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Style and Substance: Isabel Archer as a New Type of "Lady"

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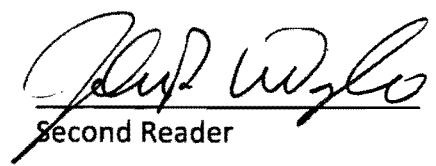
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Abstract

Henry James lived and wrote at a time of transition and great contradictions. In the late nineteenth century, there was a shift from an exploration of the romantic to a greater emphasis on the realistic. Writers began to scrutinize human nature and the concept of freedom, leading to the question: in practical, biological and social terms, are we free or do the circumstances of our own existence negate the idea of freedom? This tension is palpable in the works of Henry James. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a deep exploration of what it means to be a lady, especially in response to the cultural evolution and influences of his time. The ideal lady in nineteenth century America was ornamental, useless, and domesticated. Isabel starts out with the potential to be this ideal, but James sows the seeds of the new woman in her consciousness and he shows how those seeds can grow and flourish despite external limitations. Through Isabel, James portrays the hope of youth, the pain of illusions shattered, the resilience of experience, and the ability to find strength in the face of limitations.

Style and Substance: Isabel Archer as a New Type of “Lady”

Henry James lived and wrote at a time of transition and great contradictions. In the nineteenth century, central figures such as Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud were setting the stage for modern philosophical thought. Marx argued that man’s environment is responsible for his class and such a limitation inscribes within him a need for capital (ie, people are motivated by money). Darwin was interested in biological questions regarding evolution but his theories were also applied to society in the form of Social Darwinism and Naturalism. Freud was revolutionizing human psychology, claiming there is something lurking within – the subconscious. He proposed that unconscious impulses direct our choices and these impulses manifest in ways we can neither control nor understand. The convergence of these biological, psychological and cultural realities produced great anxiety and contributed to the emphasis on determinism and the questioning of the entire idea of choice. Overall, there was a shift from believing man can choose to a feeling that outside forces dictate choice.

These conversations impacted the literary world in America, causing a transition from an exploration of the romantic to a greater emphasis on the realistic. Writers shifted their focus from a celebration of the individual and exaltation of feeling, passion, and experience to a constant pursuit (for better or worse) of objective truth. They scrutinized human nature and the concept of freedom leading to the question: in practical, biological and social terms, are we free or do the circumstances of our own existence negate the idea of freedom? In *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Donald Pizer explores this tension:

...the literature of the age combined the old and the new...it looked both backward and forward. The old consisted of a faith in man's worth and freedom, in his power to choose even if he frequently did not choose well...The realists of the seventies and eighties and the naturalists of the nineties reflected in their novels their age's increasing sense of the limitations imposed upon man by his biological past and his social present. But they also persisted...in dramatizing man as a creature of significance and worth. (xi, xii)

This tension is palpable in the works of Henry James. As Kenneth Graham observes in his biography, *Henry James*, "Throughout his fiction we find an Emersonian emphasis on the value of individual consciousness in conflict with a Hawthornean and Melvillean insight into the destructive and self-destructive depths of individuality" (7-8). This conflict is more poignant in James' writing because he places the focus of his novels on the interior life of his characters. He strips away the outside layers and invites his readers into his characters' internal monologues. James is credited with being the father of the psychological novel specifically because of this stylistic choice.

In addition to these important cultural influences, James was also heavily influenced by his family and upbringing, specifically the nature of his education and the philosophy of his father, Henry James, Sr. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, Jonathan Freedman observes, "Perhaps no greater uniqueness was possessed by Henry than the rich and idiosyncratic family into which he was born and in which he alternately chafed and thrived" (2). Henry James, Sr. and Mary Robertson Walsh James had five children: William, Henry, Garth Wilkinson, Robertson, and Alice. William became an influential philosopher and

psychologist and Henry a dominant literary and critical voice. The James children had an unusual upbringing in the sense that, though educated, they lacked structure as they bounced back and forth between America and Europe, tutors and universities. In his analysis regarding the way Henry, Jr. was raised, Freedman argues that “this experiment placed Henry James thoroughly outside of the dominant cultural institution of his own moment in all of its attitudinal, moral, and social dimensions at precisely the moment of its social institutionalization” (4). His upbringing gave him a unique perspective: he was American but also exposed to other cultures from a young age. This exposure infused an international theme into much of his writing.

Henry James, Sr. embraced the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg as is evident in his philosophic and theological works. Swedenborg was a Swedish philosopher whose spiritual and even mystical writings focused on such ideas as the connection between self-interest and evil. In an editorial note on Henry James, Jr.’s *Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years*, Peter Collister describes the influence of Swedenborg on Henry James, Sr. “HJ, Sr. embraced a liberal perspective in his considerations of human behavior and motive, valuing spontaneity and believing that mankind’s duties were to nature, society, and, finally, God. In his theological writing evil came to be regarded and accepted as an excessive attachment to self” (128). Henry, Jr. was influenced by his father’s beliefs. A critical view of extreme self-interest is evident throughout his literary works and Henry, Jr. himself confessed, “Nothing...could alter the truth of his [HJ, Sr’s] case...he had...a selfless detachment...which I can but marvel at...the stamp was doubtless most vivid, for so differing, so gropingly “esthetic” a mind as my own” (*Notes of a Son*

and Brother and The Middle Years, 131). The so-called “mandarin aesthete” recognized that his very nature craved to internalize the rich philosophic values of his father.

All of these circumstances – environmental and familial – converge in James’ literature. His response to them is expressed in the novella *Daisy Miller* and further explored in one of his most well-known works, *The Portrait of a Lady*. In his earlier work, James experiments with the idea of an American girl abroad. But Daisy is just that, an American girl who James does not fully develop into a lady. Instead, he has her confront the traps of polite society, cause a scandal, and ultimately die. Through *Daisy Miller*, James shows what can happen when new and old world values collide. The initial themes and circumstances explored in *Daisy Miller* are revisited in *The Portrait of a Lady*. But whereas James experiments with the idea of womanhood in *Daisy Miller* and does not quite seem to know what to do with his protagonist, *The Portrait of a Lady* is a much deeper exploration of what it means to be a lady, especially in response to the cultural evolution and influences of his time.

For upper middle class white women in the early part of the nineteenth century, being a lady meant being idle and conforming to strict expectations regarding everything—dress, behavior, and etiquette to name a few. Industrialization and economic growth in America at this time divided male and female responsibilities, especially in the urban northeast. The shift from the farm to the factory meant a shift from the insular family unit (upon which agriculture relied) to a clear separation of roles based on gender. Upper middle class white men were expected to be out in the world, working and earning an income while their women were expected to stay home and tend to domestic issues. In her book, *Women in the United States, 1830-1845*, S.J. Kleinberg notes, “A specific set of economic and demographic circumstances

gave rise to the...cult of domesticity, accentuating female responsibility for home and family” (34). Much of the definition of the ideal lady was tied to the home, and women were characterized by submission to and a focus on domestic affairs.

The ideal lady was a useless ornament, assumed to be physically and emotionally helpless. The quintessential female ailment of the nineteenth century was hysteria. A lady suffering from this malady was ordered to bed rest and complete avoidance of physical or mental stimulation to calm the nerves. A lady became characterized by idleness and illness; she was vulnerable and apt to succumb to external circumstances that could too easily overwhelm her. Many nineteenth-century authors created female characters that collapsed under increasing societal anxieties and limitations. In fact, for many female characters, death, often by their own hands, was the result of the pressure they encountered. In her article, “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” Margaret Higonnet argues: “In the nineteenth century, women’s suicide becomes a cultural obsession...This nineteenth-century reorientation of suicide...seems particularly evident in the literary depiction of women...the suicidal solution is linked to dissolution of the self...” (103, 106). James might have imagined a similarly tragic ending for Isabel. But instead he paints the portrait of a new type of lady, one who is not vanquished by her circumstances.

Although the image of the vulnerable lady was a powerful one, the nineteenth century was also a period of redefining womanhood. In a chapter on ladies’ education in her book, *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, Sara Delamont observes “Ladies were imprisoned in a showy, useless existence...[yet they] spent the nineteenth century...trying to redefine being ladylike...the feminists wanted to be free and to be useful—to be women and

people” (135). The beginning of the feminist movement was rooted in this idea of redefinition, describing what it meant to be a woman or a lady on female terms.

The cult of domesticity idealized motherhood. Mothers were expected to serve as role models and set a moral example, but they were also increasingly expected to provide basic education. This meant they had to be educated themselves. In the upper middle class urban northeast, literacy was on the rise among women. Education that was imagined to produce more effective homemakers also fueled women’s contributions to moral reform and inspired the women’s rights movement. In her book, *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History*, Nancy Woloch describes “The New Woman of the 1890s, who integrated Victorian virtues with an activist social role” (180). The confidence of this new woman began to undercut the traditional ideal lady and her domestic role.

While Isabel is not an activist, James paints her partly in the manner of the new woman. She has all the style that comes with Victorian virtues but she also has substance—she is confident and pushes boundaries. In stark contrast to the representation of the fragile lady, James paints the portrait of a strong woman. Isabel might have collapsed under the weight of her circumstances. But instead of allowing a bad decision and its result to break her, James has Isabel confront her challenges and refuse to be victimized by them. Through Isabel, James emphasizes the value of individuality and freedom of choice while tempering these qualities with her noble and generous nature and a still fairly domesticated role. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James explores a new form of the lady, one that can develop despite the biological, social and psychological limitations of the times.

Much has been written on James and his works have been explored through every critical lens. Criticism specifically dealing with *The Portrait of a Lady* and Isabel Archer spans an equally wide range of subjects. Critics who focus on questions of femininity are divided: some view Isabel as a victim, destined for failure, while others view her as a hero, destined to succeed.

In her article "The Prison of Womanhood," Elizabeth Sabiston argues that Isabel "is the victim not only of the conflict between herself and the external world, but also of a tension between opposites in her own character: an idealism uninformed by knowledge of reality...a thirst for experience coupled with fastidiousness and a tendency to surrender to outside forces" (336). James does illustrate opposites in her character but in doing so he emphasizes her human qualities. He showcases the struggle of becoming a woman as well as the innocence of an American abroad. And though her final decision may be controversial, it is her choice. She, unlike Pansy, is not vanquished in the end. Isabel sacrifices, but she does so on her own terms.

In her article "The American Galatea," Judith Montgomery argues that Isabel's choice at the end of the novel "is between fulfillment of the self and fulfillment of the image. By introducing as her only remaining future a life of lust with Caspar Goodwood, James forces Isabel consistently into a role as object...As such a woman, Isabel must choose only the fulfillment of the image" (896). But Isabel is not purely an image and her choice is not solely motivated by a desire to maintain appearances. She is not the traditional fragile lady figure; she has substance she will not sacrifice. She does choose to return to her marriage knowing that she will never live up to her husband's expectations. But she makes this choice while embracing her own expectations of herself as a lady. Three factors contribute to her choice: her respect

for propriety, her love for Pansy, and her desire to be useful. While the first two motivations are characteristic of the traditional ideal lady, the third is characteristic of the new woman. The combination of these qualities makes Isabel a new type of lady.

As much as *The Portrait of a Lady* is in fact the portrait of a lady, it is also about the journey through which Isabel Archer becomes a lady. That journey is a complex one, made more so because James chooses to “Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 12). The result: “you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 12). Isabel is not just a dynamic character because she grows up through the course of the novel. She is an interesting and complicated character because James uses her to showcase the growth and development of a new type of lady.

The Portrait of a Lady begins with the portrait of a girl. For the first half of the novel, Isabel Archer is described as a child. She is imaginative, temperamental, willful, passionate and romantic. When Isabel is first introduced, she is seen through the eyes of Mr. Touchett, Ralph, and Lord Warburton. She is described as an “independent young lady...who at first sight looked pretty,” and “seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 29, 30). She took everything in “with an eye that denoted clear perception...[with] a comprehensiveness of observation...” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 30, 32). She is an “American girl” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 30), an “original” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 44). From the start Isabel is painted as fresh, young, and naïve, but simultaneously interesting, with a strong imagination and a confidence that is compelling. As Robert Weisbuch describes her in “Henry James And The Idea of Evil,” she is “an Emerson on

the road, a young woman who reads German Idealist philosophy in the locked office at Albany that occludes a view of the street; an overly theoretic, though wonderfully fresh and earnest self-realizer" (112). The elements of a new type of lady are inherent in these descriptions of Isabel. Unlike her sisters, she has not sought marriage and she values education, her independence, and her imagination.

James describes an unconventional childhood for Isabel, one that resembles his own. She is isolated in America, and she has no formal education beyond what she has read in the family library. She is "raised in isolation, lacks practical experience, and has a knowledge of life derived solely from books, supplemented by her own fantasies" (Sabiston 348). She is bright, articulate, intimidating in some regard, but her ideas are only half formed and not tested.

When Mrs. Touchett offers her the opportunity to travel to Europe, it inspires within Isabel the idea of reinventing herself, a peculiarly American trait: "She has a desire to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh. This desire indeed is not a birth of the present occasion...it had led her beginning afresh a great many times" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 46). James characterizes Isabel as a girl who is accustomed to new beginnings and this adventure presents the perfect occasion for her to reinvent herself. She knows, theoretically, what she wants. In Europe she gives up literature for society, preferring to learn from the influence of others and her own experience rather than from the novels of her youth. She is a blank slate, impressionable, open to external influence and yet confident at the core.

Isabel is somewhat neglected when it comes to parental supervision. Her mother dies and her father traipses around the world, leaving his daughters with a nursemaid. He indulges them without formally educating or disciplining them. When Isabel travels to Europe, the

Touchett's do not take responsibility for her in a parental sense. Mrs. Touchett says to Ralph: "Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do everything she chooses. She gave me notice of that" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 58). When Isabel discusses Lord Warburton's proposal with Mr. Touchett, he is reserved: "...whatever interest he might take in the matter from the point of view of sociability, he had no active voice in it" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 126). Her apparent independence is not questioned, none of the other characters take responsibility for her, and she is left very much to her own devices. James masterfully creates an image of youth with all the capricious inconsistencies common to it. But Isabel is not just a youth, she is a girl. James leaves her unshackled from masculine control, which allows her to develop without that traditional cultural constraint. He places Isabel in the center of a world that does not challenge her, where she feels superior. And he places the reader in her mind where we can easily recognize and empathize with Isabel's girlish innocence and her misguided belief that she is a self-sufficient, independent adult.

Free from patriarchal constraints early in the novel, James can illuminate the limitations women face because of biology, society and psychology. He demonstrates that innocence, the biological limitation of childish inexperience, is not just a constraint but a danger. He also shows how the ego plays a significant role in limiting self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the situations we encounter. And to underscore his view of American innocence, he pits Isabel against European sophistication in the form of the masterful manipulation of Madame Merle and Osmond.

Isabel is naively secure, like a child who cannot perceive the world beyond her safe circle. She believes she is in control and those around her contribute to her false sense of security. Her ideas and confidence have yet to be tested in the world. The other characters treat her like an adult, leaving her free to do as she will without recognizing she is vulnerable. She is vocal, opinionated, and those around her mistake this for knowledge and self-confidence; they see strength, not weakness. Isabel fears others will find her wanting; she does not realize how much credit they give her: "...the effect she produced upon people was often different from what she supposed..." (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 68). Within her limited circle, she is praised and appreciated while simultaneously left unchallenged. Like a child who has yet to experience much of the world, she is in a false position of power. She is motivated by impulses, whims, and a sense of the romantic, but she asserts her views so rapidly and candidly that she appears sure. She has the independent spirit of the American girl. James sums her up early on:

Altogether, with her meager knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant. (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 65)

Through Isabel, James embodies the tension of the age and symbolizes how that tension impacted the idea of the lady. Isabel follows the rules of propriety, but she does so without the

histrionics. In addition to style, James showcases Isabel's substance, her spirit. James says she should be an easy victim. In fact, many other female characters written in the late nineteenth century are easy victims; but not Isabel. She does not collapse in the face of adversity.

One of Isabel's deepest desires is to appear pleasing: "Isabel had in the depths of her nature an even more unquenchable desire to please than Edith; but the depths of this young lady's nature were a very out-of-the-way place, between which and the surface communication was interrupted by a dozen capricious forces" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 48). There is within Isabel a strong, natural, childish need for approval. She is aware of the ideal she is meant to represent and she aspires to it. In this regard, Isabel retains the grace and manners of the ideal lady. But ultimately, she is most aptly characterized by her desire for freedom: "I like my liberty too much...If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of...it's my personal independence" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 175). This trait is characteristically American but also resonant of the new woman. And James chooses his words carefully – it is not just independence Isabel is looking for but her *personal* independence – freedom on her own terms, freedom to choose her fate.

But what motivates her choices? Her imagination. She relies little on reason or sound judgment, partly because she has yet to learn how to parse her feelings from her reason:

It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to that sin of self-esteem...she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right...Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her

own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 64)

She is compelled not just by girlish fantasy, but by the vivid colors of her imagination. What fuels her imagination? Her romantic view of the world. It is a view which includes heroic theatrics: "Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 65). She wants to be put to the test; to struggle, fight, and prove herself. This desire is a critical element in her nature, even if it is tinged by her romantic sensibilities. This desire to struggle and define herself on her own terms is also characteristic of the new woman.

It is clear that Isabel is motivated by feeling and emotion. She is imaginative and curious, "She had a great desire for knowledge," (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 49), but she wants to learn by seeing for herself and feeding her over-developed romantic sensibilities. She responds to the emotional and she can be profoundly affected. As she explains, "If a thing strikes me with a certain intensity I accept it" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 107). Early in the novel, it is clear she has not yet learned how to exert some control over her thoughts and feelings. This indulgence in her emotions is characteristic of the trope of the ideal lady and it makes her treat everything with an air of the romantic. She trusts impressions over realities and makes assumptions based on her limited worldview. Because of this, Isabel is naturally inconsistent. She likes to play devil's advocate and take the opposing point of view just for the sake of the argument. She also contradicts her own ideas. On the one hand, Isabel wants to see the world but remain removed from it: "No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned

drink! I only want to see for myself” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 164). On the other hand, she romanticizes danger and suffering and believes she is meant to experience unhappiness: “I can’t escape my fate...I can’t escape unhappiness...I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself...From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 146). She is sentimental and fanciful. Unacquainted with suffering, she is drawn to it with childish fascination. Her sentimentality and inexperience make her vulnerable. This vulnerability is the signature quality of the traditional ideal lady.

Yet Isabel also embraces qualities of the new woman. She wants the freedom to choose, but also the freedom to express herself. This expectation opposes the cultural expectation of the silent, domesticated, ornamental lady. She values transparency, communication, and striving to be the best she can be. But Isabel is still a child and her values are underdeveloped. On the one hand, she expresses the need to be free and to express herself. On the other hand, she is overly concerned with appearances and the need to be perceived in a positive light: “Isabel’s chief dread in life at this period of her development was that she should appear narrow-minded: what she feared next afterwards was that she should really be so” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 74). She is naïve, inexperienced: “she had seen very little of the evil of the world” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 64). She does not perceive that there will come a time when she will have to choose between her desire to express herself and her desire to appear pleasing. She cannot yet comprehend what she will have to sacrifice when it comes time to make that choice. This early portrait of Isabel showcases the tension between the traditional

ideal lady and the emerging new woman. Qualities of both mingle within her and the combination results in a new type of lady.

Isabel's confidence and self-assurance are reinforced through her initial refusals of both Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood. On both occasions, she cites her desire for freedom and a feeling that somehow they would limit her as her reason for declining their offers. As Philip Sicker notes regarding Warburton, Isabel "fears that marriage to such a man would fix narrow limits upon her ever-expanding consciousness" (57). And regarding Goodwood, "Isabel believes that to marry him would be to submit her fluid inner self to a prison of mechanical American conventions" (Sicker 57). She calmly, ardently, and fairly conclusively denies these two men soon after she arrives in England. These actions further illustrate James' portrait of her as a new type of lady. She is focused on her independence and happiness, not the cultural expectation that she marry. She believes a marriage with either suitor would not supply the liberty she seeks. She also believes she cannot contribute to either marriage in a manner that would satisfy her and indulge her romantic beliefs. Her desire to give, to please her future husband, is a substantial one. She needs to be needed and she does not believe she will do either of them the good she might do elsewhere. Instead of having Isabel embrace the cult of domesticity, James shows her desire to be useful. Ultimately she:

...yielded to the satisfaction of having refused two ardent suitors in a fortnight. That love of liberty...was as yet almost exclusively theoretic; she had not been able to indulge it on a large scale. But it appeared to her she had done something; she had tasted of the delight, if not of battle, at least of victory; she had done what was truest to her plan.

(James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 178)

Isabel has yet to experience battle, but she is delighted with her perceived victory. She has not had to fight for anything, but the feeling of power, of being able to resist these men, fuels her imagination and romantic view of herself. She wants to believe in herself and her ability to stay true to her plans. She wants to believe she is strong. But at this point she is focused on the image. She has not taken the precaution of strengthening her true self. She says, "I shouldn't be an easy victim—I've proved it" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 172). She believes she has proved herself by declining Caspar and Lord Warburton, but she knows Caspar well and she knows how to defend herself against him. And Lord Warburton is honest and kind. Both men are transparent and well intentioned. Neither uses force, either overtly or covertly, to snare her.

Isabel's environment also contributes to her naiveté and inexperience. She has remained nestled in safety, surrounded by people she trusts. She is honest and has come to expect honesty from those around her. Henrietta, her closest female friend exclaims, "'I don't flatter you, Isabel, I tell you the truth!'" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 179). And Isabel has no reason to doubt her. Henrietta's character, her reputation for being direct, is too clear to be ignored. Mrs. Touchett is very forthright, as is her entire family in their own way. Her suitors, both Warburton and Goodwood, are nothing if not honest with her, even to the point of embarrassment. Isabel lives in a world where trust has been cultivated and an expectation of the truth is the norm. She admits she has never experienced much suffering. Beyond that, she has also never experienced the more delicate traps of polite society, including manipulation. In her secure world, she is free to focus solely on her own motives, her own will, her own desires, and she fails to recognize the motives of others.

Isabel's desire is to choose her fate and her expectation is that she will be able to choose wisely because she will choose for herself. But her exploration of the varying sides of a situation is limited. As Sabiston observes, "Her isolation as a young girl...has failed to provide her imagination with concrete materials on which to work, but at the same time it has provided ample space for her imagination to soar unchecked" (337). She is not experienced enough to dig beneath the surface, to enrich her exploration with a closer look at human behavior and deeper than that, human motives. Her imagination, her romantic view of the world leads her to see the world as an example of what she has read in novels instead of recognizing what she has read as a glossy example of what she will find in the world. Those around her respond to Isabel's confidence and strength without recognizing that these are qualities that, as yet, only seem unwavering because she has the boldness of youth. In reality they are qualities that make her vulnerable because she is too young to be discerning. Mrs. Touchett, Ralph, Lord Warburton, and Caspar Goodwood all believe she has strength of character. What they do not realize is how dedicated she is to appearing strong and that she has not yet cultivated real strength within.

James places Isabel in the center of these characters that feel her influence but do not recognize their own. They enjoy the effect she produces and treat her as a work of art (they feel her influence but do not think they impact her). As Ralph says, "Isabel Archer has acted on me—yes; she acts on every one. But I've been absolutely passive" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 134). Ralph is indulgent. He does not take anything seriously and he just wants to be amused. He thinks he has little influence: "She's entirely independent of me; I can exercise very little influence upon her life. But I should like to do something for her" (James, *The Portrait of a*

Lady, 196). Yet his treatment of Isabel, especially his decision to make her rich, puts her in danger. Ralph assumes it will secure her freedom, but instead it makes her a target. He assumes the best and is willing to take the risk of putting her in a position to be taken advantage of. He does not realize her character is unproven. She is absorbed with herself and inexperienced with the world. She wants freedom but is afraid of what she would do with it.

In focusing on what she evokes, the other characters ignore their responsibility to protect her, parent her, and cultivate her half-formed ideas into adult convictions. They think she is finished, when she actually needs to be shaped. They do not force her to deal with reality and they do not realize their liberal behavior towards her continues to solidify her false sense of security.

This early portrait of Isabel reveals her desire to appear an ideal lady while simultaneously revealing that she wants more—she wants to embrace and display her substance. She clings fast to the ideals she has sketched in her vivid imagination and in a life in which she has never “known anything particularly unpleasant” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 47). But her romantic ideas will eventually face reality and fight for survival. She needs to strengthen them in adversity, to test them and find ways to refine them to allow them to weather the storm. She will need to find a way to champion her values and protect them from being destroyed by outside forces.

After completing a stunningly rich and deeply human portrait of Isabel as a girl, James pits her against experience. In the tradition of the times, his heroine “attempts to impose on life a romantic ideal, which crumbles after a series of confrontations with reality” (Sabiston 339). When she encounters Madame Merle and then Gilbert Osmond, her wants, needs,

sensibilities, and ideals are threatened. She initially, and for the majority of their relationship, looks to Madame Merle as the model to fashion herself after: "Aware that her own edges are as yet only roughly hewn, Isabel, the curious, impressionable young American, sees in Madame Merle the finished, full soul she wants to become" (Jones 44). She chooses to aspire to be like Madame Merle while Madame Merle uses Isabel's willingness to be molded to manipulate her to her and Osmond's advantage. Isabel admits she expects to learn from new acquaintances. She expects outside forces to exert influence, and yet she limits that expectation to the positive. She believes all influence will be for the better. She does not consider the possibility of any damaging effects from such forces, except very conceptually or with a romantic twist.

James sketches Madame Merle as bright, cultured and amenable, and he lets the reader know these are all qualities Isabel wants others to perceive in her. She emulates Madame Merle without realizing she is following blindly. Madame Merle strives to represent the traditional ideal lady. Her greatest desire is to appear a pleasing image. She is superficial, manipulative, and does not embrace substantive qualities. But Isabel's trusting nature leaves her blinded to the motives of Madame Merle. She believes she can judge for herself: "Isabel, as a dispassionate witness, had not been struck with the force of Mrs. Touchett's characterization of her visitor, who had an expressive, communicative, responsive face, by no means of the sort which, to Isabel's mind, suggested a secretive disposition." (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 189). Isabel is not, however, dispassionate. She is influenced by this woman. She is also taken in by the charm and views Madame Merle as the absolute epitome of social refinement. Her admiration for Madame Merle and belief that she is a perfect model of a lady engenders an

unwavering trust. Isabel is neither experienced nor wise and she mistakes too easily the imitations of her ideal.

Henrietta is the only character who seems to recognize Isabel is in danger and tries to intervene. Once Isabel has financial independence, Henrietta believes her to be even more at risk. Henrietta has ambitions toward specific goals while Isabel is drifting, basing her decisions on her inclinations. Henrietta describes the change her European experience has had on Isabel: ““Yes, you’re changed; you’ve got new ideas over here...they shouldn’t interfere with the old ones when the old ones have been the right ones...You’re not the girl you were a few short weeks ago”” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 112-113). Isabel is childish, romantic and vague as compared to Henrietta who is firm, fixed, and mature. Isabel says she is not adventurous but Henrietta points out her risk-taking nature. She takes risk, in part because she does not understand the consequences. Henrietta is concerned and does what she can, at least more than any other character. She seems acutely aware and describes Isabel’s vulnerability:

‘The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You’re not enough in contact with reality—with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You’re too fastidious; you’ve too many graceful illusions...you think you can lead a romantic life, that you can live by pleasing yourself and pleasing others. You’ll find you’re mistaken. Whatever life you lead you must put your soul in it—to make any sort of success of it; and from the moment you do that it ceases to be romance, I assure you; it becomes grim reality!’ (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 231)

Henrietta works, she has responsibilities, she knows something of the world and this experience gives her perspective. She tries to get Isabel to realize that her romantic illusions are childish and unrealistic, but Isabel's innocence will not allow her to accept Henrietta's views. James portrays Henrietta as a modern American woman—she has shed the style of the ideal lady and fully embraced the substance of the new woman. She is unconcerned with appearances and propriety and solely focused on meeting her own expectations, not those imposed by external forces.

Henrietta forewarns Isabel that if she does not find a way to separate fantasy from reality, the results could be catastrophic. Ralph, on the other hand, when trying to persuade his father to leave Isabel an inheritance, quickly casts aside any risk or threat: "That's a risk [Isabel falling prey to a fortune hunter], and it has entered into my calculation. I think it's appreciable, but I think it's small, and I'm prepared to take it" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 200). Ralph is too flippant, too unappreciative of how impressionable Isabel is. She is influenced by everyone around her, and he impacts her more than he realizes. His circumstances (his illness and subsequent inability to truly participate in the world) provide him with the luxury of expressing such platitudes. But what he fails to realize are the implications associated with it for someone like Isabel. He claims money will facilitate good impulses within a good person. But what is the result of facilitating good impulses? Isabel may be good natured but her seemingly good impulse to marry Osmond ends up being the cause of great unhappiness. Philosophically, Ralph may have a point, but practically his theory is too broad a generalization. He is prepared to risk because he does not recognize what he is risking for Isabel.

Madame Merle takes advantage of Isabel's innocence and manipulates her to her own advantage. She preys on Isabel's romantic notions about herself and portrays Osmond in a way that she knows Isabel will find intriguing. She describes him as someone who has superior taste and does not make an effort with everyone. The concept plays into Isabel's ego: if Osmond takes an interest in her, she must be superior. As Montgomery argues, "Isabel and Osmond seem absolutely matched: the ultimate choice, the ultimate chooser. And so they marry, forming a union of two minds that was to be indifferent to grosser claims" (895). Madame Merle is more frank with Osmond: "I want to put her in your way...I don't pretend to know what people are meant for...I only know what I can do with them... I want you of course to marry her" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 258). She includes Osmond as a conspirator in her scheme, asking him to gather the energy to make an impression on Isabel so he and Pansy can benefit from Isabel's circumstances. Osmond plays the part extremely well, playing to Isabel's romantic sensibilities. Isabel is looking for someone who will inspire her imagination. She is drawn to Osmond for his originality and perceived good taste.

He resembled no one she had ever seen...he was a specimen apart...he was an original without being an eccentric...these personal points struck our sensitive young woman as signs of quality...as promise of interest...His sensibility had governed him—possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of the vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything...that was what made him so different. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 277, 278)

Osmond masterfully plays into the romantic ideal of what Isabel wants from a husband. She even infuses her image of him with elements he does not possess: “her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 281). Her motives and his are at odds. But because she is so focused on her own feelings and her imagination softens his, she is snared. James pits American innocence against European experience. Isabel believes Madame Merle and Osmond do not care about what other people think and that they have extreme good taste. She is mistaken. Madame Merle is fueled by ambition and necessity and Osmond is caged by his narrow-mindedness.

Osmond flatters Isabel. He is enchanted with her but he seeks perfection and places her on a pedestal. He puts forth an effort because he wants to be successful. To Osmond, Isabel’s value increases when he learns she has rejected Lord Warburton. He also believes that Isabel marrying him will increase his value. Her actions, not his own, would benefit him and he could simultaneously continue to claim disinterest when he is the most intensely interested. When Osmond courts Isabel in Rome, he is self-deprecating. Isabel views herself through his flattery and she not only believes him, she likes the image she produces: “‘For me you’ll always be the most important woman in the world.’ Isabel looked at herself in this character—looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 327). She resists him at first. She is intrigued by the mystery but she does not act impulsively. She does not immediately accept his proposal. After traveling for a year, seeing new places, meeting new people, and refusing two suitors (two times each), she believes she has matured and become more serious: “She...was...a very different person from the frivolous young woman from Albany...She flattered herself she had harvested wisdom and learned a great deal more of life than this light-minded

creature had ever suspected" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 336). She believes her experiences have made her wise, but she has still not struggled or faced anything that has truly challenged her. In reality her sense of self is still delicate and her romantic ideas continue to run wild: "She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty...The world lay before her—she could do whatever she chose. There was a deep thrill in it all" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 339). She embraces and enjoys her freedom and she believes in the goodness of humanity. In this context, she safely seeks danger but does not recognize it when she comes face to face with it.

Isabel falls in love with the image of Osmond and the idea of her and him as a couple. She falls in love with how she thinks she will appear by choosing him and also with the idea that she could be useful to him. In this mindset, she shifts her focus to securing her current state of happiness and justifies actions that might appear contrary to her previous desire for absolute freedom. When she refuses Warburton and Goodwood the second time, she gives her desire to be happy as her excuse. When Warburton appeals to her amidst the Roman ruins, she exclaims, "You may be unhappy, but you shall not make *me* so. That I can't allow" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 309). To Goodwood, she asserts, "If you're not happy yourself others have yet a right to be" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 344). But she must go further with him; she must discuss her intention to wed Osmond. She says he is "Nobody and nothing but a very good and very honourable man. He's not in business...He's not rich; he's not known for anything in particular...I'm marrying a perfect nonentity" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 346). She is compelled to paint a picture of Osmond that simultaneously inspires sympathy for him as well as a sense of her magnanimity.

As a free woman, Isabel chooses to marry Osmond, much to the dismay of her friends and family. Ralph was especially affected, he “was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 356). He tries to use her love of liberty to persuade her that she is making a mistake. But she is in love with the idea of being in love with Osmond and even more at the mercy of her romantic imagination. She rationalizes that she will retain her freedom, but in order for her to achieve happiness, she must focus and choose a path. Ralph’s accusations only strengthen Isabel’s resolve. She defends Osmond because she believes ““He wants me to know everything; that’s what I like him for...His being so independent, so individual, is what I most see in him...Mr. Osmond’s [nature] is the finest I know; he’s good enough for me...”” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 361). This is a grave misunderstanding on Isabel’s side. Her imagination has erected an image of Osmond that is contrary to the reality of who Osmond really is. When challenged on this point, she cannot do more than believe stalwartly in the fantasy she has created:

It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours. Ralph remembered what he had said to his father about wishing to put it into her power to meet the requirements of her imagination. He had done so, and the girl had taken full advantage of the luxury. Poor Ralph felt sick; he felt ashamed. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 365)

It is her imagination that compels her to stand by her choice. The resistance she gets along the way only acts to reinforce in her mind that she is right to act as she does. She “accepted as an

incident, in fact quite an ornament, of her lot the idea that to prefer Gilbert Osmond as she preferred him was perforce to break all other ties...It was the tragic part of happiness..." (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 367). She is mistaken. She thinks standing by Osmond and sacrificing her relationships with friends and family is the tragedy that will make her marriage all the more profoundly happy. But in reality she sacrifices the relationships that might ease her pain when the real tragedy strikes—when she finally sees Osmond for what he really is.

How does she justify sacrificing her hopes and dreams, her love of liberty? She does so by romanticizing her sacrifice: "These things had been absorbed in a more primitive need ...he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she was not only taking, she was giving." (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 369). Her decision to marry Osmond is self-immolating. She is motivated by the romantic and she fancies she needs to martyr herself in a way, in order to truly experience happiness. This focus on being useful and contributing to a marriage instead of a focus on purely domestic responsibilities is characteristic of the new woman. Unfortunately, Isabel's fantasy about what she can bring to this marriage is misaligned with reality.

Osmond recognizes her "faults" but does not comment on them or try to correct them until after they are married. He is critical, "...he had a mortal dislike to the high, ragged note, to what he called random ravings. He thought Miss Archer sometimes of too precipitate a readiness. It was a pity she had that fault, because if she had not had it she would really have had none" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 321). Osmond despises passion and Isabel is passionate. He is the most pedantic and limiting misogynist, while Isabel "...is forced to live in

some aesthetic, inverted “paradise” instead of contributing to the mainstream of human life” (Sabiston 346) when she most desires to be part of the world.

Isabel’s isolation allows a clearer picture of her development as a new type of lady. It is in this isolated state that Isabel experiences an awakening. She realizes that she is trapped in a gilded cage and that her only value to her husband is in how well she decorates his life. Her romantic illusions come crashing down in the face of this realization. Her journey through her marriage first shatters her romantic illusions but then ultimately solidifies her identity as a new type of lady. She cannot be satisfied with being the type of lady Osmond wants yet her respect for propriety will not allow her to leave him either.

To Osmond, Pansy is actually the ideal lady. She has no art, guile, temper or talent, and she bends absolutely to his will. James describes Pansy as a useless ornament: “She was admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece” (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 375). Isabel is not like this. Osmond believed Isabel was like Pansy and that she would please him. He assumed that she would bend easily to his will and that she would increase the value of his appearance. When he realizes the magnitude of his mistake, he is horrified:

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. But she was, after all, herself—she couldn’t help that; and now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his mind. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 445)

Osmond is not violent but he is cruel. He hates Isabel but not passionately. She is not the lady he expected so he closes himself off from her. He distances himself to protect his small, insecure ego. He only deals with her when she may be useful to him and even then he does so in a measured, mocking, dismissive manner: "He had a way of looking at her through half-closed eyelids, as if he were thinking of her but scarcely saw her, which seemed to her to have a wonderfully cruel intention. It appeared to recognise her as a disagreeable necessity of thought, but to ignore her for the time as a presence" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 494). Isabel is passionate and she cannot help herself when he baits her. His greatest weapon in the face of her passion is his indifference. For the first time, Isabel encounters traditional patriarchal expectations and because she has some elements of the new woman figure, she fails to meet them.

Isabel suffers initially with the realization that Osmond is not who she thought he was. He is not the one partner who can help her transform her consciousness. As Montgomery observes "...each discovers the enormity of the mistake. The minor flaw he once noticed becomes with time the abyss that divides them...He is discovered in return to be the diametric opposite to Isabel's impression of him: he is not indifferent to society, but supremely obsessed by it" (895). Yet she hides her suffering from those closest to her. She masks her pain: "if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression...it was a representation" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 411). She denies her pain to the world, more than to herself, as a lady would have been expected to do. Isabel suffers in silence with no outlet but her own thoughts.

At first she willingly wears the mask of Osmond's refinement. She puts it on and tries to learn how to make it fit. She tries her best to conform to his ideals but she fails. Isabel soon realizes his mask will never fit her properly. Then, instead of complaining, she chooses to continue to wear it, as uncomfortable as it may be, so that outsiders never see her unhappiness. Osmond offers cruel reminders of how she does not fit properly in the small world he has meticulously designed, but Isabel feels compelled that no one else should know it. She is humiliated and deeply disappointed by the enormity of her mistake. She bears her suffering with as much grace as she can manage, characteristic of the traditional ideal lady. But, those elements of the new woman still exist within her and impede her ability to fully embody that ideal.

Part of the reason Isabel does not live up to Osmond's expectations is because her upbringing did not teach her the etiquette he assumed she would have mastered. Mr. Archer's daughters "had been at once spoiled and neglected" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 47). The way she was raised gave her the superficial features Osmond responds to – freedom of thought, an appreciation for beauty – but it does not cultivate in her a sense of the rules and customs that Osmond is a slave to (even in his pretense that he abhors them). Yet she would have sacrificed her ideas, her opinions, and her tastes. She would have taken on those of Osmond: "She had no opinions—none that she would not have been eager to sacrifice in the satisfaction of feeling herself loved for it...She would have been willing, however, to renounce all her curiosities and sympathies for the sake of a personal life, if the person concerned had only been able to make her believe it was a gain!" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 449). She would have done almost anything to make him happy and to make him approve of her. But his

disapproval runs too deep and she recognizes there is something, her core, her character, that offends him.

Ultimately she cannot sacrifice, change or amend her essence to please him. But she does not publicly humiliate him by leaving either. This makes her a new type of lady. She would have sacrificed almost anything but she could not accept what was so contrary to the core of her being. Her life with Osmond became: "...the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation...Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 448). But when confronted with this horrific reality, Isabel does not crumble. She does not fully embrace Osmond's views as an ideal lady would because they are so abhorrent to her. Through Isabel, James shows the spirit of a new type of lady, one who has elements of both the ideal lady and the new woman.

Once Isabel confronts her new reality, she is angry, bitter, and disappointed with Osmond but even more so with herself. She has fallen far from the ideal, romantic vision she held of herself for so long. But it is not until she learns the truth about Osmond and Madame Merle and she sees how Osmond broke Pansy that Isabel realizes the extent of her misjudgment. She needs to get away, to find comfort through catharsis, by confessing her pain to Ralph:

She felt a passionate need to cry out and accuse herself, to let her sorrow possess her.

All her troubles, for the moment, became single and melted together into this present

pain...for nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish—the

knowledge that they were looking at the truth together. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 597, 598)

Her illusions are shattered and she has realized the truth. She finds some comfort in embracing the truth and learning from it.

In the light of this truth, she finds comfort in her duty towards Pansy. Her deepest desire is to be useful and to find someone upon whom she can lavish her compassion. When it turns out Osmond is not a viable receptacle, she turns her attention to Pansy. She knows she can be useful to Pansy and that might make her happy. Compassion is worth more to Isabel than the person she bestows it on. She has a very generous nature and she finds the idea of self-sacrifice appealing. By choosing to help Pansy, she also helps herself. She recognizes Pansy's suffering and takes pity: "Isabel...saw the poor girl had been vanquished...Isabel looked into her eyes and saw there mainly a prayer to be treated easy...She bowed her pretty head to authority and only asked of authority to be merciful" (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 577). In being kind to Pansy, she can assuage her ego: "I won't desert you" (James 578). Her commitment to Pansy becomes her solemn vow. This commitment could be perceived as characteristic of the traditional ideal lady and the emphasis on the sacred nature of motherhood. But, by this time, Pansy is grown up and Isabel desires to be of use to her in a way that is characteristic of the new woman. There is not much hope for Pansy since she has been utterly crushed by Osmond. But, Isabel may be able to secure her comfort, if not her happiness, through her friendship and love.

Though Isabel suffers sadness and anger and the inability for a time to communicate with the outside world, the ultimate result of her marriage is that she gains strength. Pansy says

of Isabel, “She’s not afraid of anyone” (James 406). And to the end, whether she is being pressured by Osmond regarding Lord Warburton’s intentions to propose to Pansy or through the revelation of Madame Merle’s influence over her husband, she continues to hold onto her resolve, “I must judge for myself” (James 429). Isabel’s marriage actually provides the stage on which she develops. She tries her best to conform to Osmond’s expectations of the traditional ideal lady but eventually she rejects them. Then she spends her time truly trying to work out her own convictions. Ultimately she finds and owns her strength because of her choices not in spite of them. As Maria de Sousa Santos argues, in her article “*Isabel’s Freedom: The Portrait of a Lady:*”

Her marriage had then been for her the symbol of her total freedom. When Isabel becomes gradually aware of her error of perception concerning Osmond’s character—that though she married *in* freedom, she had *not married freedom*—all her strength and sense of dignity come to her through her still...cherished ideal of freedom as opposed to her husband’s strict conformity... (Santos 307)

In the end, she accepts her situation. It is not that she is returning resignedly to her gilded cage; she has realized that this is what she must suffer in order to find future happiness.

Deep in her soul—deeper than any appetite for renunciation—was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength—it was a proof she should some day be happy again. It couldn’t be she was to live only to suffer; she was still young, after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 582)

Now that she has genuinely felt pain, she regains hope that her future happiness will be all the more real and enjoyable by comparison. Through Isabel, James shows the noble nature of the new type of lady who embodies style and substance and can embrace the struggle as an outlet to fighting circumstances:

“Yes, I’m wretched,” she said very mildly. She hated to hear herself say it; she tried to say it as judicially as possible... “I don’t know whether I’m too proud. But I can’t publish my mistake. I don’t think that’s decent. I’d much rather die...I don’t know what great 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 508)

James portrays Isabel as noble; she has strength of character as well as grace. Sabiston argues that “In a sense, Isabel’s zest for life also dies hard when she elects to return to Osmond.

Neither the creator nor the reader feels ultimately satisfied that the fate James depicts could, realistically, be that bleak and absolute” (Sabiston 351). But it is neither bleak nor absolute. It is not bleak because she is returning by choice, out of a sense of duty and love for Pansy. And it is not absolute as nothing is absolute and as Isabel recognized on the train ride to England, she has a long life ahead of her and hope that the future will bring change.

James shines a light on many ugly facets of human nature – manipulation, selfishness, cruelty, indifference – but Isabel responds to them with grace and generosity. She handles the challenges life presents with grace. She tries to make her marriage work, she chooses not to abandon Pansy, and in response to Madame Merle’s manipulation and deceit, her natural response is pity. Early on, Madame Merle says: “I want to see what life makes of you. One

thing's certain—it can't spoil you. It may pull you about horribly, but I defy it to break you up” (James 202). James demonstrates the truth in this observation—Isabel was manipulated, tossed about, but no matter how much she suffered, life does not break her.

James illuminates the implications of determinism and how underlying impulses and motives drive Isabel much more than any consciousness of choice. At the same time, her growth throughout the novel, her development and the empathy she inspires give rise to hope versus despair. The ideal lady in nineteenth century America was ornamental, useless, and domesticated. Isabel starts out with the potential to be this ideal, but James sows the seeds of the new woman in her consciousness and he shows how those seeds can grow and flourish despite external limitations. Isabel starts out capricious and flighty, young and inexperienced. She has vague notions of her beliefs and an even vaguer sense of herself. Once married and confronted with the reality of what she has married into, she grows into a new type of lady. Isabel embraces some aspects of the ideal lady and some characteristics of the new woman. She becomes a lady who knows who she is, what she believes in, what she holds dear and what she is willing to sacrifice. It is when she is stripped down to her essence and it is at her most vulnerable that she finds the strength to hope. Through Isabel, James portrays the hope of youth, the pain of illusions shattered, the resilience of experience, and the ability to find strength in the face of limitations.

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