

The Concept of Fear in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady

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Abstract

Henry James (1843-1916) born in New York city in April 15, 1843. He is one of the greatest American novelists. He was influenced by European authors like the English writers George Eliot and William Makepeace Thackeray, as well as the French writers like Honore de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert, and the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev. James wrote twenty one novels, one hundred twelve tales, several plays, autobiographical writings, literary studies, and travel impressions. James published "The Art of Fiction" in 1884, he believed that a novel should be considered an art presenting "a representation of life" exhibiting "an air of reality"; He considered "a novel is a work of art that must be judged by its oneness" (Forster, 163). Therefore he was the first concise novelist who began to turn his novel to a kind of art, and people for the first time began to think of the novel as an art. The title of The Portrait of a Lady (1881) is the same as the title of T.S. Eliot's poem "Portrait of a Lady" in which "the struggle is to create a world" (Gray, 13). James "did not provide us with 'ideas' but with another world of thought and feeling" (Salami, 52). He was awarded the Order of Merit on January the first 1916, one month before his death. This study aims at showing the meaning of fear and its impact up on the characters involved in The Portrait of a Lady.

Fear is a bad feeling that any human being has when he\she is in danger, or when she is frightened from something, or when she feels that something bad might happen to him\her or to the people around him\her. In The Portrait of a Lady fear appears in different situations according to the characters involved and especially to the heroine Isabel Archer. The Portrait of a Lady reflects the death of Minny Temple, Henry James's cousin who died very young in 1870 'radiant and rare, extinguished in her youth'. This death is connected with James's "sense of the character and possible destiny of a civilization for which he entertained the same uncertain hopes and

fears that he did for his favorite heroes and heroines"(Kaul,in Kar and Ramakrishna,320).

Isabel Archer is a young American lady who leaves her country to settle in Europe with her aunt Mrs Touchett. Isabel is very pretty with "a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others"(The Portrait of a Lady, 15).She is very sensitive and imaginative. She has grown up so much alone in Albany since her father has died and her sisters are married, she has found most of her companionship in books. She has:

Kindness,admiration,flattery,bouquets,the sense of exclusion from none of the privileges of the world she lived in, abundant opportunity for dancing, the latest publications, plenty of new dresses, the London Spectator, and a glimpse of contemporary aesthetics (ibid,33).

The novel opens in 1871, a delightful summer afternoon at Gardencourt. Mr Touchett, Ralph Touchett, and Lord Warburton are sitting and talking. Later, Isabel is introduced to them, she is simple, naive and it is her appearance and behavior that charms the three men. She has no experience in life and is fond of freedom.

She is pretty, that she loves freedom, that she loves experience, that she has endless day-dreams, that she is compassionate to the helpless, that she is grateful for goodness, and proud not to say defiant, towards those who are not good to her, but beyond that, one knows nothing about her (Hutton, in Gard,93).

She is "eager for knowledge, for life, and for the pursuit of high if somewhat undefined ideals" (Stewart,88). She has come to England and later to travel around Europe in order to know everything of life and of feelings like fear, pain, and suffering. She is a model of moral excellence.

She spent half her time in thinking of beauty, and bravery, and magnanimity; she had a fixed

determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action (The Portrait of a Lady, 47-48).

She talks with her cousin Ralph on suffering and the knowledge it offers. Ralph has a painful; disillusioning life of illness. She jokingly asks to see Gardencourts "ghost": "Isn't there a ghost?" (ibid, 43), and Ralph tells her she is not eligible yet for such a vision.

The privilege isn't given to every one; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge (ibid, 45).

Ralph asks her;" You are not afraid of suffering?" she responds:"Yes, I am afraid of suffering. But I am not afraid of ghosts" (ibid).She is a little smug, and has" an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong" (ibid, 48).She is fastidious in her relation with others.

She is quick and vital, with a great curiosity about life and a desire for happy participation in it. But she is also immature, lacking in knowledge of herself and of the world, and all her follies and confusions proceed from theories that are wholly abstracted from human reality, be it emotional, sexual, or social (Kaul, in Kar and Ramakrishna,312).

It is Ralph himself who is going to direct Isabel's destiny by allowing his father to leave Isabel a large inheritance. His father is afraid that Ralph may "put too much wind in her sails " (The Portrait of a Lady,171), and that this wealth might enable her to "fall a victim to the fortune-hunters" (ibid,172).Ralph circumvents all his father's fears by saying that sooner or later Isabel will "learn to live within her means" (ibid,171), and that Isabel "will hardly fall a victim to more than one" (ibid,172).Isabel herself is afraid and frightened from the fact that she has inherited so much money because "a large fortune means freedom, and I'm afraid of that" (ibid,206), for she

fears the freedom which money brings: "It's such a fine thing and one should make good use of it" (ibid). Isabel in *Gardencourt* is compared to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Both have a desire for knowledge. The money in *The Portrait of a Lady* may have parallels to the apple in the Garden of Eden. As a result of gaining painful knowledge both Isabel and Eve "fell" from innocence.

Isabel's first suitor is Casper Goodwood, an American cotton-mill magnate with a huge business empire from Boston. She is frightened by his ardor, and tremors in the face of his strong jawed determination she tells him: "If there is a thing in the world that I am fond of----- it is my personal independence" (ibid, 149). He is not impressed by protestations of feminine independence and Isabel is fearful of him, even though he is not violent or disagreeable but he is forceful and likes to control people. Isabel reacts with fear when she is confronted by a man and shrinking from "the baser emotions" (ibid, 151) of passions. When Casper Goodwood leaves after she refuses his proposal of marriage she drops to her knees and buries her head in her hands because of fear from what she has "escaped". Henrietta accuses Isabel of changing during her stay at *Gardencourt*. Henrietta believes that Casper Goodwood is the suitable person for Isabel to marry. Henrietta is afraid of Isabel's future and the fact that Isabel has refused Casper Goodwood means that Isabel is "drifting to some great mistake" (ibid, 154), the great mistake will be the choice of a wrong marriage partner.

Isabel's second suitor is Lord Warburton from Lockleigh, whom she meets at *Gardencourt* for the first time with her aunt's husband Mr Touchett. Within a couple of days of their first meeting, Lord Warburton informs Isabel that he would like to see her and talk to her. At this point "she had received an appreciable shock, but as it died away she felt that she could not pretend to herself that it was altogether a painful one" (ibid, 76). When Lord Warburton claims his love for her, she retreats in fear. She has concerned herself with

Moral images- things as to which the question would be whether they pleased her sublime soul. Lord Warburton looked up before her as a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule (ibid, 95).

Lord Warburton is neither an idea nor a figure in a book; he is a man and he represents "the baser part of emotion- the heat, the violence, the unreason" (ibid, 97-98), that she cannot cope with. Isabel is frightened and she recognizes a "certain fear" that Lord Warburton's proposal of marriage might suggest an end to her freedom and interrupt her plans for a fine, sensitive life. She is also afraid that her passion for adventure will be too soon sidetracked, her independence will be restricted and she will turn from intellect and imagination to passion because she fears that she might find herself at the end mistress of Lockleigh. Therefore Isabel rejects Lord Warburton's proposal and this is the second proposal she has rejected within a fortnight.

Her meeting with Lord Warburton is quite painful, she is disturbed, and she tries to explain the reasons behind her refusal to Lord Warburton's proposal and the fact that "she was really frightened at herself" (ibid,103). Dorothea Krook claims that "Isabel is 'afraid' whenever her 'freedom' is threatened"(47).

The 'fright', the 'fear' or the 'alarm' that she feels when she is proposed may indicate a pathological frigidity in her mental make-up. Her most "powerful emotion, when confronted with proposal from men she otherwise likes and she manifests a strong sense of 'fear' at the vital moments in her life" (Tanner, 34).

She decides to escape from Gardencourt and the painful thoughts it now holds and travel to London with Ralph and Henrietta. Later when they return to Gardencourt, Isabel finds Madame Merle playing on the piano and they become close friends and later on Madame Merle introduces Isabel to Gilbert Osmond. It is Isabel's innocence and inexperience that lead her to accept Osmond in the same way she accepted Madame Merle for both Osmond and Madame Merle are after Isabel's money, not Isabel herself. Isabel has many "fundamental timidity towards life and fear of self-assertion despite her many pronouncements to the contrary" (Peterson, in Kar and Ramakrishna, 334). Isabel decides to marry Osmond even though everybody rejects this marriage, she believes that by marrying Osmond she will gain maturity, wisdom, experience, she will overcome her confusions, and solve all her problems. Casper Goodwood is disturbed and upset when Isabel informs him of her intention of marrying Osmond, she feels nervous and she tells him that

her happiness is by this marriage. He says goodbye and she responds haughtily, but bursts into tears after his departure because she feels distressed when confronted by him.

Countess Gemini, on the other hand talks about her brother Osmond and she knows that Madame Merle is making a scheme on Isabel, she knows her brother is cold, and restrictive. "He is very hard to please. That makes me fear for her [Isabel's] happiness! " (*The Portrait of a Lady*,25). So, Countess Gemini fears for Isabel's happiness and the fact that she knows the truth about the relationship between her brother and Madame Merle, even though Madame Merle threatens her many times if she informs anything to Isabel.

Isabel herself is afraid of Osmond and of Madame Merle. She is troubled by horrible scenes of Osmond, even though she is interested in him but she has a disturbing, nameless fear for she is aware that "there was something in the air" (*ibid*,236) concerning Osmond and she feels a sense of mystery surround him with his relationship with Madame Merle.

It was her deep distrust of her husband- this was what darkened the world----- Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure (ibid,392).

Isabel's fear of herself because she thinks that she is not perfect, and she has made a silly mistake in marrying Osmond. Tony Tanner claims that Isabel's mistake "is a radical failure of vision" (31). Isabel's 'mistake' is inherent in her very assumption of freedom. "To do" is to suffer because when we 'do' we clash with other doers. Henry James "came to share Goethe's reflection that the acting man is always without conscience; no one has conscience but the observing man" (Tanner, 32). Osmond is the acting man and Ralph, the observing man. Isabel does not lose her sense of individuality and dignity, even though she falls into the hands of both Osmond and Madame Merle but she suffers because she is 'afraid' of vague ideals.

The mature Isabel has become "acquainted with revulsions, with disgust" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 379) at times the world "looked black and she asked herself with some sharpness what it was she was

to live for" (ibid). Life is both dull and meaningless to her now and with Osmond she is disillusioned by life, and longs for Madame Merle's talent of turning the self into "a firm surface, a sort of corselet of silver" (ibid,371). Osmond is the literary forerunner of Hawthornean's The Scarlet Letter (1850).

Many of Henry James works were influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "who shared with James a fascination with the supernatural, a concern with the restraints that society places on the individual, and an interest in the way the past shapes the present" (Salami,53).

Madame Merle herself accuses Osmond of being 'vile' and that his wife and child are afraid of him, even when she is by herself she asks herself: "Have I been so vile all for nothing" (The portrait of a Lady,484). She also suffers from Isabel's scorn and rejection. Osmond insults her and destroys her remaining illusion and he finally rejects her.

Countess Gemini informs Isabel about the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle and that Pansy is Madame Merle's daughter and also that Osmond married Isabel for her money. Isabel discovers that she has been cheated and betrayed, her fate is betrayal in the hardest sense. Isabel is shocked by what she has heard from Countess Gemini about the truth and that Osmond has told a twenty year lie to everybody around him. She is also shocked to hear that Ralph is dying, and Osmond accuses her of betrayal and forbids her to leave the house.

Isabel at her highest rate of desperation only claims that; "Ah, I must see Ralph" (ibid, 505).

When Isabel goes to London, horrors rise before her like mountains from a plain. She envied Ralph for dying but she realized that it was too soon for her to be relieved "life would be her business for a long time" (ibid, 517). She thinks that it is the destiny of fine persons to suffer. "She would never escape: she should last" (ibid). Isabel knows that she cannot "escape unhappiness" and she is convinced that she cannot escape her fate and destiny. Meanwhile she imagines that maybe;

She should some day be happy again. It couldn't be that she was to live only to suffer; she was still young, after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet (ibid).

The final vision is that of "the quick vague shadow of a long future. She should not escape" (ibid). She informs her aunt and the dying Ralph that Osmond and Madame Merle "had made a convenience of me" (ibid, 528), even though Isabel hates to make a public show of her suffering, for Isabel, "the most heinous sin is someone making use of someone else" (Krook, 53), and she knows that both Osmond and Madame Merle have made use of her.

Ralph fears for Isabel's future, he feels with despair when he thinks what kind of person Osmond is. He has "tried and tried again to make her [Isabel] betray Osmond" (The Portrait of a Lady, 430), and he fears that Isabel will suffer. Ralph is "in love with Isabel himself, though without ever thinking of sacrificing her and indeed generously forgetting his own future in the desire to add to his cousin Isabel's happiness" (Hutton, in Gard, 95). Both Ralph and Isabel have suffered and they are experts in pain and suffering. Ralph's suffering is physical and his death releases him from pain, while Isabel's suffering is spiritual and psychological. Her vision of the ghost when Ralph dies indicates that she has suffered a lot and now she can feel such visions.

The spiritual transition from the Isabel Archer of Albany to the Mrs Osmond of Rome is of course accomplished in part by natural disposition and in part by the influence of the numerous characters which surround her (Gard, 116).

Meanwhile Pansy, Osmond's daughter is afraid of her father. In spite of this fact she reacts with terror at the possibility of displeasing her father: "I must never displease papa" (The Portrait of a Lady, 512). Isabel is horrified that Pansy is going to the convent. She thinks her father is keeping the girl a prisoner and now Pansy is the "heroine of a tragedy" (ibid, 491). Pansy is afraid in the convent and wants Isabel to return and take her out. Isabel promises to help Pansy. Pansy is called "Pearl" like Pearl in The Saerlet Letter, but her role is

parallel "she's as pure as a pearl" (ibid, 225). Isabel tells Ned Roiser about Pansy "aren't you afraid that you will bore her" (ibid, 408). She tells him Pansy is too fearful to disobey her father. Pansy will marry Lord Warburton if her father wishes so, because of fear and duty towards her father rather than affection to Lord Warburton.

Isabel will remain faithful to Osmond in spite of his bitter disillusionment. Isabel is touched by the corruption of Europe but she is not corrupted by it.

Amid all the cheats and corruption of European society by which, fondly and romantically admiring, his [Henry James's] Americans are prone to be let down, there is one principle which their mature experience will endorse as valid (Stewart, 41).

Conclusion

The title of *The Portrait of a Lady* does not mean marrying nobility but it means suffering and growing. The heroine has natural nobility, she recognizes that her history is full of destruction of precious things; she has to suffer and accept her fate and destiny. She suffers for her best qualities, her quick sympathy, her generosity, and her ideals. Her innocence, inexperience, honesty, and pride lead her to be defeated by the scheming of the sophisticated people and she has to face the experience of the other people. After knowing the truth, she discovers that life is not romantic and wonderful as one had expected but it is a series of painful, suffering, disillusionment, and helplessness experiences. But it is not meaningless. She respects both her wedding promise and her promise to Pansy and returns to Rome. At the end she is grown up, she is not that naïve, smug girl. She has now practical knowledge in which she will base her actions on. Her fear and panic is the force of masculinity whenever she is offered a proposal of marriage. The other characters around her either have a certain fear for Isabel's future, destiny, and happiness like Ralph, Henrietta, Countess Gemini or they have their own fear like Pansy who is afraid of her father and that he does not approve of her marrying Ned Roiser because he is not wealthy, Pansy's fear also of being put in the convent.

Henry James the artist has been true to life in presenting a 'life-like' situation in The Portrait of a Lady, because the ending of the novel is like an episode in life. Both life and the novel are incomplete and inconclusive. We have no idea of what will happen to both Isabel and Pansy.

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