

Title	Isabel's Self-education in The Portrait of a Lady
Author(s)	Yoshii, Chiyo
Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 23 P.115-P.124
Issue Date	1984-12-20
Text Version	publisher
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25635
DOI	10.18910/25635
rights	
Note	

Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/repo/ouka/all/>

Isabel's Self-education in *The Portrait of a Lady*

Chiyo Yoshii

It has often been suggested that one of the main themes of Henry James's novels is "the dialectic of innocence and experience"¹⁾ and that James's protagonists, who are innocent Americans at their starting-point, can improve themselves through European experiences. In R. W. B. Lewis's view, they are fallen into a trap, only to attain full maturity within the solid system of European society,²⁾ and Elizabeth Stevenson also explains that their native virtues cannot be confirmed without being tested by European evil.³⁾ These critics regard Europe as an appropriate place for the fruitful self-education of James's American protagonists. However, we are hardly convinced that they find some effectual way of self-education there, for, as James comments about the closing pages of *The Portrait of a Lady*, this dialectical development is "left *en l'air*"⁴⁾ and is not given any satisfactory conclusion. James seems to repose little confidence in Europe and to suspect that Europe falls short of the expectations of his protagonists.

The purpose of this essay is to trace the self-education of Isabel Archer, protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, exploring the relations of the individual to late nineteenth-century European society. We shall start from an analysis of several characteristics of European society which Henry James builds up around Isabel as the place of her self-education.

This novel begins with the traditional scene of tea time at an old English manor. Yet this seemingly solid social framework becomes uncertain in relationship to the persons concerned in it. The present owner of the manor house named Gardencourt is an American banker, Mr. Touchett, and an English nobleman who should possess such a house is here a visitor to this American host. Moreover, Mr. Touchett and other young men discuss the change of European society in this peculiarly English landscape. Mr. Touchett realizes "the increasing seriousness of

things" (p. 22)⁵) and advises young people not to be idle but to do something that will be the firm basis of their lives, whether it is a marriage or a job. Mr. Touchett's son Ralph takes this serious situation as "the great opportunity of jokes" (p. 22), and thier visitor Lord Warburton assumes a sceptical attitude towards the age, as well. Yet Lord Warburton feels the change of the age more gravely than Ralph, as is shown in Ralph's following words: "He's the victim of a critical age; he has ceased to believe in himself and he doesn't know what to believe in" (p. 70). Warburton cannot believe in his own ground of existence, though he belongs to English aristocracy, one of the most traditional classes. He is fluctuating between fashionable thoughts and conventional notions. Liberal democrat as he is, he fears the breakdown of social order. In circumstances where "there will be great changes, and all sorts of queer things will happen" (p. 22) in no distant future, he does not know how to deal with himself and cannot find any new values to replace the old ones and sustain himself.

Thus the opening scene tells us that the traditional world is being transformed. Traditional society is being stripped of its contents, and its system is only superficially useful to those who live there.

Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle are more attached than anyone else in the novel to this society. Osmond calls himself "convention itself" (p. 265) and Ralph calls Madame Merle "the great world itself" (p. 216). These words indicate that they depend exclusively on society. However, they cling merely to the surface, the appearance of society, ignoring their inner lives. The following speech of Madame Merle shows this attitude explicitly:

"There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances.... I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! 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." (p. 175)

Madame Merle puts her idea into practice. Instead of setting herself in her own house, she leads her life by moving from one friend's house to another's. She does not stand on her own feet but is parasitic on other

lives. As Madame Merle expresses herself through her relations to her company, so Osmond expresses himself by the appearance of his house. Osmond is so absorbed in caring about his house that it comes to represent the character of its master. Its imposing, incommunicative front is a suitable symbol for Osmond's face.

Such an idea of self is valid in a sense. Certainly a self remains elusive as long as it does not attain concrete expressions. If the traditional world remained in a state of stability, it would be open for each self to realize its potential capacities. However, this idea of self is very dangerous in a decadent world. Those persons who adhere to the surface of this society have emptier inner lives than others. To make matters worse, they positively devastate their souls by expressing even their inner selves on a superficial level.

This attitude corresponds with the ideal of *l'art pour l'art* in the sense that a high esteem for inner human life is replaced by a great concern about things. *L'art pour l'art* as a principle of art is of no harm in itself, yet it proves fatal to those who harbor hollowness within themselves. If they commit themselves to *l'art pour l'art*, they may lose their moral sense and neglect not only their own but also other persons' inner lives. Osmond and Madame Merle have in fact an aesthetic passion for things even to the extent of treating personalities as things. They use people as tools to carry out their purposes of maintaining appearances at any cost.

Therefore, they view marriage as a prize. They give special weight to two things in the case of marriage: first, a great deal of money and second, an excellent partner. They place a person in the same category as money. Osmond's ideal wife is not so much a living person who has flesh and blood as an *objet d'art* which exists in the cold, material world. He thinks of Isabel as "a young lady who [has] qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects" (p. 258) and is delighted to be given "a present of incalculable value" (p. 295) by Madame Merle.

On occasion Osmond handles Madame Merle herself as a mere thing. He shows his contempt for her, as if putting away a worn-out article. As Alwyn Berland clearly points out, there is a preparation for this scene.⁶⁾ Before Osmond treats Madame Merle this way, she confesses to Isabel that

she is a cracked pot: "If I must tell you the truth I've been shockingly chipped and cracked" (p. 168). Although she perceives how terribly her inside is wasted, she has averted her eyes from that. Now that Osmond abandons her as useless cup, she learns the result of manipulating people as puppets. She is robbed of human gestures and cannot shed a tear even when she wants to weep. Madame Merle cries in a pathetic voice in response to Osmond who asks what the matter with her is:

"The matter — the matter —!" And here Madame Merle stopped. Then she went on with a sudden outbreak of passion, a burst of summer thunder in a clear sky: "The matter is that I would give my right hand to be able to weep, and that I can't!" (p. 434)

She has lost the human touch in her acquaintance with Osmond who, as she protests, has dried up not only her tears but her soul. Here she sees that she has devoted herself to the material side of the world to make herself an utterly hollow existence.

Such is the context into which Henry James puts his American heroine Isabel Archer; yet it is far from an ideal place for her self-education. The external world can no longer support the inner world of a person, and the more deeply he is involved in its social system, the hollower his soul becomes. European civilization does not secure but undermines the sense of soul, spirit, and humanity.

Isabel comes to this European world with great expectations. She is a young American girl; such attributes as "young" and "American" indicate that she has little contact with society and that she is practically in a state of innocence, of "an excellent preparation for culture."⁷⁾ She stands at the starting-point; before her eyes there is an infinite vista of life. She has boundless possibilities for self-education so that she cherishes herself above all. Isabel decisively states her view in her conversation about self-hood with Madame Merle. Isabel's idea of self is opposed to Madame Merle's that human beings are not isolated but belong to social system in which they can express their selves:

"I don't agree with you. 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. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!" (p. 175)

Isabel puts emphasis on the originality of self. She eagerly takes care of herself and intensely dislikes even slight limitations on herself. Madame Merle finds a ground of her existence in society, while Isabel holds that society lays down restrictions on herself. She wants to be nothing but herself and to be free from everything else. For Isabel this is the meaning of independence.

Isabel is courted by two suitors, the well-bred aristocrat Lord Warburton, and a brash American businessman, Casper Goodwood, soon after her arrival at Gardencourt. Whether Lord Warburton or Goodwood, it is all the same to her in the sense that their powers pressure her freedom. She types the former as a social power and the latter as a physical power, and she cannot bear to limit her freedom by marriage with either of them. She considers the matter of marriage in the abstract without caring a bit about actual life which she will lead with her partner after marriage.

Isabel loves herself so dearly that she comes to separate herself from the actual world. She only generates the world and her bright future. Her idea of life being a mere theory, there is no lively communication between her and the world around her.

This attitude is problematical. Before Isabel arrives, Mrs. Touchett sends Ralph a telegram about Isabel, and Ralph variously interprets the words "quite independent" in it: "But who's 'quite independent,' and in what sense is the term used? — that point's not yet settled" (p. 24). These words ironically cast doubt on Isabel's independence. Later on, Ralph talks with Isabel about her attitude towards life and concludes: "You want to see but not to feel" (p. 134).

It is Henrietta Stackpole that severely reproaches Isabel because of this attitude. Henrietta points out that Isabel luxuriates in her dreams of self-education without regard to the actual:

"The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You're not enough in contact with reality — with the toiling,

striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you.... Whatever life you lead you must put your soul in it – to make any sort of success of it; and from the moment you do that ... it becomes grim reality!” (p. 188)

Isabel blindly insists on maintaining her independent standpoint. She sees experiences and aspects of life from outside, and does not go through them for herself. Insofar as she takes this attitude, she will never know the realities of life, nor will she cultivate her mind through experiences.

However, the circumstances change. After Mr. Touchett's death, Isabel inherits a large amount of money from him, which legacy inclines her to marry her third suitor, Osmond. Of her suitors, Osmond is the least oppressive to her in both social and physical terms. Since her large fortune affords her the economic freedom to behave as she pleases, she makes a trip around the world. Her freedom reaches its culmination in this period. Walking the London streets, she feels that she is wonderfully free: “The world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose” (p. 273). In spite of this newly won freedom, she takes scarcely any action and still remains an idle spectator of the world. Ultimately she tires of looking about and realizes that she can never acquire self-fulfilment by such general observations. Accordingly, she seeks another way of self-education:

The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point. (p. 297)

This sentence suggests a great change of her attitude towards life. Isabel has been careful not to limit her favorable prospects to any kind of life, yet now she tries of her own will to choose a place to settle down. She ceases to keep her distance from the outer world and determines to participate in human activities in everyday social life.

This manner of living well suits those who live in a stable society. Society assures their living as they engage themselves in business or marry particular individuals. According to Stuart Hutchison, in this world, marriage is “often the climax of the characters' discovery of their true selves. It signifies too a public confirmation of the identities discovered.”⁸⁾

On the contrary, in the European world seen in this novel, one finds no steady foundation on which to establish one's life; so marriage, an entrance into social life, is not expected to propose a new identity. Isabel's married life is not so bright as she believes. Osmond describes their new life to her:

"I can't tell you how life seems to stretch there before us — what a long summer afternoon awaits us. It's the latter half of an Italian day — with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening." (p. 297)

Osmond does not make use of such usual images of new life as a refreshing morning or a clear, serene sky. This is an apt expression for the extremely sophisticated, civilized, and yet declining European society, which Isabel will enter after marriage.

Isabel tries to reach a higher stage of life by discharging her functions as Osmond's wife. She behaves impeccably as Osmond's wife when she tries to persuade her stepdaughter Pansy to marry Lord Warburton. Though she knows of Pansy's love affair with Rosier, she complies with Osmond's request that she should arrange a marriage between Pansy and Lord Warburton. Nevertheless, she is conscious that her loyalty to Osmond grieves Pansy, suffering from the conflict between Osmond's demands and her own conscience, between her functions as Mrs. Osmond and her own inner feelings.

Thus, the mask of Mrs. Osmond sits ill on Isabel, and she fails to enrich her mind in performing such functions. The emptiness of Osmond's mind frustrates her new plan of self-education. Hélène Cixous cleverly observes that the word "Osmond" can be associated with the French words "*ossements*" (skeletons) and "*os-monde*" (bone-world).⁹ These associations which the word "Osmond" evokes make us sense how dreadfully dead and sterile his inner world is. Furthermore, this vast blankness in his mind comes to threaten Isabel's sense of self. Osmond attempts to take away her own thoughts from her:

He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them.... He would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance. (p. 359)

Yet she cannot sacrifice herself for her husband, no matter how hard she tries to be a good wife for Osmond. For this reason, he oppresses her with increasing hatred. She feels herself surrounded by the shadows that he creates, and notices that "Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, [has] put the lights out one by one" (p. 356) in order to shut her up in "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (p. 360). At last he goes so far as to ignore her presence itself:

He had a way of looking at her through half-closed eyelids, as if he were thinking of her but scarcely saw her, which seemed to her to have a wonderfully cruel intention. It appeared to recognise her as a disagreeable necessity of thought, but to ignore her for the time as a presence. (p. 395)

Osmond desires to erase Isabel's whole existence that contains both inside and outside. When he gazes at her with merciless eyes, she feels "mortally cold" (p. 401). She is driven into a bitterly cold place where she cannot find a bit of warmth or human touch but meets hopelessly the unfathomable malice of her husband with an unfeeling heart.

At this juncture, Isabel receives a telegram from Mrs. Touchett informing her of Ralph's critical condition. Isabel confronts Osmond directly over her visit to Ralph and finds herself in the position of choosing between her functions as Osmond's wife and her own will. Osmond tries to persuade her out of her resolution to call on the dying Ralph by saying that she should fulfil her duty as his wife, and he emphasizes the significance of marriage. Disgusted as he is by the presence of his wife, he wants to preserve his marriage for decency's sake. Yet Isabel cannot extinguish her feelings only to please her husband and resists his pressure by breaking out, "We don't live decently together" (p. 447). Isabel resolves herself over Osmond's demands and starts for England.

Again Isabel begins to follow her former path of life. Casting away her functions as Mrs. Osmond, she strives to open up a way for herself. Again Isabel is a free, independent person. However, she is in a very forlorn state on her way to England. Though she traverses many lands "in the richest freshness of spring" (p. 464-465), her mind flies to other lands:

Her thoughts followed their course through other countries — strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of seasons, but only... a perpetual dreadness of winter. (p. 465)

She has already lost her dreams of self-education. In her mind there is neither hope nor plan for the future. Isabel is at a loss what to do, and yet she must pursue her own course amid the uncertainties of a world where she cannot rely on anything. She discovers “a very straight path” (p. 490) leading to Rome, and she returns to Osmond who waits for her, but this action of Isabel offers us no suggestion regarding her life after that. We are not sure how she makes her way in Rome and how she deals with her marriage with Osmond. Her future is lost sight of and remains indeterminate. In his notebook, Henry James admits that he himself cannot grasp his heroine’s situation in its totality.¹⁰⁾ James has lost a sense of the wholeness of the world surrounding Isabel. By offering no clear-cut conclusion to Isabel’s situation, he stresses the ambiguity and untrustworthiness of European society whose machinery, such as marriage, compels her to shed her illusions and ideals of self-education.

Evidently Isabel fails to advance steadily towards self-perfection in the effete European world. Instead of elevating her soul, this world more and more diminishes her inner life. She is entangled in its social system solely to awaken to the facts that she cannot accommodate herself to it and that she is alienated from it. As Lionel Trilling mentions,¹¹⁾ this estrangement from society is one of the most outstanding motifs of modern literature, so Isabel’s destiny is common to those of other protagonists of modern literature. We can see the loss of the ideal of self-education in James’s earlier novels also, yet there he handles this problem rather jocosely in the form of novels of manners. It is during his writing *The Portrait of a Lady* that James intensifies his consciousness of the decay of European civilization which is destined to end with the First World War.

NOTES

- 1) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 153.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 153.

- 3) Elizabeth Stevenson, *The Crooked Corridor: A Study of Henry James* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 64.
- 4) James writes: "The obvious criticism of course will be that it [the novel] is not finished – that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation – that I have left her *en l'air*. – This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together." F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (eds.), *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 18.
- 5) All the following quotations of *The Portrait of a Lady* are from Robert D. Bamberg (ed.), *Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Norton, 1975). This edition reprints the New York Edition.
- 6) Alwyn Berland, *Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 111.
- 7) Leon Edel (ed.), *Henry James: Letters*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 77.
- 8) Stuart Hutchinson, *Henry James: An American as Modernist* (London and New Jersey: Vision and Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), p. 33.
- 9) Hélène Cixous, "Henry James: L'écriture comme placement ou De l'ambiguïté de l'intérêt," trans. Wakabayashi Makoto, in *James*, ed. Saitō Hikaru (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1981), p. 495.
- 10) Matthiessen and Murdock (eds.), *Notebooks*, p. 18.
- 11) Trilling identifies a certain theme which appears frequently in modern literature by calling it "the disenchantment of our culture with culture." Lionel Trilling, "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature," in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 60.