European house. Ostensibly she conceives of this as an escape from frustrating and cramping confinement to a fuller, freer, more resonant and significant life. Actually, it is not hard to see that although James has much admiration and tenderness of feeling for his heroine, he gives her an element of perverse Yankee idealism of the sort that he was shortly to portray in the more exacerbated form of positively perverted idealism in Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*. So that for all her dark-haired, gray-eyed beauty, her delightful young enthusiasm, and her zest for life, there is in Isabel a fatal susceptibility to a form of imprisonment worse than that she has escaped. Figuratively, the house in which she lives as the wife of Gilbert Osmond confines her in a hopeless imprisonment she could not consciously have imagined....

The garden makes an inevitable part of the general metaphor which represents the enriched sensibility of the heroine.... In a novel which describes a fall from innocence, it is suitable that the tragic action should be metaphorically mirrored in the heroine's mind by this imaginative conjunction of the garden and the ancient house, in which the garden stands for Isabel's Eve-like innocence and the house for a civilization that has lost its innocence but has acquired--along with its corruption--wisdom, maturity, and the whole involved and valuable accretion of culture.... Chapter 42 of *The Portrait* brings to its fullest realization... the characteristic art of James...an assimilation of romance into the substance of the novel....

What occurs in Isabel's mind is the kind of disillusioned and profoundly realistic perception of truth about oneself and one's situation that is called 'tragic recognition'... One of these terrors is the new image she has formed of her husband, an image which distinctly reminds us of one of the cold, selfish villains of Hawthorne, a Rappaccini or a Chillingworth. She thinks of Osmond's 'faculty for making everything wither that he touched, spoiling everything for her that he looked at.... It was as if he had had the evil eye; as if his presence were a blight and his favor a misfortune'....

And so Isabel comes to see that 'under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers'.... Indeed there seems nothing left for her but a life of duty and abnegation. As we leave her at the end of the book she seems veritably to belong to the sisterhood of Hester Prynne. But...Isabel remains scrupulously virginal. She has been guilty of no misconduct in which we find any real justification for suffering.... [James] clearly admires her for her almost redemptive American probity and moral spontaneity, and yet he just as clearly thinks her guilty of presumption, and of bad manners that are only just barely made tolerable by her ingenuous charm....

Nor does James approve of her upbringing or of her father, one of those somewhat disorderly, nomadic Americans for whom he always shows a dislike. Isabel has been taught to 'affront her destiny,' as James says in his Preface; and this, one supposes, is less correct than confronting it. Even supposing... that James has a neurotic involvement with his heroine which leads him to fear her female aggressiveness and thus to take satisfaction and to derive a feeling of security in showing her, though possessed of animal spirits, to be sexually cold, and in leading her, finally, to her cruel fate--even supposing in these or other grounds a genuine animosity on the part of James toward his heroine, the fact remains that this is surmounted by his admiration of her and his profound sympathy with her.... But despite her deeply repressed sexuality, Isabel remains among the most complex, the most fully realized, and the most humanly fascinating of James's characters.... Isabel's disqualification [from triumph] is that of heroines and heroes throughout tragic literature--a blindness to reality, a distortion of awareness, that puts her at the mercy of the perverse and self-destructive inner motives struggling in her for the upper hand....

Isabel is patently romantic in the sense that she has highly imaginative dreams which prove to be beyond the possibility of fulfillment. A realistic young woman, or, for that matter, a conventionally romantic one, would have accepted Lord Warburton as a good catch, for he is, after all, an excellent man as well as a rich and noble lord. But Isabel has higher ideals than any she thinks can be realized by a life with Lord Warburton. Her personal romance includes strenuous abstractions that lead her to aspire to far more than the conventional romance of marrying an English nobleman. She therefore perversely and no doubt quite mistakenly decides that to marry Lord Warburton would be to 'escape' her 'fate'.... She rejects Lord Warburton at the behest of her puritan spirituality, which leads her to flee from the mere physical and social realities of life as these would be should she marry him. Perversely and mistakenly, her argument is that marriage to Lord Warburton would exempt her from life.... Ralph is in love with her, but his illness disqualifies him. The persistent Caspar Goodwood presents himself at intervals, but Isabel does not see him as an actual possibility. She seems to conceive of him as worthy but as rather stodgy in his conventional Massachusetts way. She scarcely thinks of him as being momentarily on the scene until at the very end of the novel when he proposes to rescue her from Osmond and, in his vehemence, frightens her with his masculine aggressiveness by giving her, so far as the reader knows, her only kiss....

[In] the American tradition of puritanism and transcendentalism, Isabel subscribes to the American romance of the self. She believes that the self finds fulfillment either in its own isolated integrity or on a more or less transcendent ground where the contending forces of good and evil are symbolized abstractions. She sees her fate as a spiritual melodrama. Her grasp of reality, though manifold in its presumptions, is unstable, and her desire for experience is ambivalent.... The kind of cold, amoral aloofness, the possibly morbid passion for observing life at a distance--these are real traits of Isabel's character.... She responds to Osmond's talk about how 'one ought to make one's life a work of art,' without being aware of the inhumanity and the withering aestheticism such an idea may imply. Only too late does she discover the cold malignancy of her husband... She is cherished by Osmond only to the extent that he can consider her another art object in his collection....

The moral world shared by Isabel and Osmond--a world in which Lord Warburton has no place--is that of the high Emersonian self-culture.... In Isabel's unhappy career we estimate the tragic implications of an idealism that in effect directs one to seek the rewards of the fully 'lived live' without descending from one's high pedestal into its actual conditions. In Isabel's sincere presentation of her essentially spiritual quest as a quest for a real involvement in 'the usual chances and dangers' of life lies the tragic irony of the story.... Like the romancer, Isabel refuses to impute significance to human actions unless they are conceived as being exempt from the ordinary circumstances of life, whereas the genuine novelist sees in ordinary circumstances the inescapable root condition of significant actions. So...James in the end brings Isabel's point of view around from that of the romancer to that of the novelist.... In James's books one catches hold of the Romance only just as it is disappearing into the thicket of the novel."

Richard Chase

The American Novel and Its Tradition

(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 119, 121, 124-26, 128, 135

"James was predisposed to the idea that the bigness of 'big subjects' lay in the significance of characters as social types and of action as social paradigm.... Isabel is still far removed from the full-fledged 'center of consciousness' of James's later fiction: for the most part, the narrator does not see directly through her eyes, and he sees many things that she does not. What is more, when we open the *Portrait*, we find ourselves in an intensely external milieu, which could scarcely be more distant from the world projected through Isabel's midnight meditations....The emphasis is wholly on containing 'circumstances,' an enviroing 'situation' celebrated by a tea ceremony; 'inward life' is reduced to the experience of the 'agreeable.' And the narrator, with whatever irony, speaks as the very voice of the 'admirable setting' that he conjures up, the ceremonious painter of an all-encompassing social order....

Isabel is rendered as a pleasing but foolish girl--full of a commendable energy and idealistic aspirations; intellectually curious, spontaneous, and affectionate; but at least an exemplary figure in a cautionary tale, one who will become 'consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity.' Though the narrator deprecates the 'scientific criticism' of more rigid moralists, he himself conventionalizes Isabel by the terms in which he describes her; and his lofty amusement follows

from his conviction that her departures from the social norm will only bring her back again in the long run.... The social world of the *Portrait* is populated by ailing people. Their deep-seated malaise is summarized by the invalid Ralph Touchett: 'There's something the matter with us all.'

All of them are in quest of value, meaning, a ground for life. They do not profoundly question the social scheme in which they find themselves, but neither do they have any profound loyalty to it. Instead, they more or less ineptly work out individual values through the 'circumstances' given to them.... It is freedom that most preoccupies them. All have this aim in common--Lord Warburton, the aristocratic radical; Caspar Goodwood, the free enterprise industrialist; Ralph Touchett, the libertine of fancy; Henrietta Stackpole, the enfranchised woman; Mrs. Touchett, the crotchety lady of independent means; and old Mr. Touchett, the Franklinesque Yankee. At the same time, the circumstances in which they are enmeshed distort or wholly destroy the value they seek.

The free will of Goodwood is ironically inverted into a rigid, mechanical personal manner and the service of his industrial machine; the 'independent' Mrs. Touchett is reduced to social superstitions and ritual observances; Warburton vacillates absurdly between his political libertarianism and the inbred habits of a great landowner; in Henrietta the breath of the prairies is transformed into journalistic clichés; Ralph Touchett feels free to claim nothing but the freedom of irony itself. In short, we are in a late-nineteenth-century milieu, where life still defines itself primarily in social terms and yet society, as such, is no longer serving as an effectual medium of value. Only old Mr. Touchett, despite his unhappy marriage, has moral stability, and he himself points out that he is the relic of another age....

The specific fate of Isabel is to be a consciousness which is a good deal less than total in an exploitative world which is far more rigidly determined and determinative than anything she has earlier rejected in Warburton and Goodwood. The subject of the book is more than ever centered in her, but now the subject, pondered by Ralph at a distance and by the narrator from close at hand, is the pathos of one who has been called to a task out of all proportion to her gifts. Once resistant to all social definition, James heroine of consciousness is doomed to betray herself and to be betrayed--not merely to fail in her quest for freedom but to be 'ground in the very mill of the conventional'."

Charles Feidelson
"The Moment of *The Portrait of a Lady*"
Ventures 8 II (1968) 47-55

"One sign of how little technical analysis James has received is the virtual neglect of his revisions.... *The Portrait of a Lady* is his first unquestioned masterpiece.... He is bound to sharpen the reader's impression of how incorrigibly romantic Isabel's approach to life is, an important issue when we come to judge the effect of the book's conclusion.... And characters, he came to believe, could be best put into such relations when they were realized visually, as lambently, as possible. This belief led him into one of his most recurrent types of revision, into endowing his *dramatis personae* with characterizing images....

Didn't he sometimes overwrite to no purpose as a mere occupational disease? Occasionally, without doubt, it is the older James talking instead of a character... The diverse types of revision demanded by the different characters may also remind us that we have in this book the most interestingly variegated group that James ever created.... She refuses Warburton not because such a marriage fails 'to correspond to any vision of happiness that she had hitherto entertained,' but because it fails 'to support an enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life.' The Isabel whom the later James saw with so much lucidity is a daughter of the transcendental afterglow, far less concerned about happiness than about enlightenment and freedom....

The revisions affecting Osmond are of a different sort. Far more of them relate to his appearance, to the polished, elegant and slightly ambiguous surface which James wants the reader to study more fully.... Such details--of which there are many more--are important in allaying the usual suspicion that James' ambiguity is unintentional, the obscurantism of a man who couldn't make up his own mind. When the writing becomes denser, as it frequently does in the revision, this is owing rather to James' gradual development of one of his special gifts, the ability so to handle a conversation that he keeps in the air not merely what is

said, but what isn't--the passage of thoughts without words.... We can read, in these extensions, the same thing that we have observed in the major characters, James' deepening of emotional tones....

The Countess expected--and hoped--that the girl would burst out with a denunciation of Osmond. But instead she is filled with pity for Madame Merle. She thinks even of Osmond's first wife, that 'he must have been false' to her--'and so very soon!' That last phrase is an addition that emphasizes Isabel's incurable innocence, despite the experience through which she is passing.... Isabel, in spite of her marriage, has remained essentially virginal, and...her resistance and her flight from Caspar are partly fear of sexual possession. But the fierce attraction she also feels in this passage would inevitably operate likewise for a girl of her temperament, in making her do what she conceived to be her duty, and sending her back to her husband....

Ralph tells us that she has 'too much conscience'--a peculiarly American complication in the romantic temperament. Although all her diverse friends are united in their disapproval of Osmond, she proceeds to do the wrong thing for the right reasons. She has a special pride in marrying him, since, she feels that she is not only 'taking' but also 'giving'; she feels too the release of transferring some of the burden of her inheritance to another's conscience--James' way of commenting on how harm was done to her by her money. But once she discerns what Osmond is really like, and how he has trapped her, she is by no means supine in his toils. She stands up to him with dignity.... In both the original and the revision Isabel lays the most scrupulous emphasis upon the sacredness of a promise.

Despite all her eagerness for culture, hers is no speculative spirit. Osmond comes to despise her for having 'the moral horizon' of a Unitarian minister--'poor Isabel, who had never been able to understand Unitarianism!' But whether she understands it or not, she is a firm granddaughter of the Puritans, not in her thought but in her moral integrity. In portraying her character and her fate, James was also writing an essay on the interplay of free will and determinism. Isabel's own view is that she was 'perfectly free,' that she married Osmond of her most deliberate choice, and that, however miserable one may be, one must accept the consequences of one's acts. James knew how little she was free, other than to follow to an impulsive extreme everything she had been made by her environment and background... James believed that the arbitrary circle of art should stimulate such speculations beyond its confines, and thus create also the illusion of a wider life.... He knew how romantic Isabel was, how little experienced she was in mature social behavior. He had shown that she was completely mistaken in believing that 'the world lay before her--she could do whatever she chose'."

F. O. Matthiessen
Henry James: The Major Phase
(Oxford 1944) 152-86

Michael Hollister (2015)

“The Portrait of a Lady” appeared in 1881 when he was at the height of his powers, and, as much as any of his books, is agreed upon as his masterpiece. As time went on James’s prose became more and more intricate and allusive, and though such later works as “The Wings of the Dove” (1902), “The Ambassadors” (1903), and “The Golden Bowl” (1904) show an increase rather than a falling off in his power of subtle analysis and his feeling for the individual quality of people and of life. But “The Portrait of a Lady” would not be what it is if it did not possess a fondness for moral seriousness, in addition to and underlying its extraordinary interest of purely intellectual curiosity.