

**Henry James** was born in New York City in 1843 and was raised in Manhattan. James's father, a prominent intellectual and social theorist, traveled a great deal to Geneva, Paris, and London, so Henry and his brother, William, accompanied him and virtually grew up in those locations as well. As a child, James was shy, delicate, and had a difficult time mixing with other boys—his brother, who was much more active, called him a sissy. William James, of course, went on to become a great American philosopher, while Henry became one of the nation's preeminent novelists.

The James family moved to Boston when Henry was a teenager, and Henry briefly attended Harvard Law School. But he soon dropped out in order to concentrate on his writing. He found success early and often: William Dean Howells, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, befriended the young writer, and by his mid-twenties James was considered one of the most skilled writers in America. In novels such as *The American*, *The Europeans*, and *Daisy Miller*, James perfected a unique brand of psychological realism, taking as his primary subject the social maneuverings of the upper classes, particularly the situation of Americans living in Europe. For James, America represented optimism and innocence, while Europe represented decadence and social sophistication; James himself moved to Europe early on in his professional career and was naturalized as a British citizen in 1915 to protest America's failure to enter World War I.

Throughout his career, James earned criticism for the slow pacing and uneventful plotting of his novels, as well as for his elliptical technique, in which many of a work's important scenes are not narrated, but only implied by later scenes. But as a stylist James earned consistent admiration; he is often considered to be a "writer's writer," and his prose is remarkable for its elegance of balance, clarity, and precision.

First written in the 1880s and extensively revised in 1908, *The Portrait of a Lady* is often considered to be James's greatest achievement. In it, he explored many of his most characteristic themes, including the conflict between American individualism and European social custom and the situation of Americans in Europe. It also includes many of his most memorable characters, including the lady of the novel's title, Isabel Archer, the indomitable Mrs. Touchett, the wise and funny Ralph Touchett, the fast-talking Henrietta Stackpole, and the sinister villains, Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle.

While he was a dedicated observer of human beings in society, James was a socially distant man who formed few close friendships. He never married and openly claimed to practice celibacy. Perhaps this gave him time to write: in four decades of his writing career, he produced nearly 100 books, including such classics as *The Golden Bowl*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and the immortal ghost story "The Turn of the Screw." He died on February 28, 1916, shortly after receiving the English Order of Merit for his dedication to the British cause in World War I.

#### **Plot Overview**

Isabel Archer is a woman in her early twenties who comes from a genteel family in Albany, New York, in the late 1860s. Her mother died when she was a young girl, and her father raised her in a haphazard manner, allowing her to educate herself and encouraging her independence. As a result, the adult Isabel is widely read, imaginative, confident in her own mind, and slightly narcissistic; she has the reputation in Albany for being a formidable intellect, and as a result she often seems intimidating to men. She has had few suitors, but one of them is Caspar Goodwood, the powerful, charismatic son of a wealthy Boston mill owner. Isabel is drawn to Caspar, but her commitment to her independence makes her fear him as well, for she feels that to marry him would be to sacrifice her freedom.

Shortly after Isabel's father dies, she receives a visit from her indomitable aunt, Mrs. Touchett, an American who lives in Europe. Mrs. Touchett offers to take Isabel on a trip to Europe, and Isabel eagerly agrees, telling Caspar that she cannot tell him whether she wishes to marry him until she has had at least a year to travel in Europe with her aunt. Isabel and Mrs. Touchett leave for England, where Mrs. Touchett's estranged husband is a powerful banker. Isabel makes a strong impression on everyone at Mr. Touchett's county manor of Gardencourt: her cousin Ralph, slowly dying of a lung disorder, becomes deeply devoted to her, and the Touchetts' aristocratic neighbor Lord Warburton falls in love with her. Warburton proposes, but Isabel declines; though she fears that she is passing up a great social opportunity by not marrying Warburton, she still believes that marriage would damage her treasured independence. As a result, she pledges to accomplish something wonderful with her life, something that will justify her decision to reject Warburton.

Isabel's friend Henrietta Stackpole, an American journalist, believes that Europe is changing Isabel, slowly eroding her American values and replacing them with romantic idealism. Henrietta comes to Gardencourt and secretly arranges for Caspar Goodwood to meet Isabel in London. Goodwood again presses Isabel to marry him; this time, she tells him she needs at least two years before she can answer him, and she promises him nothing. She is thrilled to have exercised her independence so forcefully. Mr. Touchett's health declines, and Ralph convinces him that when he dies, he should leave half his wealth to Isabel: this will protect her independence and ensure that she will never have to marry for money. Mr. Touchett agrees shortly before he dies. Isabel is left with a large fortune for the first time in her life. Her inheritance piques the interest of Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett's polished, elegant friend; Madame Merle begins to lavish attention on Isabel, and the two women become close friends.

Isabel travels to Florence with Mrs. Touchett and Madame Merle; Merle introduces Isabel to a man named Gilbert Osmond, a man of no social standing or wealth, but whom Merle describes as one of the finest gentlemen in Europe, wholly devoted to art and aesthetics. Osmond's daughter Pansy is being brought up in a convent; his wife is dead. In secret, Osmond and Merle have a mysterious relationship; Merle is attempting to manipulate Isabel into marrying Osmond so that he will have access to her fortune. Osmond is pleased to marry Isabel, not only for her money, but also because she makes a fine addition to his collection of art objects.

Everyone in Isabel's world disapproves of Osmond, especially Ralph, but Isabel chooses to marry him anyway. She has a child the year after they are married, but the boy dies six months after he is born. Three years into their marriage, Isabel and Osmond have come to despise one another; they live with Pansy in a palazzo in Rome, where Osmond treats Isabel as barely a member of the family: to him, she is a social hostess and a source of wealth, and he is annoyed by her independence and her insistence on having her own opinions. Isabel chafes against Osmond's arrogance, his selfishness, and his sinister desire to crush her individuality, but she does not consider leaving him. For all her commitment to her independence, Isabel is also committed to her social duty, and when she married Osmond, she did so with the intention of transforming herself into a good wife.

A young American art collector who lives in Paris, Edward Rosier, comes to Rome and falls in love with Pansy; Pansy returns his feelings. But Osmond is insistent that Pansy should marry a nobleman, and he says that Rosier is neither rich nor highborn enough. Matters grow complicated when Lord Warburton arrives on the scene and begins to court Pansy. Warburton is still in love with Isabel and wants to marry Pansy solely to get closer to her. But Osmond desperately wants to see Pansy married to Warburton. Isabel is torn about whether to fulfill her duty to her husband and help him arrange the match between Warburton and Pansy, or to fulfill the impulse of her conscience and discourage Warburton, while helping Pansy find a way to marry Rosier.

At a ball one night, Isabel shows Warburton the dejected-looking Rosier and explains that this is the man who is in love with Pansy. Guiltily, Warburton admits that he is not in love with Pansy; he quietly arranges to leave Rome. Osmond is furious with Isabel, convinced that she is plotting intentionally to humiliate him. Madame Merle is also furious with her, confronting her with shocking impropriety and demanding brazenly to know what she did to Warburton. Isabel has realized that there is something mysterious about Madame Merle's relationship with her husband; now, she suddenly realizes that Merle is his lover.

At this time, Ralph is rapidly deteriorating, and Isabel receives word that he is dying. She longs to travel to England to be with him, but Osmond forbids it. Now Isabel must struggle to decide whether to obey his command and remain true to her marriage vows or to disregard him and hurry to her cousin's bedside. Encouraging her to go, Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, tells her that there is still more to Merle and Osmond's relationship. Merle is Pansy's mother; Pansy was born out of wedlock. Osmond's wife died at about the same time, so Merle and Osmond spread the story that she died in childbirth. Pansy was placed in a convent to be raised, and she does not know that Merle is her real mother. Isabel is shocked and disgusted by her husband's atrocious behavior—she even feels sorry for Merle for falling under his spell—so she decides to follow her heart and travel to England.

After Ralph's death, Isabel struggles to decide whether to return to her husband or not. She promised Pansy that she would return to Rome, and her commitment to social propriety impels her to go back and honor her marriage. But her independent spirit urges her to flee from Osmond and find happiness elsewhere. Caspar Goodwood appears at the funeral, and afterwards, he asks Isabel to run away with him and forget about her husband. The next day, unable to find her, Goodwood asks Henrietta where she has gone. Henrietta quietly tells him that Isabel has returned to Rome, unable to break away from her marriage to Gilbert Osmond.

### **Character List**

**Isabel Archer** - The novel's protagonist, the Lady of the title. Isabel is a young woman from Albany, New York, who travels to Europe with her aunt, Mrs. Touchett. Isabel's experiences in Europe—she is wooed by an English lord, inherits a fortune, and falls prey to a villainous scheme to marry her to the sinister Gilbert Osmond—force her to confront the conflict between her desire for personal independence and her commitment to social propriety. Isabel is the main focus of *Portrait of a Lady*, and most of the thematic exploration of the novel occurs through her actions, thoughts, and experiences. Ultimately, Isabel chooses to remain in her miserable marriage to Osmond rather than to violate custom by leaving him and searching for a happier life.

**Gilbert Osmond** - A cruel, narcissistic gentleman of no particular social standing or wealth, who seduces Isabel and marries her for her money. An art collector, Osmond poses as a disinterested aesthete, but in reality he is desperate for the recognition and admiration of those around him. He treats everyone who loves him as simply an object to be used to fulfill his desires; he bases his daughter Pansy's upbringing on the idea that she should be unswervingly subservient to him, and he even treats his longtime lover Madame Merle as a mere tool. Isabel's marriage to Osmond forces her to confront the conflict between her desire for independence and the painful social proprieties that force her to remain in her marriage.

**Madame Merle** - An accomplished, graceful, and manipulative woman, Madame Merle is a popular lady who does not have a husband or a fortune. Motivated by her love for Gilbert Osmond, Merle manipulates Isabel into marrying Osmond, delivering Isabel's fortune into his hands and ruining Isabel's life in the process. Unbeknownst to either Isabel or Pansy, Merle is not only Osmond's lover, but she is also Pansy's mother, a fact that was covered up after Pansy's birth. Pansy was raised to believe that her mother died in childbirth.

**Ralph Touchett** - Isabel's wise, funny cousin, who is ill with lung disease throughout the entire novel, which ends shortly after his death. Ralph loves life, but he is kept from participating in it vigorously by his ailment; as a result, he acts as a dedicated spectator, resolving to live vicariously through his beloved cousin Isabel. It is Ralph who convinces Mr. Touchett to leave Isabel her fortune, and it is Ralph who is the staunchest advocate of Isabel remaining independent. Ralph serves as the moral center of *Portrait of a Lady*: his opinions about other characters are always accurate, and he serves as a kind of moral barometer for the reader, who can tell immediately whether a character is good or evil by Ralph's response to that character.

**Lord Warburton** - An aristocratic neighbor of the Touchetts who falls in love with Isabel during her first visit to Gardencourt. Warburton remains in love with Isabel even after she rejects his proposal and later tries to marry Pansy simply to bring himself closer to Isabel's life.

**Caspar Goodwood** - The son of a prominent Boston mill owner, Isabel's most dedicated suitor in America. Goodwood's charisma, simplicity, capability, and lack of sophistication make him the book's purest symbol of James's conception of America.

**Henrietta Stackpole** - Isabel's fiercely independent friend, a feminist journalist who does not believe that women need men in order to be happy. Like Caspar, Henrietta is a symbol of America's democratic values throughout the book. After Isabel leaves for Europe, Henrietta fights a losing battle to keep her true to her American outlook, constantly encouraging her to marry Caspar Goodwood. At the end of the book, Henrietta disappoints Isabel by giving up her independence in order to marry Mr. Bantling.

**Mrs. Touchett** - Isabel's aunt. Mrs. Touchett is an indomitable, independent old woman who first brings Isabel to Europe. The wife of Mr. Touchett and the mother of Ralph, Mrs. Touchett is separated from her husband, residing in Florence while he stays at Gardencourt. After Isabel inherits her fortune and falls under the sway of Merle and Osmond, Mrs. Touchett's importance in her life gradually declines.

**Pansy Osmond** - Gilbert Osmond's placid, submissive daughter, raised in a convent to guarantee her obedience and docility. Pansy believes that her mother died in childbirth; in reality, her mother is Osmond's longtime lover, Madame Merle. When Isabel becomes Pansy's stepmother, she learns to love the girl; Pansy is a large part of the reason why Isabel chooses to return to Rome at the end of the novel, when she could escape her miserable marriage by remaining in England.

**Edward Rosier** - A hapless American art collector who lives in Paris, Rosier falls in love with Pansy Osmond and does his best to win Osmond's permission to marry her. But though he sells his art collection and appeals to Madame Merle, Isabel, and the Countess Gemini, Rosier is unable to change Gilbert's mind that Pansy should marry a high-born, wealthy nobleman, not an obscure American with little money and no social standing to speak of.

**Mr. Touchett** - An elderly American banker who has made his life and his vast fortune in England who is Ralph's father and the proprietor of Gardencourt. Before Mr. Touchett dies, Ralph convinces him to leave half his fortune to his niece Isabel, which will enable her to preserve her independence and avoid having to marry for money.

**Mr. Bantling** - The game Englishman who acts as Henrietta's escort across Europe, eventually persuading her to marry him at the end of the novel.

**Countess Gemini** - Osmond's vapid sister, who covers up her own marital infidelities by gossiping constantly about the affairs of other married women. The Countess seems to have a good heart, however, opposing Merle's scheme to marry Osmond and Isabel and eventually revealing to Isabel the truth of Merle's relationship to Osmond and Pansy's parentage.

### **Analytical Overview**

The *Portrait of a Lady* explores the conflict between the individual and society by examining the life of Isabel Archer, a young American woman who must choose between her independent spirit and the demands of social convention. After professing and longing to be an independent woman, autonomous and answerable only to herself, Isabel falls in love with and marries the sinister Gilbert Osmond, who wants her only for her money and who treats her as an object, almost as part of his art collection. Isabel must then decide whether to honor her marriage vows and preserve social propriety or to leave her miserable marriage and escape to a happier, more independent life, possibly with her American suitor Caspar Goodwood. In the end, after the death of her cousin Ralph, the staunchest advocate of her independence, Isabel chooses to return to Osmond and maintain her marriage. She is motivated partly by a sense of social duty, partly by a sense of pride, and partly by the love of her stepdaughter, Pansy, the daughter of Osmond and his manipulative lover Madame Merle.

As the title of the novel indicates, Isabel is the principal character of the book, and the main focus of the novel is on presenting, explaining, and developing her character. James is one of America's great psychological realists, and he uses all his creative powers to ensure that Isabel's conflict is the natural product of a believable mind, and not merely an abstract philosophical consideration. In brief, Isabel's independence of spirit is largely a result of her childhood, when she was generally neglected by her father and allowed to read any book in her grandmother's library; in this way, she supervised her own haphazard education and allowed her mind to develop without discipline or order. Her natural intelligence has always ensured that she is at least as quick as anyone around her, and in Albany, New York, she has the reputation of being a formidable intellect.

After she travels to England with her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, however, it becomes clear that Isabel has a woefully unstructured imagination, as well as a romantic streak that suits her position as an optimistic, innocent American. (For James, throughout *Portrait of a Lady*, America is a place of individualism and naïveté, while Europe is a place of sophistication, convention, and decadence.) Isabel often considers her life as though it were a novel. She also has a tendency to think about herself obsessively and has a vast faith in her own moral strength—in fact, recognizing that she has never faced hardship, Isabel actually wishes that she might be made to suffer, so that she could prove her ability to overcome suffering without betraying her principles.

When Isabel moves to England, her cousin Ralph is so taken with her spirit of independence that he convinces his dying father to leave half his fortune to Isabel. This is intended to prevent her from ever having to marry for money, but ironically it attracts the treachery of the novel's villains, Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. They conspire to convince Isabel to marry Osmond in order to gain access to her wealth. Her marriage to Osmond effectively stifles Isabel's independent spirit, as her husband treats her as an object and tries to force her to share his opinions and abandon her own.

This is the thematic background of *Portrait of a Lady*, and James skillfully intertwines the novel's psychological and thematic elements. Isabel's downfall with Osmond, for instance, enables the book's most trenchant exploration of the conflict between her desire to conform to social convention and her fiercely independent mind. It is also perfectly explained by the elements of Isabel's character: her haphazard upbringing has led her to long for stability and safety, even if they mean a loss of independence, and her active imagination enables her to create an illusory picture of Osmond, which she believes in more than the real thing, at least until she is married to him. Once she marries Osmond, Isabel's pride in her moral strength makes it impossible for her to consider leaving him: she once longed for hardship, and now that she has found it, it would be hypocritical for her to surrender to it by violating social custom and abandoning her husband.

In the same way that James unites his psychological and thematic subjects, he also intertwines the novel's settings with its themes. Set almost entirely among a group of American expatriates living in Europe in the 1860s and 70s, the book relies on a kind of moral geography, in which America represents innocence, individualism, and capability; Europe represents decadence, sophistication, and social convention; and England represents the best mix of the two. Isabel moves from America to England to continental Europe, and at each stage she comes to mirror her surroundings, gradually losing a bit of independence with each move. Eventually she lives in Rome, the historic heart of continental Europe, and it is here that she endures her greatest hardship with Gilbert Osmond.

Narratively, James uses many of his most characteristic techniques in *Portrait of a Lady*. In addition to his polished, elegant prose and his sedate, slow pacing, he utilizes a favorite technique of skipping over some of the novel's main events in telling the story. Instead of narrating moments such as Isabel's wedding with Osmond, James skips over them, relating that they have happened only after the fact, in peripheral conversations. This literary technique is known as ellipses. In the novel, James most often uses his elliptical technique in scenes when Isabel chooses to value social custom over her independence—her acceptance of Gilbert's proposal, their wedding, her decision to return to Rome after briefly leaving for Ralph's funeral at the end of the novel. James uses this method to create the sense that, in these moments, Isabel is no longer accessible to the reader; in a sense, by choosing to be with Gilbert Osmond, Isabel is lost.

### **Study Questions and Essay Topics**

Describe the elliptical technique James often uses in his narration. What is a narrative ellipsis? How does James employ the technique? What effect does his frequent skipping forward have on the novel as a whole?

Answer for Study Question #1

*Portrait of a Lady*, as its title would suggest, is largely devoted to the character of Isabel Archer. How does James use his psychological portrayal of Isabel to justify her decision to surrender her treasured independence in order to marry Osmond?

Answer for Study Question #2

"The *Portrait of a Lady* is consistently focused on the idea of Isabel Archer's independence: whether she has it, whether she is true to it, whether she betrays it, and whether it is more important than her social duty. But the novel never really defines what "independence" means, and as a result, it lacks thematic focus." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Defend your answer.

Answer for Study Question #3

Compare and contrast Isabel's three suitors, Gilbert Osmond, Caspar Goodwood, and Lord Warburton. How are they alike? What are their important differences? What ideas do they each symbolize? How does Isabel respond to each of them, and why does she respond to them as she does? What light do they cast on Isabel's relation to the idea of romance?

With particular attention to the characters of Henrietta Stackpole and Mrs. Touchett, what does the novel's position seem to be with regard to feminism? Is *Portrait of a Lady* a feminist book in any way or ultimately a conservative novel?

Describe the character of Madame Merle. What role does she play in the novel? Where does she seem to fit on the spectrum between personal independence and social conformity? Is she ultimately a villain, or does she have qualities that enable the reader to sympathize with her behavior?

Discuss James's use of geography as an object of symbolism in the novel. How do particular places take on thematic qualities? What symbolic trajectory does James chart by having Isabel travel from Albany to London to Florence to Rome?