

Psychological Self-Realization in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

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abstract

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* represents a profound exploration of the human psyche, with a particular focus on the psychological struggles of women in the 19th century. The novel employs psychological realism to examine the character of Isabel Archer, an American woman who challenges societal expectations and confronts personal limitations. Through a close textual analysis, the study examines how James utilizes narrative techniques to portray Isabel's psychological struggles as she challenges gender expectations and seeks personal autonomy. The findings reveal that James not only critiques Victorian societal constraints but also offers a timeless exploration of the complexities of individual desire versus societal pressures, contributing to the discourse on female subjectivity in literature.

Keywords: Henry James, psychological realism, *The Portrait of a Lady*, female subjectivity, Isabel Archer

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1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a profound exploration of the human psyche, particularly the psychological struggles of women in the 19th century. Through the perspective of psychological realism, the novel studies the character of Isabel Archer, a spirited American woman who confronts societal expectations and personal limitations. As a central figure in the development of psychological realism, James employs a range of techniques to reveal the inner workings of his characters' minds. According to Mary S. Schriber (1976, 441) no nineteenth-century American novelist grasped the complexities and nuances of women's position in society better than Henry James. By analyzing Isabel's journey of self-discovery and disillusionment, this paper aims to illuminate the complex interplay between individual desire and societal constraints.

The novel's narrative structure, characterized by its intricate point of view and psychological depth, allows readers to access the characters' thoughts and feelings. James's use of free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness techniques further enhances the psychological realism of the text. Through these devices, the reader is invited to inhabit the minds of the characters, experiencing their emotions and perceptions firsthand.

Through a close reading of the text and a critical analysis of its psychological dimensions, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of James's artistry and his enduring relevance to contemporary readers, and argues that through the psychological development of Isabel Archer, Henry James critiques the restrictive societal norms of the Victorian era, demonstrating how these constraints hinder the self-realization of women.

1.1. Psychological Realism in *The Portrait of a Lady*

Psychological realism, as a literary technique, focuses on the internal lives of characters, studying their thoughts, feelings, and motivations. It seeks to portray the complexity of the human psyche, often exploring themes of consciousness, subconsciousness, and the impact of social and cultural forces on individual behavior. To achieve this nuanced portrayal, psychological realism often intersects with the principles of cognitive psychology, which provides a theoretical framework for understanding the mental processes underlying language and behavior. "Psychological realism adopts the theoretical perspective of cognitive psychology to understand language-related behaviour...It explains language behaviour as the coordinated interaction, in real time, of a set of more primitive capacities or functions that map between inputs and outputs." (Goldrick 2011, 632)

Henry James, a master of psychological realism, employs this technique to great effect in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In this novel, James reveals the psychological depths of Isabel Archer, a young American woman who travels to Europe and becomes entangled in a complex web of relationships. Through the use of multiple narrators and shifting perspectives, James provides readers with a multifaceted view of Isabel's character. Accordingly, the readers witness the heroine's hopes, dreams, and aspirations, as well as her gradual disillusionment and despair.

One of the key aspects of psychological realism in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the exploration of the subconscious mind. James suggests that many of Isabel's actions are motivated by unconscious desires and fears. Her attraction to Gilbert Osmond, for example, may be rooted in a deep-seated

longing for a strong, paternal figure. Similarly, her resistance to societal expectations may stem from a subconscious desire for independence and autonomy.

Another important aspect of psychological realism in the novel is the examination of the impact of social and cultural forces on individual psychology. Isabel's experiences are shaped by the gender roles and expectations of the 19th century. As a woman, she is expected to conform to traditional norms of femininity and to prioritize domesticity over personal ambition. However, Isabel challenges these expectations, leading to conflict and ultimately, her downfall.

By examining the psychological underpinnings of Isabel's character and the broader social and cultural context of the novel, this paper aims to offer a nuanced and insightful analysis of James's masterpiece.

1.2. The Role of the Unreliable Narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady*

One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Portrait of a Lady* is James's use of an unreliable narrator. By employing multiple narrators, James creates a complex and ambiguous narrative, allowing readers to question the reliability of the information they receive. This technique adds a layer of psychological depth to the novel, as it invites readers to consider the subjective nature of perception and memory.

The primary narrator of the novel is an unnamed figure who often seems to misunderstand or misinterpret the events they describe. This unreliable narrator can be seen as a reflection of the limitations of human perception and the fallibility of memory. By questioning the reliability of the narrator, James encourages readers to engage in a more active reading experience, forming their own interpretations of the text.

The use of an unreliable narrator also allows James to explore the theme of self-deception. Isabel herself is often deceived by her own idealized view of the world. She misinterprets the intentions of others and fails to recognize the true nature of her own desires. This self-deception, coupled with the unreliable narration, creates a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity that permeates the entire novel.

Through the use of an unreliable narrator, James challenges the traditional notion of a single, objective truth. Instead, he suggests that reality is subjective and that our understanding of events is shaped by our own biases and limitations. This approach to narrative allows for a more nuanced and complex exploration of the human psyche, as it acknowledges the role of the subconscious and the limitations of conscious awareness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* has been the subject of numerous critical analyses, with scholars exploring various aspects of the novel, including its psychological depth, its social commentary, and its formal innovations. While many critics have focused on the novel's exploration of female subjectivity and its critique of societal constraints, fewer have delved into the specific psychological mechanisms that drive Isabel Archer's character development.

One influential interpretation of the novel offered by Ernest Sandeen argues that Isabel's character represents Henry James's "Albany cousin" Mary Temple who died in 1870. According to Sandeen the image of Mary Temple "figured more or less obscurely in several of his stories and minor female characters but according to his own testimony was most fully and consciously operative in his creation of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*" (1954, 1060).

Similarly, Lotus Snow (1958) also claims that "certain friends of Henry James recognized that Isabel Archer was modeled after Mary (Minny) Temple, his adored cousin who died at twenty-four of tuberculosis" (312).

Oscar Cargill (1957, 11) highlights James's significant advancement over Shakespeare and George Eliot by noting that James was inspired to make his heroine the central focus of his narrative rather than merely a contributing character. Cargill (1957) maintains that unlike Shakespeare and Eliot, who, despite their deep interest in their heroines, did not fully center their works around them, James positioned his heroine at the very core of the story. He centered everything within her consciousness, placing particular emphasis on her self-perception, thereby surpassing his predecessors in his portrayal of a female protagonist.

Critics such as Quentin Anderson (1957) defended the idea that the form of the novel is incomplete based on the belief that "the novel closes at the moment when Isabel has her foot on the threshold of the adult world" (190). Anderson believes "the book clearly seems more rounded off to him than it can to the uninitiated reader" (189). In opposition to this view, Lyall H. Powers (1959) defends the idea that "the form of the novel is complete and, once identified, familiar and indeed satisfactory. The form of the novel is, of course, essentially the pattern traced by the career of Isabel Archer, the career which begins within the sheltered confines of Gardencourt and leads her via Rome to Gardencourt again" (144-145). According to Powers "Isabel's career is defined quite strictly by the polarity set up in the novel between Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond; and we must be clearly aware of this polarity in order [to properly] appreciate the heroine's career" (145).

Another important critical perspective is provided by Linda A. Westervelt (1983), who emphasizes the novel's formal innovations, particularly its use of point of view. Westervelt argues that James's complex narrative technique allows readers to access the characters' consciousnesses and to experience the story from multiple perspectives. This technique, she suggests, enhances the psychological realism of the novel. According to Westervelt:

Focusing on the work of his major phase, critics have pointed out James's contribution to shaping the modern novel, especially the direct presentation of character and the absence of authorial guidance.' However, that contribution begins much earlier with *The Portrait of a Lady*, which opens with the conventions of a Victorian novel but ends as a modern one. Looking at James's notion of history, comparing the narrator's introduction of Isabel Archer with his direct presentation of her during her meditative vigil, and considering the implications of having the Countess Gemini reveal Pansy's heritage will show the extent of James's early experimentation and the importance of *The Portrait* for the modern novel. (1983, 75)

More recent scholarship has focused on the novel's different implications. Annette Niemtzw (1975, 377) puts forth that marriage was a central theme in James's family, with the novelist's father, Henry James Sr., deeply invested in marital discourse. While *The Portrait of a Lady* seemingly critiques the transcendental idealism of James's father, the novel's narrative - where Isabel Archer chooses to remain in an unhappy marriage - paradoxically aligns with Henry James Sr.'s views on marital relationships. These perspectives were most prominently articulated in public debates in the New York Tribune in 1852 and later in a series of marriage-focused papers in the Atlantic

Monthly in 1870. Niemtzow's study provides valuable insights into the ongoing debates about traditional marriage as reflected in the New York Tribune and Atlantic Monthly in the mid-19th century.

In his recent study, Casey M. Walker (2013, 161) asserts that in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, urban landscapes are deeply intertwined with the inner workings of his characters' minds. This intricate relationship prompts readers to look beyond mere historical accounts or physical descriptions of cities like London and Rome, urging a sensitivity to the dynamic interplay between imagination and material space.

By building upon these existing interpretations, this paper aims to offer a fresh perspective on *The Portrait of a Lady* by focusing on the psychological underpinnings of Isabel's character. By analyzing the specific psychological mechanisms that drive her choices and experiences, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's enduring significance.

3. ANALYSIS OF ISABEL ARCHER'S CHARACTER

Isabel Archer, the novel's protagonist, is a complex and enigmatic figure who embodies the tension between individual desire and societal expectation. Initially presented as an independent and spirited young woman, Isabel possesses a strong sense of self and a desire for autonomy. However, her idealism and romantic notions of love and marriage ultimately lead to her downfall.

One of the key psychological mechanisms that drives Isabel's character is her tendency toward self-deception. She often deludes herself into believing that she can control her own destiny, despite the constraints imposed upon her by societal norms and expectations. This self-deception allows her to maintain a sense of agency, even as she becomes increasingly trapped in a loveless marriage.

The following dialogue between Isabel Archer and Henrietta Stackpole in the novel serves as a poignant exploration of the protagonist's internal struggle within her unhappy marriage:

"Yes, I'm wretched," she said very mildly. She hated to hear herself say it; she tried to say it as judicially as possible.
"What does he do to you?" Henrietta asked, frowning as if she were enquiring into the operations of a quack doctor.
"He does nothing. But he doesn't like me."
"He's very hard to please!" cried Miss Stackpole. "Why don't you leave him?"
"I can't change that way," Isabel said.
"Why not, I should like to know? You won't confess that you've made a mistake. You're too proud."
"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." (654)

This exchange occurs at a critical juncture in the novel, where Isabel confronts the emotional neglect she endures from her husband, Gilbert Osmond. Through their conversation, James explores the themes of personal freedom, societal constraints, and the complexities of self-sacrifice. The interaction not only highlights the stark contrast between Isabel's passive resignation and Henrietta's assertive pragmatism but also underscores the psychological depth of the characters. Analyzing this moment reveals James's mastery in portraying the nuanced struggles of the human spirit against the backdrop of Victorian societal expectations.

Another pivotal dialogue is the one leading up to Osmond's marriage proposal. Despite warnings from friends and family about Osmond's true nature, Isabel is swayed by his crafted persona.

In their conversations, Osmond flatters her intelligence and portrays himself as someone who truly understands her. He appeals to her sense of adventure and desire for a profound connection. Isabel perceives this as an opportunity to explore uncharted territories in her personal life, further fueling her impulsive decision to accept his proposal.

“I haven’t the idea that it will matter much to you,” said Osmond. “I’ve too little to offer you. What I have - it’s enough for me; but it’s not enough for you. I’ve neither fortune, nor fame, nor extrinsic advantages of any kind. So, I offer nothing. I only tell you because I think it can’t offend you, and some day or other it may give you pleasure. It gives me pleasure, I assure you,” he went on, standing there before her, considerably inclined to her, turning his hat, which he had taken up, slowly round with a movement which had all the decent tremor of awkwardness and none of its oddity, and presenting to her his firm, refined, slightly ravaged face.

“It gives me no pain, because it’s perfectly simple. For me you’ll always be the most important woman in the world.” (424)

It is possible to state that another important aspect of Isabel’s psychology is her fascination with the unknown. She is drawn to mystery and intrigue, and she often seeks out experiences that challenge her sense of self. This desire for novelty and excitement leads her to make impulsive decisions, such as accepting Gilbert Osmond’s marriage proposal.

As the novel progresses, Isabel’s idealism is gradually eroded by the harsh realities of life. She comes to realize that her dreams of love and happiness are unattainable, and she is forced to confront the limitations of her own agency. This disillusionment leads to a profound sense of despair and a loss of hope.

3.1. Isabel’s Character in the Context of the 19th-Century Society

Isabel Archer’s character is deeply rooted in the societal and cultural context of the 19th century. Her experiences and choices are shaped by the limited opportunities available to women during this time.

In order to comprehend the character of Isabel Archer in full, it is essential to take into consideration the cultural and historical context of the novel, as well as the three central themes of the cult of domesticity, the role of marriage and the representation of the American girl abroad.

The 19th century was a time of significant social and political change, particularly in terms of gender roles and women’s rights. Women were often confined to domestic spheres and expected to prioritize marriage and motherhood over personal ambition. For example, in his article *Is Marriage Holy?* (1870) Henry James Sr. explains that marriage has two sides: it’s both a legal agreement enforced by laws and a moral commitment guided by conscience. He considers a situation where one spouse is unfaithful. While the law allows the other spouse to seek legal action, he suggests that conscience might lead them to forgive instead of seeking revenge. James highlights the difference between laws that control outward behavior to maintain order, and inner moral principles that shape our character and promote kindness and social harmony. He believes that the true sanctity of marriage is found in its social purpose - the nurturing of the family as the foundation of society - rather than in selfish interests or strictly legal righteousness. Ultimately, he advocates focusing on the true spirit of marriage and the well-being of society, rather than pursuing personal revenge when facing marital problems.

Isabel’s character challenges these traditional gender roles. She is an intelligent, independent, and willful woman who desires intellectual stimulation and personal growth. However, her aspirations

are often thwarted by the societal expectations of her time. Her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, a controlling and manipulative man, further restricts her freedom and limits her opportunities for self-fulfillment.

The novel's exploration of Isabel's experiences highlights the limitations imposed on women in the 19th century. Her struggle for autonomy and self-determination is a reflection of the broader societal challenges faced by women during this period. By examining Isabel's character in the context of her time, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the novel's enduring relevance and its critique of patriarchal norms.

The Cult of Domesticity: A pervasive ideology in the 19th century, the Cult of Domesticity prescribed that women should confine themselves to the domestic sphere, focusing on domestic duties, child-rearing, and religious piety. Isabel, however, defies this expectation. She seeks intellectual stimulation and personal fulfillment beyond the domestic realm.

The Role of Marriage: Marriage was often viewed as a means of social and economic security for women in the 19th century. It was also seen as a way to fulfill one's duty to society and family. While Isabel initially rejects conventional notions of marriage, she eventually succumbs to societal pressures and marries Gilbert Osmond. Her marriage, however, proves to be a source of misery and constraint, as Osmond's controlling nature and her own disillusionment undermine her hopes for happiness.

The American Girl Abroad: As an American woman traveling to Europe, Isabel embodies the trope of the "American Girl Abroad." This figure was often portrayed as innocent, idealistic, and vulnerable, easily susceptible to the temptations and corruptions of the European society. While Isabel possesses a strong sense of self, she is nonetheless influenced by the expectations and pressures of European high society.

By examining Isabel's character in the context of the 19th century society, we can appreciate the depth and complexity of James's novel. Her struggle for autonomy and self-fulfillment is a timeless theme that resonates with readers across generations.

3.2. Isabel's Idealism and Its Consequences

Isabel Archer's idealism is a central aspect of her character, both propelling her forward and ultimately leading to her downfall. Her romantic notions of love and marriage, combined with her desire for independence, create a complex and often contradictory psychological profile.

Isabel's idealism allows her to envision a life of freedom and self-fulfillment, but it also blinds her to the harsh realities of the world. She is drawn to Gilbert Osmond, a man who initially appears to embody her romantic ideals, but who ultimately proves to be a manipulative and controlling figure.

As Isabel embarks on her 'free exploration' of life, Henrietta is outspoken in declaring that she is drifting rather than 'some great mistake' that she is not enough 'in contact with reality,' with the 'toiling, striving' world. Ralph tells her that 'she has too much conscience'- a peculiarly American complication in the romantic temperament. Although all her diverse friends are united in their disapproval of Osmond, she proceeds to do the wrong thing for the right reasons. She has a special pride in marrying him, since she feels that she is not only 'taking,' but also 'giving', she feels too the release of transferring some of the burden of her inheritance to another's conscience James' way of commenting on how harm was done to her by her money. (Mathiessen 1944, 183)

Isabel's belief in her own ability to shape her own destiny leads her to make impulsive decisions, such as accepting Osmond's marriage proposal. She is convinced that she can transform him and their marriage into something beautiful, but she soon realizes the futility of her efforts.

As the novel progresses, Isabel's idealism is gradually eroded by the harsh realities of her marriage. She becomes increasingly isolated and disillusioned, and she struggles to maintain her sense of self. As Mathiessen states "but once she discerns what Osmond is really like, and how he has trapped her, she is by no means supine in his toils. She stands up to him with dignity" (1944, 183) Her initial optimism and hope are replaced by a sense of despair and resignation.

By examining the role of idealism in Isabel's character, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological complexities of the novel. Her journey from idealistic youth to disillusioned adulthood reflects the universal human experience of confronting the gap between dreams and reality.

3.3. Isabel's Struggle for Autonomy

A significant aspect of Isabel's character is her relentless pursuit of autonomy. She yearns for independence and the freedom to make her own choices, unconstrained by societal expectations or familial pressures. This desire for self-determination is a recurring theme throughout the novel.

However, Isabel's quest for autonomy is often hindered by external forces. Her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, for example, severely limits her freedom and subjects her to his controlling nature. Despite her initial resistance, she gradually succumbs to his influence, as her options become increasingly limited.

Isabel's struggle for autonomy also reflects the broader societal constraints imposed on women in the 19th century. As a woman, she is expected to conform to traditional gender roles and to prioritize domesticity over personal ambition. Her defiance of these expectations challenges the patriarchal norms of the time.

By examining Isabel's struggle for autonomy, we can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's feminist implications. Her character serves as a powerful symbol of female resistance and a critique of the limitations imposed on women in the 19th century.

4. CONCLUSION

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a profound exploration of the human psyche, particularly the psychological struggles of women in the 19th century. Through the lens of psychological realism, the novel delves into the character of Isabel Archer, a spirited American woman who confronts societal expectations and personal limitations. By analyzing Isabel's journey of self-discovery and disillusionment, this paper has illuminated the complex interplay between individual desire and societal constraints.

A central theme of the novel is the tension between individual freedom and social conformity. Isabel, a strong-willed and independent woman, challenges the societal norms of her time. However, her pursuit of autonomy is ultimately thwarted by the limitations imposed upon her by gender, class, and cultural expectations.

The novel's exploration of the human psyche is further enhanced by James's use of psychological realism. Through the use of techniques such as free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness,

James delves into the inner thoughts and feelings of his characters. This allows readers to experience the story from a subjective perspective, gaining insight into the complexities of human consciousness.

Moreover, the unreliable narrator adds a layer of ambiguity and complexity to the narrative. By questioning the reliability of the narrator, James invites the readers to engage in a more active reading experience, forming their own interpretations of the text. This technique also highlights the subjective nature of perception and memory, emphasizing the limitations of human understanding.

In conclusion, *The Portrait of a Lady* remains a powerful and enduring work of literature. Through its exploration of the human psyche, its critique of societal norms, and its innovative use of narrative techniques, the novel continues to resonate with the readership today. By examining the psychological underpinnings of Isabel Archer's character and the broader social and cultural context of the novel, we can gain a deeper appreciation of James's artistry and his enduring relevance.

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