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ROLE OF ISABEL ARCHER IN THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY BY HENRY JAMES

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Abstract:
Undoubtedly, Isabel Archer is a victim of certain delusions and inflated ideals. Isabel Archer is an abstract idealist who runs away from life because she is baffled by it and does not know how to cope with its challenges, but in her own mind she gives it the colouring of a pursuit of an exalted good. She is terribly mistaken in her belief that she knows a great deal about the world and its people. Her infinite hope that she will never do anything wrong coupled with her ignorance of the ways of the world as it was constituted ultimately leads her into the trap laid down by Gilbert Osmond believing him to be a paragon of virtue and rare embodiment of wisdom and refinement. This crucial step gives Isabel ample opportunity to discover the evil of the world in all its dreadful entirety and with all its most restrictive limitations.

Introduction:
Isabel's conception of the self and her views of the assertion of freedom of this self are revealed in a philosophical discussion she has with Madame Merle. Madame Merle views self as something which is defined by the external circumstances of life. But Isabel feels that the –self-morality is totally intrinsic having no meaning in terms of things and circumstances. She says, "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one**"** . She thinks that the self can exist on its own terms, irrespective of the pressures exerted by the environment. It does not need any outward help to express itself. For her the self is autonomous and is not affected by external things. This idea of self as something intrinsic is deep-rooted in Isabel Archer's mind, and although James understands the limitations of such an abstract idea of the self, he is himself largely in sympathy with it. When it is carried too far in terms of interiorization and total withdrawal a from the affairs of normal life, he may feel uneasy about it, but he cannot consider it very wrong and even feels tempted to offer weak and largely unconvincing rationalizations for it. It is Isabel's erroneous conception of the self that makes her reject lord Warburton, who, she feels, is only "a collection of attributes and powers**"** and is limited by his social position. Caspar Goodwood's possessive nature also seems to pose a threat to her identity.
Osmond's main appeal to her, on the other hand, is that he is "a specimen apart" and a unique personality not to be explained by his possessions, his status or his roots. He appears to her as a man free from social position and material circumstances. Little does she realized that whom she considers above the influence of material things is the man who values things and forms more than anything else in life and has very little of intrinsic self or the morality which such an intrinsic self embodies.
In the name of search for new possibilities and free exploration of life, what Isabel Archer actually gets is a man like Gilbert Osmond who is "a perfect nonentity" , but appears to her to be kindred spirit representing freedom, integrity of the self, idealism, intelligence, refined taste and breadth of sympathies. He seems to her to be free from all prejudices and extraordinarily responsive to the rhythms and messages of life around him. By marrying Osmond, she fondly hopes, she can retain her

freedom and keep her identity. She believes that he would only help to know more and more in life and live it with maximum intensity of involvement and appreciation. James' clear presentation of the weakness inherent in Isabel Archer's abstract notion of the self is an evidence of the fact that he has partly dissociated himself from the position typified by Isabel Archer and has an abstractly idealistic person can commit. He even makes Isabel Archer herself realise that the root cause of her own mistakes lies in her romantic and unworldly notion of the self-morality.

All of her friends and admirers disapprove of her marriage to Osmond. Mrs. Touchett calls him "an obscure American dilettante" . Ralph also is disappointed to see her caught like that because he had hoped that she was "meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante" . However, Isabel Archer herself comes to realise her mistake and know the grim reality of his true character. She had seen only half of his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now she saw the whole man. Under all his culture, his good and amiable nature, his morality, his knowledge of life, it was his egotism that lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers. It is clear that she thinks herself guilty of presumptions.

It is in the famous 'Midnight Vigil' in chapter 42, which James thought "the best thing in the book," that we get a peep into the inner working of Isabel Archer's mind. Her torment, her sufferings and her tragedy are fully manifested in this long soliloquy. For the first time she seems to recognise the wrong assumptions on which she had acted on account of her illusions as well as the evil character of her husband's nature. The vigil begins Isabel's long-drawn-out recognition that "to seek possibility without limits means to find limits without possibility." Thus she enters the phase of the "sick-soul," faced with the intimidating reality of evil in the world, caught between two alternatives: she can remain submissive to the forces she has surrendered to in marrying Osmond or she can become defiant and rebellious against them. To remain submissive is to deny that she has any freedom at all; to rebel is to deny the responsibility of recognizing that limits do exist. She must seek a compromise between these polar alternatives that will allow her both to recognize her responsibility to exercise what freedom is available and to admit what limitations are acknowledge and work within "the paradox of the servile will. Hence, it is also a part of her moral vision.

Knowledge of the objective other is painful and frightening; it means the loss of the condition of innocence and ignorance the state of childhood, of the "unified ego", the "healthy-minded" soul. Achieving and accepting that knowledge is, however, a necessary step toward maturity and full participation in the human condition. In fact, the fear of the suffering accompanying knowledge or awareness makes Americans in general and the American girl in particular unnaturally prolong their blissful state of "unawareness". Thus the trauma the American girl experience when invited to eat of 'the tree of knowledge' which she finds in Europe becomes more explicable. This leads to the condition of the "twice- born" and of what William Blake calls "higher innocence."

When Isabel archer enters the scene at Gardencourt she seems to be in her initial innocence. The innocent Isabel leaves garden court to embark on her career. Isabel's experience takes her to Gilbert Osmond and Rome, which she comes to think of "chiefly as the place where people had suffered" . Rome is a fallen world standing outside of Gardencourt. Here the married Isabel lives, and specifically, "in the very heart of Rome"; and here she suffers the shock of recognition that opens her eyes to the situation she has put herself in as Mrs. Osmond. Her career follows the three stages

marked by William James and Henry James, who see them in Blakean or Miltonic terms as innocence, experience and maturity or "higher-innocence" or "salvation". And Isabel's moving from first to the second is pointedly characterized as a fall from innocence. Ralph has encouraged her fondly to spread her wings and rise above the ground, after her engagement he tries once, last time to dissuade her from marrying Osmond: " You were not to come down so easily ...it hurts me,' said Ralph audaciously, "hurts me as If I had fallen myself . She must face the truth about the evil to which she has wedded herself, not flee from the fact like Blake's Thel.

In the novel Isabel's marriage to Osmond is necessary and even inevitable: it represents a quality of the human condition in fallen world. In the process of moving from initial innocence and morality to adult maturity, each of us has to marry the "Osmond" in our world and come to terms with him - not free from him. Virginia C. Fowler offers this acute observation: "Isabel's return to her marriage to Osmond thus reflects her acceptance of what she believes the conditions of life to be. She believes that a permanent retreat or escape from Osmond would constitute a desire to escape from the realities of life itself." Poor human - hearted, Isabel, who had seen very little of the evil of the world, has now encountered that evil directly and intimately. She has eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

James' attitude is critical towards the English ladies, especially as it relates to **The Portrait of a Lady.** He says, "Now that I am in England." He has a further word of praise for the qualities of the American character: "As for the (English) women ... I revolt from their dreary deathly want of - what shall I call it? Clover Hooper has it - intellectual grace - Minny Temple has it - moral spontaneity. They (the English) live wholly in the realm of the cut and dried." The memory of Milly's "Moral spontaneity" guided James in the creation of the heroes and heroines of his international fiction. He insists to William: "She was a breathing protest against European grossness, English compromises and conventions - a plant of pure American growth". James' development of the international theme in his fiction seems to be a constant quest for that very compromise, union, fusion between the European and the American. That international confrontation was his constant metaphor, the means of expressions he used again and again in his literary career. James represented to his mind quite simply the acceptable compromise between America and Europe, a successful union of those qualities he found admirable in the English and their way of life with those he cherished in his compatriots. James himself wrote in his preface to the New York edition that "the 'international' light lay, in those days, to my sense, thick and rich upon the sense. It was the light in which so much of the 'picture' hung."

Ralph is one of the most intelligent, sensitive and noble creations in all of James' fiction. Born of American parents but brought up in England, he combines the best of both cultures. Endowed with the advantage of an Oxford education, and abundant wealth - he is yet doomed. He is struck with tuberculosis and has only a few years to live; but though an invalid he shows no trace of bitterness or cynicism. He is instantly attracted towards Isabel and becomes very fond of her. But his fatal illness, he knows, rules out on attachment that can only have an unhappy ending. He thus merely watches her develop with interest, but what is a supreme irony, while seeking to promote her happiness he becomes an unconscious agent of her tragic fate.

Henry James shows the artistic and cultural riches of Europe and believes in the innate gracefulness of the people of aristocratic lineage. He probed into Europe to ferret out its aesthetic and moral reactions. He was trained as an Art critic and as much as admired European architecture very

much. He describes many of the architectural monuments of Europe in their fullest details. Undoubtedly Henry James transcends all types of prejudices and obsessions whether geographical or chauvinistically national. American and European ideals and traditions combine amicably in his writings. American innocence and ignorance as well as European sophistication and glamorous refinement are portrayed by Henry James.

Some critics have underscored the fact that James saw his American characters largely as innocent people confronting the vast civilization of Europe. He concludes usually with the cultivated and unfortunately more corrupt Europeans. All the members of Touchett family, Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel Archer and Goodwood are Americans living in Europe and England so much so that they have become domiciled on the continent. In case an American loses his national identity, he is likely to become vulgar and crude. This seems to be what James wanted to convey. That has been admirably done by depicting the moral degradation of Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond etc. Of course, persons like Ralph Touchett could combine the best of both cultures in their everyday life in England. Later on, Henrietta Stackpole, after her marriage with Mr. Bantling, becomes mildly critical of America. In the novel, Isabel is not described directly as the American victim of European duplicity but as an intelligent and presumptuous girl with some idealism who has to undergo suffering due to her mistaken preconceptions and lack of accommodation and readiness for adjustment. Her tormentors Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle are transplanted Americans who have not yet become Europeanised in full.

Morality is a necessary aspect of the novel. It is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration. It has nothing to do with the artistic process and it has everything to do with the artistic effect. It is thus obvious that, for James, morality is an inseparable part of the aesthetic effect which the artist strives to achieve through a work of art. Naturally, therefore, he would wish the novelist to wean himself from the bad habit of writing moral tales. The very taste for writing a story with a preconceived morality disturbs the ebb and flow of feelings. It forces the novelist to remain within the boundary of morality which is completely divorced from a compact aesthetic effect. James wrote a letter to William Dean Howells: "The novelist is a particular window, absolutely and of worth in so far as he is one; and it's because you open so well and are hung so close over the street that I could hang out of it all day long." The window metaphor, as James E. Miller, Jr. rightly points out, "serves for suggesting the relation of fiction and morality." The window metaphor, of course, "suited James's purpose in stressing individuality, as a prime value in the novelist." In his celebrated preface to **The Portrait of a Lady** he has said that the novelists at the windows "are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine." So that every novelist has his own unique 'moral' view of life. In other words, his moral sense is his own affair. It is not something which he derives from an accepted ethical code of morality. Because a great artist takes up the question of morality every time a new and deals with it in his own characteristic way, the moral view of life in his hands undergoes a process of continual renewal and refinement which it is denied outside the realm of art. It is in his particular sense that art makes life; it may even, from his point of view, be of greater importance than life itself.

A novel deals with 'felt life' and morality. This is what James wrote in his preface to **The Portrait of a Lady.** He wrote: "There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this

connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to 'grow' with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience." It is the perfect dependence of true values upon felt life. James relates the "moral" sense of a work of art back to the sensibility of the artist. James would have fully endorsed Chekhov's view that the artist must set the question and not try to give moral solution. An artist, in the words of Chekhov, "observes, selects, guesses, combines" what he has at the disposal of his imagination into the web and texture of his art. This individual vision and the 'pressure of the individual will' enable an artist to select judiciously his material and treat it the way he does. Morality, in fact, is not something which is taken and added from outside.

James pointed out that an inseparable link exists between art and life, life and morality and art and morality. At the end of his preface to the **The Portrait of a Lady** James reiterates his position regarding the relationship between art and morality. He writes: "Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has been conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral reference." James seems to suggest that the creative artist's moral sense does not depend upon the ethical codes and prejudices which largely determine the social and moral view of life of an ordinary human being. For a great artist, life is always subjected to a fresh and innovative view. His point of interest lies not only in the flowing stream of experience but also in the dark recesses of human mind out of which a spectrum of morality evolves. In this way alone he extends the limits of the horizon and presents a geneological view of human experience. James may have agreed with Sartre in thinking that "the novel is, in this sense, a task set to freedom."

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