The Portrait of a Lady Study Guide

The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James

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Introduction

Henry James was an established author when *The Portrait of a Lady* was published. The novel was first published serially in 1880 and 1881, appearing in *Macmillan's Magazine* in England and in *Atlantic* in the United States. The first book edition was published in 1881.

The Portrait of a Lady was widely, and mostly favorably, reviewed. Some reviewers recognized it immediately as James's most important novel thus far, and a few called it a masterpiece. Both of these opinions have been affirmed as time has passed. Many scholars consider *The Portrait of a Lady* one of the greatest novels in modern literature. Its heroine, Isabel Archer, is widely considered one of James's most powerful characters.

The Portrait of a Lady is, above all, Isabel's story. Following the technique of Russian author Ivan Turgenev, James makes Isabel the axis around which the story revolves. All the story's events, and all the other characters, exist only to serve the purpose of revealing Isabel to the reader.

Author Biography

Henry James was born in New York City on April 15, 1843. His father, also named Henry, was a minister who had inherited wealth. His mother, Mary Robertson Walsh James, was devoted to her husband and five children. Henry was their second son. The first, William, became a Harvard professor and a philosopher whose best-known books, especially *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), are still read today. The younger children were Garth, Robertson, and Alice.

James's father took the family on an extended trip to Europe the year Henry was born. Henry's childhood was spent traveling between a family home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Europe, where the James's spent time in England, France, and Switzerland. In Cambridge and nearby Boston, young Henry came to know the American intellectual and literary stars of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William Dean Howells. He was educated by private tutors at home and abroad until he enrolled at Harvard, where he studied only briefly. Howells, an influential magazine editor, helped James launch his literary career as a critic and writer for magazines including the *Nation* and the *Atlantic*.

In 1876, at the age of thirty-three, James moved permanently to England; he eventually became a British citizen. The meeting of American and European cultures is the predominant theme in his work. James is considered a master of the novel form and one of the leading practitioners of realism, the literary movement that arose at the end of the Civil War as a reaction against romanticism. James's work falls into the category known as psychological realism, in which the significant action in a work takes place inside the minds of the characters.

Although best known as a novelist, James was also a prolific and respected writer of short stories, plays (some were adaptations of his novels), criticism, and travel essays. As was common at the time, many of his novels were serialized in magazines before they were published as books. *The Portrait of a Lady*, first published in 1881, is widely considered the best of his early novels. Other lasting novels of this period include *The Europeans* (1878) and *The Bostonians* (1886). Well-known and still-popular later works include *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903); James himself considered the latter his masterpiece. Two novellas, *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), appear in countless anthologies and remain popular.

Never successful as a student, James finally received honorary degrees from two of the most prestigious universities in the world: from Harvard, in 1911, and from Oxford, in 1912. He died in London on February 28, 1916, after a series of strokes. His ashes are buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1—9

The novel opens at Gardencourt, the English country home of the Touchetts. Mr. Touchett, his son Ralph, and their friend Lord Warburton are having tea. Mrs. Touchett arrives from America with her niece, Isabel Archer. Isabel is a young American woman of marriageable age. Her father has just died, her mother died some time previously, and her two older sisters are already married. Since Isabel is now alone, and since her aunt thinks well of her, Mrs. Touchett has brought Isabel to Europe so that she can become more sophisticated and therefore improve her prospects for a good marriage.

Just before Isabel appears, Lord Warburton tells Mr. Touchett and Ralph that he is bored with his life and will not get married unless he meets an especially interesting woman. When Warburton meets Isabel, he finds her interesting indeed, and he soon falls in love with her. He invites her to visit his home, and Isabel learns from her uncle that Warburton is very wealthy and highly placed socially. Isabel does visit Warburton's home, where she gets to know and like his two admiring sisters. She also finds that Warburton is kind and sensitive.

Chapters 10—14

Not long after her arrival at Gardencourt, Isabel receives a letter from Henrietta Stackpole, an American friend of hers who is in Europe working as a journalist. When Isabel mentions this to Ralph, he invites Henrietta to come stay at Gardencourt, which she does.

As soon as Henrietta settles in, Isabel receives another letter from another American friend, Caspar Goodwood. Caspar wants to marry Isabel and has followed her to England to press his case with her. Isabel, however, is irritated at Caspar for following her and refuses to answer his letter.

The same day that brings Caspar's letter also brings a visit from Warburton, who proposes to Isabel. She likes him but is not ready to settle down. An independent spirit, she wants to see the world and experience more adventure before she closes off her options in life. Although Warburton is both wealthy and kind, the idea of marrying him makes Isabel think only of her "diminished liberty." She gently but firmly rejects him via letter. Her aunt and uncle are baffled by this, as is Warburton, who comes to see her to ask for further explanation of her refusal. Isabel remains kind but firm toward him.

Chapters 15—21

Isabel, Henrietta, and Ralph travel to London together, since Isabel has not yet visited the capital. Ralph has become very fond of Isabel; her vigor and high spirits make her

attractive to everyone she meets. Henrietta meets an old acquaintance of Ralph, Mr. Bantling, who quickly becomes her tour guide and companion. Caspar presents himself at Isabel's hotel and presses her to marry him. Isabel tells him, as she told Warburton, that she wants her freedom for the time being. She adds that, if Caspar still wants to marry her after two years, she will consider his proposal at that time.

Ralph receives a telegram telling him that his father is seriously ill. Ralph and Isabel return to Gardencourt, while Henrietta remains in London with Mr. Bantling. A friend of Mrs. Touchett, Madame Merle, is staying at Gardencourt and befriends Isabel. During this time, Ralph and Mrs. Touchett are preoccupied with Mr. Touchett, who is dying. Ralph persuades his father to leave half his estate to Isabel, so that she will be as independent financially as she is in spirit. Ralph is willing to have most of his inheritance go to Isabel because he, too, is ill, and he knows that he will only live a few more years. Mr. Touchett worries, rather prophetically, that having a large fortune could actually endanger Isabel, making her attractive to unsavory men who want her money. Ralph convinces his father that Isabel is too strong and independent to end up a victim.

Mr. Touchett dies, and Isabel receives her inheritance. Mrs. Touchett takes Isabel to Paris, while Ralph goes south to the Mediterranean, where the climate will be better for his health. In Paris, Isabel spends time with Henrietta and Mr. Bantling, whose travels have brought them to France.

When Mrs. Touchett and Isabel leave Paris, they visit Ralph on the Mediterranean shore. Isabel questions Ralph about his role in her inheritance and expresses concerns similar to those of her uncle that the money might not be altogether good for her. Ralph reassures her.

Chapters 22—35

Mrs. Touchett and Isabel go on to Florence, where Mrs. Touchett has a home. Here they again meet Madame Merle. Madame Merle arranges for Isabel to meet her friend Gilbert Osmond, an American-born man who has lived virtually his whole life in Europe. Madame Merle speaks highly of Gilbert to Isabel, and she has already told Gilbert about Isabel, as well□including the fact that Isabel is wealthy. Indeed, Madame Merle has told Gilbert that she wants him to marry Isabel.

At their first meeting, Gilbert invites Isabel to his home to see his art collection. There Isabel meets Gilbert's fifteen-year-old daughter, Pansy, and his sister, Countess Gemini. Through a conversation between the Countess and Madame Merle, readers learn that Madame Merle is orchestrating the marriage of Isabel and Gilbert so that Pansy will have money and will therefore be able to marry well. (Gilbert has little money but expensive tastes.) The Countess makes clear her objection to the trap that is being set for Isabel, but she does nothing about it.

Ralph has already let Isabel know that he does not like or trust Madame Merle and that Gilbert has no money. Now Mrs. Touchett begins to suspect Gilbert's motives in

pursuing Isabel. She does not, though, suspect that her friend Madame Merle is working behind the scenes to bring the two together.

Isabel falls in love with Gilbert for the same reason she is impressed with Madame Merle: both have a very refined manner and are accomplished in all the social graces. They are the epitome of the sophistication that Isabel has been brought to Europe to acquire. Henrietta and Ralph make appearances in Florence to warn Isabel that Gilbert is a dilettante who is only interested in Isabel because she is wealthy and because she will impress his social circle. Isabel remains as independent-minded as ever, insisting that she loves Gilbert. She spends a year traveling, some of it with Madame Merle, and then returns to Italy. Caspar comes to see her, two years having passed, but Isabel rejects him again. Instead, she agrees to marry Gilbert. Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel that Madame Merle has orchestrated the marriage for reasons of her own, but Isabel does not believe her aunt. Ralph also expresses his disappointment and misgivings□specifically that Gilbert will crush Isabel's independent spirit□but Isabel is determined to follow her heart.

Chapters 36—55

Four years have passed. Gilbert and Isabel are living in Rome. Isabel has realized that her friends and relatives were correct in their objections to Gilbert. He is selfish and controlling; he cares nothing for Isabel's ideas or her happiness but instead seeks to mold her into his idea of the perfect wife.

Isabel hears from Mrs. Touchett that Ralph is dying at Gardencourt and wants to see her. Gilbert tells Isabel that her place is with him, not with Ralph. Upset by this, Isabel talks with Countess Gemini. Gilbert's sister takes the occasion to tell Isabel about Gilbert's past: Pansy is not the daughter of Gilbert and his deceased first wife, as Gilbert has always told Isabel (and everyone else). In fact, Pansy is the daughter of Gilbert and Madame Merle. The two had a long affair, and Madame Merle has engineered Isabel's marriage for the benefit of her daughter, Pansy.

Isabel goes to England to see Ralph and admits to him that he was right about Gilbert's marrying her for money and crushing her independence. Ralph now believes that, indeed, the inheritance that he insisted his father give to Isabel has ruined her. Isabel is not bitter but instead seeks to understand what is the right solution for her predicament.

Ralph dies, and Isabel remains at Gardencourt for a time. Both of her former suitors, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, make final appearances and urge her to leave Gilbert. Isabel returns to her husband, though, because she believes that this is the right thing to do. She feels that if she does not keep her marriage vows, she would be the same kind of person as Madame Merle, whom she now realizes is profoundly corrupt. Isabel now understands that people like Madame Merle and Gilbert only have the appearance of refinement but are actually immoral. Isabel is not willing to be like them.

Characters

Isabel Archer

The novel's central character, Isabel is a young American woman who embodies all the best of what James depicts as American qualities, especially vitality, sincerity, and independence. As the novel opens, Isabel is arriving at the English home of her aunt and uncle. Her father has recently died. (Her mother died previously.) Her aunt, who traveled to the United States after Isabel's father's death, feels that Isabel has more potential than her circumstances in America will allow her to fulfill, and so she brings Isabel back to England with her.

Isabel wins the admiration of everyone she meets, including her cousin Ralph. Ralph talks his dying father into leaving half his estate to Isabel so that she can be free to do as she pleases. In addition to this benefactor, Isabel also has suitors. Caspar Goodwood travels from America to urge Isabel to marry him. Lord Warburton, a wealthy friend of the Touchett family, also wants to marry Isabel. But Isabel's independent nature leads her to reject both men. She finds Caspar boring and turns down Warburton partly because she is not ready to marry and partly because she fears life with him would be too easy. She longs for some adventure—even for some difficulty that will test her resourcefulness and mettle.

Isabel's independent spirit is the driving force in her personality, and it is what propels her into an unhappy marriage. When she falls in love with Gilbert Osmond, her friends and relatives almost unanimously warn her against him. But she refuses to take anyone's counsel but her own and learns too late that she completely misjudged her husband. Her failure to accurately judge Gilbert's character springs from an innocence that is characteristic of youth and also, in James's view, of Americans. Isabel's direct, trusting nature is contrasted to that of the book's European characters, who have secret pasts and ulterior motives for everything they do.

Although she makes a bad marriage, Isabel is not a tragic character. Once she realizes that she made a mistake in marrying Gilbert, she resolves to bring her strength of character to bear upon the circumstances that she has created by her own free choice. By refusing to leave her marriage, Isabel refuses to adopt the corrupt ways of her European circle. Instead, Isabel intends to graciously and courageously accept the consequences of her unwise decision and to make the best life she can.

Mr. Bantling

An old acquaintance of Ralph, Mr. Bantling meets Henrietta when she is in London with Ralph and Isabel. He becomes Henrietta's companion and guide as she travels around Europe as a journalist.

Countess Gemini

Countess Gemini is Gilbert Osmond's sister. She is well aware of Gilbert's true character and thus has no affection for him, but the two have a familial relationship in spite of this. The Countess catches on quickly to Madame Merle's scheme to get Isabel to marry Gilbert and voices her objection to it, but she doesn't actually do anything to prevent it. Four years after the marriage, at a time when Isabel is distraught over Gilbert's controlling nature, the Countess, out of sympathy, finally tells Isabel the truth about Gilbert's past.

Caspar Goodwood

Caspar is Isabel's American suitor. Having fallen in love with Isabel in the United States, he follows her to England to try to get her to agree to marry him. Isabel sees his persistence as aggression and is only irritated by it. However, the novel's one moment of passion takes place between Caspar and Isabel, when Caspar goes to see Isabel at Gardencourt one last time after Ralph's death. The couple's passionate kiss can be seen as Isabel's belated appreciation of the honesty and simplicity of character that Caspar personifies.

Madame Merle

Madame Merle is a friend of Mrs. Touchett. Isabel first meets her when both women are guests at Mrs. Touchett's home in England just before Mr. Touchett's death. Madame Merle is older than Isabel and very accomplished socially. She is charming and congenial and, as becomes clear only later, adept at manipulating people and events to serve her interests. Isabel is dazzled by Madame Merle's apparent refinement.

Gilbert Osmond

Gilbert Osmond was born in the United States but has lived virtually his entire life in Europe. He has the same qualities as Madame Merle, and Isabel is attracted to both of them for the same reason. Gilbert is an art collector, and he has an air of charm, sophistication, and refinement that greatly impresses Isabel. While all of her friends and relatives see Gilbert for the self-centered dilettante he is, Isabel is completely taken in and falls in love with him.

More than any other character, Gilbert is not what he appears to be. Although he has expensive tastes, he does not have money. Although he is charming and seductive, he does not really care about Isabel. And although he pretends that his daughter is the child of his deceased first wife, she is actually the product of an affair with Madame Merle.

Pansy Osmond

Pansy is Gilbert's daughter, and she is fifteen years old when Isabel meets Gilbert. Gilbert has always said that Pansy is the child of his first wife, who died giving birth to her, and Pansy was brought up in a convent. The nuns have reared her to be a completely obedient child, which pleases Gilbert.

Readers, along with Isabel, learn the truth about Pansy years after Isabel's marriage to Gilbert. Pansy is actually the product of a long affair between Madame Merle and Gilbert, whose first wife did die, but not in childbirth. Pansy does not know that Madame Merle is her mother but has an obvious dislike for the woman. Pansy likes Isabel and is very happy when she learns that Isabel is going to marry her father. Isabel's love for Pansy may be one reason why she returns to Gilbert at the end of the novel.

Henrietta Stackpole

Henrietta is an American journalist and a friend of Isabel. She is the quintessential "ugly American": loud, brassy, and boorish. Although Isabel sees Henrietta's faults, she is loyal to her friend, as Henrietta is to her. And, although Henrietta does not have Isabel's refinement, she is a better judge of people, and she warns Isabel not to marry Gilbert.

Mr. Touchett

Mr. Touchett is Isabel's wealthy uncle. Like most of the novel's characters, he was born in the United States, but at the time of the story, he has lived for many years in England. He comes to care deeply for Isabel and, when he hesitates to leave her half his fortune, it is only because he is afraid that the money will bring her harm rather than good. Mr. Touchett dies early in the novel after letting Ralph persuade him to leave Isabel a fortune.

Mrs. Touchett

Isabel's aunt, Mrs. Touchett, goes to New York after the death of her brother, from whom she was estranged, and decides to bring Isabel back to Europe with her. Mrs. Touchett is a well-meaning woman who shares some of Isabel's independence and, more surprisingly considering her age and her long time in Europe, her naiveté. Her independence is clear from the fact that she long ago set up her own home in Florence while her husband remained in England, since the two did not enjoy the same kind of life. The two crafted an amicable marriage out of visits to each other's homes. Mrs. Touchett's naiveté is clear in her unwarranted trust of Madame Merle. Like Isabel, Mrs. Touchett is impressed with Madame Merle's mastery of the social graces and fails to see that she is corrupt until it is too late to save Isabel from her scheme. Mrs. Touchett does realize the truth before Isabel does, however.

Ralph Touchett

Ralph is Isabel's cousin. He becomes her admirer, friend, and confidant. Like Isabel, he is intelligent and good-hearted. Unlike her, though, he is physically frail. He is also much less naive than his cousin. He understands and condemns the conniving of Madame Merle and others like her.

Because Ralph cares for Isabel and sees her potential to blossom into a sophisticated woman, he wants to do what he can to give her an advantage in life. Ralph is ill and knows that he will not live long, and therefore he persuades his dying father to leave half his estate to Isabel.

Throughout the novel, until his death at the end of the story, Ralph remains Isabel's supporter, although Isabel's insistence on marrying Gilbert causes tension and even a brief rupture in their relationship. It is significant that when Ralph is near death and asks Isabel to travel to England to see him, she does so even over her husband's objections. Isabel also admits to Ralph that she made a terrible mistake when she married Gilbert. These two actions show the closeness and loyalty that Isabel feels toward Ralph.

For his part, Ralph dies feeling that, while he hoped to benefit Isabel by securing a fortune for her, he actually brought about her ruin.

Lord Warburton

Lord Warburton is a friend of the Touchetts who falls in love with Isabel almost as soon as he meets her. He proposes to Isabel, and when she rejects him, he asks for an explanation but then accepts her decision graciously. Since Warburton is not only extremely wealthy but also considerate and kind, Isabel's rejection of him stuns everyone. Isabel's choice of Gilbert over Warburton is a clear sign of her lack of judgment.

Like Caspar Goodwood, Warburton comes to see Isabel at Gardencourt at the end of the novel and, like Goodwood, he is rejected one final time.

Techniques

In the Preface to the New York Edition of The Portrait of a Lady, James recalls that one of his major challenges was how to endow his image of "the slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl . . . affronting her destiny" with "the attributes of a big Subject." To accomplish this, he could have surrounded his heroine with a rich social context of characters and events according to the conventions of the realistic social novel as developed by Jane Austen and George Eliot. Or, he could have equipped her with a complex personal consciousness and adopted the metaphoric language of the tradition of the romance as it had been brought to perfection by Nathaniel Hawthorne. He decided to aim for a delicate balance of crucial elements from both traditions, incorporating social history while making the growth of his heroine's consciousness his compositional center. He thuse created a highly innovative work of fiction that begins as a novel of manners with Isabel as the focal point and modulates into a darker drama of her developing consciousness.

Writing about his decision to make Isabel's destiny his primary focal point and source of meaning, in an era when novels were generally multi-plotted, James recalled that his watchword was to "Place the center of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness . . . Stick to that — for the center . . .

Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight . . . press least hard . . . on the consciousness of your heroine's satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one." As a result, although Isabel is such a fascinating character precisely because she is never fully revealed, every element of the story — the characters, events, settings and symbols, as well as explicit responses to her and overt comparisons with other characters — functions mainly to illuminate her and to clarify the social, psychological and moral aspects of her predicament.

Structurally, the story falls into two parts. In the first, Isabel pursues her illusion of freedom and her quest for knowledge as she moves toward her choice of a husband. In the second, having made her choice, she gradually recognizes that complete freedom is impossible and total knowledge an elusive dream. Important changes in point of view accompany this structural division. In the opening chapters, Isabel and the other characters are seen primarily through the authorial narrator who speaks with omniscience to present and evaluate them in short psychological portraits. The most important of these is the one depicting Isabel in Chapter Six. As the story progresses, the authorial perspective begins to alternate with the observations and ideas of the characters, most notably of Ralph and Isabel whose points of view on particular incidents and characters are sometimes set in revealing opposition. In the second half of the novel, direct commentary by the authorial narrator steadily becomes less frequent in favor of the increasing centrality of Isabel's perceptions. The authorial narrator even withholds certain information, such as the love affair between Merle and Osmond, so that the reader learns about it along with Isabel and in the context of her emotional response.

The process of attributing centrality to Isabel culminates in Chapter FortyTwo when she retraces her experiences before and after her marriage in a long retrospective meditation that represents the turning point in her life. The revolutionary nature of this monologue derives from how it reveals Osmond's character, Isabel's confusion and the quality of their marriage without reporting specific details but through imagery and by tracing the nuances of her thoughts. In it, her motionless reevaluation of the past and consequent transformation of her self image move the plot forward as efficiently as a series of external events might have done and constitute a dramatic action as full of suspense as an episode in an adventure story. Aside from its importance in this novel, this crucial chapter is worthy of note because it foreshadows James's growing concern with the life of the imagination in his later works, especially those of his final phase like The Ambassadors (1903), and because it prefigures the emphasis on subjectivity and perspective that was to characterize the modern psychological novel.

Another admirable technique is the use of images and symbols that not only enhance the quality of the narrative but also express meaning and advance plot. As noted, each of the protagonists is associated with certain characterizing images which indicate their personality and suggest the nature of their relationship to Isabel.

Other image patterns deepen the reader's understanding of Isabel's fate. She and Ralph both describe her future in images of birds and flying while her feelings toward her suitors emerge as images of entrapment. When Warburton declares his love for her she feels like "some wild creature caught in a vast cage" while Osmond's proposal evokes an ambiguous response she identifies as "the slipping of a fine bolt — backward or forward, she couldn't have said which." Similarly, images of light and dark trace her path toward her destiny, specifically, her movement away from the brightness of Gardencourt, to the twilight of her period of courtship in Florence, into the darkness of Palazzo Roccanera in Rome.

Of utmost importance in the texture and meaning of the novel are the architectural metaphors by which different dwellings express different human attitudes and houses and their inhabitants reflect the stages of Isabel's quest for experience of the world and for self-identity. Her home in Albany, described in a flashback to the day she sat alone in an empty room brooding on her future, symbolizes the limitations of her American background, especially in light of her curiosity about the world and her lively imagination. That Gardencourt represents a perfect blend of nature and civilization is immediately made clear when she first sees it "in a flood of summer light" during the pleasant ritual of tea on the green lawn. Warburton's castle, Lockleigh, suggests confinement in the alien social order of which he is an esteemed member, so she quickly decides it would never be a suitable dwelling-place for her. Unfortunately for her, Isabel's response to Osmond's villa on the outskirts of Florence parallels her mistaken evaluation of the man himself. She overlooks its gloominess and allows herself to be enchanted by the marvelous vista from the back terrace which she instinctively associates with what she imagines to be Osmond's hidden charm. As for Palazzo Roccanera, during her midnight vigil she admits that it is "the house of darkness, the house of numbness, the house of suffocation" and draws an analogy between it and Osmond's mind which is similarly sinister and black.

From this perspective, Gardencourt represents a now-distant innocence and sense of possibility and it is to this sacred spot that she retreats to assist Ralph on his deathbed and to seek spiritual restoration.

The overall texture of the narrative is rich and varied, being made up of superbly depicted scenes, dramatic dialogue, authorial commentary, character perspectives on Isabel and her inner analysis, as well as ample imagery, symbolism and metaphor. The authorial narrator speaks in a moderately ironic tone as he describes the characters, indulges in evaluations of their psychology and offers commentary in an artfully constructed yet lucid and crisp style. The dialogue, studded with witty phrases, has a leisurely pace and always reflects the personality of the speakers along with the nature of their relationship at that particular moment. Ralph and Isabel engage in some sparkling conversations which reveal their essential affinities even as they disagree. Osmond's speech exposes his hostility and massive egotism in his sarcasm and his cutting descriptions of others. The imagery contributes to the vivid pictorial quality of the prose while the more elaborate metaphors ensure a slow accretion of meaning. Throughout, as Isabel evolves into a mature woman, her thought processes are reported with an increasing poetic intensity that parallels the deepening of her insight and the broaden ing of her knowledge of the human condition.

Thematic Overview

The Portrait of a Lady, James's first masterpiece, was serialized in Macmillan's Magazine in England and in The Atlantic Monthly in America between the fall of 1880 and the winter of 1881 just prior to its publication in book form. Surpassing his previous fiction in the subtlety and depth of its characterization, it depicts one of the great heroines of the nineteenth century and has a wonderful cast of supporting characters. Its themes are of enduring interest, its social and psychological observation is acutely insightful and it is written in a rich, witty and lively style.

Set in the 1870s, The Portrait of a Lady focuses on Isabel Archer, an attractive and charming young woman from Albany who is invited to Europe by her wealthy Aunt Lydia Touchett.

When the story opens, she is visiting Gardencourt, the Touchetts' country estate in England. Eager to see more of the world and to broaden her experience, she refuses an offer of marriage by the handsome and distinguished nobleman, Lord Warburton, and another by the wealthy American businessman, Caspar Goodwood.

Shortly afterwards, through the generosity of her ailing cousin Ralph who is secretly in love with her, she inherits a large sum of money from her Uncle Daniel. While at Gardencourt, she is befriended by Madame Merle, a mysterious woman whose polished manners and many accomplishments inspire her admiration. When they meet again in Florence, Merle introduces her to Gilbert Osmond, a widower with an adolescent daughter and a passion for collecting art objects, whom she soon idolizes.

The narrative then leaps ahead several years to "an afternoon in the autumn of 1876." Isabel, now Mrs. Osmond, is living in Rome with her husband, from whom she has become emotionally estranged, and his daughter Pansy, who risks being forced into a loveless marriage to satisfy her father's ambitions. Isabel does not realize why her life has taken such a negative turn until she sees Merle and Osmond in intimate conversation and senses they have in some way determined her fate. She soon learns they were lovers and that Pansy is Merle's unacknowledged daughter and realizes that she herself was maneuvered into her marriage. Against her husband's wishes, she returns to Gardencourt because Ralph is fatally ill.

She and her cousin finally speak openly about her failed marriage and his adoration for her and just as he dies she sees "the ghost of Gardencourt" he had once told her appeared only to those acquainted with suffering. Although momentarily tempted to seek refuge in Goodwood, who makes a final offer of love and protection, Isabel decides to return to Rome, perhaps out of respect for her marriage vows, perhaps to help Pansy, perhaps because convinced that only through further pain can she reach salvation.

The major themes of the novel are related to Isabel's quest for self-definition as a woman and as an individual.

She insists she does not want to begin life by marrying, that there are other things a woman can do and that she does not need a man to teach her how to live, but she never seems to call into question that her fate depends largely on the man she chooses to marry. Accordingly, the first part of the novel focuses on her courtship and her selection of a husband as she attempts to choose "freely" in preparation for a future that will allow her further growth. In keeping with these aims, she declines to marry Warburton because she fears being enclosed in his social system and she rejects Goodwood because she is afraid his singleminded purposefulness would curtail her liberty. The idealism that makes her insensitive to the appeal of money and social status in these worthy suitors simultaneously leaves her vulnerable to manipulation by such fortunehunters as Merle and Osmond. Osmond enchants Isabel because he projects an image of himself that has been carefully constructed to satisfy the requirements of her imagination. He pretends to have no ambitions and no concern for the world, to be a devoted father for Pansy and to care deeply that Isabel enjoy the "triumph" of doing exactly as she pleases. Only after marriage does Isabel realize that Osmond lives exclusively for appearances and form, feels he has the right to suffocate her ideas and has practically annihilated his daughter's individuality.

The spiritual dimension of Isabel's quest involves her desire to live according to her romantic dream of freedom and her high ideals of ethical behavior. As the narrator remarks, "she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action . . . she was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress."

Her dream at first seems destined for fulfillment due to her youthful vitality and her intelligence. To this is added the unexpected inheritance which Ralph hopes will free her from the limitations of an impecunious girl on the marriage market and endow her with more independence than most women of that era. Nonetheless, she is defeated. In part, she is a victim of common greed and intrigue, her inexperience being skillfully exploited by her opponents. Yet she is also selfbetrayed by her tendency to read reality as she wishes it to be rather than facing it directly. Isabel is not alone in her failure to realize her potential. Just as her good qualities are wasted, so too are Ralph's idealistic generosity and Pansy's sweetness thwarted by the cold and callous behavior of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, who increasingly stand for the destructiveness of a reality indifferent to beauty and fineness of spirit.

Isabel's defeat can also be read as a critique of the very American concept of transcendental individuality. She embodies such typically American traits as optimism, self-reliance, a desire to forge a new future, and a belief in a boundless expansion of the self.

James constantly balances these ideas against the power of circumstances that bind the individual. The philosophical concepts thus placed in tension, freedom and necessity, are articulated most fully in her little debate with Madame Merle. Merle argues that one's identity depends largely on one's "whole envelope of circumstances," asserting that "One's self — for other people — is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one

keeps — these things are all expressive." To this, Isabel replies: "I think just the other way: I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary, a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one."

Isabel's innocent idealism is admirable but the more cynical and sophisticated Merle is wiser in the ways of the world. In fact, Isabel's external circumstances help determine her fate.

Merle wants her to marry Osmond for the financial security she may someday provide for Pansy while Osmond wants her for her money and because he views her as a beautiful object to add to his collection. When Isabel finally realizes the extent to which outside forces have shaped her as a social being and delimited the expansion of her inner self, she experiences a profound psychological crisis. However, as she reaches a new equilibrium, she remains convinced that it is still possible to act responsibly and in conformity with her personal conscience and her sense of justice. Her insight suggests that, for James, balanced maturity lies in the recognition that the self and the world constantly interact and that the search for fulfillment within an inevitably circumscribed field of action is never complete.

Along with these acute social and psychological themes, The Portrait of a Lady has a moral level that unfolds in an almost allegorical manner as the struggle between goodness and evil.

Isabel, radiating innocence and confident in her high ideals, enters Gardencourt, a place of Edenic beauty and brightness that seems to reflect the purity of her inner spirit. She hardly recognizes the existence of pain and evil and she even tells Ralph — her guardian angel — that "It's not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that." Inexperienced and immature, she leaves Gardencourt determined to fulfill her highest aspirations for a life of spiritual richness, intellectual discovery and human satisfaction. However, the forces of evil await her. At the instigation of Madame Merle, she meets Osmond, a satanic figure whose "egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers." Osmond is guilty of what James's predecessor Nathaniel Hawthorne termed "the unpardonable sin" of intentional manipulation of other people. This sin manifests itself in his greed, his lack of values and the cold inhumanity that allows him to use other people to satisfy his vanity and his ambitions. It also surfaces in his consummate powers of dissimulation which prevent Isabel from recognizing her danger. Thus, she unwittingly lets herself be imprisoned in a life-diminishing marriage where her vision of "the infinite vista of a multiplied life" together with Osmond concretizes in "a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end."

Themes

American versus European Character

The contrast between the American character and the European character is a theme that appears throughout James's work. This is not surprising, since it is a contrast he observed throughout his life as an American who spent most of his adulthood in Europe. According to James, Americans tend to be naive, energetic, practical, sincere, direct, and spontaneous, and they value the individual above society. Conversely, Europeans are sophisticated, lethargic, formal, insincere, obtuse, and scheming, and they value society above the individual.

This theme is especially interesting in *The Portrait of a Lady* because most of its characters are Americans who have been living in Europe for varying periods of time. In general, the longer an American-born character has been in Europe, the more European traits he or she has. Gilbert has lived nearly his whole life on the Continent and is completely European in character. James uses him to personify the worst manifestations of European traits. At the other end of the spectrum is Isabel, who is just arriving in Europe as the novel opens. The things that make her distinctively American, such as her energy and independent attitude, are fresh and interesting to the European characters. They are also, however, the things that lead to her downfall. By refusing to take the counsel of those who care about her, Isabel falls prey to the more sophisticated Europeans who manipulate her for their own purposes.

James does make a moral judgment about which culture produces better people; he clearly portrays the Americans as having more integrity. But he also shows that, taken as individuals, most Americans and Europeans alike have both good and bad qualities. While Isabel is almost wholly admirable and Gilbert is almost wholly despicable, the other characters are drawn in shades of gray. Henrietta is an example of an American whom James portrays less positively. Her American qualities are exaggerated so that her directness is actually rudeness. Her lack of regard for society and convention is so extreme that she offends as routinely as Isabel enchants. Lord Warburton, on the other hand, exemplifies European qualities in their most positive form. He is sophisticated and conventional, but he is also courteous, sensitive, and gracious even in defeat. Ralph is also a positive European character, a physically weak man who is nevertheless morally strong.

Social and Emotional Maturation

Isabel's social and emotional development is thrown into high relief by James's contrast of American and European natures. Yet Isabel's experiences and the wisdom she gains from them are certainly not unique to American women coming of age in European society. Isabel's naiveté is common among young women in all cultures, which is one reason why the novel remains popular. It is almost a rule that young women make poor

romantic choices. In fact, they often make exactly the mistake that Isabel makes: they choose a man who is charming and seductive, yet self-centered, over one who is less worldly but more substantial and caring. This oft-repeated error of youth has been the subject of many works of literature. Perhaps the best-known is Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, which contrasts the naive Marianne and her wiser sister, Elinor.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James uses one theme, the contrasts between Americans and Europeans, to intensify another, more universal theme of a woman's development from naive youth to mature wisdom as she suffers the consequences of a poor romantic choice.

Style

Psychological Realism

James is considered the foremost author of psychological realism, a subcategory of American realism.

The Realist period in American literature followed Romanticism, a movement that produced stories of idealized love and that elevated emotion above reason. The harsh realities of the Civil War suddenly made Romanticism irrelevant. The year of the war's end, 1865, marks the end of the Romantic period and the beginning of American realism.

Realism got its name from the fact that its stories depicted realistic characters in believable, lifelike situations. Heroes and heroines were not larger than life; they were often "just plain folks" that readers could identify with. And these characters faced problems similar to those that real people faced□neither melodramatic and overblown nor magically solved by some unexpected and incredible twist of the plot. These stories were told in straightforward, objective prose that sought to engage readers' minds more than their emotions.

James was one of the leading authors of American realism, along with Mark Twain (who is sometimes classified as a regionalist) and William Dean Howells. Some critics complained that there was nothing realistic about James's stories, in which everyone was wealthy and refined. The simple answer is that James never pretended to write about all elements of human society. He wrote about the wealthy because it was the wealthy and their problems that he was familiar with and interested in.

In addition to limiting his subject matter to the lives of the wealthy, James also built his stories on the psychology of his characters. The stories are about what goes on inside characters' minds, how they experience and think about the things that happen to them, and how these inner experiences change them as people. The events that happen in James's stories are included not primarily for their own importance but because they shed light on the minds and personalities of the characters. *The Portrait of a Lady* is the story of Isabel's mind and how it shapes her destiny and her character. For this and other masterful tales of human psychology, James is considered the father of psychological realism.

Point of View

Modern readers are unlikely to take special notice of point of view in *The Portrait of a Lady*, but James's contemporaries did. While the point of view that James uses is common today, it was an innovation in James's time. In fact, it was an innovation to which James was an important contributor.

In most novels published before this one, the author was a prominent narrator□almost a character. In addition to telling the story, the author-narrator often inserted asides directly addressing the reader, commenting on the characters' actions, and so on. This gives fiction an artificial quality; the reader never forgets that he or she is being told a story that has been invented and shaped by the author. To put it another way, the author is always "visible" as an intermediary between the characters and the reader.

This technique of storytelling was not suitable to realism, which strove to make the story seem lifelike rather than artificial. James wanted readers to observe his characters directly and to interpret characters' actions themselves, just as they would observe people around them in life. This meant that he had to get himself as author out of the picture. So, while *The Portrait of a Lady* does have a third-person narrator, that narrator is not James and does not intrude into the story. Instead of readers learning about Isabel through a narrator's comments and interpretations, readers learn about Isabel directly by observing Isabel's actions.

James was influenced by George Eliot, who was a pioneer in minimizing the author's role in the story, but he developed the new point of view into the form that is common today.

Historical Context

Although the period known as the Enlightenment took place a century before *The Portrait of a Lady* was written, the Enlightenment is the historical period that most influences the novel's characters and its story. Isabel, especially, is a product of Enlightenment ideas.

The Enlightenment was a philosophical, political, and literary movement that swept Europe and the United States throughout the 1700s. Its major feature was the elevation of reason and scientific observation above the mysticism and superstition of the Middle Ages. All traditions and conventions, from the religious to the political and social, were reevaluated. No idea or authority was to be accepted blindly or merely because it had been accepted in the past; only those ideas that could be supported by reason or proven scientifically were considered valid.

The idea of the superiority of the intellect led to the idea that human beings were essentially good and were capable of improving and even perfecting themselves. People did not need religious dogma or political authorities to tell them how to live; they had the ability, and therefore the right, to make their own decisions. It is easy to see how such thinking led directly to an emphasis on the political and social rights of individuals.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel and the other American characters are products of the Enlightenment whose lives show how completely these ideas were adopted in the United States and how strong their influence still was a century later. It was the big ideas of the Enlightenment that fueled the American Revolution and forever shaped what it meant to be an American. Hence, Isabel takes for granted that she should be able to make her own decisions in life and to do what she feels is best, regardless of social conventions or other people's opinions.

Enlightenment ideas actually first took shape in Europe, but they never fully took hold in England, which is home to most of the novel's European characters. The French Revolution followed the American war of independence and represented the victory of Enlightenment ideas in France. But the English monarchy, Parliament, and ruling class defended themselves against the rising tide of democracy and individualism around them. England never had a revolution. Old ideas about authority and tradition were never swept cleanly away. In the late 1800s, when *The Portrait of a Lady* was written and takes place, England was still very much a society based on wealth, class, tradition, and the supremacy of society over the individual; and it was still consolidating its rule over a vast empire of subject peoples. In stark contrast to America, England saw democracy as a radical ideology and a threat.

Characters such as Ralph and Lord Warburton find Isabel's independence and individualism captivating because Isabel is a captivating young woman who clearly is not a threat. These men, although they reflect European ideas in their own lives, find Isabel's ways refreshing□as long as they are expressed by a lovely young woman and

not by an angry mob. To the darker personalities of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, on the other hand, Isabel's new and different ideas make her an adversary. She is not one of them□she does not value the same things or follow the same conventions□and therefore their impulse is to set themselves against her in some way, just as their government and their society has long set itself against the ideas she represents.

Critical Overview

When *The Portrait of a Lady* was published, James was a well-known and respected author whose story *Daisy Miller* was enjoying great popularity. *The Portrait of a Lady* was widely reviewed, and most reviews, including those in the leading American publications, were positive.

Horace E. Scudder reviewed *The Portrait of a Lady* for *Atlantic*, in which the novel was serialized before its book publication. Scudder's review focuses almost exclusively on what he calls the story's "consistency," by which he means that the novel's "characters, the situations, the incidents, are all true to the law of their own being." Scudder's single complaint is that he does not like the novel's ending. Simply put, he objects to James's sending Isabel back to Gilbert. Isabel deserves better than this, Scudder insists, and when one reads of her return to the dastardly Gilbert, "one's indignation is moved."

An anonymous review for *Harper's*, the other leading American literary magazine of the day, calls *The Portrait of a Lady* a "long and fragmentary but profoundly interesting tale."

In the *Nation*, W. C. Brownell calls the novel "an important work, the most important Mr. James has thus far written" and "his masterpiece." Brownell, too, has one complaint, though he voices it hesitantly: he thinks the story lacks excitement. He writes:

The Portrait of a Lady . . . is not only outside of the category of the old romance of which *Tom Jones*, for example, may stand as the type, but also dispenses with the dramatic movement and passionate interest upon which the later novelists, from Thackeray to Thomas Hardy, have relied. In a sense, and to a certain extent, Turgeneff [Turgenev] may be said to be Mr. James's master, but even a sketch or a study by Turgeneff is turbulence itself beside the elaborate placidity of these 519 pages.

Brownell then calls his complaint "ungracious" and "hypercritical," and concludes that *The Portrait of a Lady* is the best piece of realistic fiction published to date.

A long, unhappy review in the British magazine *Blackwood's*, by Margaret Oliphant, is fascinating for its litany of political and cultural objections and its paucity of comment on the book's literary merit or lack thereof. Two brief excerpts from Oliphant's review sum up her attitude. Of James, she writes:

This gentleman's work in the world seems to be a peculiar one. It is to record and set fully before us the predominance of the great American race, and the manner in which it has overrun and conquered the Old World.

This is an interesting view of an American who chose to live his life in Europe. But Oliphant is certain in it, and describes Isabel Archer as

the young lady who suddenly appears in the doorway of an old English country-house, inhabited like most other desirable places by American tenants . . . fresh from her native

country, prepared to take instant possession of her birthright as explorer, discoverer, and conqueror of the old country,□and, in fact, reducing the gentlemen who meet her into instant subjection in the course of half an hour.

The Portrait of a Lady has grown in stature in the century and a quarter since its publication. It continues to be included among James's best novels, among the greatest novels written in English, and even among the greatest works in all of world literature. George Perkins writes in his *Reference Guide to American Literature* article on James, "In *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*, the theme of partial perspectives (which involves often the theme of too late awareness) merges with the international theme to provide the substance of James's most lasting achievement."

The chapter on *The Portrait of a Lady* in the Twayne's United States Authors Series volume *Henry James: The Early Novels* pays high tribute to the novel while acknowledging its impact on literature to come:

The Portrait of a Lady shows James in the fullness of his powers. The sheer beauty, grace, and assurance of the writing, almost startling in the opening description of Gardencourt, and sustained for five-hundred pages, reveal James at a new level of achievement as a prose stylist; and the richness of his character portraits and intensity of his engagement with his subject are of a kind that belong to history-making novels. *The Portrait of a Lady* is history-making literally. The opening account of Gardencourt, in which a densely solid actuality has begun to dissolve into psychological atmosphere, shows literary impressionism at a high stage of development. And Isabel's chapter-length meditative vigil, projected in a long, dramatic interior monologue, lays the foundations of the stream-of-consciousness novel of Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses James's descriptions of the various houses in The Portrait of a Lady *and how these descriptions function in the story.*

Every novel can be said to have an architecture in the sense of having a structure. But *The Portrait of a Lady* has an entire neighborhood of architectures. It has a minutely planned, carefully executed structure that reflects the sensibilities of its designer every bit as clearly as a great building reflects those of its architect. But, in addition, James uses houses throughout the novel to create his settings, to establish moods, to illuminate the characters who occupy them, and to foreshadow what kinds of things will happen to his main character during the time she spends in each house.

Since the novel opens in England, Isabel's childhood home in Albany, New York, is described only as a memory□a dull memory to show that Isabel's life and her prospects were dull compared to what Europe offers her. The house is described in minimalist terms as "the old house at Albany, a large, square, double house." The room in which Isabel met Mrs. Touchett on the latter's visit is pointedly described as "the most depressed" area of the house. The place is so shabby that, at least for Isabel, it cast a shadow even over the coming of spring. The narrator describes her sitting alone in the house on a (fittingly) rainy afternoon after her father's death and feeling that the promise of spring is only a "cosmic treachery."

In short, every piece of information that James gives about the house in Albany is designed to portray Isabel's life in the United States as little better than a prison that she was fortunate to escape.

The contrast between this and her aunt and uncle's English country house could not be greater□starting with the latter's name, Gardencourt. This beautiful old estate is where Isabel makes her first appearance in the novel, and to set the stage for his heroine's entry, James describes the estate at length. The first words about the place depict perfection: "the shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular." James continues that the house

stood upon a low hill, above the river□the river being the Thames some forty miles from London. A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers. . . . Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hilltop seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. The great still oaks and beeches flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains.

When Isabel makes her entrance into this scene a few pages later, James paints her as a pretty, gracious, enchanting young woman who belongs in just this kind of setting. The reader understands immediately that Gardencourt will be like a home to her; that this is

a place where her fine qualities will be appreciated and where she will be loved and protected.

The next house Isabel visits belongs to the wealthy and noble Lord Warburton. James describes his house in just the way that Isabel will come to think of its owner; it has qualities that make it seem both chivalric and staid: "as they saw it from the gardens, a stout grey pile, of the softest, deepest, most weather-fretted hue, rising from a broad, still moat, it affected the young visitor as a castle in a legend." Warburton himself is the novel's most noble character, not only in title but in character, as gallant and strong as an old castle. But a moat is a symbol of isolation, and isolation is the last thing Isabel wants. Though she likes Warburton, Isabel sees him as "a stout grey pile" who would bore her at best and imprison her at worst, even if he did so with only the purest and best motives□those of protecting and providing for her.

The next house that James describes in detail is the villa in Florence, Italy, that belongs to Gilbert Osmond. As with Gardencourt, James describes it thoroughly before Isabel visits, so that once again he is setting the scene into which the heroine will step and planting clues about what will befall her there. If Isabel could have read James's description of the villa, it might have dissuaded her in a way that all of her friends and relatives could not:

The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure, with the far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves and which, on the hills that encircle Florence . . . make so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise in groups of three or four beside it. The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hilltop; and this front . . . had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes. . . . The windows . . . seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-barred.

The house's occupant, of course, also wears a mask that prevents anyone from seeing what is really inside.

Four years later, Isabel has become Gilbert's wife, and the couple are living in a house in Rome. James describes it in much more explicit and forceful terms than he does Gilbert's house in Florence, signifying that Isabel's entrapment and ruin are complete. She lives with Gilbert in

a dark and massive structure . . . a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon to [an onlooker's] apprehensive mind . . . a kind of domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence . . . which had a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche.

Having fled a moat, Isabel has been imprisoned in a fortress.

Though Isabel's fate is sealed in this house, her story does not end there. When the dying Ralph calls her to come to Gardencourt to see him, she temporarily flees her

Roman prison and returns to the peaceful sanctuary on the Thames. It is her true home□the place where she is loved and safe. Ralph knows this and invites her to live there permanently. Her former suitors, Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, return to her there as well, each offering her a second chance at real love.

Isabel refuses them both, though, and returns to the grotesque husband in the grotesque house in Rome. But it is significant that readers do not actually see her there again. Isabel's last appearance is at green, friendly Gardencourt, which confirms what James has already conveyed about Isabel: that she will not allow the tragic mistake she has made to destroy her good nature. Though it may seem on the surface that Isabel has traded a dingy house in Albany for a fabulous dungeon in Rome, it is clear that she will find some way to transplant a measure of Gardencourt's brightness to her home and her life in Rome. It may be only a small measure, but it will be enough to sustain her, as a single candle flickering in a dark window can enliven an entire house on a foreboding night.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

A film version of *The Portrait of a Lady* was directed by Jane Campion and released in 1996. It stars Nicole Kidman as Isabel, John Malkovich as Gilbert, and Martin Donovan as Ralph. It is available on videocassette and DVD.

A made for television movie adaptation was directed by James Cellan Jones and broadcast in 1968. Starring Suzanne Neve as Isabel, James Maxwell as Gilbert, and Richard Chamberlain as Ralph, this movie is available on videocassette and DVD.

An abridged audiocassette recording of *The Portrait of a Lady*, with Gayle Hunnicutt as reader, was published by HighBridge in 1995. An unabridged version with Laural Merlington as reader was published by Brilliance Audio in 1998.

An unabridged version of *The Portrait of a Lady*, with Laural Merlington as reader, was published by Brilliance Audio in 1998.

Topics for Further Study

Do research to learn about Americans who lived in Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Why were they there? What were their lives like? How accurately did James portray these people and the times in which they lived?

Discuss your opinion of Isabel's decision to return to Gilbert. What do you think were her motivations for doing this? Do you think the decision was a wise one, or not? Why or why not?

Discuss James's ideas about Americans as depicted in the novel. According to James, what traits are distinctly American? To what extent do Americans today reflect these traits? What other traits would you consider to be characteristic of today's Americans?

Ralph thought that a large inheritance would enable Isabel to fulfill her potential and have a good life. Many people today feel the same way□that having money is the key to happiness and fulfillment. What role did Isabel's inheritance play in her life? Would she have been better off without the money? What lessons can readers draw from her experience?

Write an epilogue for the book, telling what the rest of Isabel's life is like. What happens to her independent spirit? How do her relationships with her husband and stepdaughter evolve? How much happiness does Isabel find?

Compare and Contrast

Late 1800s: England, France, and Italy are the cultural epicenters of the Western world. England produces the best literature and drama; Italy leads in art and architecture; and French style and society are considered the height of sophistication. The United States is viewed as a sort of cultural country cousin to Europe; its arts and culture are considered far inferior to those of the Continent.

Today: The United States is the cultural pacesetter for the world. American movies, television, music, fashions, and lifestyles are in demand and emulated, not only in Europe but around the globe.

Late 1800s: Most wealthy Americans made their money in industry during the Industrial Revolution of the early 1800s. Factory owners and railroad developers are among those who have amassed huge fortunes. Many of the wealth-producing ventures are family-owned and passed down from father to son. The gap between the rich and poor is growing, as the rich get richer and the poor struggle to maintain a decent lifestyle in an economy producing more and more expensive goods.

Today: Many of the new wealthiest Americans made their money in the high-tech boom of the late 1990s and in other businesses, such as finance, that benefited from it. Most wealth-producing companies are publicly owned, and scandal erupts in 2001 when many of these companies suddenly fail, costing stockholders billions, while top executives continue to receive multi-million-dollar salaries.

Late 1800s: Women do not have the right to vote in the United States or in England. In England, voting rights have long been limited to wealthy men, but they are gradually being extended to more men.

Today: In both the United States and Great Britain, all men and women have the right to vote.

What Do I Read Next?

James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) provides a counterpoint to *The Portrait of a Lady*. *The Ambassadors* is considered one of the finest works from the later period of his career and James himself considered it his masterpiece. Like the earlier work, *The Ambassadors* is a psychological novel that portrays Americans in Europe, but the later work clearly shows a shift in James's attitudes toward Americans.

James was well known as a travel writer. In 1993, the Library of America published a two-volume collection of his travel essays: *Henry James: Collected Travel Writings; Great Britain and America* and *Henry James: Collected Travel Writings; The Continent*.

American author Edith Wharton was a friend of Henry James, and the work of the two is often compared. Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) is often recommended as a paired reading with *The Portrait of a Lady* because the novels deal with similar subject matter and are written in a similar style, yet Wharton's is written from a distinctly female point of view.

Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* can be compared with Bathsheba Everdene, the heroine of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, written by Thomas Hardy and first published in 1874. Ranked as a Victorian classic, Hardy's story of a woman farmer and her three suitors is similar in subject matter to *The Portrait of a Lady* but is written in an earlier and very different style.

George Eliot, an early master of psychological realism, was one of James's primary literary influences. Dorothea Brooke, protagonist of Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch* (1871), is another character who has often been compared to Isabel Archer. Like Isabel, Dorothea marries men her family and friends do not approve of.

Key Questions

Throughout the novel the various characters and the narrator attempt to trace Isabel's portrait but no one succeeds completely. A fruitfu l topic for discussion would be what motivates the desire to "fix" her in a static depiction and why it is so difficult to do so.

Isabel herself makes a strong effort to escape final definition by others since her youth, optimism and imagination make her desire constant change and growth. Inevitably, however, her dream of freedom and her extreme individualism come up against the inherent limitations of life in the human community. Groups may wish to examine the many aspects of James's development of the theme of freedom vs necessity. In addition, it would be interesting to consider to what extent the vision of self, society and others that emerges in this novel is relevant in the contemporary world. Also inviting serious discussion is the theme of belated knowledge and self-awareness, especially on the part of characters like Isabel and Ralph who pride themselves on their supposed ability to face life directly. Examination of their errors could lead to speculation about the tragic quality of James's view of human nature and about the difficult choices we all have to make in determining what opportunities are true occasions for growth and which conceal hidden dangers. James refused to give his novel a happy ending or even to imply that Isabel's decision to return to Rome would ultimately bring her serenity and happiness. Discussion of the ending could center on the historical and psychological circumstances influencing Isabel's decision, whether it has dramatic verisimilitude and how convincing it seems today.

1. What do the concepts "freedom," "choice" and "destiny" mean for Isabel? Does anyone else in the story share these ideas?

2. To what extent is Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood due to her fear they will limit her freedom to explore the world and to what extent is it related to her fear of sexuality? What images suggest these various fears?

3. Why does Ralph want Isabel to inherit a large sum of money? Is his altruism mixed with any selfish motives? When does he realize the seriousness of his mistake?

4. When does the reader begin to suspect that Madame Merle is not the woman Isabel believes her to be? Why doesn't Isabel suspect her of duplicity? Why did Merle give up her daughter?

5. What is Mrs. Touchett's role in the novel?

6. What elements of Osmond's characterization make him the most diabolic figure in the novel? What symbols reinforce his association with the devil?

7. Why does Isabel choose Osmond as her husband? What does this choice reveal about her?

8. Why is Isabel reluctant to tell Ralph she is unhappy in her marriage? What does her evident unhappiness mean for Ralph?

9. How are Gardencourt and Palazzo Roccanera set in contrast? What aspects of Isabel's quest do they respectively represent?

10. James believed that Isabel's meditation in Chapter Forty Two advanced his plot as efficiently as a series of external events. What "happens" in this chapter? How has Isabel changed as a result of her meditation? How do these changes affec t her later actions?

11. How does James use Pansy and her infatuation with Ned Rosier to illuminate Osmond's character?

12. How does Pansy's situation contribute to Isabel's deepening awareness of her own predicament?

13. Why does Osmond forbid Isabel to go to Gardencourt when Ralph is dying? Why is Isabel reluctant to disobey him?

14. What does Isabel learn about herself at Gardencourt? What does she learn about her relationship to others?

15. What motivates Isabel's decision to return to Rome?

Literary Precedents

The social observation and the memorable characterizations of The Portrait of a Lady align it with the Victorian novel of manners, while its balanced structure and artfully-wrought prose style relate it to the work of the best French Realists. Its experimentation with point of view, which culminates in Isabel's magnificent meditative vigil in Chapter Forty-Two, instead looks forward to the modernist technique of interior monologue subsequently developed by writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Another harbinger of Modernism is the "open ending" which perplexed certain contemporary readers but was firmly defended by James who believed "The whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together."

As a character, Isabel Archer takes her place alongside such unforgettable heroines of the nineteenth-century novel as Jane Austen's Emma (1816), Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857), Tolstoy's Anna Karenina (1877), and George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke of Middlemarch (1872), whose stories similarly turn on the question of a woman's destiny.

Philosophically, her experiences can be related to the very American tradition of self-reliance as defined in the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and as exemplified by Henry David Thoreau in Walden (1854), Walt Whitman in Song of Myself (1855), and Mark Twain in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884).

Finally, Isabel's decision to renounce part of her happiness out of a sense of responsibility toward others and her strong, proud nature link her to Hester Prynne, the great protagonist of The Scarlet Letter (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Further Study

Anesko, Michael, ed., *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

This selection of correspondence between James and Howells, two of the luminaries of American realism, provides insight into how both authors worked.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
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Data Capture
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535