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### A Portrait of Freedom: A Bakhtinian Interpretation of Henry James' The Portrait of a Lady

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A Portrait of Freedom:

A Bakhtinian Interpretation of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*

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## Abstract

Few issues in the Jamesian corpus have been more controversial than Isabel Archer's decision to return to her cruel husband Gilbert Osmond at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. While critics have often thought of Isabel's decision as either unrealistic, unjustifiable, or misguided, her choice becomes more rational when viewed within the context of a Bakhtinian polyphonic novel. By seeing the novel as a free-flowing novel of voices about the nature of freedom, Isabel's choice can be explained as holding true to her belief that "freedom" means holding steadfast to one's responsibilities, a conclusion she reaches by synthesizing other ideas about freedom she has learned from other female characters in the novel. *Portrait* therefore is a "novel of voice", where characters like Isabel reach self-actualization by interacting with speech, unrestrained and unprivileged, and creating a new, autonomous, unified self out of it.

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## Introduction

“Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony of afternoon tea.” (James 15). So begins Henry James’ gorgeous seventh novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, a novel famous literary critic F.R. Leavis once called one of “the most brilliant novels in the [English] language.” (Leavis, Quoted in Mills, 380). Yet *Portrait*, for all of its moving characters and beautiful prose, has attracted a great degree of controversy for its ending. Isabel Archer’s decision to return to Gilbert Osmond at the novel’s end, rejecting opportunities to divorce him, separate from him, or marry seemingly more promising men, has long puzzled readers and critics alike. Especially confounding is the proto-feminist undertones that last throughout the first half of the book, featuring declarations from people like Isabel that she is “very fond of her freedom” (James 38), and positively portrayed characters such as Henrietta Stackpole who are symbols of the growing role for women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Critics have sometimes dismissed the ending as a failure on the part of James, perhaps wanting to escape the tropes of the “domestic fiction” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet this point ignores James status as the so called “master” of fiction, to deprive him his due as an author as an architect of his own creative decision. After all, when James was given the opportunity to revise *Portrait* in the 1907 edition of all his major published works, he revised the ending to make Isabel’s fateful decision *more* explicit. If the reader feels uncomfortable at the end of *Portrait* they are certainly not unjustified; yet if one truly wants to understand the novel, and the great achievement that James has pulled off in the work, one must appreciate Isabel, her intellectual, emotional, and moral journey, and finally grapple with the controversial, yet also justifiable, fateful decision that she makes to return to her husband.

## Literature Review

Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* was recognized as a masterpiece almost immediately upon publication in 1881, celebrated for its "superfine" prose style that was claimed to mimic the effects of poetry and its deeply psychological outlook that is often thought to presage later developments in literature of the Modernist writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Around *Portrait* a diverse body of criticism has developed, but perhaps no more issue in the entire Jamesian cannon has attracted as much interest as its controversial ending, where the main character, Isabel Archer, chooses to return to her vain, cruel, and controlling husband Gilbert Osmond. Isabel's final choice has long puzzled readers and critics alike, given Isabel's passionate declaration that she is "very fond of her freedom" (James 38), and that the novel's thematic focus is set so squarely on increasing independence and changing roles for women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Critics therefore have used a variety of different approaches to come to often disparate conclusions on why Isabel makes such a seemingly contradictory choice to her character. These conclusions often fall into three major categories and have developed in a fairly chronological manner, with early critics often claiming Isabel was *wrong* in making the decision she did, Formalist critics beginning in the 1930's claiming that Isabel's choice is explainable, and later critics, who used more structuralist approaches, including those of Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, to try and claim Isabel is correct in making the decision she does, with the last of these approaches promising to be the area best suited to future scholarly development.

Patrick Fessenbecker in his essay "Freedom, Self-Obligation, and Selfhood", identifies three major strands of literary thought in regards to Isabel's decision at the end of the novel. The first of the major strands asserts that Isabel makes an unequivocal mistake in acting as she does, with these types of criticisms typically coming within the first thirty years of publication of

*Portrait*. The second major grouping often asserts that Isabel's actions are *explainable* within the context of the novel, with these criticisms typically associated with Formalist approaches and often using strong textual focuses to assert that there are relevant moral and ethical factors that Isabel uses to make her decision. Finally, the final strand of thought asserts that Isabel's actions are actually justifiable, with this strand of criticism becoming more prevalent only recently with the advent of structuralist and postmodernist approaches (Fessenbecker 70-71). Fessenbecker emphasizes though that this chronological and typological grouping should not be taken as dogmatically true, as some critics today still argue that Isabel's actions are incorrect, and some critics will often blur the line in their interpretations between one of the three categories. Still this classification system is useful in grouping most of the major scholarly works concerning the ending of *Portrait*, especially considering the bevy of criticism available.

Perhaps there was no greater contemporary critic of James' own work though than himself, as James, when he revised all of his works for the 1908 publication of the *New York Edition* of every one of his major novels and short stories, wrote introductory "prefaces" (really critical essays) for each work. The *New York Edition* sold poorly and exhausted James intellectually, but the prefaces were later collected into a book entitled *The Art of the Novel* by R.P. Blackmur, who sold the work as a treatise by James on his own conceptions on "novel theory". The likelihood that James ever intended his works to be read as comprehensive statements about his own literary philosophy is probably dubious, but they do provide a good starting place for evaluating how James felt about his own works and how they might be interpreted. James was a remarkably frank critic, and for *Portrait*, James identified many possible issues that he felt plagued the novel: the lack of a plot, the use of stock characters such as Henrietta that he saw as cartoonish (a criticism now dismissed), and perhaps a lack of clear

motivations for characters actions (including Isabel's). Unfortunately for James, many of his contemporaries used his own critiques of his works against him, arguing that the novel was "unrealistic" and that James's ended the novel in such a manner to escape the tropes of "domestic fiction" of the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While there is still serious scholarship that continues to insist Isabel is wrong in acting as she does, such as how Nina Baym does in her essay "Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of a Lady*", this claim gradually lost ground as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed as greater attention was paid to "point of view" and the subjective nature of making such important ethical decisions.

While James was considered a major author during his lifetime, and was widely appreciated by authors such as Edith Wharton and William Dean Howells, his popularity dimmed after his death in 1916, a result of changing public tastes that were dissatisfied with his dense prose style. James experienced a revival though in the public consumption of his works and critical appreciation with the advent of the "New Critics", associated with Formalism, in the 1930's. Perhaps the most famous critic of *Portrait* of the New School was Edwin Bowden, a Yale professor who asserted in his 1956 book *The Themes of Henry James* that Isabel makes her fateful decision because of a moral imperative to do so, as she had promised Osmond's daughter Pansy that she would return to save her from her oppressive father. Critic Dorothy van Ghent meanwhile claims in her book that *Portrait* is influenced by the "tragic view of life", and that Isabel returns to Osmond because she has achieved "self-knowledge" (*anagnorisis*) about her own mistakes, including disregarding the warnings of her cousin and friends not to marry Osmond (Van Ghent, 549). Neither of these critics assert that these are justifiable reasons for Isabel to return to Rome where Osmond awaits, but rather assert that they represent an acceptable moral and ethical imperative, one that is based in a firmly textual focus upon her own



thoughts, with Bowden, emphasizing the subjectivity involved in the choice, claiming that “The moral decision however is seldom a matter only of an ethical choice between right and wrong, but more often involves a choice between two ways of life...” (53) (Bowden 7). This emphasis on the subjectivity involved in moral dilemmas and the importance of point of view would be seized upon by later structuralist critics and represents a significant movement away from the dismissive attitude of James’ contemporaries.

Recent scholarship has seen an attempt to use the theories of Russian Formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin to explain Isabel’s actions in a new context, who only recently came to prominence after translations of his works became available in the 1980’s with the decline of the Soviet Union. Bakhtin developed a theory of language in literature known as “dialogics”, which emphasized the speech of characters within novels as free-flowing, independent discourse, equally valid in their intellectual validity (Bakhtin, *Problems*, 6). Bakhtin also emphasized that all speech is involved in a “heteroglossia”, where language renews itself by interacting in an open-ended universe where language constantly recalls historical, cultural, and sociological factors not just from the past, but also from the present and future (Bakhtin, *Imagination*, 7). Critic Dorothy Hale was the first to use such an application of Bakhtin’s theories in America for the novels of Henry James, an innovative development considering Jamesian novel theory was often thought to be diametrically opposed to Bakhtinian literary concepts. Hale however powerfully argues in her work *Social Formalism* that far from being on opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of theory, James and Bakhtin were quite similar in their beliefs, and that James did in fact place a high emphasis on treating his characters as thoughtful and intellectually independent beings whose discourse should be given the best treatment as possible. Hale largely draws upon the statements James made in his various letters, speeches, and essays he compiled

during his lifetime, where he slowly developed his concepts of what novels “should be”. James for example once famously claimed that “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million- a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has to be pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” (James 4). Hale concludes then that James, in the English speaking world, was similar to Dostoyevsky in his intents and abilities to make characters free-flowing voices of their own philosophy, arguing that he marks an important figure in the development of later Modernist and Post-Modernist literature, and further that Bakhtin’s theories can and should be used to analyze the works of James (Hale 36).

Hale had an influential impact upon the corpus of Jamesian criticism, with many recent scholars also using Bakhtinian concepts to interpret the works of James, including critics such as Sigi Jokkandt and Paul Armstrong, who used a combination of Bakhtinian concepts and other structuralist/philosophical approaches to justify Isabel’s actions. Jokkandt for example constructs almost a Kantian categorical imperative around Isabel’s actions, claiming that “freedom without boundaries...is no freedom at all but rather a wearisome slavery to her immediate whims. By marrying Osmond, Isabel imagines she will expand rather than contract her freedom—duty will give her a vehicle through which to articulate her freedom.” (Jokkandt 16). Armstrong however emphasizes that Isabel now sees herself as someone who has gained wisdom about the world, resolving to go back to Osmond to demonstrate her newfound knowledge and strength and having a “sense of integrity [at the end of the novel] that comes from accepting the irreversibility of what has been in one’s own history” (Armstrong 131). These developments represent an interesting turn in the Jamesian critical corpus, an attempt to use a moral, philosophical, and structural framework to try and justify Isabel’s actions. With Bakhtinian works now finally

translated into English and readily available to scholars, along with his unconventional theories that emphasize individuality, freedom, and character autonomy, this area of study promises to be the area most ripe for development into investigating Isabel's actions in *Portrait* in the future.

**A Portrait of Freedom: A Bakhtinian Interpretation of  
Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady***

Understanding Isabel's own definition of freedom, which for her equates to responsibility, hinges upon the premise that *Portrait*, as a work, can be classified as a Bakhtinian "polyphonic novel." By establishing this premise, not only can the reader better understand Isabel's paradoxical choice, but also begin to see the other legitimate conceptions of freedom of the other characters in the novel. By recognizing that important concepts such as freedom take different definitions for various people, readers not only are better able to understand the motivations and actions of the characters, but can also recognize, through their own "discourse" with the novel, their own agency in crafting and tolerating such ideas for themselves in the outside world. Isabel's paradoxical decision to return to Osmond then at the end of *Portrait* is justifiable within the context of a Bakhtinian "polyphonic novel," as in doing so she proposes a theory where true freedom means holding steadfast to one's responsibilities and promises. *Portrait* therefore is a "novel of voice", where characters like Isabel reach self-actualization by interacting with speech, unrestrained and unprivileged, and creating a new, autonomous, unified self out of it.

The idea of the "polyphonic novel" originated with the critic Mikhail Bakhtin, often considered apart of the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism, who has only recently come to prominence in America a result of his works becoming translated into English after the fall of the Soviet Union. Heavily influenced by the linguistic Structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Bakhtin conducted most of his research into the works of French writer Francois Rabelais and the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, often focusing on issues related to political power, character autonomy and voice, and the importance of dialogue in novels (Kim

54). Bakhtin particularly developed his idea of the “polyphonic novel” around the works of Dostoyevsky, whose novels Bakhtin praised for always featuring “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 6).

In Bakhtinian thought, a polyphonic novel is typified by characters often considering gravely important philosophical ideas, such as the existence of God, the proper ordering of governments, or the rationality of suicide. Bakhtin however recognized in Dostoyevsky’s works that his novels never come to a definite resolution over such debates, in part because some of these ideas are intractable, but also because Dostoyevsky created characters with distinct, persuasive, and intellectually serious speech. Dostoyevsky’s novels do not contain any straw man arguments, nor do they shy away from controversial or unpalatable ideas. When characters act in the works of Dostoyevsky, even if a reader might not agree with them, they can understand, by following the “voice” and logic of the characters speech, their fateful decision. Bakhtin however criticized authors, such as Tolstoy, who wrote in what he called a “monological” way, with each character in the novel becoming a mouthpiece for the ideological motives of the author (as Levin does in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*). By contrast, Bakhtin argues, Dostoyevsky’s novels contained “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal right and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (6).

The implications then of an author writing in a “polyphonic” manner are numerous. Perhaps chief among these includes the idea that readers should take each character *seriously* in their personal philosophies and life choices, even when these seem irrational or because the reader might disagree with them. Further, it conforms greatly to modern ideas about freedom of speech and thought, promoting the idea that while societies can have serious disagreements about

the way to properly live, this does not mean that society should avoid, or silence, those who choose a different philosophy than the currently *en vogue* mode of living.

Meanwhile, Henry James was a prolific literary critic himself, publishing numerous critical essays throughout his lengthy career and wrote “prefaces” (really pieces of literary criticism) for nearly every one of his major novels in the *New York Edition* of his works, published in 1907. However, James was often thought to have a literary philosophy that was diametrically opposed to that of the structuralists (such as Bakhtin) who became prominent from the early 1900’s and onwards, instead asserting the prime importance of the author as the “artist” or “great mind” that crafted great literature. He was known as a perfectionist and a master of English prose (his writing has often been claimed to mimic the effects of poetry) and he was perhaps the first author who aimed to accurately represent the full psychological consciousness of a character, a technique which would become especially prominent in the Modernist use of the “stream-of-consciousness” style that Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner would become famous for (Gorra, *Masterpiece*, 34).

This precision with language and the power of authorial control is no different with James’ creation of *Portrait*. In one introduction to *Portrait* critic Gabriel Brownstein notes that “His words [were] chosen with mind boggling precision. The narrative voice in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the voice of an artist, methodically and painstakingly composing the complexity of his portrait...” (Brownstein, XXX). James himself once claimed in the preface to *Portrait* that when he created Isabel he saw “...that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of ‘plot’ ...but altogether in a sense of a singular character, the character and aspect of a particularly engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a ‘subject’, certainly of setting, were to need to be super-added.” (James, 4). His statement implies that he saw himself in the position of an

artist, as a crafter of character, prose, and the other elements of the novel, and that as such, he was the sole and final executor of how his characters would be portrayed and should be received—what Bakhtin might have called a monological author.

The seeming conclusion is that James' novels are not very receptive to the application of Bakhtinian concepts, especially given James' perfectionism and the care he put into portraying the psychology of his characters. Critic Dorothy Hale however, in her book *Social Formalism*, did much of the groundwork in proving that James' novels were in fact compatible with a Bakhtinian interpretation. Hale's central thesis encompasses the idea that James, in his great novels, often patterning what now might be called a "social novel" considered many pertinent social and political questions of the day. Hale further argues that James was giving voice, in a polyphonic manner, to a diverse range of people in the society through his characters, who each have their own views on topics as varied on the proper attitude towards aesthetics, to the observation of morality and ethics, to their view on important political issues such as women's suffrage or the right to divorce. Hale therefore concludes that in the novels of James, "No viewing position is privileged; no window offers a more accurate or more preferable understanding of life than another" (Hale 25).

Much of Hale's commentary relies upon the numerous essays and speeches that James had given over his nearly four-decade long literary career, where he developed ideas on the function of the novel as an artistic medium in society and what an author should aim to represent within the art of their fiction. Two quotes of James in particular seem to be indicative that he would have been receptive of Bakhtinian concepts. For example, in a letter that James sent to a boy's preparatory school in Massachusetts, James claimed that "...any point of view is interesting that is a direct impression of life." (James, Quoted in Hale, 25)." Here, James seems

to be asserting that *all* viewpoints, from the prince to the pauper, to the political radical to the arch-conservative, are valid to explore, so long as they do not indulge in the fantastical or unrealistic. Then, in a famous quote in the preface James wrote for *Portrait*, James famously declared: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” (James, 6). In the second quote, James asserts that there are *millions* of different viewpoints in fiction that can be explored, and that only by interacting with these novels in the spirit of interest and intellectual curiosity can we truly understand both art and the world around us. James himself once admitted that many of his novels could be distilled to one specific conceit (James, *The American*, 7). But it is this simplicity of conflict that allow each of his characters to become fully realized—having their own opinions on how a woman should live her life and what consequences of newfound financial and personal freedom might give her (the conceit of *Portrait*). By grounding his works with such simple conflicts and themes, James recognized the multifarious opinions and positions that each character could have, and that he, as the artist, could give license to these characters espouse their viewpoints. James was certainly not like Dostoyevsky in the stylistic sense, considering complex and difficult philosophical questions to create this polyphony. Instead he formed his own twist on the polyphonic novel, where conventional arguments highlighted the most serious of divisions. It is in this simplicity of mission for James, where characters can become truly complex.

Yet James’ own receptivity to Bakhtinian framework is not just seen within his own speeches, essays, and letters but can also be seen within the text of *Portrait* itself. The prevalence of the tropes of a “polyphonic novel” occurs in nearly every major chapter of the novel and



encompasses numerous topics. Yet the most pertinent to Isabel's decision to return to Osmond can be best understood through the four major female characters in the novel, all American, and all intimately acquainted with one another, namely being: Isabel, Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett, and Henrietta Stackpole, with each having their own understanding of what "freedom" means. Further, the way that each of the women lives out her ideals to the fullest is a crucial one for any polyphonic novel, as critic Andrew Robinson notes, that "In a fully dialogical world-view, the structure of the text should itself be subordinate to the right of all characters to be treated as subjects rather than objects....Ideas are not presented in abstraction, but are concretely embodied in the lives of protagonists" (Robinson).

The oldest and most "experienced" of these women is Mrs. Touchett, Isabel's maternal aunt and the woman who lifts Isabel out of the obscurity of her home in Albany. Mrs. Touchett is married to Mr. Touchett, a wealthy expatriate banker who now lives permanently outside of London at his idyllic, Tudor-era country mansion "Gardencourt," together with his consumptive son Ralph. Mrs. Touchett and her husband however have been separated for nearly their entire marriage after the birth of Ralph, and she spends most of her time at her palazzo in Florence, milling about with the other American expatriates and spending large amounts of money on her various whims, including high-priced art and furniture. She does however make occasional trips back to Gardencourt, engaging pleasantly enough with her estranged spouse, but with their interactions never affectionate or romantic. Mr. Touchett is perfectly content to allow his wife to spend "her share" of his considerable fortune on what she pleases, and makes no attempt to control her actions or speech, accepting the reality that their marriage, one of social convenience, while not one of attraction and passion does not have to be one of disgust and hatred. They observe the old, generally aristocratic values of their generation, frowning upon divorce, placing

a high value on “seemliness”, and generally conforming to conservative Victorian political and moral attitudes.

This is not to suggest of course that Mrs. Touchett’s lifestyle should be condemned because she is old-fashioned, and nor does her general abandonment of her family imply some villainous streak. Mrs. Touchett merely represents the conservative ethos, a kind of senescent sage who aims to pass down wisdom through the generations because experience has given her knowledge about the way of the world. By taking Isabel out of her status of social and financial mediocrity at the beginning of the novel she is living out one of the classic conservative attitudes at protecting those within the “family”, an aristocratic impulse, and hopes, by bringing Isabel to Europe and allowing her to travel where she pleases, to give her an “education” in the great cultural artistic achievements of Western Civilization, as well as a social education to enter high society. Through herself, she hopes, Isabel will come to realize that there are eternal truths to the world, and that only by viewing and studying the best, such as the genteel, the powerful, the rich, and the cultured, can Isabel make use of her great potential.

Yet, while James recognizes the value in the conservative tradition, a fact he acknowledges by establishing Mrs. Touchett as a generally successful, content, and socially respected woman of her time, it is important to underscore that Isabel cannot bring herself to fully accept the precepts that Mrs. Touchett would have her adhere to. In a famous passage in *Portrait*, Mrs. Touchett, Isabel, Ralph, and the wealthy, handsome, aristocratic Lord Warburton all recline in the drawing room after dinner, laughing and speaking of intellectual matters that Isabel is fascinated by. Later on in the evening, Mrs. Touchett announces that she is retiring to bed and that Isabel must come with her, as in her words “young girls here—in decent houses—don’t sit alone with gentleman late at night” (James 80). Despite protestations from everyone,

Isabel concedes the point and goes upstairs with her aunt where she curiously informs her that she "...always want[s] to know the things one shouldn't do." Mrs. Touchett then satirically asks Isabel "so as to do them?" aware that Isabel is a spirited and unconventional girl, fond of her freedom, and harboring the classic American spirit of independence that might predispose her towards youthful rebellion. Yet Isabel, far from being dismissive of or ungrateful to her aunt, who merely wishes to inform Isabel of society's expectations and traditions, responds "so as to choose" (82). By placing the emphasis on her *own* ability to choose she acknowledges in the first place, that perhaps Mrs. Touchett is right in her assessment and that by being so careless about the "seemliness" of one's actions social ruin really may come to pass. Yet only newly arrived in Europe and only having just escaped the deadening provincialism of her life in Albany, Isabel has still yet to see the world and account for all the possibilities that life may have to offer. It is the novel's first, truly "polyphonic" moment where Isabel acknowledges that while her aunt may indeed be correct, that she does not have the requisite information necessary to embrace any kind of philosophy on how best to live life. Isabel, by asserting her own independence, freedom, and ability to make choices for herself, delays the final embracement of any kind of fate and asserts sovereignty over the decision making for her own life.

Meanwhile, Henrietta Stackpole leads the most "radical" life out of all the four women, a representation of the intellectual, economically independent "new woman" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who fights for women's suffrage and a greater role for women in society. Henrietta is both Isabel's best friend and her fiercest critic, oscillating between a desire to realize what is "best" for Isabel, and opposing any attempt by Isabel to immerse herself in the culture of the "Old World," seeing it as frivolous and archaic. Henrietta is a journalist for the *Interviewer* and has been sent to Europe to gain insights into the lives of the great aristocrats and expatriate

Americans who now claim Europe as their home (such as the Touchetts). Henrietta is an unequivocal trailblazer, and she even triumphantly declares upon arriving in Europe that “I shall make my own atmosphere. That’s the true way—then you can breathe.” (99). Henrietta even declares that her intention in Europe is to write from the “radical point of view,” and further the narrator states that Henrietta “eagerly prayed she might be delivered [from marriage]; she held that a woman ought to be able to live to herself...and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse minded person of the opposite sex.” (66). Henrietta is also fiercely defensive of her native country and is so wrapped up in the America ethos and spirit, praising the qualities of independence, freedom, and equality of opportunity, that she declares in a conversation with Ralph that the “advantage of being an American here [in Europe] is that you don’t belong to any class.” (71). While characters talk disapprovingly of Henrietta and her radical lifestyle and politics, derisively calling her “literary woman,” Isabel has a high opinion of Henrietta, admiring the fact that “she doesn’t care a straw what men think of her” and claiming that “it is very easy to laugh at her but it is not easy to be brave as she” (97). In Henrietta, Isabel sees one of the prime virtues for any person, that of courage, and both admires and desires to be as fierce as she is in defending her freedom and her lifestyle choices.

Henrietta then proposes to Isabel a conception of unmitigated, self-reliant freedom, where in the “modern” world, a young woman can do whatever she pleases because she has *agency* to do so. Henrietta, by praising the American ethos, rejecting the idea that she needs men to make her happy, and refusing to conform to expectations that society has for women, proposes a conception of freedom that is radically different than that of Mrs. Touchett’s conservative portrait of how life should be lived, a kind of feminist trailblazer who will do anything necessary to get others to recognize both her own power and ability to make decisions for her own life. Henrietta

also acknowledges that Isabel probably will not follow the rather extreme path (for the time) that she has embarked on, but implores her to marry an American suitor, Caspar Godwood, who might preserve her from being corrupted from the influence of Europe.

Isabel is certainly attracted to Henrietta's claims that freedom is the highest ideal, professing early in the novel, "I'm very fond of my liberty" (James 34). Yet while Isabel sees the value in what Henrietta is doing, and generally approves of the American virtues, of self-reliance and freedom, she also has reservations about Henrietta's lifestyle and actions. She finds Henrietta's insistence that she will reproduce a conversation had between herself and Mr. Touchett in the *Interviewer*, who is hosting Henrietta at Gardencourt despite not having an invitation, as deeply unseemly, and finds her almost constant attempts to impose her will on others, a manifestation of her unbridled spirit, as uncalled for, for example, inviting Godwood to Gardencourt without consulting either Isabel or the Touchetts. Henrietta, in her attempts to force Isabel to conform to the lifestyle she has chosen, has hypocritically violated her own ideal. Isabel therefore always politely declines Henrietta's life advice, appreciating the American perspective and her courage in living a life that is disapproved of by so many, but unable to embrace absolute freedom as way of life, because, paradoxically, it seems stifling itself.

Further, as both Isabel and Henrietta will learn, freedom, unmitigated and absolute, comes with consequences, for as Michael Gorra claims, one the great themes of the novel is "...the limits of self-sufficiency" (Gorra xi). Henrietta insists throughout the novel that she will never marry, but midway through the work meets a Mr. Bantling (a British man no less), who quickly becomes her companion all over in Europe. While Henrietta insists that she has no love for Mr. Bantling, she finally, at the end of the novel, decides to marry him, claiming that a "woman has to change a good deal to marry" and that her marriage is not a betrayal of her values

and native land but rather “an attack” where she finally will grapple with Europe and the ideas she has always opposed (James 386-7). It is a demonstration that Henrietta is willing to learn from experience. And Henrietta’s advice is sometimes profound and prophetic, telling Isabel after she has received her fortune:

“...you can’t always please yourself; you must sometimes please other people. That, I admit, you’re very ready to do; but there’s another thing that still more important—you must often displease others. You must always be ready for that—you must never shrink from it. That doesn’t suit you at all—you’re too fond of admiration, you like to be thought well of. You think we escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic views—that’s your great illusion, my dear. But we can’t. You must be prepared on many occasions to please no one at all--not you even yourself” (James 153).

Henrietta therefore acknowledges that life is not (nor should it be) a series of indulging one’s whims. Sometimes life forces one to make decisions that would otherwise be disagreeable because other considerations have to be taken into account. It is these powerful words from Henrietta that Isabel will keep close to her heart, and that she will consider heavily when she later contemplates leaving Osmond.

This leaves then the enigmatic Madame Serena Merle, a mysterious American expatriate, espousing a cynical, material philosophy for life. The widow of a minor Swiss merchant, readers first meet Madame Merle at Gardencourt on the eve of Mr. Touchett’s death, with Isabel attracted to her gorgeous playing of the piano. Isabel immediately takes an interest in Madame Merle, a woman of around forty, tastefully dressed, and an expert in conversation and intellectual matters. Further, Isabel remarks that Madame Merle’s had a “manner [that] expressed the repose

and confidence that comes from experience”, and that she seemed to be a woman of “strong impulses kept in admirable order,” a quality Isabel remarks, that she finds highly commendable (James 127). She is later referred to as an incredibly clever woman by Ralph who “is welcome wherever she goes” and that she may go wherever she pleases in Europe because she has friends everywhere. Isabel finds Madame Merle fascinating, but Ralph complicates the picture by warning Isabel that while Madame Merle is a “complete” woman, it is fortunate that she never had a child, for “she’d be sure to spoil it” (James 128). Even with Ralph’s warning, Isabel quickly befriends her, and the two are nearly inseparable for the a large portion of the novel, almost always staying in the same city, and at one point going on six month tour of the Orient with one another.

If Mrs. Touchett represents the old, aristocratic order, and Henrietta represents the young, free, independent, radical up and coming generation, Madame Merle is somewhere in-between, a middle-aged woman, with no husband and no responsibilities other than catering to her own whims, and with no definite income and no strong emotional attachments to speak of. What Madame Merle lacks however in familial bonds or propertied wealth, she makes up for by having *wisdom* gained through experience, living part of the lives that both Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta and thus able to speak on the virtues and drawbacks of both. She seems intent on informing Isabel about the “way the world is” and educating her in the fact that, if not necessarily true in the philosophic sense, that all that matters in the world is the material. Order, tradition, and custom mean nothing without wealth. Freedom, independence, and liberty also mean nothing if not aided by a kind of social prudence (as Henrietta offends the sensibilities of most she meets), an appreciation for culture, and again a certain amount of financial wealth to utilize one’s independence. Isabel is fascinated with Madame Merle and the amazing display of

talents and friends she has arrayed for herself, but she is resistant to indulge Madame Merle about these finer points about that only youth, beauty, and wealth matter to people. In perhaps one the most classic polyphonic discussions in the novel, Madame Merle tells Isabel:

“When you have lived as long as I have you will see that every human being has his shell and that you must take that shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances...What do you call one’s self? It overflows into everything that belongs to us...I have a great respect for things! One’s self- for other people- is one’s expression of one’s self; and ones house, one’s clothes, the one reads, the company one keeps-these things are all expressive” (James 144).

Isabel is shocked at Madame Merle’s claims that people are nothing more than the “envelope of circumstances” and that one’s “things” are the only truly defining characteristic of a person. Hoping to counter Madame Merle’s jaded cynical realism, Isabel calmly responds to her, without malice and in the spirit of genuine philosophical debate:

“I think just the other way. I don’t know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything’s on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly, the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don’t express me, and heaven forbid they should...[They] may express the dressmaker, but they don’t express me” (144).

Here in this exchange the reader receives, distilled into two gloriously constructed speeches, distinct, opposing, and yet both intellectually valid conceptions of what truly defines a person. Isabel’s argument is sometimes seen as the weaker of the two, with critic Michael Gorra



for example claiming “We can’t easily reject either woman’s position, and while the balance does finally tip, we’re not happy about it. We’d prefer to side with Isabel—with youth—and her ideal remains necessary, the ideal of some unified and autonomous self, independent of an anterior to its social circumstances” (Gorra X). Gorra asserts that Madame Merle’s argument is the stronger because she recognizes that the “self is socially determined, and not entirely separable from the world around it” (X), but even this claim seems partial to something that *seems* more “realistic” in Madame Merle’s argument, without giving due weight to the possibilities wrapped up in Isabel’s speech. Nina Baym for example claims that at the base of Isabel’s being is that she cannot “accept any mode of existence that is not self-expressive” and that this is a “good transcendental reason” for being resistant to claims such as Madame Merle’s (Baym 526). This exchange therefore is the apex of the polyphonic discussions of the novel and encompasses the central philosophical debate that characters engage in: whether a person is defined by society, or if a person can define themselves.

Yet even with this profound disagreement about the nature of human beings Isabel still finds Madame Merle enchanting. She alone, out the triad of characters of Mrs. Touchett, Henrietta, and herself, has given Isabel an avenue to live life as she pleases. Madame Merle is intellectually refined, universally admired and beloved by her friends and society, and can drift about Europe wherever she pleases, her reputation sterling and unmitigated by any social obligations whatsoever. Instead of being weighed down by the stable but oppressive conservative tradition or being cast adrift by the personally liberating but socially damaging life of the liberal radical, Madame Merle can exist comfortably in both. Isabel therefore tethers herself to Madame Merle, seeing her as a model on how best to live her own life.

However, Madame Merle, always clear-sighted, cynical, and pessimistic, warns Isabel not to get too wrapped up in her presence. She says to Isabel for example that she wishes she “could only begin again—if I could have my life before me!” Isabel is shocked by Madame Merle’s lament, and claims that to her Madame Merle is the “vivid image of success.” Madame Merle informs Isabel though that in reality, her life is “gone for nothing,” with “neither husband, nor child, nor fortune, nor position” to show for it, and nothing but using her many talents for the sake “...of using them, to get through the hours, the years, to cheat myself with some pretense of movement” (James, *Portrait*, 143). Isabel protests to Madame Merle that she still has her friends, her ambitions, and her talents. But Madame Merle has planted the seed inside Isabel’s head that without money, family, or social position, life quickly becomes meaningless.

The novel begins in earnest then when Mr. Touchett, who was always fond of Isabel, dies, persuaded by Ralph to leave her a fortune of nearly 70,000 pounds, valued today at about six million dollars (National Archives). Ralph claims that he is fascinated to learn what Isabel will make of herself with her newfound fortune, and hopes that through her financial means she will find a way to perpetuate her independence and freedom. In one moment, Isabel has become one the most eligible bachelorettes in all of Europe: beautiful, intelligent, genteel in her manners, in the prime of her youth, and rich. Indeed, Isabel seems to have all the characteristics that most people would *assume* might make them happy (especially Madame Merle). Yet Isabel senses that she is missing something, and longs for fulfillment, noting that this large fortune that has been placed on her, is in many ways, a *burden* on her life. She says to Ralph for example that “A large fortune means freedom, and I’m afraid of that. Its such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn’t one would be ashamed.... I’m not sure its not a greater happiness to be powerless” (James 158). Financial freedom has not given her happiness but only the means

to it. By having such a large fortune, and a family who is eager to see what Isabel “makes of herself,” Isabel is now forced to *act*. Before, Isabel was passive and reactive to things around her; she was able to reject marriage proposals from Lord Warburton and Caspar Godwood by insisting that she could not give up her independence so readily without seeing Europe first. Now with her great beauty, intelligence, charm, and fortune, she is expected to actually *do* something, to realize the dreams and ambitions she has pined for. As Nina Baym notes, her response is to reflexively revert to the stable and conservative tradition that her Aunt had pushed for, and further, to demonstrate to society and her family, against their wishes and their expectations, that her independence and freedom can be secured *within* a socially unconventional marriage (Baym 527-28).

It is at this point in the novel, where she must confront the reality of realizing her limitless potential, that Isabel’s conception of freedom comes squarely into focus. Isabel has had propositions before from seemingly fitting suitors in the form of the wealthy, handsome, aristocratic Lord Warburton, and the American industrialist Caspar Godwood, a man, we are told, Isabel was prepared to marry before her aunt gave her the opportunity to go to Europe. Isabel rejects these suitors though because they offer Isabel all the benefits that such a marriage might bring, including social stature and great amounts of wealth, without any claims to impose upon herself. This seems paradoxical (as most of Isabel’s conceptions of freedom are), but is not unfounded. Godwood and Warburton love Isabel so greatly and offer her a life so grandiose that it would defy reality. Warburton, for example, has been described as “richer than Mr. Darcy” (Brownstein XI), Godwood meanwhile is regarded by Isabel as the “finest young man she had ever seen....he inspired her with a sentiment of high, of rare respect” (James 35). To marry men like Warburton and Godwood, who are handsome, age-appropriate, socially illustrious,

intellectually refined, genuinely in love with her and seemingly “good” (in the moral sense), would be to admit that her own life is nothing more than a fairytale, unrealistic and predestined, and free from any conflict because of her great beauty, talent, and luck.

In fact Isabel actually desires, in a sense, to be constrained by the forces of marriage. Echoing in part the words of Henrietta, Isabel sees no point in marrying someone who will allow her to live her life in some grand “romantic” notion unimpeded without having to cede any part of her being. Marriage, a truly fulfilling one Isabel intuitively feels, involves sacrifice, with the narrator claiming that her soul was filled with a “sense of life [that] was vacant without some private duty that might gather one’s energies to a point” (James 244). For Isabel, sacrifice might allow a person to find meaning, to find actual fulfillment in a new union of peoples where old parts of the independent self are shed to craft a stronger union. Isabel acknowledges that there is a danger and certain pridefulness in insisting on such a strange understanding of happiness that prevents her from accepting the great opportunity that Godwood and Warburton have offered her. Yet by making the unconventional marriage, the one not of social convenience, of cultural affiliation, or of fairytale proportions, she thinks that she is making the realistic choice. Isabel will not be undone by any romantic notions that Henrietta warned her about, the “grand plans” that her cousin Ralph envisioned for her, the bounds of tradition that her aunt wants to place on her, or the stifling nature of a conventional marriage. Isabel will defy the odds and marry someone who transcends these idealistic or fanciful notions. As Sigi Jokkandt notes, for Isabel “freedom without boundaries . . . is no freedom at all but rather a wearisome slavery to her immediate whims. By marrying Osmond, Isabel imagines she will expand rather than contract her freedom—duty will give her a vehicle through which to articulate her freedom.” (Jokkandt 16). Freedom for Isabel then, will only come with responsibilities, with something to live for day in,

and day out. Through duty, obligation, culture, and promise, Isabel will enter a fulfilling way of life.

The opportunity to realize this conception is given to Isabel when, visiting Florence, she is introduced to Gilbert Osmond, an “acquaintance” of Madame Merle’s, and another American expatriate. Osmond is man of rather impoverished means (although “impoverished” in the world of Henry James means something like only being able to keep up two servants instead of twenty), owning a small piazza outside of Florence where he lives a life of leisure and idleness. Osmond also has a teenage daughter, Pansy, who spends almost all her time away from her father being educated at a convent, perfectly obedient to her father and harboring an innocence and naivete about the world that patterns Isabel’s behavior early in the novel. A man of around forty, he is described as having “eyes, at once vague and penetrating, intelligent and hard” and was “dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things” (James 162). Osmond is confirmed to have an impeccable taste in art, and a remarkable eye for recognizing the value of things, one that has been sharpened by the necessity of not having money, but still wanting to have “good taste.”

While Osmond’s initial characterization ranges from the neutral to the positive, as he is depicted as a mild-mannered, genial father, with a keen eye for the artistic and the beautiful, this characterization takes a turn for a worse when he converses with Madame Merle. Madame Merle for example, hoping to introduce Osmond to Isabel, offers to arrange a meeting between the two, with Osmond refusing unless Isabel is “...beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous. Its only on those conditions that I care to make her acquaintance” (James 169). Osmond however, a victim of his own slothfulness and vanity, is persuaded by Madame Merle’s promises about Isabel’s wealth to agree to meet her. Once Osmond meets

Isabel though, like most other men in the novel, he immediately becomes enamored of her, although he feigns enough indifference to pique Isabel's interest. While Isabel rejects Osmond's first proposal of marriage while the two are in Rome together, she feels herself inexorably being sucked into his orbit. Isabel is attracted to Osmond because he has seemingly made so much of himself with so little resources, and she seems emboldened by the fact that nearly everyone, including Ralph and Henrietta, beg her not to meet him, with Ralph calling Osmond nothing more than a "sterile diletante" (237). Rejecting the views of her friends and family, Isabel sees Osmond as a man who can "assure her a future at a high level of the high consciousness of the beautiful" (James 244) and is attracted to Osmond's claims that she should "go everywhere, do everything; get everything out of life. Be happy—be triumphant" (James 216). Consequently, after her month's long tour of the Orient, Isabel returns, and having "tired" of living a life of fulfilling her whims, agrees to marry Osmond, attracted to his "splendid" daughter, his promises of allowing her the latitude of triumphant freedom, and the value of his appreciation of beauty and culture, something that Isabel has greatly come to appreciate during her time in Europe.

Yet in a tragic twist, the marriage is not as blissful as Isabel believed it would be. Osmond, once the frugal and wise consumer of art, begins to spend Isabel's money wantonly, buying numerous pieces of "ugly" and vulgar art and moving them into an imposing, yet oppressive, home in the heart of Rome. Isabel and Osmond have a son with one another, but he is born stillborn, a seeming reference that no life can be produced from the relationship between the two. Meanwhile, Osmond and Isabel quickly run out of things to talk about, and while Isabel plays the role of a good hostess at the parties that her husband loves to throw to expatriate community in Rome, it is clear to almost everyone the two are not compatible. Yet even though the two have fallen out of love, Osmond enlists the support of Isabel in persuading Lord

Warburton to marry Pansy. Isabel however has reservations about her husband's request, which has the air of a command, and because another young man, Edward Rosier, has also expressed that he intends to marry Pansy. Osmond makes clear to Isabel that if she does not secure Pansy's marriage to Warburton it will mean she is defying him, and he leaves the room coldly late one night, with the fate of their marriage seeming to hang in the balance based on Isabel's decision.

Then, in one of the novel's most famous chapters (Chapter XLII), Isabel ruminates late into the night about the failures of her marriage and the person that she has become. While sitting in a great big-armchair as the candles burn out around her Isabel reflects that she now had a "deep distrust of her husband". Isabel affirms that their marriage has not fallen apart because of his "misdeeds, his turpitudes; she accused him of nothing" but rather because "she simply believed he hated her." (293). Isabel pinpoints Osmond's growing distaste for her because "He had thought at first that he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he should like. But she was, after all, herself—she couldn't help that; and now there was no use pretending" (293). Isabel however, as Nina Baym had noted before, *has* to be self-expressive. It is wrapped up in her being and she cannot, simply, change for Osmond or submit to his commands without being destroyed. Their marriage therefore is perilously on the brink of disaster, where one must concede that the other is right lest they part forever.

Finally, events converge that bring Isabel and Osmond into a final confrontation over the nature of their marriage. Isabel makes clear to Lord Warburton that Pansy is in love with another person (Rosier) and tells him that he deserves someone who loves him for who he is. Warburton is devastated, but it is implied to the reader that the real reason he wanted to marry Pansy in the first place was to be closer to Isabel, and so he graciously leaves. Osmond however is furious with Isabel because he knows did not use her powers of persuasion over Lord Warburton to her

fullest effect, and tells her that it is tantamount to a betrayal. Pansy then declares to her father that she is in love with Rosier and wishes to marry him, but the move blows up in Pansy's face, and Osmond locks her up in a convent so that she might learn obedience. Then Isabel receives a telegram from Mrs. Touchett that Ralph, living at Gardencourt, is finally dying of tuberculosis and that she must come at once. Isabel announces that she must go, but Osmond forbids her from leaving, telling her "If you leave Rome today it will be a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated, opposition." (365). Isabel responds that Osmond is being unjust in his actions, to which he launches into a tirade on the nature of their marriage and lists all the reasons he believes she should not leave for England, claiming:

I've an ideal of what my wife should and should not do. She should not travel across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire, to sit at the bedside of other men....I assure you Mrs. Osmond that *we*, *we*, is all I know. I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making. You don't like to be reminded of that, I know; but I'm perfectly willing....Because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honor of the thing! (James 366).

Here in this paragraph Osmond's motivations and beliefs can truly be understood, and in some sense, James is giving Osmond his polyphonic moment. Osmond, in his own roundabout, casually cruel way, has all at once confirmed that he does *love* Isabel, even if he has realized that he cannot possess her as he pleases, and also emphasizes that while even he himself is unhappy in the marriage, that he believes he and Isabel should keep their promise to one another as man and wife. This is not even that surprising of a claim from Osmond, who throughout the novel has always placed a high emphasis culture and promise. Isabel notes further that Osmond's voice is not couched in the tone of command, but rather a plea for Isabel's understanding and sympathy. Isabel does come to appreciate Osmond's words and takes them seriously, but simply cannot



reconcile herself to staying in Rome and not seeing Ralph, especially after Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, reveals that Pansy's real mother is Madame Merle.

Before she leaves, Isabel goes to the convent where Pansy is locked up and offers to bring her away to London with her. Pansy however, refuses, insisting that she will obey her father and could not disobey him even if she wanted to. Isabel recognizes Pansy's position and sympathizes with her, who she realizes loves her father above everything and cannot bring herself to reveal Pansy's true origin. Isabel also realizes that she has genuinely come to love her stepdaughter, and realizes that Pansy has many of the same opportunities and promise that she had at a similar age. Therefore, Isabel promises Pansy that she will return one day, and then quickly departs for England to say goodbye to Ralph.

At Gardencourt, Isabel does get to have her final, tearful goodbye with Ralph, who she has come to love as if he were her brother. While conversing with Ralph for the final time, Isabel apologizes to Ralph for not taking his advice about Osmond and affirms that "Yes, he was in love with me. But he wouldn't have married me if I had been poor." (393). Ralph therefore concludes that their marriage must be over, and asks her "It is all over then between you?" Isabel however calmly responds that "nothing is ever final" and that it is still too soon to tell whether her and Osmond's marriage is over (393). The statement is a profound one and emphasizes Isabel's reflective nature, where she is thinking carefully of the profound implications her future if she decided to leave her marriage. Meanwhile, the goodbye is painful for Isabel, who realizes that she has sacrificed possibly her marriage to see Ralph one last time. Isabel is then visited for a final time at Gardencourt by Caspar Godwood, who begs her to runaway with and them forcefully kisses her. Isabel is shocked by Caspar's forwardness, and while James does indicate

that Isabel felt electrified by the kiss, she runs away from Caspar after the embrace, perhaps shocked into realizing, by this act of infidelity, how valuable her marriage truly is to her.

The return to Osmond has baffled many readers and critics alike, because it seems that after the cruelty she has experienced from him, his treatment of Pansy, the revelation of his former love affair with Madame Merle, and her tearful goodbye with Ralph, that Isabel could (or should) not even fathom going back to Rome. Isabel does suggest to Henrietta that one reason why she might return is because she promised Pansy she would do so, which Henrietta agrees would be legitimate, yet on the last page of the novel her decision could not be clearer: Isabel is not just returning for just for Pansy but is going back to her marriage. Some of have criticized this moment of the novel as too absurd to be true to life, while others have criticized Isabel for making a profound error in judgement, understanding why she might feel the need to go back (particularly her heartfelt promise to Pansy), but rejecting this as a legitimate condition of limiting her apparent freedom and autonomy so willingly.

Yet appreciating Isabel's decision can only come by realizing that she now, in the words of critic Henry Armstrong "has achieved that sense of integrity that comes from accepting the irreversibility of what has been in one's own history. . . . Neither defiant nor submissive, Isabel has emerged, then, from healthy-minded naiveté and the depression of a sick soul into the integrity of the twice-born" (Armstrong 131). At the end of the novel Isabel has gained all the requisite wisdom she needs for how to live life and plunges into her decision head-on. Isabel therefore, when she returns to Osmond, has fulfilled the ideal of the polyphonic novel. She has listened carefully to those around her, the powerful and the admirable women such as Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta Stackpole, and the wise, if manipulative, Madame Merle. From them she gained her orientation about how to live life. From Henrietta she has gained the independent

spirit, the courageousness and tenacity to stand up to those who would oppress us, and an ability to articulate positions, unafraid of the consequences that might come out of it. From Mrs. Touchett she has learned the value of tradition, of custom, of social respectability, and has learned that we should only abandon these things at our great peril. From Madame Merle she has acquired a kind of painful wisdom, one that traffics first in the idea that betrayal and duplicity are realities in the world, and second that people can sometimes be shockingly obsessed with material things, from wealth to fine art, and that in some degree, people judge us based on these “appurtenances”. From these women she has synthesized their speech into her own personal philosophy, one that holds that true freedom can only come when we are free to make promises and choices, and then are obligated to fulfill them or accept the consequences. Of course for Isabel one must not accept abuse or someone restricting their spirit; that must be confronted as boldly as she did when she ruptured Osmond’s plans for Pansy’s marriage or when she left for England to see Ralph. Yet she also holds that we cannot simply abandon our promises because they prove painful. Instead, she holds, we should face them with dignity and grace, confronting them with the spirit that we can find happiness even if it seems to have been denied to us in the short term.

When Isabel returns to Osmond, she does so with absolute knowledge of who he is and what his motives are and further has demonstrated her ability to stand up to him. Never again will she let Osmond dominate her, bully her, and shrink her spirit as she allowed him to do earlier in her marriage. But at the same time, she admits to herself that she has made a promise, not only to Pansy, who she swore she would return for, but also to Osmond when she entered the sacred institution of marriage with him. In a way, Isabel is embracing a kind of Kantian categorical imperative that she has constructed for herself, recognizing that promises, both sacred

and personal, transcend the mere words that are used to make them. Wrapped up in them, as Isabel would identify, is *ourselves*. Promises have been self-expressed, and so long as they are freely entered into, Isabel posits, they are virtually binding. To betray a promise, to break a vow, to Isabel, would be the highest violation of the ideal of freedom. Freedom then for Isabel, and for Henry James, can only come when we recognize that there are transcendental things, such as promises, duties, and obligations that are of near supreme importance to our lives. Readers may yearn for Isabel's fate to be different, for her to have married Lord Warburton and for her life to have been blissfully happy as she reposed as an English lady. And yet, for all of our wishes as readers, we must confront the reality that Isabel freely chose her decision and has a rational reason for doing so, one that we might disagree with, but one that lines up squarely with her independent spirit and her fierce insistence to make her own way in the world.

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