

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

HENRY JAMES was born in 1843 in Washington Place, New York, of Scottish and Irish ancestry. His father was a prominent theologian and philosopher, and his elder brother, William, is also famous as a philosopher. He attended schools in New York and later in London, Paris and Geneva, entering the Law School at Harvard in 1862. In 1865 he began to contribute reviews and short stories to American journals. In 1875, after two prior visits to Europe, he settled for a year in Paris, where he met Flaubert, Turgenev and other literary figures. However, the next year he moved to London, where he became so popular in society that in the winter of 1878–9 he confessed to accepting 107 invitations. In 1898 he left London and went to live at Lamb House, Rye, Sussex. Henry James became a naturalized citizen in 1915, was awarded the Order of Merit, and died in 1916.

In addition to many short stories, plays, books of criticism, autobiography and travel, he wrote some twenty novels, the first published being *Roderick Hudson* (1875). They include *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Tragical Muse*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Awkward Age*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*.

GEOFFREY MOORE was born in London. After war service in the RAF he read English at Cambridge. His career as an academic included appointments at the universities of Wisconsin, Tulane, New Mexico, Southern California, Kansas and Harvard. In 1955 he became the first full-time lecturer in American literature at a British university (Manchester), and from 1960 to 1982 he was Professor of American Literature at the University of Hull. He also ran a weekly arts programme on American radio, and edited and produced for BBC Television. He was a contributor to *The Times Literary Supplement* for many years. His publications include *Poetry from Cambridge in Wartime* (1947), *The Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954), *Poetry Today* (1958), *American Literature and the American Imagination* (1964), *American Literature* (1964) and *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (1977; revised 1983). Geoffrey Moore was General Editor for the works of Henry James in Penguin and, in addition to *Portrait of a Lady*, edited and introduced *Roderick Hudson* and Daisy Miller for the Penguin Classics. Geoffrey Moore died in 1999.

PATRICIA CRICK, one-time scholar of Girton College, Cambridge, is a teacher of Modern Languages.

RICHARD MAXWELL took a doctorate in English literature from the University of Chicago. The author of *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (1992), and editor of *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002), he has also written extensively on the historical novels of John Cowper Powys. He is now working on a study of historical fiction between the seventeenth century and the present. He teaches in the Comparative Literature and English departments at York University.

HENRY JAMES

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY GEOFFREY MOORE

AND NOTES BY PATRICIA CRICK

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INTRODUCTION

When Henry James sat down to write *The Portrait of a Lady* in the spring of 1880, he did not come to his task unprepared. He had, as he recalls in his preface to the New York edition of 1908, ‘the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a “subject”, certainly of a setting, were to need only be super-added’. Furthermore, he says, he conceived of her as ‘affronting her destiny’.

The ‘young woman’ – in the event to become a ‘lady’ – had, of course, to be an American. We find him writing to his brother William as early as March 1870 about the unsuitability of 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.*

Throughout the late seventies his letters to his family constantly refer to the important new novel he was planning. When William pronounced *The Europeans* ‘thin’, Henry wrote back on 14 November 1878: ‘I don’t at all despair, yet, of doing something fat.’[†] He returned to the theme on 4 March 1879, when he wrote to William again: ‘I shall before very long gratify your “pining” for a “big novel” – or a bigger one at least than these last little things.’[§] Such was his confidence that, before the end of the year, he was able to negotiate simultaneous contracts for serial publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* from *Macmillan’s Magazine* of London and *The Atlantic Monthly* of Boston.

Now, at last, he was ready; it had taken four years. As a result of the publication of *Roderick Hudson* in 1876 he had spent some time in France, meeting among others Turgenev, Flaubert, Maupassant, Daudet and Zola. In England he visited, or dined with, George Eliot, Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning, William Morris, Herbert Spencer and Leslie Stephen. With the appearance of *The American* in 1877 and *The Europeans* in 1878, his reputation was further advanced. In 1879 he published *Confidence*, Hawthorne, *An International Episode* and *The Madonna of the Future*; finally, *Daisy Miller* brought him international fame. On 5 April 1880, while he was writing the first instalments of *The Portrait of a Lady* in the Hotel de l’Arno, Florence, he celebrated his thirty-seventh birthday. It was a happy period of his life. He was young, he was confident, and he felt himself to be a success. This successful young man, then writing the first novel of his career that he felt was going to be an indisputable contribution to literature – how would he start?

The opening of *The Portrait of a Lady* is a curious mixture. In the first place it has a memorable visual quality – a marked feature of James’s work. We receive from the opening paragraphs a clear picture of an English country-house scene: a lawn sloping down from a Tudor mansion to the Thames. On this lawn are three figures. We see them at first from a distance, and then, as in a film, we zoom in on them. They are old Mr Touchett, the American banker who is the owner of the house; his son, the sickly, unprepossessing, yet engaging and intelligent Ralph; and their guest. Lord Warburton, he of the ‘lively grey eye’, thirty-five years old and ‘remarkably well made’, possessing ‘the air of a happy temperament fertilized by a high civilization’. They talk of this and that, but in particular of Mr Touchett’s niece

Isabel.

The first chapter, then, seems designed to usher in the characters like the opening scene of a play, emphasizing another striking quality of Henry James's talent: his powerful dramatic sense (which, alas, he was never able to harness to the vehicle of a play proper without disaster and humiliation). But there is another, less favourable feature of this crucial opening section: the style is surprisingly pompous. Richard Poirier* says that it has 'a kind of elegant prissiness', and it is easy to see why. The first sentence reads: 'Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.' The narrator goes on to describe 'Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history'. He speaks of 'the implements of the little feast'. The persons concerned in it were 'not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony'. Old Mr Touchett is referred to as bringing from America 'at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy' which he had 'kept... in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with perfect confidence'.

Poirier suggests that James was deliberately aping the ponderous English style of the period, poking gentle fun. But there are two faults in this theory. First, and most important, the average reader can have no idea that such parody is going on (if it is), and takes it at face value. Second, it is to impute to James I (albeit at the triumphant end of his reign) the artistic sophistication of the Old Pretender.* Could it be, instead, that James was unsure of himself? It is no mean task to commit yourself to writing the great novel of your life in serial form, in which you cannot rearrange or remove anything. Besides, what kind of reader was he writing for? His experience of London literary life had taught him to play the American role diplomatically. He wanted, I suggest, to capitalize on the easy English success of *Daisy Miller* while at the same time satisfying the more demanding standards of the formidable American critics. In the end he took a half-ironic stance, producing, not a deliberate 'spoof' as Poirier claims, but a style which is as far from the crisp narrative of *The Europeans* as it is from the artistic circumlocution of *The Golden Bowl* – a novel with which, in other respects, it has much in common.

The conversation, too, in this oddest of opening chapters is inept. Perhaps this is how such characters really spoke? Certainly, Lord Warburton is no Sydney Smith. But Ralph? Surely he is capable of more than 'Oh, come, daddy' and banter about Mr Touchett's 'poor old legs'? The most embarrassing remark of all is the last: ' "Ah, well," said Lord Warburton with a humour broader still, "perhaps, after all, she's not worth trying on." ' What humour? The statement is the more ironical in view of an earlier comment by Lord Warburton that he comes to Gardencourt for the 'uncommonly good talk'.

When Isabel arrives on the scene the atmosphere changes, and our interest quickens. Quite simply, we want to see what she will make of these English. Although she has already been designated the 'intellectual' (sister Lilian is the practical one, and Edith, the beauty) Isabel is twice referred to as 'pretty'. She is very much at her ease, although – a deft touch in view of future developments – she cannot enjoy light conversation or conventional flattery. Isabel has been brought up in Albany, in upper New York State, spending a great deal of time in her grandmother Archer's house. Mrs Touchett's proposal to take her to Europe makes her realize what a fortunate (and sheltered) existence she has had. She knows of 'the bad things' through

her reading of literature, but her 'handsome, much-loved father' had kept reality hidden from her. This 'too generous, too good-natured' man had aroused even 'greater tenderness' in her since his death, but to others – although they admitted that he had 'a remarkably handsome head and a very taking manner' – he had made poor use of his life. He took his daughters across the Atlantic three times before they were fourteen and was feckless in his dealings with them, leaving them at one point for three months with a French *bonne* who then eloped with a Russian nobleman staying at the same hotel.

There is, the reader soon begins to see, something of Henry James in Isabel Archer. From internal evidence – judging the novel to begin in 1870 or shortly after – Isabel would have been born about 1847, only four years after James himself. James, too, was taken three times across the Atlantic by his father before he was fourteen – like Isabel, to the Continent rather than to England. Like her, James passed through the American Civil War (1861–5) in 'a state of almost passionate excitement'.

The most explicit information about Isabel is given in [chapter VI](#), in which we are given every possible clue to her (by conventional standards) strange behaviour in the matter of Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond. She possessed 'a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast', and had therefore been accustomed to be held in some awe by them. Although her father's sister had spread rumour that she was writing a book, Isabel 'had no talent for expression and too little of the consciousness of genius; she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior'. Her mind moved more quickly than theirs, 'and this encouraged an impatience that might easily be confounded with superiority'. Then comes the most telling sentence of all: 'Isabel was probably very liable to *the sin of self-esteem*; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage' (my italics).

'The sin of self-esteem' – a clear case of *hubris*, of pride coming before a fall: the Greeks' tragic formula. James rubs it in further. Isabel's thoughts 'were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority'. But, he concedes, she had:

a certain nobleness of imagination... She spent half her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity; she had fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion... It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel; she had seen very little of the evil of the world...

Precisely – and that is why she cannot recognize it in Osmond and Madame Merle. James stresses the importance to Isabel of her independence. The person who makes the most 'enlightened use of that state' in Isabel's eyes, who 'offered so high an example of useful activity that Isabel always thought of her as a model', is the journalist Henrietta Stackpole. The admiration is clearly mutual, since Henrietta thinks Isabel a 'glorious creature'. On her part Isabel takes Henrietta as 'a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy'.

At this point James plunges into the heart of the matter: Isabel's 'views on the subject of marriage'. She is convinced of 'the vulgarity of thinking too much about it... she held that a woman ought to be able to live to herself... and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex'. James has

prepared us more than adequately – if we but look carefully at these early chapters – for the conduct of Isabel’s which so puzzled the British reviewers of 1881, a puzzlement that has lasted until the present day. She can only give herself completely to a man ‘if a certain light should dawn’; otherwise, they do not seem worth the ‘ruinous expenditure’.

At this point we find a further indication that James is thinking of himself as he maps out Isabel’s early career. Like him, she has seen a lot of the Continent, but little of London. Isabel’s reaction is similar to James’s in those years of exploring England when he was still in his thirties. As he says in his notebook entry of 21 February 1879 (we compare this with ‘the rich perfection’ of the Gardencourt description in *The Portrait of a Lady*):

Oh, yes, the United States – a country without a sovereign, without a court, without a nobility, without any army, without a church or clergy, without a diplomatic service, without a picturesque peasantry, without palaces and castles, or country seats, or ruins, without a literature, without novels, without an Oxford or Cambridge, without cathedrals or ivied churches, without latticed cottages or village ale-houses, without political society, without sport, without fox-hunting or country gentlemen, without an Epsom or an Ascot, an Eton or a Rugby...

This is something slightly different from what has been labelled ‘the International Theme’ i.e. the confronting of corrupt Europe with fresh, idealistic and innocent America. In the very heart of corrupt Europe there is something which James sees to be the breath of life itself and which is the key to Isabel’s succumbing to the acquired cultivation and knowledgeability of Osmond – that American Italianate who, like his English forerunners of the seventeenth century, turns out to be the Devil incarnate.

Chapter XII is a masterpiece for which we can forgive James the slowness of the previous sections. Lord Warburton comes to see Isabel, and she has a sense of alarm. ‘It may appear to some readers that the young lady was both precipitate and unduly fastidious,’ says James. Quite so. There follow two pages in which Isabel sums up her feelings and shows us why she, a poor, untried American girl, had the temerity – and, one might add, the character – to refuse an English lord:

When she had thought of individual eminence she had thought of it on the basis of character and wit – of what one might like in a gentleman’s mind and in his talk... Lord Warburton loomed up before her, largely and brightly, as a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule, but which demanded a different sort of appreciation – an appreciation that the girl, with her habit of judging quickly and freely, felt she lacked patience to bestow. What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct... murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own...

James somewhat spoils the effect of this magnificent passage by indulging himself in a piece of Victorian moralizing which – if we were to follow Poirier – might be taken as a ‘spoof’:

Smile not, however, I venture to repeat, at this simple young woman from Albany who debated whether she should accept an English peer before he had offered himself and who was disposed to believe that on the whole she could do better. She was a person of great faith, and if there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity.

Here we have it again: the novel is intended to be a moral tale, halfway between the black and-white crudities of a melodrama and the classical colour and grandeur of a tragedy. False pride, we have been told, brings Isabel low, having too great an opinion of herself. But since she is no king or queen or Scottish chieftain but only 'a simple young woman from Albany' she does not die as a result of her 'folly'; she suffers, instead, a fate worse than death. The gods laugh loud and long. She has dug her own grave; she has made her bed and must lie on it. The ripest clichés apply. But, as James might say, we anticipate. We (as he does say) are the point at which 'a great nobleman' is 'in the act of making love'. Which means that Lord Warburton is about to pop the question. 'I'm a very judicious animal,' says nice Lord Warburton, 'I don't go off easily, but when I'm touched, it's for life. It's for life, Miss Archer it's for life.' And he looks at her 'with eyes charged with the light of a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser parts of emotion'. Could Isabel want better than that? As we have seen, she is not a great one for 'the baser parts'. She is quite carried away; she glows inwardly; but what she says is, 'I thank you more than I can say for your offer. It does me great honour.' This, of course, is the kiss of death, and Warburton knows it. He falls into blustering apology for 'coming down on her with such a thumper'.

To give her credit, Isabel wonders if she is not 'a cold, hard, priggish person'. She feels 'really frightened at herself', and it is this feeling which leads her to speak to her uncle about Lord Warburton's offer. He counters her 'I don't wish to marry anyone just now' with 'You think someone may come along whom you like better.' It is from this point – a quarter of the way through the novel – that Isabel begins to grow in stature in James's imagination. She is above 'normal' curiosity about Lord Warburton's letter; the other side of her seeming priggishness is a true nobility of thought and motive. We continue to mull over the rival merits of the suitors, however. Lord Warburton becomes 'poor Lord Warburton', compared with Caspar Goodwood, who:

expressed for her an energy – and she had already felt it as a power – that was of his very nature. It was in no degree a matter of his 'advantages' – it was a matter of the spirit that sat in his clear-burning eyes like some tireless watcher at a window. Sometimes Caspar Goodwood had seemed to range himself on the side of her destiny, to be the stubbornest fact she knew; she said to herself at such moments that she might evade him for a time, but that she must make terms with him at last – terms which would be certain to be favourable to himself.

The use of the word 'destiny' in connection with Goodwood is significant. Within the macrocosmic destiny of all girls of twenty-three in the 1870s – to get married – there is the microcosmic personal destiny of Isabel, she fears, to fall into the clutches of Caspar Goodwood. It is slightly incongruous that he should have a matinée-idol type of kiss ('like white lightning') when he is 'the son of a proprietor of a well-known cotton mill in Massachusetts', the inventor of the Goodwood patent and a highly competent industrial manager. But there is more to it than his being a captain of industry; he could, in Isabel's romantic imagination, have been another kind of captain:

It pleased Isabel to believe that he might have ridden, on a plunging steed, the whirlwind of a great war – a war like the Civil strife that had overdarkened her conscious childhood and his ripening youth...

However, his jaw is 'too firmly set' for the virginal Isabel – that Maid of Albany – suggesting 'a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life'.

Isabel and Henrietta propose a trip to London but, before they go. Lord Warburton comes over from Lockleigh. They have lunch, and afterwards, in the picture gallery (Lockleigh, significantly, has no pictures), Isabel and Lord Warburton are left alone. 'It's that I can't escape my fate,' says Isabel, her eyes full of tears. Warburton understandably wants to know what she is talking about. Isabel gets herself into deeper water by saying that it is not her fate 'to give up'. 'Do you call marrying *me* giving up?' asks Lord Warburton. Isabel stumbles on. Marrying him would be to 'give up other chances'. No, she doesn't mean chances to marry, she says, colouring: 'I can't escape unhappiness.' There you have it; James has set it out clearly enough. If she 'affronts' her destiny in one sense, she embraces it in another. She is, after all, like all those other stoic American heroes and heroines (mostly heroes one must admit), from Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo to Hemingway's Ole Andreson. Yet – 'I'm not bent on a life of misery,' says Isabel:

'I've always been intensely determined to be happy, and I've often believed that I should be... But it comes over me now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself.'

'By separating yourself from what?'

'From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer.'

Later, Isabel feels 'the cold breath of her last suitor's surprise'. Mixed with her 'imperfect pride', however, is a sweet feeling of freedom which:

occasionally throbbed into odd demonstrations. When she walked in Kensington Gardens she stopped the children (mainly the poorer sort) whom she saw playing on the grass; she asked them their names and gave them sixpence and, when they were pretty, kissed them. Ralph noticed these quaint charities...

So indeed he might.

Ralph is, as he confesses engagingly – but in view of his feelings poignantly – an Isabel-watcher. Whenever Ralph speaks, the level of the conversation rises several notches: 'I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton... We shall hang on the rest of your career... You know I'm extremely fond of the unexpected, and now that you've kept the game in your hands I depend on your giving us some grand example.' Of course, Ralph understands very well that Isabel does not want 'to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do.'

Good for Isabel, then, the New Woman of the 1870s, perhaps the first feminist in English fiction (even though she ultimately *achieves* very little). I say this in full recognition of the Elizabeth Bennets, the Cathys, the Jane Eyres, the Becky Sharps and the Dorothea Brookes, because, however independent they strive to be, they have little in common with Isabel. For one thing they do not have her (American) advantages, and for another they are not allowed to indulge – as Isabel is, to an extreme degree – in what Poe called 'ratiocination'.

Isabel, surprised by Caspar, allows him to be shown up to her room at Pratt's Hotel. Presumably a couple of Americans could ignore the niceties of British mores, but, more than that, it is a tribute to Caspar's basic 'Goodness', and Isabel's high-mindedness, that the grossest possibilities are not allowed to suggest themselves. Caspar, coming straight to the point, asks 'Why didn't you answer my letter?' Isabel, equal to the occasion, replies, 'How did you know I was here?' As they dart their barbed arrows at each other, the Archer on one side, the

Knight Errant (his eyes seeming 'to shine through the vizard of a helmet') on the other, the reader obtains an insight into why Isabel is so afraid. Did she but admit it to herself, could she but submit to the domination she inwardly feels but outwardly shies away from, Caspar is the man for her.

Isabel tells him that she has refused Lord Warburton. 'If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of,' she goes on, 'with a slight recurrence of grandeur' (and as if James had not told us many times already), 'it's my personal independence.' At the same time, we must remember that if, as we are told, James was trying to reveal Isabel through the reactions of others, then a certain amount of repetition is necessary. Again, as she tells it to Goodwood:

'I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell...'

Brave words, that tempt disaster. With added irony, she tells Goodwood that if he hears rumour that she is on the point of marrying, 'remember what I have told you about my love of liberty and venture to doubt it.' With even heavier irony Caspar says, 'One would think you were going to commit some atrocity.' When he has gone Isabel is so overcome that she drops to her knees and hides her face in her hands. She is not praying, says James, but trembling – doing everything she can 'to resist her excitement'. However, Isabel is very severe with Henrietta when the latter returns from dinner. Henrietta justifies herself by saying, 'If you marry one of these people I'll never speak to you again.' She caps this by asking, 'Do you know where you're going, Isabel Archer?' Isabel has not the least idea: 'a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see – that is my idea of happiness.' 'Like the heroine of an immoral novel,' says Henrietta.

When Isabel goes to Gardencourt because old Mr Touchett is ill, she meets Madame Merle (her first appearance in the novel), who has come as a friend of Mrs Touchett. Although to Isabel's untutored ear she speaks like a Continental, Madame Merle disabuses her: 'My father was a high officer in the United States Navy.' Her eyes shine with intelligence; she has a 'liberal, full-rimmed mouth which when she smiled drew itself upward to the left side' and thick fair hair arranged 'as if she were a Bust'. She looks like a 'baroness, a countess, a princess'. She is childless, we are told, and her husband is dead. We learn to our surprise that Ralph 'was once in love with her'.

As Mr Touchett lies dying he discusses his will with Ralph, and at this point there occurs the momentous event which is to make such a difference to the life of Isabel Archer – and to the course of the story. Ralph thinks that if Mr Touchett gives her sixty thousand pounds she will not have 'to marry for money'. On the other hand, says Mr Touchett, 'a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters.'

Pat upon these words – in view of Madame Merle's instrumentality in snaring Isabel for Gilbert Osmond – Isabel and Madame Merle are 'thrown much together during the illness of their host'. Isabel is enchanted. She:

had never encountered a more agreeable and interesting figure... she said things to this amiable audistress that she had never yet said to anyone... Sometimes she took alarm at her own candour; it was as if she had given to a comparative stranger the key to her cabinet of jewels.

When she compliments Isabel, the girl receives the ‘assurance as a young soldier, still panting from a slight skirmish in which he has come off with honour, might receive a pat on the shoulder from his colonel’. Madame Merle says to Isabel that she will ‘some day a tale unfold’, but the hint is ignored. Mrs Touchett’s ‘Serena Merle hasn’t a fault’ unintentionally furthers the covert purposes of this supreme confidence trickster. It is a constant theme of James’s: being taken in by someone you have learned to trust.

Madame Merle learns of Mr Touchett’s will from her friend the widow. Between instalments the sum bequeathed to Isabel has risen. ‘Isabel steps into something like seventy thousand pounds,’ says Mrs Touchett, which provokes Madame Merle into an ill-considered ‘Ah, the clever creature.’ ‘What do you mean by that?’ asks Mrs Touchett with ‘a quick look’. Madame Merle tries to retrieve herself, but her true nature has been revealed. Consummate actress that she is, she later lays a hand on Isabel’s shoulder and kisses her ‘as if she were returning the kiss she had received from her at Gardencourt’.

In [chapter XXII](#) we have the first of those leaps in time which indicate that James was becoming conscious of the slow progress of his story. On this occasion it is a small one – six months after Mr Touchett’s death. We are introduced to a group of people ‘gathered in one of the many rooms of an ancient villa crowning an olive-muffled hill outside of the roman gate of Florence’. It is here that we meet Pansy and her father, Gilbert Osmond:

He was a man of forty, with a high but well-shaped head, on which the hair, still dense, but prematurely grizzled, had been cropped close. He had a fine, narrow, extremely modelled and composed face, of which the only fault was just this effect of running a trifle too much to points; an appearance to which the shape of the beard contributed not a little. This beard, cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century and surmounted by a fair moustache, of which the ends had a roman upward flourish, gave its wearer a foreign, traditionary look, and suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style. His conscious, curious eyes, however, eyes at once vague and penetrating, intelligent and hard, expressive of the observer as well as of the dreamer, would have assured you that he studied it only within well-chosen limits...

From the way in which Madame Merle and Osmond speak to each other it is obvious that there is something between them. Their bickering reaches such a degree that Pansy is sent into the garden. Madame Merle has come to tell Osmond something. Can he stir himself out of his habitual indolence sufficiently to catch the fish she has carefully guided into his waters? Here, she says, is a twenty-three-year-old, beautiful, accomplished ‘and, for an American, wellborn’ girl, very clever, and with a handsome fortune.

Osmond comes to pay a call on Madame Merle, and this female Pandarus introduces him to Isabel. Osmond, just as subtle as Madame Merle, does not assert himself. Isabel finds him ‘not handsome but fine... his very voice was fine... His utterance was the vibration of glass.’ Not the kind of man that everyone would wish for, perhaps, but Isabel, as we know, is averse to ‘more or less coarse-minded members of the opposite sex’. Nothing of that sort about Osmond. And, since he is seventeen years older than Isabel, as well as being immensely civilized and authoritative, there is something of the pupil-teacher, father-daughter relationship that can be so effective when combined with (however refined) sexual possibilities.

Osmond invites Isabel up to his hill-top, as a result of which invitation Madame Merle remarks that Isabel had been just ‘charming... as one would have wished you’, receiving the tart reply, ‘I’m under no obligation that I know of to charm Mr Osmond.’ At which Madame

Merle begins one of her 'dear child' routines, saying that she *really* meant that she thought Isabel liked *him*. 'I did,' says Isabel. 'But I don't see what that matters, either.' Clearly, this fish is going to be a difficult one to net.

The great visit takes place. Isabel stays talking to Osmond while Madame Merle advances to greet Pansy and the Countess Gemini, Osmond's sister. Over tea, Osmond emphasizes his 'studied... wilful renunciation' of life (in direct contrast, we note, to what Isabel believes). She herself supplies 'the human element which she was sure had not been wanting'. Of course, it *had* been wanting, as the reader knows full well. We are increasingly aware of a dramatic irony; the villain's movements are obvious to all but the heroine.

While Osmond is having 'this sufficiently intimate colloquy (prolonged for some time after we cease to follow it)', Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini are sniping away at each other ([chapter XXV](#)). The Countess likes Isabel, and on her behalf does not appreciate the prospect of being married to her brother; she tells Madame Merle that she is going to warn Isabel. The two harpies fall to talking of the impossibly submissive and malleable Pansy, significantly referred to earlier as a 'pearl' – no doubt with *The Scarlet Letter* in mind, since not only the name but the adulterous (we later learn) circumstances fit.

The necessity of assuming his best face makes Osmond 'a delightful associate'. He is in good humour because the only fault he can see in Isabel (presumably apart from that mentioned earlier of having 'too many ideas') is that she is 'sometimes of too precipitate a readiness'. Without that fault 'she would have been as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm'. He actually writes a sonnet entitled 'Rome Revisited', so contented is this man for whom (marvellous phrase) 'the fertilizing dew of a conceivable felicity too seldom descended on his spirit'. James is at his best when dwelling on the dubious attributes of Osmond. For example: 'His "style" was what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble.'

Before Isabel is rescued by Mrs Touchett there occurs a significant conversation with Osmond, in which Isabel acts in a way entirely inconsistent with the character of the self-confident girl who had arrived at Gardencourt from Albany. 'You see my ignorance, my blunders,' she says childishly, 'the way I wander about as if the world belonged to me, simply because – because it has been put in my power to do so. You don't think a woman ought to do that. You think it bold and ungraceful.' We might say at this point that Osmond has done a superb job on the poor girl; but it has been a soft sell. Isabel has, in fact, sold herself, because what Osmond is offering comes nearest to her own idea of what she wants.

It is at this point that her suitor – perhaps even believing it at the moment of utterance, says, 'I find I'm in love with you.' The two look at each other and Osmond repeats, 'I'm absolutely in love with you.' He has chosen the strategic moment. Osmond wants her to do one service for him – to go and see Pansy before she leaves Florence. How cunning the man is: it is Pansy who is the catalyst in this great experiment (see the suggestion in [chapter LIII](#) that Isabel feels forced at the end to return to Rome at least partly because of Pansy). Of Isabel, James says:

The working of this young lady's spirit was strange, and I can only give it to you as I see it, not hoping to make it seem altogether natural. Her imagination, as I say, now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn't cross – a dust

uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. *But she was to cross it yet* [my italics].

In [chapter XXXI](#) we skip a year – informing us, incidentally, that Osmond is having to bide his time. During this period Isabel has taken Madame Merle on a visit to the Near East. Madame Merle ‘as a lady-in-waiting to a princess circulating *incognita*, panted a little in her rear’. Isabel returns to stay with Madame, at which point Gilbert Osmond descends from Florence and remains for three weeks, seeing her every day. Suddenly, Caspar Goodwood re-enters the story. He is shown in, ‘straight, strong and hard’. Isabel’s first words are: ‘I can’t tell you how I hoped you wouldn’t come.’ Most men would be put off by this rudeness, but not Caspar. He has come post-haste, for ‘After what you’ve done I shall never feel anything.’ This is our first intimation that Isabel has actually accepted Osmond (one has to read the text very carefully indeed). Caspar presses Isabel with questions until finally she says, ‘I’m marrying a perfect nonentity.’ ‘You don’t mean in the least that he’s a perfect nonentity,’ says Caspar. ‘You think he’s grand; you think he’s great, though no one else thinks so.’ Isabel refuses to discuss the matter further; but her anger is mixed with doubt:

She had felt pain and displeasure on receiving early that day the news he was in Florence... She had not been betrayed when she saw him; his being there... implied things she could never assent to – rights, reproaches, remonstrances, rebuke, the expectation of making her change her purpose. These things, however, if implied, had not been expressed; and now our young lady, strangely enough, began to resent her visitor’s remarkable self-control. There was a dumb misery about him that irritated her; there was a manly staying of his hand that made her heart beat faster. She felt her agitation rising and she said to herself that she was angry in the way a woman is angry when she has been in the wrong.

What Caspar – and the reader – cannot understand is that ‘you said you’d never marry, and you said it with such a manner that I pretty well believed it’. When he goes, ‘no hand-shaking, no sign of parting, was exchanged between them’. And yet, ‘five minutes after he had gone out, she burst into tears’.

[Chapter XXXIII](#) is one of the book’s crucial chapters. Isabel goes to tell her Aunt Lydia of her decision to marry what the latter calls ‘that man... Madame Merle’s friend – Mr Osmond’. ‘Was it for this you refused Lord Warburton?’ Mrs Touchett quite reasonably wishes to know. ‘There is nothing of Osmond, she points out. Besides, Isabel will be bringing all the money to the match. She suggests that if Isabel wants to give money to Osmond, she would be better advised to do it without marrying him. What Mrs Touchett is most upset about, however, is the duplicity of Madame Merle – the friend who told her that ‘she was watching you only to interpose’. Thus, says Mrs Touchett bitterly, she gained time: ‘While I waited for her to interfere, you were marching away, and she was really beating the drum.’ With this kind of thing being said so explicitly it is astonishing that Isabel does not suspect anything. Once committed, however – and what a hard business it has been – she is obstinately determined.

When Ralph arrives back on the scene, Isabel waits three days for him to say something about her intended marriage, but he feels that:

to try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decidedly discreet only in the event of her being persuaded... Osmond at this moment showed himself little at Palazzo Crescentini; but Isabel met him every day elsewhere...

One day, on her way back from one of these visits, she finds Ralph sitting in the garden. He can hold back no longer, she accuses him of not trusting her. 'I trust you, but I don't trust him,' he replies:

'I confess I haven't facts and items to prove him a villain. But all the same I can't help feeling you are running a great risk... You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue – to be, sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Sudden someone tosses up a faded rosebud – a missile that should never have reached you – and straight you drop, to the ground...'

In [chapter XXXVI](#) we jump to the autumn of 1876. Isabel has been married three years and has already lost a child. Edward Rosier calls on Madame Merle at a small apartment on the third floor of an old Roman house. In the summer of that year Rosier had met, at Saint Moritz, a charming young girl who turns out to be Pansy, she by this time being, presumably about nineteen or twenty. Rosier, who comes to tell Madame Merle that he is in love with the girl and wishes her to intercede with 'the family' and her step-mother, receives the reply

'Mr Osmond's her father, certainly: but his wife can scarcely be termed a member of her family. Mrs Osmond has nothing to do with marrying her.'

Rosier goes to one of Isabel's 'evenings' in the 'dark and massive structure' in which she now lives with her husband in the heart of Rome, the Palazzo Roccanera ('Black Rock'). He tries to speak to Osmond, who gives him 'two fingers of his left hand'. Isabel enters (her first appearance for three years, so we are agog for comment) and we are told that 'the flower of her youth had not faded; it only hung more quietly on its stem. She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception – she had more the air of being able to wait.'

Lord Warburton appears, heavier and older. He has brought Ralph Touchett, who, he senses, is dying. Isabel wants to go to her cousin immediately. She is pleased to see Lord Warburton, but when he says in his hearty way, 'Well now, I suppose you're very happy, and all that sort of thing,' we can see why Isabel could not bring herself to marry him. She is simply too bright a girl, and not only bright but possessing a taste for the sarcastic which sometimes rivals that of Mrs Touchett. 'He must be very clever,' says Lord Warburton, commenting on Osmond's skill in arranging the house. 'He has a genius for upholstery,' says Isabel. Warburton notices a 'dear little maid' talking to a 'rosy young man', and Pansy, like a piece of property to be shown off, is presented by Osmond to the 'English lord'.

At this point, a necessary elucidation of the narrative line calls for some flashbacks and we learn, somewhat to our surprise, that Ralph had been present 'at the ceremony by which Isabel was united to Mr Osmond'. However, Ralph has seen nothing of Isabel for two years. He feels that he has been a fool to put her on her guard; there would have been more communication between them if he had simulated 'delight in her union'. Isabel wears an expression of 'fixed and mechanical' serenity:

There was a kind of violence in some of her impulses, of crudity in some of her experiments, which took him by surprise; it seemed to him that she even spoke faster, moved faster, breathed faster than before her marriage. Certainly, she had fallen into exaggerations – she who used to care so much for the pure truth... Of old she had been curious, and now she was indifferent, and yet in spite of her indifference her activity was greater than ever... Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament... she represented Gilbert Osmond... Osmond was in her

element; at last he had material to work with... Osmond lived exclusively for the world... Everything he did was *pose* – *pose* so subtly considered that... one mistook it for impulse... It had made him feel great... to play the world a trick... the gullible world was in a manner embodied in poor Isabel...

The pace quickens: ‘Isabel had had three years to think over Mrs Touchett’s theory that Madame Merle had made Gilbert Osmond’s marriage.’ Her view was that, if this was so, ‘she had certainly not made Isabel Archer’s’. James refers (and how frequently we find this metaphor, which also occurs in the case of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*) to Isabel’s ‘poor winged spirit’, which ‘had always had a great desire to do its best’ and therefore had not sought revenge for any suspected wrong done to her. She had been a free agent; there had been no plot. When a woman had made such a mistake, ‘there was only one way to repair it – just immensely (oh, with the highest grandeur!) to accept it’.

Pansy accompanies Isabel on the walks she likes so much. On her way back from one of these, Isabel surprises Osmond and Madame Merle in an attitude which betokens much greater intimacy than she had supposed: Madame Merle is standing while Osmond is sitting. The talk turns to Pansy. ‘If you wouldn’t marry Lord Warburton yourself,’ Madame Merle tells her, ‘make him the reparation of helping him to marry someone else.’ Osmond pursues the matter with Isabel. Their conversation – given the ‘niceness’ of the earlier part of the novel – is distressingly acid. ‘My daughter has only to sit perfectly still to become Lady Warburton,’ says Osmond, adding that ‘The moment you really wish it you can bring him to the point.’ These words cause ‘deep vibrations’ in Isabel. Was Lord Warburton pretending to be in love with Pansy in order to be near Isabel herself? It is evening; Isabel sits by her dying fire, her soul ‘haunted with terrors’:

she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end... it was if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one... She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel: she simply believed he hated her... He had discovered that she was so different, that she was not what he had believed she would prove to be. He had thought at first he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he would like... He had succeeded because he had been sincere; it never occurred to her now to deny him that. She admired her... because she was the most imaginative woman he had known.

This is the chapter (XLII) which James thought ‘obviously the best thing in the book’. Isabel’s cheeks burn. Did she really marry in order to do something ‘finely appreciable’ with her money? Her giving herself to Osmond was an act of devotion, until ‘he said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them’. From that time on, her dwelling had seemed a house of darkness (*vide* the Palazzo Roccanera). ‘Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers.’ They both loved ‘the aristocratic life’ but whereas for Isabel it ‘was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty’, for Osmond ‘it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude’. When she had felt Osmond’s ‘rigid system close about her’ (cf. her reaction to Lord Warburton’s ‘system’) she had resisted, only to arouse his scorn. The real offence:

as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his – attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers... He had expected his wife to feel with him and for him...

This perhaps would have been tolerable but for the fact that among the things she was required to 'take in' were some 'that were hideously unclean'. 'Were all women expected to have lovers? Were there only three or four that didn't deceive their husbands? Did they all lie, and even the best have their price?'

Despite these thoughts, we find that even by [chapter XLV](#) – with the novel nearly at an end – Isabel 'had not as yet undertaken to act in direct opposition' to Osmond's wishes: 'he was her appointed and inscribed master; she gazed at moments with a sort of incredulous blankness at this fact'. She had no wish to violate:

all the traditional decencies and sanctities of marriage. The idea of violating them filled her with shame as well as with dread, for on giving herself away she had lost sight of this contingency in the perfect belief that her husband's intentions were as generous as her own... almost anything seemed preferable to repudiating the most serious act – the single sacred act – of her life.

Osmond is characteristically surly when Lord Warburton does not appear: 'What does he mean by treating one like a tradesman with a bill?' Finally, Isabel is driven to say, 'If you really wish to lay hands on Lord Warburton you must lay them yourself,' only to receive the reply, 'That won't be easy, with you working against me.' We are in an arena of accusation and counter-accusation so unbelievably nasty in the light of Isabel's nature and career that it is a wonder she can put up with it so calmly. 'You've played a very deep game; you've managed it beautifully' – Osmond insults her in such a manner that he breaks down the last vestige of her loyalty: 'He was going down – down; the vision of such a fall made her almost giddy: that was the only pain. He was too strange, too different; he didn't touch her...' When he accuses her of stopping a hypothetical letter from Lord Warburton about Pansy, she bursts out with: 'Oh, Gilbert, for a man who was so fine–!'

Isabel learns from Henrietta Stackpole that Caspar Goodwood had come to Rome three days after Lord Warburton had left. He still represents a 'threat' in a way that Lord Warburton has never done:

He had bumped against her prow... while her hand was on the tiller and... had given the lighter vessel a strain which she occasionally betrayed itself in a faint creaking.

Caspar starts coming to Isabel's 'Thursdays', and Osmond, to Isabel's amazement, takes a fancy to him, expressing surprise that she did not marry him: 'It would have been... like living under some tall belfry which would strike all the hours and make a queer vibration in the upper air.' He is made so much a part of the household that Isabel dares to ask a favor of him: to go and see Ralph. He goes, finds Henrietta there, and Isabel conceives the plan of persuading him to take Ralph away.

This is exactly what happens: 'It's the golden age,' exclaims Ralph, when Henrietta says she is coming, too. Henrietta sees Isabel as 'the stricken deer', and urges her to leave her husband. Isabel regards this suggestion as 'off-hand', and such is the persistence of James on this point that the reader senses something more than a cleaving to old-fashioned values. It is nothing so simple as loyalty – certainly not to Osmond, nor even to the 'sacred institution' of marriage. It is, we are reminded, pride which is at the heart of Isabel's difficulties. She cannot admit to the world that she, Isabel Archer, was wrong in mistaking the fool's gold of Gilbert

Osmond for the real thing. There is another consideration too, which is that even after he has shown himself at his most base and petty-minded, she cannot forget the charm and courtesy, the sparkling attractiveness, which is the other side of his personality.

As Caspar Goodwood leaves with Ralph, Osmond informs him in his princely way that he 'the most modern man we know', in spite of the contamination of his commercial background. We are told that Caspar 'scarcely knew what Osmond was talking about', but we can hardly, in view of Goodwood's intelligence, accept this piece of stage instruction. What we *can* believe is that Caspar was full of 'dull rage' when he heard the insidious little man 'speak of his wife's feelings as if he were commissioned to answer for them'. Moreover, he had gained nothing from his visit. Isabel was 'imperturbable, inscrutable, impenetrable'. Osmond keeps on emphasizing, to Caspar's mounting irritation, his togetherness with Isabel:

'my wife and I do so many things together. We read, we study, we make music, we walk, we drive – we talk, even, as when we first knew each other. I delight, to this hour, in my wife's conversation...'

Madame Merle comes back to congratulate – she mistakenly believes – Lord Warburton on proposing to Pansy. Isabel, who had no idea of her 'zealous interest in Pansy's marriage', is alarmed by her intensity. She begins, at long last, to perceive the truth: 'Madame Merle's interest was identical with Osmond's.' Madame Merle's conduct now gets completely out of hand. 'Your husband judges you severely,' she says to Isabel. 'Let him off – let us have him.' Madame Merle has never gone as far as this. Isabel, aghast, says ' "What have you to do with my husband?" It was strange that for the moment she drew as near to him as if she had loved him.' She falters: 'What have you to do with me?' 'Everything,' answers Madame Merle. Isabel asks herself:

with an almost childlike horror of the supposition, whether to this intimate friend of several years the great historical epithets of *wicked* were to be applied... Perhaps it was not wicked – in the historic sense – to be even deeply false; for that was what Madame Merle had been – deeply, deeply, deeply... Madame Merle... had brought about the union of her two friends; a reflection which could not fail to make it a matter of wonder that she should so much have desired such an event... She had... a conception of gain, and Isabel asked herself where she had found her profit... She found herself confronted... with the conviction that the man in the world she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her, like a vulgar adventurer for her money... Strange to say, it had never before occurred to her... A man might marry a woman for her money... But at least he should let her know... Would he take her money and let her go?

The remarkable thing about this interior monologue is the quite extraordinary naivety, or, you like, the archetypal innocence of its deliverer. She finally pities Madame Merle for having received little thanks from Osmond for all her scheming.

These two are, meanwhile, seated in Madame Merle's salon. The latter cynically remarks to Isabel that 'She seemed in a very simple, almost in a stupid state of mind. She was completely bewildered.' Madame Merle goes on: 'Your wife was afraid of me this morning, but in me it was really you she feared.' The chapter (XLIV) ends on one of those classic Jamesian locutions: "Have I been so vile all for nothing?" she vaguely wailed.'

At her father's request. Pansy has apparently given up all idea of marrying young Ned Rosier, who ironically has sold all his bibelots ('I have the money, instead – fifty thousand dollars. Will Mr Osmond think me rich enough now?'). Osmond decides to send her back to

the convent:

‘One’s daughter should be fresh and fair; she should be innocent and gentle. With the manners of the present time she liable to become so dusty and crumpled. Pansy’s a little dusty, a little dishevelled...’

Isabel receives a telegram from Mrs Touchett announcing Ralph’s impending death and on impulse decides to go to him. Osmond wishes her not to; her opposition to him, he says, is ‘calculated’. However, he speaks in such a way that another dimension of his character is revealed. When Isabel tells him, ‘You’ve no reason for such a wish... It’s your own opposition that’s calculated. It’s malignant’:

the sensation of hearing it was evidently new to Osmond... she knew that between them they had arrived at a crisis... went on: ‘You say I’ve no reason? I have the very best... It’s dishonourable; it’s indelicate; it’s indecent... I’ve an ideal of what my wife should do and should not do. She should not travel across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire, to sit at the bedside of other men. Your cousin’s nothing to you... You are nearer to me than any other human creature, and I’m nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it’s one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making... I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing...’

Osmond could not have touched Isabel more nearly:

His last words... constituted a kind of appeal... they represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s country. He spoke in the name of something sacred and precious...

Here we approach the dénouement of the tale. The Countess Gemini tells Isabel that there is something she ought to know: ‘My first sister-in-law had no children.’ Pansy is her husband’s child, but ‘someone else’s wife’s’. Osmond’s wife had indeed died, but ‘It wasn’t till after her death that Pansy arrived.’ Osmond had to ‘fit on afterwards the whole rigmarole of his own wife’s having died in childbirth... The story passed sufficiently... But, of course, *I* knew – without researches... as also, you’ll understand, without a word said between us.’ When the Countess says that ‘the real mother, to save *her* skin, renounced all visible property in the child’, Isabel bursts into tears. ‘He must have been false to his wife – and so very soon she continues, and the Countess replies, ‘That’s all that’s wanting – that you should take up *her* cause.’ Isabel wants to know whether he has been faithful to *her* – a question she would never have allowed herself to ask before. She cannot now leave the matter alone: ‘Why then did she want him to marry me?’ and ‘Why did Osmond never marry her?’ are her next two questions – to which the replies are, respectively: because Isabel had money and Madame Merle thought that she would be good to Pansy, and, second, because Madame Merle did *not* have money. The Countess plunges on: ‘the only tangible result she has ever achieved – except, of course, getting to know everyone and staying with them free of expense – has been her bringing you and Osmond together.’ Isabel is rendered weak and dizzy by these revelations, which constitute the classical untying of the knot.

Isabel visits Pansy before leaving Rome and meets Madame Merle at the convent. She realizes that ‘Madame Merle had guessed in the space of an instant that everything was at an end between them’. There is one more thing to be revealed, however: ‘it was your uncle’s money, but it was your cousin’s idea. He brought your father over to it.’ Madame Merle announces her intention of going to America – a radical act, which must signify some enormous change in her thinking. She is turning her back on a place and a relationship which

has steeped her in vileness, perhaps? She is purifying herself by returning to the clean, if dull air of Protestant America.

Isabel travels to England in a state of agitation. There is nothing to regret now except, possibly, 'that Madame Merle had been so – well, so unimaginable'. She herself wants to go 'further away than little grey-green England'. Henrietta questions her closely. Did Osmond make a scene about her leaving? Why did she promise Pansy to go back? (This has not been put in so many words before.) As light relief we learn that the very modern Henrietta has, after five years, agreed to marry the amenable and aristocratically connected Mr Bantling 'and locate right here in London'.

But there is no lightness at Gardencourt. Mrs Touchett appears looking like 'a queen-regent or the matron of a gaol'. When she announces that Ralph's has not been a successful life, Isabel says 'No – it has only been a beautiful one.' 'There's no beauty without health,' snaps Mrs Touchett, that fountain of common sense. We learn that Lord Warburton is engaged to be married to a 'Lady Flora, Lady Felicia – something of that sort'. Isabel looks wan at this news not through jealousy but because 'her imagination had traversed half Europe; it halted, panting, and even trembling a little, in the city of Rome. She figured herself announcing to her husband that Lord Warburton was to lead a bride to the altar.' 'I should like to ask you three questions,' says Mrs Touchett. Does she regret not marrying Lord Warburton?

'No, dear aunt.' Does she still like Serena Merle?

'Not as I once did. But it doesn't matter, for she's going to America.'

'To America? She must have done something very bad.'

'Yes – very bad.'

'May I ask what it is?'

'She made a convenience of me.'

Two things are significant about this exchange. The first is the mildness of Isabel's comment. The second is the now stated motivation for Madame Merle's self-imposed penance in going back to that country from which all civilized persons (at least in the 1870s) flee: she simply cannot bear to face Isabel any more.

At last Isabel is able to see Ralph; he knows she has come, without anyone telling him. She stays with him for days at a time, although he cannot speak. In what might otherwise – but for the singularity of the protagonists – be a conventionally sentimental Victorian death-bed scene, Isabel, for the first time since we have met her, truly breaks down. This happens after Ralph tells her, 'I wish it were over for you.' Isabel can do nothing but sob, her face in her hands. Then Ralph makes the odd remark, 'Ah, what is it you have done for me?' He presumably means that in giving her the money he has made her dance to his tune. 'I believe I ruined you,' he 'wails'. 'He married me for the money,' she admits. Ralph receives his greatest shock when he asks, 'It is all over between you?' and Isabel replies, 'Oh no; I don't think anything's over.' So she is planning to return to Rome, after all. '“If you've been hated you've also been loved. Ah, but Isabel – *adored!*” he just audibly and lingeringly breathed.' 'Oh my brother!' she cries, 'with a movement of still deeper prostration.'

We are now at the last chapter. Isabel wakes in the early morning: 'It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there – a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room'

(we remember the significant 'ghost' reference in [chapter V](#)). Ralph is dead. At the funeral Caspar Goodwood looks 'somewhat *harder* than he usually looked in public' (my italics). Isabel feels the necessity of returning to Rome. Osmond:

was not one of the best husbands, but that didn't alter the case. Certain obligations were involved in the very fact marriage, and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it.

Again, disappointing but in character, given Isabel's cleaving to her particular (ironically, also Osmond's) idea of honour. She will not, she cannot, cut and run; we know her too well to expect her to do so.

However, she bides her time at Gardencourt, thus allowing James, the puppet-master, to decide what her last encounters in England will be. He chooses to make Lord Warburton her first visitor since – with Ralph dead and Osmond the *victor ludorum* in Rome – only he and Caspar remain. Warburton must be decently disposed of since he is engaged, and a threat no longer. Or is he? He is obviously disconcerted by the encounter, not knowing whether or no Isabel has left Osmond. 'I'm not here for long, you know,' says Isabel, 'with a certain eagerness'. Warburton seems unable to let her go; he wants her to promise to stay at Lockleigh at Whitsuntide. Isabel once more feels 'sorry for him'. His manner, in fact, is such that, when he has gone, Isabel asks, 'Are you very sure he's to be married?' 'I congratulated him, and he accepted it,' says Mrs Touchett. 'Ah,' says Isabel, 'I give it up!' But it is, of course, very clear that Lord Warburton has not given it up. 'Lady Flora, Lady Felicia' – these are but substitutes; he will always be in love with Isabel.

So will Caspar Goodwood, who arrives upon the scene again in a manner entirely unlike that of sheepish Lord Warburton. Coincidentally, Isabel is standing by the same rustic bench that she had been sitting on six years before, 'when a servant brought her from the house the letter in which Caspar Goodwood informed her that he had followed her to Europe'. And while she stands there the past comes back to her 'in one of those rushing waves of emotion by which persons of sensibility are visited at odd hours'. She then sinks into the seat, overcome, only to see Caspar standing before her. She starts to rise, but he grasps her by the wrist 'with a motion that looked like violence, but felt like – she knew not what'. 'You've frightened me,' says Isabel; she has 'a feeling of danger'. Caspar is excited; he has come to help her. 'You're the most unhappy of women, and your husband's the deadliest of fiends.' She turns on him 'as if he had struck her'. 'Are you mad?' she cries. But Caspar persists:

I understand all about it: you're afraid to go back. You're perfectly alone; you don't know where to turn. You can't turn anywhere; you know that perfectly. Now it is therefore that I want you to think of *me*.

Isabel repeats his words:

The idea of which she had caught a glimpse a few moments before now loomed large... she stared at it as if it had been a comet in the sky.

Goodwood (it is worth noting that James never calls him 'Caspar') goes on, 'Why should you go back – why should you go through that ghastly form?'

'To get away from *you!*' she answered. But this expressed only a little of what she felt. The rest was that she had never been loved before. She had believed it, but this was different; this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which t

others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet, while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth.

This is about as good a description of complete sexual arousal as one could find in the Victorian novel – even down to the symbolic forcing-open of her ‘set teeth’. And it is the more remarkable, considering the nature of James’s own sensibility, that he should be able to be so explicit. Isabel floats ‘in fathomless waters’. She believes that ‘to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying. This belief, for the moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink.’ In answer to her request that he should leave her alone:

He glared [James’s favourite verb for Caspar] at her for a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arm about her. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing of his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession.

That does it, however. Caspar has gone too far, and Isabel knows that there is ‘a very straight path’, which, of course, leads to Rome. The last word is with Henrietta. ‘Look here, Mr Goodwood,’ she says, ‘just you wait!’ Caspar thinks at first that she is giving him encouragement, but all she means is that he is young. Only one small ray of hope is left: ‘She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience.’

Despite the engrossing events of ‘the last five instalments’ after Isabel’s marriage (see James’s notebook entry; in the event there were six), *The Portrait of a Lady* seems over-long. The earlier sections drag. It was this which agitated Howells so much as he received the first instalments from Florence. There is too much humming and ha-ing over Isabel’s situation, too much repetition – albeit beautifully done, and designed to show the different facets of Isabel in the mirror of her encounters. And as for Isabel herself, we have, as Rebecca West said, ‘the sense of having met somebody far too radiantly good for this world’.*

This is true, but there is something more than that, even. Whatever the sternest critics say about the fallacy of identification, we like to have some point of contact with the hero or heroine. Isabel is all head and no heart – like, as Sartre said, ‘a winged bust’. She is not, on the other hand, a frigid woman. She is capable of deep sexual passion, though it is obvious that she has obtained no satisfaction from Osmond, child or no child; her love for him has always been, as D. H. Lawrence put it, ‘in the head’. Warburton merely excites her pity. Ralph comes closest to providing the right combination, but he is ill and a relation. Goodwood offers her all the sexual excitement she can take, but his mistake is that he wants to possess her. Besides, she does not respect his mind enough; she needs a finer sensibility.

I have concentrated in these comments on the ebb and flow of the novel. But, of course, there is much to dwell on if the types, themes and symbols are considered. Lord Warburton is surrounded by references to broken columns and dying gladiators. By contrast, Caspar Goodwood is always ‘hard’. There is the cracked cup, which Osmond handles and Madame Merle picks up. Other recurring symbols are armour and similar references to war (including besieged castles); dancing and dance music; picking and wearing flowers; dark alleys and houses (as prisons); masks; hunting; gardens; hills and mountains; birds and flying; *objets*

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