



Signet Classics

THE PORTRAIT
OF A LADY

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD
BY COLM TÓIBÍN

HENRY JAMES

THE
PORTRAIT
OF A
LADY



Henry James

*With an Introduction by Regina Barreca
and a New Afterword by Colm Tóibín*

SIGNET CLASSICS

SIGNET CLASSICS

Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0745,
Auckland, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classics Printing (Tóibín Afterword), July 2007
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction copyright © Regina Barreca, 1995 .

Afterword copyright © Colm Tóibín, 2007

All rights reserved

Cover painting: *Mrs. Charles E. Inches (Louise Pomeroy)* (1887) by John Singer
Sargent (1856–1925). © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/Anonymous gift of Mrs.
Charles Inches' daughter, Luise Brimmer Inches Seton/The Bridgeman Art
Library.



REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Printed in the United States of America

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this
book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the
publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment
for this "stripped book."

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via
any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punish-
able by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not
participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your
support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Introduction



“But who is ‘quite independent,’ and in what sense is the term used?—that point is not yet settled. . . . [I]s it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they have been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? Or does it simply mean that they are fond of their own way?”

—Ralph Touchett, in *The Portrait of a Lady*

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James takes an enthusiastic, spiritually ambitious, emotionally charged, attractive and powerful young woman, and seems to set her up for the coming-of-age rites of wealthy young Americans made familiar by earlier writers. Our heroine comes to England in the full flush of her early adulthood, learns about European manners and mannerisms, and finds her American sense of self-reliance challenged. James then presents us with what has been regarded as the appropriately happy ending for such a heroine: she meets and marries a man some years her senior who will shape her ambitions to fit acceptable conventions and teach her to harness her energies for suitably feminine purposes. But *The Portrait of a Lady*, first published in 1881, is like other James novels in this one respect: it does not proceed according to formula.

The heroine's marriage does not signal the end of her story, but instead ushers her into an entirely new world: a world where Isabel Archer's true character is tested and shaped in ways that place her firmly in the company

of other great—and perhaps tragic—heroines. But unlike her possible companions in tragedy—Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, Lily Bart—Isabel Archer's passionate response to the quiet desperation of her married life does not lead to her death but to a sense of survival.

Isabel Archer survives because she is the quintessential young American woman, one who has been raised to trust her own intelligence and intuition. As young as she is, Isabel instinctively resists the confinement of artificial manners and inherited values that usually characterize her European counterparts. James twins her American sensibilities with an understanding that the world is already moving in the new directions that will make it the modern world and so constructs a woman who, despite the more conventional aspects of her life, is clearly subversive.

Isabel is subversive in ways even she does not intend or fully understand, in part because of her will toward independence. Isabel believes and repeatedly asserts that she is an independent young woman, but the very definition of the term "independence" for a woman is at the heart of James's novel. Isabel's adoring cousin, Ralph, questions precisely how the term "independence" applies to the nineteen-year-old woman from Albany: is it a matter of money, of morality, or merely a refusal to listen to the advice or warnings of others? Can a woman, especially a young American woman transported to Europe and given access to a fortune without an education in how to deal with either, be independent, given the limited options open to one in her position? Isabel is awarded financial independence through Ralph's intervention but must learn the difference between freedom and independence. Even at the beginning of the book, Isabel is independent; only by the end of the work is she free.

Early in the novel James tells us that it is one of Isabel's theories about herself that she was "very fortunate in being independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of her independence." But even with all of her excellent qualities—we are informed by the narrator that she is "intelligent and generous" and has "a fine free nature"—the question remains: "[W]hat

was she going to do with herself? . . . Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own." Having intentions of her own, however, is no guarantee that Isabel is indeed free to choose her own destiny. The overriding tension in the novel concerns Isabel's continuing belief in her own independence in light of her gradual awakening to the fact of her own subjugation, to the awareness that she seems fated to do the world's will rather than her own.

From the start Isabel asserts her need for the good will of other people even as she insists on the predominance of her own judgment. Despite the fact that her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, is responsible for chaperoning Isabel from America to England after the death of Isabel's parents, "our heroine" (as James often calls her) is wary about accepting the counsel offered by her well-meaning relative, even at the cost of her own reputation. When Mrs. Touchett suggests that it is simply not correct for Isabel to remain alone in the company of Ralph and his friend Lord Warburton after her aunt leaves the room, Isabel obeys her wishes with great reluctance because she does not understand the objection. Yet she nevertheless informs her aunt that she "always want[s] to know the things one shouldn't do." Thinking her niece merely contrary by nature, Mrs. Touchett rejoins, "So as to do them?" Isabel's answer provides an early key to her character; she is not so simple as Mrs. Touchett assumes. Isabel wants to know what is done "so as to choose."

It is not surprising that the choice that puzzles most readers of *The Portrait of a Lady* is Isabel's choice of a husband. To paraphrase Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged, at least by readers of fiction, that a young woman in possession of a fortune must be in want of a husband.

Isabel differs from many of her textual peers—and no doubt most of her readers—insofar as she does not regard marriage as the inevitable consequence of her adventures. "Among her theories," the narrator tells us, "this young lady was not without a collection of views

on the subject of marriage." Of course she has opinions about marriage—what heroine doesn't? But this heroine is different: "The first on the list was a conviction that it was very vulgar to think too much about it." She is determined to resist the seductions of the easy, domestic and appropriately feminine path. She wants to plot a course of her own, but she has no idea yet what that course will be.

Isabel first refuses the marriage proposal offered by Lord Warburton, a charming, sophisticated, rich English peer with liberal ideas, who would clearly be regarded as a great catch by any young woman—but who is not regarded in that light by Isabel. Isabel tests the strength of her will toward independence against the enticements offered by Warburton. He has grand and effective ideas about changing the world for the better. He is clever and sincere. He has an enormous estate that—to put the finishing touches on the fairy tale—even includes a moat.

Offering to leave his family's mansion and land to live in a place of Isabel's choosing, Warburton declares that he's had the house "thoroughly examined; it is perfectly sanitary. But if you shouldn't fancy it you needn't dream of living in it. There's no difficulty whatever about that; there are plenty of houses. I thought I would just mention it; some people don't like a moat, you know. Good-bye." In contrast to his rather fumbling erasure of his own love for her, Isabel's reply is a classic moment of self-assurance and composure. "I delight in a moat," says Isabel. "Good-bye." Why does Isabel refuse Warburton's offer?

In at least one respect the answer is the same as the answer to the question of why Hamlet does not immediately kill Claudius: there would be no story if these two acted with alacrity. George Eliot, a near contemporary of James, wryly noted that "the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history." Isabel, for better or worse, is destined to have a history. She tries to explain as much to Warburton when she announces: "I can't escape unhappiness. . . . In marrying you, I shall be trying to." So that he does not misunderstand her, Isabel explains that "I am not bent on being miserable. . . . I have always been intensely determined

to be happy. . . . I've told people that; you can ask them. But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself." If Isabel had married Warburton her life would have been the stuff of romantic fantasy, but Isabel's fantasies lie elsewhere.

Not for this heroine the quiet pleasures of the hearth and the joys of a safe and uneventful passing of days. Isabel reveals to her best friend, Henrietta, that instead of wanting safety, she longs for a taste of uncertainty. Her imagination is captured by the idea of "a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see—that's my idea of happiness." Henrietta accuses her of sounding "like the heroine of an immoral novel," and she may well be right. Isabel's tastes run toward the edge of experience and the margins of acceptability. She regards herself in the light of an intellectual adventuress, willing to barter the ordinary for the uncommon.

The luxury of the ordinary is not completely lost on Isabel, however. James tells us that "she would have given her little finger at that moment, to feel, strongly and simply, the impulse to answer: 'Lord Warburton, it is impossible for a woman to do better in this world than to commit herself to your loyalty.' But though she could conceive the impulse, she could not let it operate; her imagination was charmed, but it was not led captive."*

Ralph Touchett shores up Isabel's idea of herself as a woman whose unique character will place her in remarkable circumstances. As fond as Ralph is of Warburton, he is even more attached to the idea of Isabel as a woman who is destined to carve out an unusual destiny. Arguing that, had she married Warburton, she would still have had a good life, "a very honourable and brilliant one," he goes on to claim, "But relatively speaking, it would be a little prosaic. It would be definitely marked out in advance; it would be wanting in the unexpected."

*James later revised this passage to end: "But though she was lost in admiration of her opportunity she managed to move back into the deepest shade of it, even as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage. This 'splendid' security so offered her was not the greatest she could conceive."

Lord Warburton is not Isabel's only suitor; neither is he the first to sense that recognizing Isabel's independence of spirit might be the easiest way to gain her affections. When her American suitor, Caspar Goodwood, offers to allow her to "keep" her independence, Isabel believes that true independence rules out the idea that another person can award it; if someone "allows" you your independence, you are no longer independent. "Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? . . . What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent—doing whatever you like?" asks Caspar Goodwood, because "it is to make you independent that I want to marry you," to which Isabel, always on her guard around Goodwood, replies, "That's a beautiful sophism."

When she turns down Warburton she is pleased with her gesture; when she sends Caspar Goodwood away she is devastated, even though she makes the choice deliberately. Turning down *two* good, intelligent, and wealthy men forces Isabel to confront her own ambitions. When her aunt questions Isabel's motives for turning down Warburton's offer, Mrs. Touchett intuits that Isabel might "expect to do something better." Isabel's belief, as she tells Goodwood, is that she will probably never marry. But that is before Ralph persuades his father to give Isabel a large inheritance and before she has even tasted the first mouthful of life as a woman of means. It would be a misreading to think that Isabel believes she will marry a man greater than Goodwood or Warburton; instead she desires merely to write the script of her own life in her own hand.

The shine is taken off of Isabel's triumphant moment of what she believes are the unique gestures of independence in turning down not one but two excellent proposals of marriage, however, when an experienced woman of the world tells Isabel she should not consider her refusal of a good proposal as so important or creative: "We have all had the young man with the moustache. He is the inevitable young man; he doesn't count," says her coolly sophisticated and world-weary friend, Madame Merle. Every attractive young woman with money has refused offers, Madame Merle implies, and Isabel

should set her sights higher when looking for triumph. Drawn into a web of fascination woven by Madame Merle, Isabel believes that she is being advised by an older, trustworthy, sincere counsellor, who wishes only the best for her. She could not be further from the truth. Madame Merle wants Isabel to act in ways she herself could not, but she has breathtakingly selfish reasons for this, as Isabel will discover.

Ralph, too, wants Isabel to do what he cannot. With exhilaration Ralph anticipates a future full of voyages into unmapped emotional territories for his cousin, imagining experiences for her that he himself could never embark upon. In fact, the invalid Ralph is in love with Isabel because she is the only individual, among all the human beings about him, able to relieve his ennui; he is thrilled by the state of happy uncertainty into which he is plunged when he is in her company or when he observes her career. Ralph believes that he wishes only to observe and be left to his own interpretations of her actions, but of course it is his action—the insistence that his father give Isabel a large inheritance—that redirects the course of Isabel's life.

Ralph is no casual observer, no matter how he defines himself. Despite the fact that he, too, adores Isabel, Ralph is delighted by the parade of prospective bridegrooms at her door. Taking vicarious pleasure from his cousin's flinging aside the fears and doubts usually ascribed to young women, Ralph believes that she will reject the men who offer their hands in marriage, and he eagerly awaits this spectacle. "He knew that she had listened to others," remarks James,

but that she had made them listen to her in return; and he found much entertainment in the idea that, in these few months that he had known her, he should see a third suitor at her gate. She had wanted to see life, and fortune was serving her to her taste; a succession of gentlemen going down on their knees to her was by itself a respectable chapter of experience. Ralph looked forward to a fourth and a fifth *soupirant*; he had no conviction that she would stop at a third. She would

keep the gate ajar and open a parley; she would certainly not allow number three to come in.

Watching Isabel as if she were on stage, Ralph applauds her emotional and intellectual improvisations with all the possessiveness of one of the show's backers.

For her cousin, Isabel is an oasis of mystery in the desert of convention. This is a twist on the usual state of the lover, who typically desires complete knowledge of the beloved's every thought, and who laments the barrier of the individual self that comes between them. For Ralph, however, Isabel comes to represent all the joys of a world still mysterious, of a future left open to conjecture. He watches the expression on her face and speculates on its meaning; he asks for her opinion with the real interest of ignorance, and she holds for Ralph the fascination of an unraveled destiny.

These comments bear directly on the structure of *The Portrait of a Lady*, which is characterized by the withholding, rather than the dissemination, of information. What is revealed to the reader is revealed through a complex labyrinth of emotional curves, swerves, turns, and dead ends. The story is set up like a maze, where the reader eagerly pursues one path that promises enlightenment, only to find the narrator undercutting what has just been read. It is as if a route taken by the reader ends in a blank wall so that the reader must make an about-face and retrace steps to seek again what is of importance. This complicated method for the disclosure of information must be foregrounded in any discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* for one crucial reason: the central concern of the story itself is the revelation of information and the epistemology of truth. The way the novel is written, with its sudden turns and mysterious hints of what is to come, is in complete contradiction to the honesty insisted upon by many of its characters.

As the novel progresses, the now wealthy and well-traveled Isabel becomes deeply attracted to Gilbert Osmond, introduced by Madame Merle as a man having "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything. Oh yes, he paints, if you please. . . . His painting is pretty bad." Osmond, like

Dracula, sleeps much of the day, has no employment, but still manages to make people around him "feel that he might do something if he would only rise early." Why is Isabel attracted to so unlikely a candidate for her affections?

In one sense, Isabel Archer can be seen as James's "portrait of a lady as a young artist." Isabel doesn't paint or write, but at the beginning of the novel she views the blank canvas of her own future with what can only be regarded as an artistic vision. Believing that she is responsible for creating and crafting her own destiny, she thinks she picks up and puts down her fate the way a painter would a brush or a writer would a pen. Instead, the reader realizes that Isabel is not the creator of her own life.

But she is the creator of a fantasy about Gilbert Osmond. She holds in her mind, early on in their relationship, an image of him that is quite telling:

It seemed to tell a story—a story of the sort that touched her most easily; to speak of a serious choice, a choice between things of a shallow, and things of a deep, interest; of a lonely, studious life in a lovely land; of an old sorrow that sometimes ached to-day; a feeling of pride that was perhaps exaggerated, but that had an element of nobleness; a care for beauty and perfection so natural and so cultivated together that it had been the main occupation of a lifetime of which the arid places were watered with the sweet sense of a quaint, half-anxious, half-helpless fatherhood.

It is clear that Isabel has invented and projected whatever integrity, sincerity, and passion she sees in Osmond, much as a child projects personality and responsiveness onto a doll, or a painter creates something beautiful out of ugliness.

Clearly Isabel confuses imagination with desire. Drawn to Osmond because he represents much more than he actually offers, Isabel tries unconsciously to overlook his selfishness, his whining, as well as his lack of accomplishments, because she regards him as authoritative and powerful; she regards him as someone who has achieved

independence. James suggests that Isabel's image of Osmond springs directly from her imagination rather than from his actual nature: "It was not so much what he said and did, but rather what he withheld, that distinguished him; he was an original without being an eccentric." Isabel, then, turns away the traditional and "nice" men who want her and finds someone whom *she* wants, someone whom she believes she is freely choosing. In marrying Gilbert Osmond, and in rejecting the men who offered her easier lives, Isabel believes she is carving out her own destiny. She sees herself as a heroine or, at the very least, regards her choice as heroic.

Ralph understands why Isabel would make such a choice, even though he can also see that it is disastrous for her.

She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that she had invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, and 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 Isabel's power to gratify her imagination. He had done so, and the girl had taken full advantage of the privilege. Poor Ralph felt sick; he felt ashamed.

The very reasons that cause Ralph to love Isabel will later cause Isabel to love Gilbert Osmond. Both Ralph and Isabel choose to act the same way in light of their own desires: they want to give money that is rightly theirs to the person who has most completely captured their imagination. They believe that by giving their money away they in turn will allow the other to grow and thrive. In both cases, they are wrong. Their tragedies are based on a matched set of misjudgments.

Osmond does not love what is best about Isabel, a fact that is not lost on Osmond's sister. The Countess is sorry to see Isabel's attraction to her brother because she is resigned to her brother's effects on women: "Well, it is a pity she is so nice," the Countess declared. "To be sacrificed, any girl would do. She needn't be supe-

rior." To attract Osmond in the first place, Isabel had almost unwittingly buried her superiority, "effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth." In a way, therefore, honest Isabel was disingenuous. She pretended to be more "feminine" inasmuch as she pretended to be more submissive, more compliant, less intelligent, and have less integrity than she actually possessed. As for Osmond, "He was not changed; he had not disguised himself, during the year of his courtship. . . . But she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man . . . she had mistaken a part for the whole."

Why doesn't Isabel simply leave Osmond? When Henrietta asks the same question, Isabel replies, "I'm extremely struck . . . with the off-hand way in which you speak of a woman's leaving her husband. It's easy to see you've never had one!" Isabel does not stay with her husband because of the usual social pressures or because of some abstract idea of what is expected of a woman in her position; she is quite willing to override convention. Isabel stays because of her commitment to the bond of her word, and she stays because she is unwilling to abandon what she still sees as a decision made out of her sense of independence. She married Osmond because she wanted to; she regards it as the representation of her will to choose and to not remain caged in someone else's vision of her life.

Isabel tells herself that she must accept responsibility for her actions, even if she has blundered tragically.

It was impossible to pretend that she had not acted with her eyes open; if ever a girl was a free agent, she had been. A girl in love was doubtless not a free agent; but the sole source of her mistake had been within herself. There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked, and considered, and chosen. When a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one way to

repair it—to accept it. One folly was enough, especially when it was to last forever; a second one would not much set it off. . . . She had said to herself that we must take our duty where we find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible.

She sees her marriage as evidence of her independence—but we know it is not. Sometimes in seeking to avoid our fate, wrote the philosopher Seneca, we leap to meet it. Isabel Archer marries Gilbert Osmond because Madame Merle wants Pansy Osmond to have a better life than the one she was forced to lead. In this way Isabel's "decision" to marry Osmond is rendered bankrupt. The text makes clear that Madame Merle has manipulated Isabel into marriage with the skill of a professional seducer: as if she, not Osmond, were to be the partner. As the novel progresses, we know that Isabel believes that she acts on the world, even as we see that she is acted upon. But she is not just acted upon: although she is chosen by Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle primarily for her fortune, she is also chosen for the richness of her character. The irony, of course, is that Osmond wants to deplete that character as soon as possible. He delights in the idea of reshaping Isabel: "If, however, she were only willful and high-tempered, the defect might be managed with comparative ease; for had one not a will of one's own that one had been keeping for years in the best condition—as pure and keen as a sword protected by its sheath?"

Yet Isabel maintains sufficient independence to break away at least temporarily from her marriage, ultimately choosing to be at Ralph's deathbed than remain in the tomb (the name of the house is Italian for "black rock") that Gilbert Osmond has made their home. As Isabel faces the misery of her marriage, acknowledging that she has not been mistress of her own destiny, she also comes to understand that the groundwork for her present had been laid long in her past. It was not just her inheritance or Madame Merle's machinations that forged her life. "It suddenly struck her that if her Aunt Lydia had not come that day in just that way and found her alone, everything might have been different. She might have

had another life, and today she might have been a happier woman."

Clearly, even at the close of the novel, Isabel believes that the proper world for anyone, male or female, is the world of intelligence, of honest effort, of moral strength. Isabel's grip on her image of her life slips through her fingers and scatters, like a drop of mercury splashing on the floor: elusive in the first place, now gone forever. Isabel stays with Osmond in part because of the force of habit, emotional exhaustion, fear of the mockery of others, and an unwillingness to believe that she has made a great mistake not only in her life but with her life.

Yet Isabel remains one of the sturdiest, strongest and most powerful heroines in any nineteenth-century novel, becoming more heroic in her ability to survive than most of her contemporary textual heroines are in their deaths. Compared to Isabel's fierce and independent judgment, the wills of the other characters pale. Her ability to think for herself, coupled with her internal desire to do as much good as she might, sets her apart from the rabble of the European salons, and from the diluted heroines of lesser novels, who succumb to the evils of a world for which they are too good. Isabel does not sacrifice herself on the altar of social expectation or duty.

If the conventional plots offer heroines marriage or death, it is obvious that James is determined to script a new plot for Isabel. She is not, we imagine, going to fade into the background, a quiet martyr to her husband's narcissism, or even a mere prop and guide for her stepdaughter, Pansy. Isabel's story cannot be contained within the acceptable plot of resignation and unhappiness so familiar to the heroine who has made a failed marriage. Isabel does not surrender and she does not die.

It might be desirable to die; but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. 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 exhilarating, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength—it was a proof that she should some day be happy again.

It couldn't be that she was to live only to suffer; she was still young, after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet.

Independence for Isabel implies something she must react against or free herself from; freedom implies genuine choice, not only reactions born of the wish to choose. She struggles to come to terms with her life—all of it, not just the paths of which she is most proud. This, finally, marks the achievement of her true independence. At the end of the novel, and for the first time in the novel, Isabel Archer is free.

—Regina Barreca