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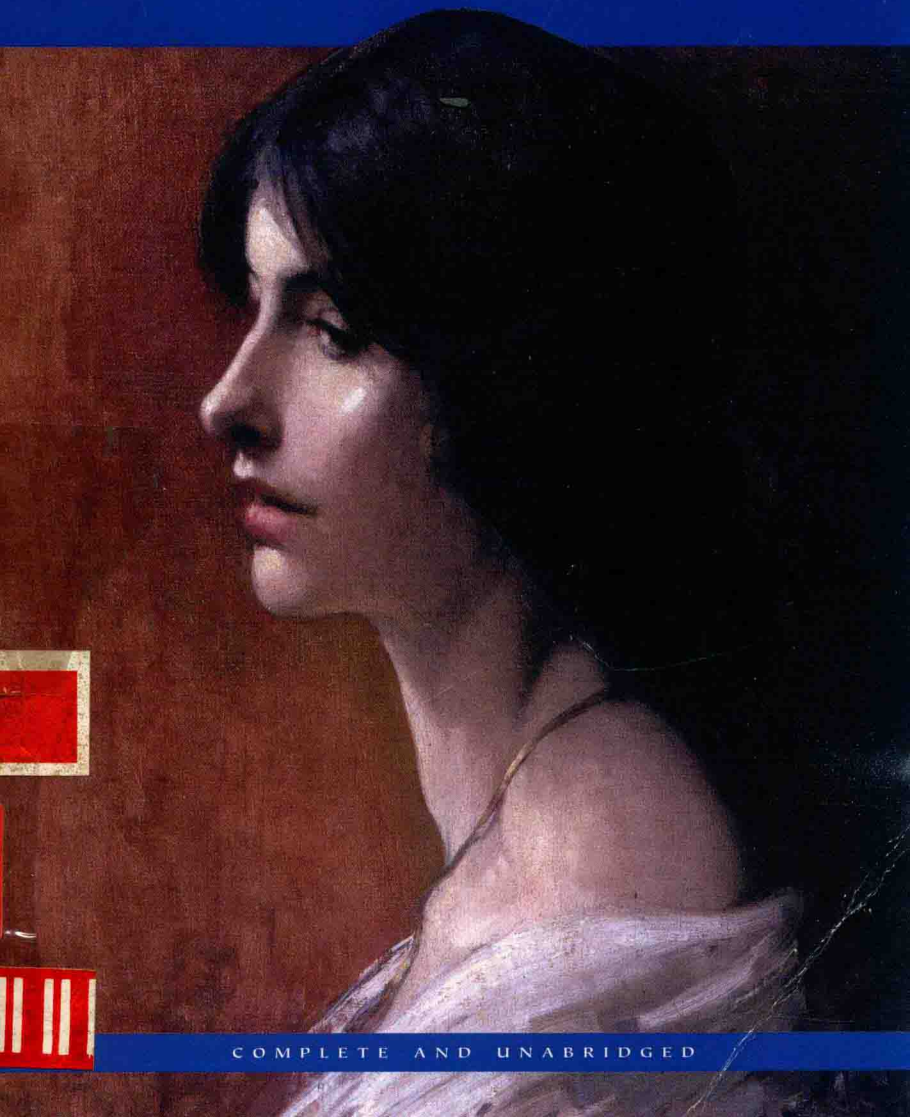
The Portrait of a Lady

HENRY JAMES



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

Henry James

With Introduction and Notes by
LIONEL KELLY
University of Reading

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide-ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Preface to this novel written for the 1907 collected edition of his works, Henry James describes its making in these terms: 'The point is, however, that this single small corner-stone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of *The Portrait of a Lady*' (p. 8). He pursues this notion of the novel as an architectural structure – the 'house of fiction' is one of his famous phrases for it – and writes with some pride of what he calls the architectural competence of *The Portrait of a Lady*, which he now thinks 'the most proportioned' of his works after *The Ambassadors* (p. 9). In keeping with this language of proportion and balance James also describes the characters of the novel as like the weights in two scales, in one of which is 'the centre of the subject', 'the young woman's own consciousness', and in the other lighter scale her 'satellites', the other characters, 'especially the male'. If the heroine of this novel, Isabel Archer, and her consciousness is at the centre of James's interest it is a part of his design that she is the

victim of two schemes laid by these 'satellite' characters for her. The first of these involves the abrupt acquisition of great wealth through a fortune bequeathed to her by her dying uncle, Mr Touchett, at the instigation of his son, Ralph. The motives of father and son are generous and well intentioned, but as Ralph acknowledges at the end of the novel, near the moment of his own death from consumption, in answer to Isabel's question if it was he who made her rich, he responds, 'Ah, don't speak of that – that was not happy,' and adds, 'I believe I ruined you' (p. 487). When we come to this passage in Chapter 54, we know that the Touchetts' scheme to liberate Isabel from economic dependency has unintentionally brought about the other scheme central to the novel's dynamics – Madame Merle's plan of marrying Isabel to Gabriel Osmond. Thus Isabel becomes an unwitting pawn in the hands of others and if we pick up the implied irony of her surname, Archer, then the arc of the flight of her arrow of desire brings her precisely where she, and the Touchetts, would least want her to be, in the toils of a loveless marriage to a man who married her for her money. There is more to it than this, but in essence this is Isabel's fate. However, whilst James exploits one of the standard conventions of the Victorian novel, the heiress and her vulnerability to fortune-hunters, Isabel's fate is contested by others whose love and fidelity to her is uncontaminated by an interest in her wealth.

Money, wealth, possessions, these are crucial to the circumstances of Isabel's story, and affect all the other major characters in the novel, as with Pansy, the illegitimate daughter of Osmond and Madame Merle, who is effectively offered in marriage to the highest bidder. Isabel's inheritance is very substantial – she is left £70,000 – enough to make her a multi-millionairess in today's terms if we take account of the difference in the purchasing power of money between the 1870s and the present. Pansy's suitor, Ned Rosier, who is loved by her but dismissed by Osmond because he is not rich enough, has an income of 40,000 francs a year which Lord Warburton translates as £1,600 pounds a year and rightly describes as a 'very good' income. In the early years of this century an income of £500 a year was considered more than adequate to meet the needs of a middle-class British family who could live well, with servants, on that sum. I mention this to provide some rudimentary scale by which we can assess the real terms of Isabel's inheritance.

It is an important part of James's procedure that Isabel is the recipient of two marriage proposals from wealthy suitors before she becomes wealthy in her own right: James arranges this so that Isabel will first be seen in a light which emphasises her natural appeal:

physically, she is a tall, willowly young woman, with soft grey eyes and a 'clear, still smile', whom old Mr Touchett describes as 'beautiful'. If she alarms the young men who pay court to her sisters in their family home at Albany where her reputation for 'reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic' (p. 42) her American suitor Caspar Goodwood thinks her 'the most beautiful young woman of her time', and Lord Warburton instantly recognises her as the type of 'interesting woman' he has been searching for. In the early chapters we are repeatedly told of Isabel's independence of spirit, and proof of this is her refusal of Goodwood and Warburton's proposals of marriage: she is not someone who would marry merely to improve her material circumstances. If independence is a word repeatedly used of her, there is an equal insistence on her imagination: James tells us that, 'Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window' (p. 40): this concern with her imagination pervades the novel, and is very marked in the opening chapters.

James delays a full account of Isabel's character until Chapter 6, after we have already seen her effect on the Touchetts, Goodwood and Warburton: in this important early chapter James delivers a wry description of Isabel with the announcement that she was a young person of 'many theories; her imagination was remarkably active.' This is a double-edged portrait of his heroine, noting her qualities and her faults: thus, if she has 'a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast', a thirst for knowledge and understanding of the unfamiliar, she is also liable to the 'sin of self-esteem' with a complacent sense of her own nature. In a sentence which looks innocent enough when we first read it, we are told that 'Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself someday in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded' (p. 56), one of many examples of James's use of the device of rhetorical anticipation, as the events of the novel prove unhappily true to Isabel's naïve conjectures when she comes in time to occupy that 'difficult position'. In another passage, James's figurative language again suggests the distinction between Isabel's theories and the realities she will encounter:

> She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress. Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless

> when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many places which were not gardens at all – only dusky pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery. [p. 57]

If the second sentence seems appropriate to the pastoral pleasures of the setting of Gardencourt where we first see her, the final sentence figuratively anticipates the comfortless grandeur of the Palazzo Roccanero in Rome, and the convent to which Pansy is returned is now seen not as a site of physical and spiritual security but a prison. For Osmond the function of their social gatherings at the Roman palazzo on Thursday evenings is not to enjoy the pleasure of those invited, but for the perverse pleasure of keeping others out. The word 'vistas' is particularly important here – it has been called the controlling word of the novel[1] and is used by James both in the Italian sense of a panorama, a wide-angled view, and the English meaning to describe the convergence of vision on a distant object through an avenue of trees or buildings where the object viewed is traditionally one of aesthetic beauty – a pleasing prospect. The pleasing prospects of life's possibilities, enriched for Isabel by Mr Touchett's bequest, come to be narrowed and darkened through her marriage to Osmond. In Chapter 42, with its crucial account of Isabel's inner consciousness of her present situation, the concept of the vista is now used to to express the sense of a narrowed world for 'she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end' (p. 363). Her cherished hope of a view of the world has collapsed from one of anticipated 'exaltation and advantage' to one of 'restriction and depression' caused by 'her deep distrust of her husband – this was what darkened the world' (p. 363). Earlier, Osmond had characterised the prospects before them in their marriage in terms which emphasise the glow of light, 'My dear girl, I can't tell you how life seems to stretch there before us – what a long summer afternoon awaits us. It's the latter half of an Italian day – with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening, and that divine delicacy in the light, the air, the landscape, which I have loved all my life . . . ' (p. 303). It is consistent with the way these oppositions of light and dark, outside and inside, openness and closure work in the novel that after this period of their betrothal we

1 I am indebted to Charles R. Anderson's *Person, Place and Thing in Henry James* for his seminal study of imagery in James, and particularly for his attention to the meanings of 'vista' in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

commonly see Isabel and Osmond together inside rooms, cloistered in an increasingly wretched domestic intimacy.

Osmond is a compelling figure, of more substance than James's prefatory suggestion of his status as a 'satellite' to the central figure of Isabel. Shrewd, manipulative and exacting, he is a counterweight to Ralph with whom he shares certain similarities. Unlike Lord Warburton who has the care of his estate with its many houses and land, and a place in Parliament, and Goodwood, the American manufacturer, neither Osmond nor Ralph work, Ralph because of the good fortune of his wealth and the bad fortune of his ill-health, Osmond because he affects to disdain the 'grubbing and grabbing' of conventional existence – it is his proud boast that 'I never in my life tried to earn a penny' (p. 302) – and lives, as far as we can tell, on the slender inheritance left him by his mother. Osmond and Ralph are both 'collectors' and there are nicely contrasting passages when Isabel is shown their acquisitions, first at Gardencourt when she asks Ralph to show her the pictures of which 'there were a great many in the house, most of them of his own choosing' (p. 50), and then by Osmond in his villa at Florence, where the effect is signally different: here we learn that 'His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him' (p. 228). That word 'overhang' is suggestive of Osmond's relation to his things, and whilst this is followed by Isabel's appreciative sense of Osmond's uniqueness – 'he was a specimen apart' – the terms of this appreciation, delivered by James's through Isabel's consciousness, carry more discriminations than she is aware of: 'His sensibility had governed him – possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history' (p. 229). The cumulative effect here is damning in the way it emphasises the aesthetic over the human, and tallies with the earlier description of the façade of Osmond's villa which had 'a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes' (p. 200). And James draws a direct comparison between Osmond and Ralph in relation to the cultivation of 'taste' above all other considerations: 'Ralph had something of this same quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr Osmond it was the key-note, and everything was in harmony with it' (p. 229). Isabel admits that her understanding of Osmond is limited, though others see through him. On learning of her engagement to Osmond, Ralph describes him as 'a

something she cannot fully understand, as when Osmond tells her he loves her, we learn that her imagination 'now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn't cross – a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet.' (p. 270–1). I have only alluded to the imagery and vocabulary of pictures and painting with which this novel is saturated, and here one subtle occasion must suffice. After Ralph's death Isabel is seen in the picture gallery at Gardencourt where she stops in front of a small picture 'a charming and precious Bonington – upon which her eyes rested a long time. But she was not looking at the picture; she was wondering whether if her aunt had not come that day in Albany she would have married Caspar Goodwood' (p. 481). Despite the qualification of that final sentence this 'precious' picture has a symbolic value in the novel as an icon of foreclosed prospects, for the man who painted it, Richard Bonington, died early like Ralph from consumption, and it is fitting that as she stands before it Isabel herself dwells on an earlier closed prospect. What lies before her now is a return to the 'dead wall' of life with Osmond, driven as she is by duty and conscience.

The final third of *The Portrait of a Lady* is especially compelling in the emotional power with which James unfolds Isabel's fate. Three particular aspects of the narrative converge here: the despair of Pansy's dutiful submission to Osmond's iron will, Isabel's denial of his will in her flight to Ralph's death-bed, and the final revelation of her consciousness, now fully alert to what has been done to her, and what possibilities lie ahead. In a state of physical and emotional exhaustion on her journey from Rome to England, 'so detached from hope and regret, that she recalled to herself one of those Etruscan figures couched upon the receptacle of their ashes' (p. 475), Isabel still manages 'a mutilated glimpse' of a future, and if this is a threadbare prospect she is bolstered by the sense that 'deeper than any appetite for renunciation – was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come' (p. 475). Yet even now the wheel of fortune must take her through two further revolutions, the death of Ralph soon after their confession of love for each other, and the final repudiation of Caspar Goodwood. If her running away from Goodwood at the novel's end repeats the figurative patterning of captivity and flight we have noticed throughout, this moment is subtly delivered by James in a passage where the concept of 'possession' so central to the novel is used for the last time. Goodwood takes her in a sudden passionate embrace and kisses her: 'His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed: and it was extraordinarily as if,

solemn 'as a Cimabue Madonna' (p. 186) in the days following the death of Mr Touchett sounds ironically through the novel, for this famous early Renaissaince painting is, in the genre to which it belongs, a picture of a mother *and* child.

Isabel has been manipulated and deceived but the novel insists that she is responsible for her own fate. For all her independence of spirit, her love of freedom, and her imagination, her understanding fails her in dealing with Osmond and Madame Merle. On her first visit to Osmond's villa, when Madame Merle and the Countess leave her alone with Osmond, he asks Isabel what she thinks of his sister. The question surprises her since she barely knows the woman. Osmond's subsequent account of his sister is designed to sow mistrust in Isabel towards her because the Countess knows the history of his sexual liaison with Madame Merle: it is his way of pre-empting any moves the Countess may make in alerting Isabel to that history. This moment should be seen in conjunction with others when Isabel has a sense of a 'false note' about something said or a scene encountered, especially in relation to Madame Merle, which she fails to read at the time. The most significant of these comes in Chapter 40, when Isabel suddenly comes upon Osmond and Madame Merle in a drawing room: Madame Merle is standing whilst Osmond is sitting, an anomaly 'that arrested her' and she has a momentary illumination of something about them 'like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected' (p. 349). The significance of this scene dawns slowly for Isabel through the ensuing events of the novel and is finally confronted in Chapter 42 when she sits alone through the night, now fully alert to the mess of her circumstances.

One of the traditions of critical commentary on James in this century notes his early interest in melodrama and the Gothic and sees *The Portrait of a Lady* within that tradition, though transforming its conventions through the complexity of his handling of character and situation. The stock ingredients of melodrama are certainly present here – imprisonment, possession, exploitation and deception – all these terms apply either figuratively or literally to Isabel and Pansy in what has been called its deep structure of Gothic underpinnings.[2] The language of the novel is saturated throughout with an oppositional vocabulary which sets possessions, ownership, wealth and associated terms on one side against

2 See David Kirby, *The Portrait of a Lady and The Turn of the Screw: Henry James and Melodrama* in The Critics Debate Series, Macmillan, 1991, p. 12. Kirby's short book provides an excellent analytical survey of critical assessments of the novel and includes his own instructive 'appraisal'.

notions of freedom, liberty and independence on the other. The political ambience of the novel, muted as it is, reflects the wider social relevance of these terms. It was written some fifteen years after the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States, and the Paris scenes are set in the early 1870s with the establishment of the Third Republic after the brutal suppression of the people's revolt in the Paris Commune of 1870–1. In Paris Isabel is taken by Mrs Touchett to see an old friend, Mrs Luce, 'the only person in Paris she now went to see', who had been living in Paris 'since the days of Louis Philippe'. Her wealthy husband, who has spent half a century of idle leisure in Paris, was a 'deep' conservative, a man with no faith in Republican government which he thought would not last and whose opinion of the French people was that, 'They want to be kept down, sir, to be kept down; nothing but the strong hand – the iron heel – will do for them.' Mrs Touchett shares his views and 'wished to know what one had crossed that odious Atlantic for but to get away from republics' (p. 189). Whilst such are opinions are native to the wealthy upper classes they are implicitly damning in the mouths of Isabel's American connections, and run counter to her own instincts for freedom and independence. Lord Warburton is presented as the type of radical freethinking British aristocrat, deeply aware of the unfairness of his own privileges and wealth, yet unable to effect change. The only character who openly challenges the institutionalised forms of slavery on which the people of Isabel's world depend for service is Henrietta Stackpole, and in its way this is remarkable, for James was characteristically hostile to journalists and their profession. She brings a naïve faith in the virtues of American republicanism to the novel, and if she is frequently ironised for this, and for her busy attempts to represent European life to the readers of the *Interviewer*, her fidelty to Isabel is a surviving virtue.

The Portrait of a Lady is a relatively early novel in James's oeuvre and is written in style less forbidding than that of his later work. One of its striking features, indeed one of its great pleasures, as we have seen, is James's persistent use of a figurative language to reveal and amplify the implications of scene, character, conversation, motive and event, as on the occasions I have illustrated so far. This figurative language conditions the tone of what we read, and bears upon the difficulty of how we read the novel as a whole, given its mixture of comedic and tragic elements: are we reading a comedy of manners or a sombre tale of deception and its consequences? The answer, of course, is both. Near the end of his Preface to the novel James addresses what he calls his 'treatment' of his subject which involved 'never forgetting, by any

lapse, that the thing was under a special obligation to be amusing' (p. 15). If we ask what he means by this, the answer cannot be that he wants us to be merely 'amused' by his novel. Some comic elements are transparent. There is a comic eccentricity about Mrs Touchett. Henrietta and Mr Bantling are defined as 'a pair of groping celibates' (p. 193) and she reminds Osmond of 'a new steel pen – the most odious thing in nature' (p. 417). The Countess is presented as a foolish woman whose agency is none the less to tell important truths: for example, she uses a striking image when she tells Isabel that Madame Merle's 'great idea has been to be tremendously irreproachable – a kind of full-blown lily – the incarnation of propriety' (p. 463). The implications of 'a full-blown lily' with its echo of 'fly-blown' is unmistakably satiric and marks the distance between Madame Merle's veneer of propriety and the truth of her relations with Osmond, whilst Ralph's view of her is unequivocally reductive when he equates her universal appeal with that of 'some new volume of smooth twaddle' (p. 221). On the other hand a passage in Chapter 12 is more difficult to assess, despite its direct narrative address to the reader as James asks us not to 'Smile' at Isabel's belief that she could do better than marry Warburton, and that if there was 'folly in her wisdom' she becomes wise 'only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity' (p. 98).

Charity, whatever its occasions, entails a sympathic response, and our feelings about Isabel, Ralph and Pansy are ultimately conditioned by the deepening tones of the novel's final chapters. James uses images of fruit, flowers, birds, landscapes, seascapes and the pictorial vocabulary appropriate to the novel's title, a figurative language equal to the architectural idiom of structure and balance offered in his Preface. Mrs Touchett thinks of 'a young gentlewoman without visible relations . . . as a flower without foliage' (p. 195): Ralph urges Isabel not to 'try so much to form your character – it's like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose' and advises her to 'Spread your wings; rise above the ground' (p. 196). When Lord Warburton tells her of Ralph's return to Rome near the point of death Isabel is pictured 'like a winged creature held back' (p. 329). Isabel thinks of her last meeting with Goodwood before her marriage as 'like a collision between vessels in broad daylight. There had been no mist, no hidden current to excuse it, and she herself had only wished to steer wide. He had bumped against her prow, however, while her hand was on the tiller and – to complete the metaphor – had given the lighter vessel a strain which still occasionally betrayed itself in a faint creaking' (p. 412). In another of those shadowy moments when the light of her prospects is darkened by

something she cannot fully understand, as when Osmond tells her he loves her, we learn that her imagination 'now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn't cross – a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet.' (p. 270–1). I have only alluded to the imagery and vocabulary of pictures and painting with which this novel is saturated, and here one subtle occasion must suffice. After Ralph's death Isabel is seen in the picture gallery at Gardencourt where she stops in front of a small picture 'a charming and precious Bonington – upon which her eyes rested a long time. But she was not looking at the picture; she was wondering whether if her aunt had not come that day in Albany she would have married Caspar Goodwood' (p. 481). Despite the qualification of that final sentence this 'precious' picture has a symbolic value in the novel as an icon of foreclosed prospects, for the man who painted it, Richard Bonington, died early like Ralph from consumption, and it is fitting that as she stands before it Isabel herself dwells on an earlier closed prospect. What lies before her now is a return to the 'dead wall' of life with Osmond, driven as she is by duty and conscience.

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while she took it, she felt each thing in 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' (p. 499). The language here openly acknowledges the thrust of sexual possession, and Isabel responds in a swoon-like fantasy of drowning – 'So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink.' If the threat of sexual possession and the imposition of one identity upon another is foregrounded here, it is consistent with all the other acts and schemes throughout the novel which impose on Isabel's freedom. That she can withstand this final imposition affirms her freedom, now construed as the knowledge of freedom of choice, and if she chooses the 'very straight path' (p. 500) of obedience to her marriage vows, we are left with the sense that her return to Osmond will not be a return to servitude.

The Portrait of a Lady survives comparison with James's late masterworks, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). It has a weight and beauty all of its own, and in its singular focus on the consciousness of its central character, the strength of its structural design, its use of irony and the cohesion of its figurative language, it possesses an enduring appeal.

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