

## **The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James**

The *Portrait of a Lady* is a novel by Henry James, first published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1880–1881 and then as a book in 1881. It is the story of a spirited young American woman, Isabel Archer, who "affronts her destiny" and finds it overwhelming. She inherits a large amount of money and subsequently becomes the victim of Machiavellian scheming by two American expatriates. Like many of James' novels, it is set mostly in Europe, notably England and Italy. Generally regarded as the masterpiece of his early phase of writing, this novel reflects James's absorbing interest in the differences between the New World and the Old, often to the detriment of the former. It also treats in a profound way the themes of personal freedom, responsibility, betrayal, and sexuality.

### **Plot summary**

Isabel Archer, originally from Albany, New York, is invited by her maternal aunt, Lydia Touchett, to visit Lydia's rich husband Daniel at his estate near London, following the death of Isabel's father. There, she meets her cousin Ralph Touchett, a friendly invalid, and the Touchetts' robust neighbor, Lord Warburton. Isabel later declines Warburton's sudden proposal of marriage. She also rejects the hand of Caspar Goodwood, the charismatic son and heir of a wealthy Boston mill owner. Although Isabel is drawn to Caspar, her commitment to her independence precludes such a marriage, which she feels would demand the sacrifice of her freedom. The elder Touchett grows ill and, at the request of his son, leaves much of his estate to Isabel upon his death.

With her large legacy, Isabel travels the Continent and meets an American expatriate, Gilbert Osmond, in Florence. Although Isabel had previously rejected both Warburton and Goodwood, she accepts Osmond's proposal of marriage. She is unaware that this marriage has been actively promoted by the accomplished but untrustworthy Madame Merle, another American expatriate, whom Isabel had met at the Touchetts' estate.

Isabel and Osmond settle in Rome, but their marriage rapidly sours due to Osmond's overwhelming egotism and his lack of genuine affection for his wife. Isabel grows fond of Pansy, Osmond's presumed daughter by his first marriage, and wants to grant her wish to marry Ned Rosier, a young art collector. The snobbish Osmond would rather that Pansy accept the proposal of Warburton, who had previously proposed to Isabel. Isabel suspects, however, that Warburton may just be feigning interest in Pansy to get close to Isabel again.

The conflict creates even more strain within the unhappy marriage. Isabel then learns that Ralph is dying at his estate in England and prepares to go to him for his final hours, but Osmond selfishly opposes this plan. Meanwhile, Isabel learns from her sister-in-law that Pansy is actually the daughter of Madame Merle, who had an adulterous relationship with Osmond for several years.

Isabel visits Pansy one last time, who desperately begs her to return someday, something Isabel reluctantly promises. She then leaves, without telling her spiteful husband, to comfort the dying Ralph in England, where she remains until his death. Goodwood encounters her at Ralph's estate and begs her to leave Osmond and come away with him. He passionately embraces and kisses her, but Isabel flees. Goodwood seeks her out the next day, but is told she has set off again for Rome. The ending is ambiguous, and the reader is left to imagine whether Isabel returned to Osmond to suffer out her marriage in noble tragedy (perhaps for Pansy's sake) or whether she is going to rescue Pansy and leave Osmond.

### **Major themes**

James' first idea for *The Portrait of a Lady* was simplicity itself: a young American woman confronting her destiny, whatever it might be. Only then did he begin to form a plot to bring out the character of his central figure. Ironically, that plot became an uncompromising story of the free-

spirited Isabel losing her freedom—despite (or because of) suddenly coming into a great deal of money—and getting "ground in the very mill of the conventional." The theme of freedom vs. responsibility runs throughout *The Portrait* and helps explain Isabel's possible final decision to return to Osmond. In this sense it is rather existentialist, as Isabel is very committed to living with the consequences of her choice with integrity but also a sort of stubbornness.

But that decision is affected by another major theme of the novel: Isabel's sexual fears and diffidence. Although she is eventually shown as capable of deep arousal, she rejects Warburton and Goodwood, two very strong and masculine suitors, in favor of the seemingly less threatening and hopelessly cold Osmond. Although the conventions of 19th century Anglo-American fiction prevented a completely frank treatment of this part of Isabel's character, James still makes it clear that her fate was at least partially shaped by her uneasiness with passionate commitment.

The richness of *The Portrait* is hardly exhausted by a review of Isabel's character. The novel exhibits a huge panorama of trans-Atlantic life, a far larger canvas than any James had previously painted. This moneyed world appears charming and leisurely but proves to be plagued with treachery, deceit and suffering. It is only through disappointment and loss, James seems to say, that one can grow to complete maturity.

### **Literary significance & criticism**

With the inevitable exceptions, *The Portrait of a Lady* has been the subject of critical acclaim since its first publication in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and it remains the most popular of James' longer fictions. Contemporary critics recognized that James had pushed the analysis of human consciousness and motivation to new levels, particularly in such passages as the famous Chapter 42, where Isabel meditates deep into the night about her marriage and the trap she seems to have fallen into. James justly celebrated this brilliant and moving account of Isabel's deepest terrors in his preface to the New York Edition version of the novel.

More recent criticism has come at the novel from feminist, sociopolitical and formalist directions, though some critics have demurred at these approaches as somewhat anachronistic for what remains, after all, very much a product of the Victorian era. In particular, Isabel's final return to Osmond has fascinated critics, who have debated whether James sufficiently justifies this seemingly paradoxical rejection of freedom.

The extensive revisions James made for the 1908 New York Edition have generally been accepted as improvements, unlike the disagreement provoked by the changes in other texts, such as *The American* or *Roderick Hudson*. The revision of the final scene between Isabel and Goodwood has been especially applauded. As Edward Wagenknecht noted, James "makes it as clear as any modern novelist could make it by using all the four-letter words in the dictionary that [Isabel] has been roused as never before in her life, roused in the true sense perhaps for the first time in her life." James' verbal magic allowed him to both obey and evade the restrictive conventions of his day on the treatment of sexuality in literature.

Critic Alfred Habegger argued that the main character of *Portrait* was inspired by Christie Archer, the protagonist from Anne Moncure Crane's novel, *Reginald Archer* (1871). Crane (1838—1872) may have influenced James, who Habegger claimed was interested in Crane's female characters. In the preface to the New York Edition text of the novel, James himself referred to several of George Eliot's female protagonists as possible influences on the *Portrait*.