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“The Portrait of a Lady”: Henry James’s ‘Frail Vessel’ That Matters

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Abstract: *The Portrait of a Lady* is a masterly portrait of its female protagonist, Isabel Archer. The pathos and spiritual richness make it a very moving account and illumination of the situation and character of Henry James’s vivid individual, described by one of his characters as a rare apparition. Isabel, the young independent American girl is intelligent, generous hearted, innocent and yet dogmatic in her beliefs. She is duped by the sophisticated façade of European aestheticism in the persona of the manipulative villainous duo of Gilbert Osmond and his mistress Madame Merle. Isabel’s idealistic illusions of the world as a place of free expansion and as a place of brightness are cruelly shattered when she realizes their duplicity and becomes a prisoner in Osmond’s house of darkness and humiliation. Denied her mental space and freedom, Isabel yet rejects the free life offered by her American suitor, Caspar Goodwood. She goes back to the poisonous atmosphere of Osmond’s world to save his teenage daughter Pansy from a disastrous marriage of convenience, brokered by him, to a much older but titled man. Henry James examines important social issues of human exploitation in the face of vulgar materialism, the role of the individual and the aspiration for freedom and self-fulfilment. *The Portrait of a Lady* is an ‘architectural’ marvel of the consummate artist, the poet-novelist, Henry James, who carefully piled brick on brick to give us a literary masterpiece suffused with ethical and aesthetic power.

Keywords - portrait, literary monument, consciousness, moral, architectural competence, international theme.

I. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic and sharply focused portrait of Isabel Archer, an extraordinary young woman, the passion for the special case, is the motivating energy of the story teller’s art, as enunciated by Henry James in the Preface to the novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*. The presentation of this “rare creature” who has an “air of being someone in particular” is the major wonder of the novel (Portrait, 42). Henry James was, for a long time, in “complete possession” of the central image “of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman”, and was moved by a “pious desire” to “place my treasure right” (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, vi; x). He makes his heroine focal rather than contributory and as he writes in the Preface to the novel, he set about “positively organizing an ado” about the exquisite Isabel Archer (Preface, xi). Henry James is “the historian of fine consciences”(Conrad, 589). As Walter Allen has analysed, the technical innovations of Henry James were aimed at isolating and exhibiting the workings of this fine conscience: “the trick of investing some conceived or encountered individual, with the germinal property and authority” and so arrange an array of characters as “satellites” to highlight the prodigy that his heroine was (Preface,viii; xiii). The novelist writes about the architectural design of how “this single small cornerstone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destinycame to be a square and spacious house”(Preface, x-xi). Henry James is perhaps the first novelist to study seriously the problem of consciousness and its novelistic expression. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, he has placed “the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness” (Preface, xiii) and the novel treats Isabel as “a goddess in an epic”, the keystone of Henry James’s sprawling cathedral - like structure (Portrait, 35).

II. DISCUSSION

The novel is about freedom and Isabel declares: “I’m very fond of my liberty” and “she had a system and an orbit of her own”(Portrait, 21;102). Lily’s description of her sister, Isabel, as a “person of genius-- in want of encouragement and patronage” coincides with the views of their rich aunt Mrs.Touchett who takes her under her wing because “she was meant for something better” (Portrait, 43). Isabel asserts that “I don’t wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs” (Portrait, 161). She has immense curiosity about life and with a nobleness of imagination explores the sea of life which she sees as an area of free expansion and goodness. Her cousin Ralph Touchett puts the wind in the sails by persuading his father to bequeath Isabel with seventy thousand pounds endowment and he enjoins her to “spread your wings; rise above the ground” and achieve her aspirations (Portrait, 222). The novel is the revelation of the inadequacy of Isabel’s view of freedom. Isabel is intelligent but presumptuous having an “unquenchable desire to think well of herself” and “she treated herself to occasions of homage” (Portrait, 50). The objective narrator further tells us that the tragedy arises from her giving an “undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging” (Portrait, 33). Her “inflated ideals” and “meagre knowledge” of the world together with an

excessively naïve self-confidence leads to her downfall in society whose ruthlessness she had no more comprehension than Desdemona had of the motivation of Iago (Portrait, 52;51).

The desire to live, to achieve a fullness of consciousness which permits the richest yet most exquisite response to the vibrations of life is central to Henry James' novels. *The Portrait of a Lady* identifies life with impulsive reckless curiosity which leads to a "spiritual shudder" of bitter knowledge, but finally to an assertion of moral integrity and responsible awareness – identifies, as it were, the two trees, the tree of the Fall and the tree of the Resurrection (Portrait,581). The novel is informed with the tragic view of life contained in the Biblical words, 'he who loses his life shall find it'. Isabel's keen search for fuller consciousness leads her to choose an illusion of perfect freedom, but ironically to choose an evil. In marrying Gilbert Osmond she proceeds to commit a "morbid perversity" according to her aunt (Portrait,274). Isabel defends her choice as she finds "his superior enlightenment" as a beautiful vista opening up, being herself "a young woman of extraordinary profundity" (Portrait, 263; 49).

Isabel had a romantic attitude to life. Her cold, amoral aloofness is summed up by Ralph as "you want to see, but not to feel" (Portrait, 150). Isabel's view of life as a journey in a fast moving carriage in the dark without any particular destination, her desire not to touch the cup of experience as it is a poisoned drink is highly unrealistic. She wants to become mature and experienced without getting involved and Madame Merle rightly warns her that "there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman" (Portrait, 201). Yet Isabel does not believe that the ordinary vulgar circumstances of one's life have anything to do with one's self. She responds with great enthusiasm to Osmond's talk about how "one ought to make one's life a work of art", without being aware of the inhumanity and the withering aestheticism such an idea may imply (Portrait,307-8). The novel explores the limits of romance. Henrietta rightly admonishes Isabel: "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.... You're too fastidious; you've too many graceful illusions" (Portrait, 216-17). Isabel does not shrink from the idea of suffering which is inevitable for all human beings, but she had thought it as a rewarding involvement with life and ultimately all would be right for her. But she finds suffering and knowledge of the grimdest sort and all it leaves her with, is a sense of duty and abnegation. Isabel's romantic imagination responds to Osmond intensely because she conceives his image at a high level of abstraction and symbolic of ideal values. She applauds Osmond as the "incarnation of taste" (Portrait, 345) and her tragedy arises because she hankers after the purely aesthetic and does not take into consideration the moral question of the "amount of felt life" (Preface, viii). She sees the moral vision as divorced from the aesthetic vision of life. The informing and strengthening of the eye of the mind is the theme of the novel. The aesthetic perception leads to spiritual perception and the two are inseparable. Isabel's unhappy journey makes her realize that the sterile aestheticism of Osmond is "a blight" and makes "everything wither" (Portrait, 424). Instead of a world of free expansion and freedom, she finds herself in a "house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air" (Portrait, 429). Isabel is horribly disillusioned and there is tragic recognition in her profoundly realistic perception of truth about oneself and one's situation. She sees into the real nature of Osmond as a serpent in a garden enticingly beautiful, a serpent whose "blasphemous sophistry" does not permit that she should be "having a mind of her own at all" (Portrait,537; 432). Osmond is an outright villain wearing the mask of a charming, intelligent, modest and sensitive connoisseur of Art, but proves to be idle, cruel, hegemonic and arrogant man. He married Isabel for her money but wooed her in the name of Art.

In spite of the cold horror of Osmond's world and Isabel's realization that she had thrown away her life yet she goes back to him and this is a kind of a triumph and not the degradation of a splendid spirit. The knowledge she has acquired is tragic knowledge but it has been the means to 'life' and having learned to live she must live long as she says: "life would be her business for a long time to come" (Portrait, 561). It is only the process of the learning that the portrait frame itself holds. The decision to go back to Rome is a measure of the integrity of her character as she had given her word to Pansy, Osmond's sixteen-year old daughter. Isabel goes back to save Pansy from being wasted by Osmond's perversity in getting her married to Lord Warburton who is forty- two years old. Marrying his daughter into this noble family would provide Osmond with aesthetic relish as he "regarded his daughter as a precious work of art", an object, rather than a human being in love with her loving and devoted young suitor, Edward Rosier. Isabel was sure that her husband was cold-blooded enough and "was capable of going—to the point of playing theoretic tricks on the delicate organism of his daughter" by forcing Pansy to marry a man much older than herself (Portrait, 532). It is in this act that Isabel finds meaning in life as she had always possessed "an infinite hope that she would never do anything wrong" (Portrait, 51). Isabel goes back to the "poisoned air" of Osmond's world regardless of comfort or personal happiness because no other decision would fit her conception of herself, her honour and self-respect (Portrait,589). Duty has meaning for Isabel whereas sheer liberty typified by Caspar Goodwood has no appeal. Hers is painful knowledge: "I've been punished" for her unconventional aspirations. This is her lesson derived from experience and she learns that freedom is not an abstract quality inherent in the individual soul. Yet the extraordinary person that she is, she questions: "what have we to do with pain? That's not the deepest thing; there's something deeper" (Portrait, 577).

III. CONCLUSION

Isabel is both the life and the light of this novel. Hers is a masterly portrait full of psychological interest. Isabel is an autobiographical figure resembling Henry James's beloved cousin, Minny Temple, who had the same aspirations but for the want of money could not achieve them and moreover was sickly and died young. The narrator of Henry James's novel gently hints and foreshadows the tragic fate of Isabel: "sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded" (Portrait, 51). Madame Merle, Osmond's perverted partner in crime, rightly analyses Isabel's character that sorrow "may pull you about horribly, but I defy it to break you up" (Portrait, 188). It is often felt that the ending of the novel is left vague and Henry James acknowledged the fact that he did not see his heroine to the end of her situation. An air of finality is lacking and it is here that Henry James anticipates the stream-of-consciousness novelists when he writes that "experience is never limited and it is never complete" (Shapira,56). Yet he "framed...the picture of a gracious lady" (Portrait, 367).From the aspiration to make her life a piece of art, a composer of her own destiny, Isabel's free keen spirit is crushed by the "sterile dilettante" Gilbert Osmond, but she becomes consummate at "the art of life" (Portrait , 345; 401). Osmond humiliates her but she stoically accepts that she has thrown away her life due to her own misrecognition that she was nothing but a convenient tool in the hands of the materialistic and demoniac pair of Osmond and his mistress, Madame Merle.

Yet to reject the love and devotion of her persevering admirer, Caspar Goodwood and instead go back to the horror of Osmond is a testimony of “her remarkable soul” (Portrait, 54). She is indeed a “rare creature” and “was stoutly determined not to be hollow” (Portrait, 42; 53). She confronts her fate head on, determined to fulfil “the tremulous longing, the definite ideal of the child”, Pansy, for a loving life partner in Rosier. Putting aside “her own dry despair”, Isabel feels a responsibility towards the child of the depraved twosome—Osmond and Madame Merle (Portrait, 529). Such humanistic concern and high ideals make James’s heroine be seen and judged in “largely the scale of her relation to herself”. The novelist succeeds in his vision of creating an unforgettable character: “the girl hovers, inextinguishable, as a charming creature” and the novelist achieves “the perfect dependence of the ‘moral’ sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it” (Preface, xiii; viii). Further, as Henry James elaborates in his Preface to the novel: “the house of fiction” has a million windows projecting “the individual vision” of the human scene or ‘choice of subject’ supported by the ‘literary form’. The house of fiction affords the writer “boundless freedom and his ‘moral’ reference” while answering the question “is it valid...genuine...sincere”, leaving “some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience” (Preface, ix; viii). Henry James appreciative of George Eliot’s depiction of women characters in her fiction upholds her views that: ‘in these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection’ (Preface, xi). Isabel held her journalist friend, Henrietta Stackpole, a role model of the independent woman and was firm in her belief that “a woman might suffice to herself and be happy” and certainly could do without the “exceptional flimsiness” of a coarse – minded husband (Portrait, 53). Being stoutly determined not to be hollow, Isabel goes back to the rescue of the vulnerable girl, Pansy, in a solidarity of women. Henry James is the real progenitor of the free- spirited American girl and was concerned about “the situation of women...the agitation on their behalf” in America (Allen, 268). His heroines “are the product of an attitude towards women different from the English Victorians” (Allen, 266). On a wider scale, Henry James’s ‘international subject’ as he called it, has the American character who is innocent, candid, naïve, sensitive with Puritanic zeal, pitted against the sophistication, worldly experience and exploitative impulse of the European. Henry James examines some significant social issues such as vulgar materialism and human exploitation versus civilizational graces, the freedom of the individual, his role in society and modes of self-fulfilment. He stood for a universal society based on an axiological backdrop of human values, of a vision of life of aesthetic beauty infused with ethical values. *The Portrait of a Lady* is indeed “a literary monument” created by the supreme art of Henry James, “a structure reared with an ‘architectural’ competence” (Preface, xiii). A subtle master of perception and artistic expression, Henry James compels us to ponder, in our own uncertain times, on the possibilities that human conviction and courage can yet grow--- be it for life or for the judgement of life in Art.

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