

USE OF OBJECTS OF ART IN A SYMBOLIC WAY IN THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY BY HENRY JAMES

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Abstract:

Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Portsmouth, England, the second son of eight children born to Elizabeth Barrow (1789-1863) and John Dickens (1785-1851), a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. Dickens' father was a well-paid clerk, but he was often in debt due to his extreme congeniality and hospitality. In 1814, Dickens moved to London, then to Chatham where he was a student. In 1824, his father was imprisoned in Marshalsea along with the rest of his family because of debt, but twelve-year-old Charles was sent to work at a blacking factory in Hungerford Market, London, a warehouse for manufacturing, packaging and distributing "blacking" or polish for cleaning boots and shoes, which enabled him to support his family.

Introduction:

While working at the blacking factory, he dined on a slice of pudding and for his twelve hour daily labour, received meagre wages of six shillings a week. In addition to his miserly existence, he slept in an attic in Little College Street, at Camden Town. Such an execrable experience at a tender age led Dickens to empathize with the wretched condition of children in his novels, which ultimately was parallel to the state of poor children in Victorian society. The period of hardship in Dickens' life obviously played an influential role in many of his novels. The ability to depict real life situations was greatly influenced by his unpleasant experience as a young man, which included being a victim of child labour.

After his father's release from debtors' prison, his mother forced him to remain working at the factory, a fact which emotionally scarred him for the rest of his life. His father, however, later allowed him to study at Wellington House Academy in Hampshire Road, London, from 1824-1827. Dickens was then able to secure a post as a law clerk and later a shorthand reporter at Doctor's Commons. Working as a reporter in the Courts and Parliament provided him with first hand background information of the inner workings of the justice system which would later appear in many of his novels, particularly **Bleak House**. Being a reporter greatly impacted the writings of his earliest letters which allude to his working experience. Moreover, he developed a more critical perception of society, which enabled him to write his novels from a realistic perspective, connecting real life experiences to his characters. The Parliamentary scenes which he observed provided him with the raw material for later satiric portraits as well as shaping his social vision and his attitude towards bureaucracy, officialdom and the ruling class.

In **The Portrait of a Lady**, James has used objects of art in a symbolic way. Different characters through their attitude to these objects express their moral values. Gilbert Osmond is a collector of medallions, crucifixes, tapestries, correggios etc. It may seem at first that Osmond has a real aesthetic sense but as we turn over the pages of the novel we start realizing that he is no more than a "sterile dilettante." His utilitarian interest has made him collect these objects of art. As he uses objects of art

so he uses human beings. He tells Isabel that life is a work of art. He has reduced Pansy to an object which can merely echo him. She, instead of going against the wishes of her father, thinks it her sacred duty to do what he desires. The morality of aesthetic life of Gilbert Osmond results in the death of spirit and stasis of action. Isabel's sojourn in Osmond's Villa is nothing more than Osmond's attempt to turn her into a 'Portrait' to add a new decorative touch to his villa. Madame Merle who dazzles Isabel is a woman of great accomplishment whom Isabel loves to emulate. She is well versed in fine arts like painting, music and embroidery. Besides, this has also mastered the art of keeping up appearance, the art of social conversation etc. She herself says: "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for ... I only know what I can do with them." (PL, 176) Osmond uses Isabel 'as handled ivory to the palm so she too used people as means to her ends. Osmond and Madame Merle have seemingly good manners and good tastes but they also have wretched morals. Both are theoretical and superficial. In the end, we discover that Osmond who seemed at first sight, a protagonist of art is a hollow being in both the moral and aesthetic spheres. His aesthetic sensibility is passive and has a lurking evil in it. Isabel is at once enchanted and then ensnared by Osmond's appearance. She discovers him nothing more a sterile dilettante. It discovers that life is the very substance of art.

Ralph too is interested in art but does not give it the adulation which Osmond does. He knows the distinction between art and nature. When he conducts Isabel through the art gallery at Gardencourt he thinks that Isabel was better looking at than most works of art. He plans to make Isabel rich so that she can fulfil the requirements of her imagination. His love for Isabel emerges as love of life itself. This humanistic attitude crystallizes his moral values. The idea of his regular occupation is to sit at the base of a statue of the dancing nymph, even when he is dying. He likes to sit at the feet of the dancing muse and play while others dance. He is the artist who plays with Isabel's imagination but his music unluckily does not produce sweet melodies. His aesthetic morality is both human and inclusive. He is the one whose eye pierces beyond Osmond's appearances. He says: "Osmond always had an eye to effect and his effects were deeply cultivated. They were produced by no vulgar means, but the motive was as vulgar as the art was great". (PL, 381).

Isabel wants to see life and she sees without judging. When she comes to Gardencourt and is introduced to Lord Warburton, she exclaims, in accordance with her habit of viewing life through the medium of literature, that "it's just like a novel". Her response to art is immediate and tinged-with emotions. It is this which makes her marry Gilbert Osmond, who appears to her a devotee of arts" Isabel who could be Columbia and Diana at Gardencourt, merely echoes Osmond at Osmond villa. Osmond wants Isabel to assist him in his plan to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton. When she learns about Pansy's love for Edward Rosier and wants Pansy to do what her father desires, she finds herself insincere. As her steps move deeper into the-dark house of her marriage, she intends to hide her suffering by putting on an artful mask. James says that it seemed to her an act-of devotion to conceal it elaborately, in their talk she was perpetually hanging out curtains and arranging screens. She is like Osmond and Madame- Merle, in danger of succumbing to a sterile aestheticism by substituting appearances for reality, not so much because of a blind worship of appearances, convention-and, forms as because of a certain fear of reality itself. She finds it her duty to play the part of a good wife; but she is to learn that feeling and experiences,, cannot be separated. Her moral and aesthetic senses are discordant. Her moral aesthetic sensibility is integrated when she realizes art is merely art not enough and that morality is equally important. This knowledge seems to be gradually entering her

mind when we see her absorbing, strengthening reminders and consoling clues from the marred but splended debris of human habitations of past. Suffering is a supreme discipline- it is the price one pays for being able to feel and thus Isabel has triumphed over the fate which awaits such characters as Gilbert Osmond, Mrs. Touchett and the Countess Gemini. Isabel gains, through suffering, maturity of experience and knowledge which is no less than an enlightenment. She understands universal sympathy with stream of morality and tolerance - the cardinal virtues in Jamesian universe.

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