

Isabel Archer, one of Henry James's passionate pilgrims

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Henry James (1843-1916) was born in New York and studied in Geneva, London, and Paris until 1875 when he finally settled in Europe to become later an English citizen. The prolific writer has been considered one of the pioneers of what is now termed “American literary Realism”, which was characterized by the acute examination of character instead of the traditional emphasis on the sequence of plot schemes (Cunliffe, 1973). Thus, one of the most prominent subject matters of the realist novel is the examination of character in difficult situations or in unfamiliar social contexts that lay bare the character's moral weaknessesⁱ.

James's concept of “character” became a key aspect in his work, a concept that echoed his brother William's notion of personality that maintained that “character is formed by an accretion of innumerable moral choices; character is a construction that becomes ‘permanent’ through sheer force of habit” (Crowley, 1999). It is precisely the array of moral choices that an individual is confronted with that helps understand a most complex character such as Isabel Archer, the heroine in what is regarded Henry James's finest work: *The Portrait of a Lady* (1885).

In Andrew Lawson's analysis of the modern American novel, the critic emphasizes James's unfaltering zeal to break with the traditional realist novel. In fact, he cites James's review of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) in which James praises the novel as “vast, swarming and deep-coloured” but also as “treated with too much refinement and too little breadth. It revolves too constantly on the same pivot; it abounds in fine shades, but it lacks, we think, the great dramatic *chiaroscuro*”ⁱⁱ (emphasis in the original).

James meant to go beyond those standards hitherto established by Eliot. He focused the novel's foremost conflict within the main character's mind: he sought to create “some direct impression of perception of life,” (Matthews, 2009: 142).

The Portrait of a Lady novel narrates the story of an American orphan who is taken to Europe by her rich and independent aunt, Mrs. Touchett. Once there, she gets in

contact with her aunt's husband and her cousin Ralph. She's also introduced to Lord Wardburton, whose marriage proposal, Isabel would later turn down since she is too fond of her free and independent life. As it is expected, the young American girl is soon dazzled by the exquisite lifestyle she encounters, a lifestyle she would soon get used to as she later inherits her uncle's fortune, an event that would certainly transform her life.

James Berkman has perceived a pattern of correlations between *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Middlemarch* in terms of setting, plot and charactersⁱⁱⁱ. According to the scholar, James rewrote the Victorian novelist's text and tried to purge it from what he considered its main flaw, i.e. having "wasted" an exceptional heroine.

Despite the parallelism Berkman identifies between the two novels, James's chief source of inspiration seems to revolve around the American vs. European theme. *A Passionate Pilgrim* -a novella also written by Henry James- was first published fourteen years before *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the narrative, the writer introduces the clash between American and European morals and standards. The title also makes reference to an anthology of twenty poems *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), attributed to William Shakespeare. The idea of "pilgrim" does, of course, bring to mind the first settlers in Massachusetts, although in James's dramas, the pilgrims' journey is reversed. These pioneers landed on a vast, free and primeval territory, and -because of this fact, together with the possibility of starting afresh- have quite often been compared to Adam in paradise (e.g. Emerson, Lewis, Madsen). Emerson would establish the parallelism by announcing: "Here's for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine Self against the whole world". Isabel is the embodiment of this myth.

The protagonist of *A Portrait of a Lady* bears several Adamic traits, as many other American heroes. She is endowed very early in life with the personality traits and the socio-economic prospects that could easily translate into success. She is clever, confident, intelligent, independent and -thanks to her cousin's generosity- wealthy. This bright girl from Albany is one of James's "passionate pilgrims" on the long list of his international characters who are sent to the Old World just to get trapped in it.

As Howell Daniels points out, James created the characterization of the "international subject", someone who was historically immersed in the period after the Civil War (1865): "for negative as well as for positive reasons, he deliberately placed his

American characters in a European context [...] in order to examine the behavior of certain representative individuals in an environment at once familiar and alien” (1973: 276). In James’s opinion, in Europe, the American character was susceptible to be influenced and shaped due to the “fresh” and “natural” quality of his mind and spirit. In Poirier’s words, these heroes were open and willing to explore “the possibilities of their own characters”. In his essay, “The Prey of all the Patriotisms”, Daniels warns us against the oversimplification of equating Americans to “innocence” and Europeans to “experience”, which could easily be backed up with the array of characters depicted in *The Portrait of a Lady*- we should not forget that Gilbert Osmond and Madam Merle, the villains in Isabel’s life, are Americans.

Isabel is the independent, goal-oriented, overconfident American idealist who openly declares: “I can do what I choose...I wish to choose my fate and know something of the human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me” (James, 1885:148). Even after having gotten acquainted with the European standards and having inherited some of her uncle’s money, tenacious Isabel keeps defying social conventions. She is introduced to Lord Warburton, a member of the aristocracy, who is from the very beginning captivated by the young American girl. Lord Warburton soon proposes to her. Nevertheless, to everybody’s surprise, she turns down his marriage proposal, a decision that seems to anticipate the bad choices she would keep on making throughout her life. She further challenges her family’s views and expectations by marrying Mr. Osmond, described mainly as a dilettante.

Ruland and Bradbury would describe her as “the free young girl determined ‘to see, to try, to know.’ Set in motion through three European countries-a green-lawned England, a socialite France, and aesthetic Italy-she endures as an emblem of hope until the money that is to set her free becomes her downfall” (1991: 215). Isabel feels she can approach life without being attached to socio-cultural constraints. The young American idealist feels she can act and conduct herself beyond societal mandates and restrictions. This is precisely, the connection that will bring Isabel and Osmond together. As Howell asserts, these two characters share “an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude towards experience” (282), which is eloquently voiced by Isabel when she proclaims she is not to be identified or defined by the clothes she wears or any other object that belongs to her.

However, the money she inherits gives her the means to explore life as she wanted to but it will also give her a load she will not easily get rid of.

It is worth noting what Dietmar Schloss reveals in *Culture and Criticism in Henry James* (1992) as to James's thoughts about American women. According to the critic, James believed women from the US were meant to have an extraordinary destiny but, by a twist of fate, they did not meet those expectations. In the same analysis, he also states that, in James's view, these women strongly held liberal beliefs that eventually turned against them.

Thanks to her wealth, Isabel becomes learned as to what beauty and art are concerned but her broad travelling and active social life by no means shield her from being deceived. James contraposes, as he also does in "Daisy Miller" (1878), the innocence and boldness of the New World to its experienced and mature counterpart, Europe. In fact, Benn Michaels judges Isabel Archer as someone who sees her belongings as "barriers", barriers that are not broken since for the critic "there is no Emersonian triumph of the internal over the external (Matthews, 2009:142).

Ironically, the young heroine is manipulated, as we have already pointed out, by two other Americans, Mr. Osmond and his former lover, Madame Merle, who after having lived too long in Europe, had forgotten the American traditional values. However, the reader wonders how Isabel -despite the vast realm of life experiences she undergoes- remains unaware. Her arrogance seems to be a sort of tragic flaw that can only lead to her downfall. Once she has fallen, voicing, perhaps, the reader's thoughts, her dying cousin distressingly exclaims:

I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future, I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily or so soon. ... You seemed to be soaring far up in the blue- to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly someone tosses up a faded rosebud – a missile that should never have reached you- and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me. Hurts me as if I had fallen myself (James, 1885: 395).

As to the question above posed in connection to Isabel's lack of alertness, we might grasp some answers from the meaning Henry James ascribed to experience and the consequent effect on an individual's mind and soul: "nothing else than the awareness of an achieved communion: man's apprehension of himself [...] in his social being" (Lewis, 1955: 193). However, through her life, Isabel seems not to realize her attachments as a socio-historical being as she strives to stay unrestrained by them. Isabel's fall is, undoubtedly, the moment she stops evading the full "apprehension" of herself and its social implications and comes face to face with evil, a moment dissected in her mind in the emotional and psychological turmoil of the famous chapter 42:

It was not her fault -she had practised no deception; she had only admired and believed. She had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure. It was her deep distrust of her husband- this was what darkened the world (James, 1885:474).

The complexities of Isabel Archer's mind do not stop perplexing the reader after that night she keeps vigil: even after discovering she has been manipulated and betrayed, she makes one final choice and stoically accepts the mistake she had made accepting Mr. Osmond's proposal. She goes one step further and, surprisingly, decides to stay within "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" that her husband erects for her. Later, she confesses the true reasons of her last choice:

I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I much rather die. I don't know what much unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can't change that way (James, 1885: 536).

By contemporary and even nineteenth century standards, it is a challenge to common sense to understand the now middle-aged woman's choice, although, it should be granted, her proud resolution encloses some hues of atonement. The idealist American woman might be, once more, trying to shun responsibility of what a fully independent life implies in the same way she did as regards the load money meant for her, the core reason for her decision to marry Osmond:

At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world? (James, 1885: 476).

Later, she admits...

Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one the sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment (James, 1885: 480).

However, her incapacity to discern and her ignorance of human nature betray her plans. The imprisonment to which she submits turns her plans overwhelmingly ironic.

Certainly, her determination and the development of the novel's central consciousness takes on significance through Henry James's understanding of the Adamic myth in which he privileged the mature and experienced after-the-fall hero over the untested Adam (Lewis, 1955: 59). The writer from New York city believed the attractive and flawless image of prelapsarian Adam was devoid of human qualities. He also thought that individuals could accomplish "Divine manhood and dignity" through suffering and tragedy since thereafter the Fall, an improvement upon the self, took place: "...the transformation of the soul in its journey from innocence to conscience: the soul's realization of itself under the impact of and by engagement with evil, the tragic rise born of the fortunate fall" (Lewis, 1955: 122).

From the novel we should then infer that although the passionate pilgrim from Albany remains innocent through most of her life, her heroic deed does not only lie in her learning to resiliently cope with evil but in the complete apprehension of herself as bound to the social milieu.

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Notes

ⁱ Cited from "Early Literary Modernism", by Andrew Lawson, *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900-1950*, John T. Mattheus (ed.) 2009.

ⁱⁱ First printed in the *Galaxy* (March 1873): 424-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: "Eliot Rewritten, James Revisited: A Streak of Roman Sunlight Reveals the Real Inspiration for *The Portrait of a Lady*", by James Berkman.
