

Pursuer of Freedom, or Prisoner of Mind -- A New Study of the Theme “Freedom” in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract: As one of the important themes in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), “freedom” has drawn the attention of many scholars; however, few critics have ever explored the theme of “freedom” from the dimension of Isabel’s mind. From the perspective of the protagonist’s divided self, this paper aims to illustrate the colonization of Isabel’s mind by literary imagination and patriarchal ideology, thus drawing the conclusion that Isabel is in effect the prisoner of her own mind even though she tries to pursue the abstract freedom unlimited by any exterior conditions.

Key Words: *The Portrait of a Lady*; freedom; literary imagination; patriarchal ideology; discipline

The Portrait of a Lady (1881), a transitional novel in Henry James’s literary career, is called by David Daiches “the first of James’s full-length novels to illustrate clearly and successfully what he was trying to achieve in his fiction” (573). It occupies a significant position in the nineteenth century Western canon of literature for the complexity of its themes, the use of sophisticated narrative technique, the elaborate structure of the novel, as well as “the artfulness of its conception and execution” (Porte 1). In his landmark essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884), Henry James asserts the interdependence of “character” and “incident”. He might have intended to argue for the reciprocity of the two major elements in a novel, but nevertheless character emerges on the dominant side in this relationship: character is defined as “determination of the incident,” whereas the latter, incident, merely functions as the “illustration of character” (12).

This emphasis on character by James is best exemplified in his ground-breaking novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, a novel of character instead of incident. Isabel Archer, the protagonist of the novel, is at the center of the entire novel, whose consciousness and point of view, rather than the development of plot, eventually attract more of the reader’s attention. Beginning as a girl dreaming of an expansive world and personal freedom and independence, Isabel ends up trapped in convention. Isabel appears to be a pursuer of freedom, however, the author’s delineation of her character and the development of her consciousness in the novel both demonstrate that she is rather a prisoner of her own mind, since it is her inclination towards quiet and retreat in her sub-consciousness that takes the upper hand in her self-divided character.

After coming back to Gardencourt to visit the dying Ralph, Isabel, “ground in the mill of the conventional . . . envied Ralph his dying, for if one were thinking of rest that was the most perfect of all” (607). Echoing Keats who is obsessed with the sweetness of death in his “Ode to a Nightingale”, she thinks that “to cease utterly, to give it all up and not know anything more—this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land” (607). Her longing for an eternal rest gives evidence of her “divided self” (Schneider 56). However, it is not until now that Isabel’s self becomes divided; rather, from the very beginning, she has shown the tendency towards quiet and sequestration. When she is first found by Mrs. Touchett in Albany, it seems to her aunt that Isabel has locked herself away in the musty old office of the family home, where she reads and dreams of the outside world. Here Isabel is described as sitting very close to the window but not wishing to look out into the street for fear of destroying the illusion of the outside world which, according to its different moods, may bring the imaginative child delight or terror. “James is careful to describe Isabel’s imagination here . . . so that the reader can see how that imagination accounts for her suffering in the second half of the novel and, in the end, for her new sense of life” (Kirby 32).

As a young girl, Isabel is immensely immersed in her literary world, from which she obtains the pleasure of life and a high taste for beauty. However, literature does not merely have entertaining and didactic functions; it also plays a significant role in one’s perception of reality. In this novel, literature is in fact one of the powers that colonize Isabel’s imagination. “*The Portrait of a Lady*, like many other Jamesian works, insists on literature’s role in shaping the individual and collective imagination by disseminating ideological representations” (Izzo 352). Isabel’s imagination is deeply influenced and even “shaped” by literature. Just as what Henrietta Stackpole has said, she lives too

much in her own dreams. When Stackpole asks Isabel if she knows the destination of her drifting, Isabel answers, “No, I haven’t the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see—that’s my idea of happiness” (219). In this conversation, Isabel makes use of one of the most celebrated images in the novel to express her abstract ideal of happiness and freedom, from which we can sense her romantic temperament and unrealistic outlook on life. It seems that “the world of Isabel’s habitation has been a figment of her imagination, a world of no substance” (Rawlings 75). What she does in life appears to be out of her own will, but nevertheless it is actually already predetermined by some conventional ideas in her imagination. She is just like a character coming out of a novel, who performs her social roles according to the conventional ethics in the book.

As already mentioned, Isabel desires to lead an authentically free and independent life that transcends any restrictions of exterior circumstances. What she is pursuing is actually an authentic existence directed by her own will. Yet, according to Sartre, the existence of an individual is not only for itself, but also for others (293). The presence of others causes one to become a social being, which means that she is an object of others’ gaze apart from being an independent individual. In the world of *The Portrait of a Lady*, eyes and gazes are very important in establishing relationships and influencing one’s identity formation: everyone is both the subject and the object of observation at the same time; however, it is mostly on Isabel that other characters’ gazes focus. Other characters are like spectators surrounding and observing Isabel. Sartre holds that existents (human beings) must maintain a balance between existence and their social roles to become authentic beings (360). Despite Isabel’s claim of independence, she is still restricted in many ways both before and after her marriage. According to Althusser, the subject is a “subjected being ... stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (169). No one, as Althusser tells us, can be completely independent of the control of ideology.

Ralph Touchett wishes to liberate his cousin from the limitations of material need, yet he never frees her from her imagination, which is always colonized by the gender ideology. In many cases, Isabel articulates her wish to be quiet and reclusive, which exhibits the operation of patriarchal ideology in her mind. On meeting the nun-like Misses Molyneux, she tells Ralph, “I think it’s lovely to be so quiet and reasonable and satisfied” (130). After her refusal of Goodwood, she thinks to herself that she only wants to be “still” and to “case herself again in brown holland” (217). Here the words “quiet”, “still” and “holland” reflect her tendency toward passivity and stasis in her deep heart. Furthermore, her final agreement to marry Osmond seems to be attributed to Osmond’s life-long vow “to be as quiet as possible”, which is perhaps one of his strongest appeals to the like-minded Isabel. After her marriage, the images of self-surrender and submissiveness keep appearing in her relationship with Osmond, the perfect representative of the power of a husband in the patriarchal society. Even though she feels rather constrained by her husband, she feels not able to disobey him, “her appointed and inscribed master” (386), which has nothing to do with whether he possesses wealth and status or not. When she hears the news that Ralph is dying, she wants to return to England but must first seek approval from her husband. But of course, Osmond, who dislikes Ralph to the utmost, will not give his approval. “His last words were not a command, they constituted a kind of appeal . . . they represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s country” (446). Apparently, what Osmond is appealing to is Isabel’s sense of responsibility as a wife. Women’s subalternity in society dictates Isabel’s submission to her husband’s will. If not for Countess Gemini’s final revealing of the secret between Osmond and Mme. Merle, Isabel would have remained in Rome and missed her last chance to see her cousin. Meanwhile, despite her wholehearted sympathy towards her stepdaughter, Isabel always asks Pansy to obey her father’s “command” whenever she converses with her, even though this is a violation of Isabel’s own moral conscience. Pansy represents a house angel in the novel; and in some sense, she can be regarded as Isabel’s mirror or her alter ego. Just as her imprisonment reflects Isabel’s entrapment, her submissiveness to her father is also a projection of Isabel’s propensity to conformity. Away from Rome, Isabel seems once more to be faced with a future full of choices, but her final return to Italy can be interpreted as her denial of an alternative life with Goodwood, which is apparently unconventional. Marriage is her constraint, but also her “shell” to encapsulate her “body”. It is in this sense that Isabel’s final decision to go back to Osmond seems to completely correspond with her self-divided character.

The Portrait of a Lady, a novel about freedom and its limitations, centers on the development of the consciousness of a girl who dreams of freedom and independence, but finally finds herself “ground in the very mill of the conventional”(450). Isabel yearns to see life as an affair of spontaneity and choice, but the absolute freedom she is in pursuit of turns out to be an illusionary dream. As a self-absorbed girl, Isabel is

a tragic protagonist, her fatal flaw being her rich imagination, which has been colonized by literature as well as by patriarchal ideology and societal constraints. Spinoza once said that “thinking can only be constrained by thinking” (quoted in Sarter 368). An individual cannot exist outside society; likewise, human freedom exists and is limited. Isabel can never escape the circumscription of the conventional, just as she is always framed in her “portrait” as a lady, as indicated by the title of the novel. The exquisite description of the protagonist’s consciousness contributes greatly to the success of this novel of character as well as its author’s greatness as a master of psychological realist.

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