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Henry James' *The Portrait of A Lady*: An Odyssey from Illusion to Reality

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Henry James with his intense knowledge of intimate human relationship with the self and with the world becomes an explorer of the intricacies of human life. A man of cosmopolitan perspective and international outlook, Henry James presents men and women as not merely confined within their own world but also as concerned with the outer world. For him, man is not static and during his journey of life he comes across several encounters –good or bad –through which he gains experiences which consequently enrich his life. This reality of human life forms the basis of the present novel *The Portrait of A Lady* in which a young innocent American girl during her physical and spiritual journey of life comes through several experiences, hence becomes mature enough to get rid of her vague romantic notions.

An intense study of the consciousness and the conscience, of the being and the seeing, the novel gives us a psychological reflection of Isabel's journey from innocence to experience. Her odyssey from illusion to reality becomes a means to depict human dilemma of having either the pleasure of knowledge or the pleasure of comfort. The quest for the former may cause suffering but with a reward of experience and the wish for the later, no doubt, keeps us away from pain at the cost of knowledge. *The Portrait of A Lady*, centered round Isabel Archer and her experiences, begins and ends as Henry James himself points out in his New York Edition, with "the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny"⁴⁸. This lady namely Isabel moves from illusion to reality, from happiness to suffering and from adolescence to maturity during her spiritual odyssey presented concretely through her voyage from America to Europe. No doubt, innocence for a child is good but an exploration of the values, norms and realities of the world is necessary for grown-ups. This movement from innocence to experience is actually a basic truth of human life presented effectively by Henry James.

James presents this idea through Isabel Archer whom he portrays as a lady of intellectual aspirations desiring for more and more knowledge of life. Isabel wants to see the life in its each and every aspect. She loves life intensely and wants to enjoy it in its full. In fact, she is a romantic adventurer residing in her idyllic American paradise with highly inflated romantic passions.

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...⁶⁰.

Her friend Henrietta very acutely describes her, "...you live too much in the world of yours dreams... you've too many graceful illusions"²²³⁻²⁴. Isabel is, in fact, a modern American girl who likes to say- 'I'm not opinionated, I'm just always right. She has a lot of self-confidence and obviously a complete self-acceptance. She cannot bear the interference of others in the domain of

her will as, for her, it imposes limitations on her free life and on the right to make a choice. Isabel wants to be independent – independent of all constraints and restraints.

‘An independent young lady’ – this has become the identity for Isabel and with this particular remark her aunt introduces her at the Gardencourt. Isabel herself asserts, “I’m very fond of my liberty” 30. It is this ‘always right’ attitude that leads her to make a wrong choice, that is, her preference for Osmond as a life-mate. Isabel’s self-assertions and imaginative assumptions though make her pass through a grueling process of life, yet gradually take this youthful innocent adventurer into a world of knowledge and awareness. Her innocence along with romantic aspirations compel her to face the wide realities of life and to shed her self-perceived limited vision of the world off. For Isabel, compulsions of the culture, restraints of the society and confines of the family are of no worth and hence a rejection of peace, honor and security attainable only at the cost of her own freedom takes place. This is the reason why she disapproves the proposals of lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood. Such a decision appears to her as an assertion of freedom and as an opportunity to search out new larger areas of life. However, this desire of Isabel for a self-made life reflects merely her innocence and immaturity which make her to commit a grave mistake for which she has to pay a heavy price.

Isabel, in fact, is not able enough to identify the reality underlying the type of the human life represented by a man like Gilbert Osmond – the reality of the seamy side of life. Osmond’s apparent disinterestedness, seeming individuality and aestheticism seem to be more fascinating for this young lady than the social identity and the concrete actuality of Warburton and Goodwood. Osmond, for Isabel, “..... was an original without being an eccentric. She had never met a person of so fine a grain” 268. Isabel very much impressed by Osmond’s appearances seems to be so excited that she cannot wait for the inner reality to come out. In fact, it represents only her instinct to test things and people by their capacity to please her sublime soul. She justifies her decision of choosing Osmond by affirming that she has experienced life enough and now she should choose only a corner and cultivate it. It is obvious how confident she is. It is actually nothing but only a misconception of an innocent girl as experience being an immense sensibility can never be limited and can never be completed.

This depicts Isabel’s tendency to go away from opportunities of life and also her distrust of all amenities and comforts of life. In fact, her “love of knowledge co-existed in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance” 207. Dorothy Van Ghent here makes an appropriate remark:

The heroine’s voluntary search for fuller
consciousness leads her in an illusion of perfect
freedom to choose only ‘the best’ in experience,
to choose an evil;..228.

It seems as if Isabel has come from her ‘American Garden of Eden’ to Europe just to meet her destiny in the form of Osmond which proves to be a crucial turning point for her innocence. Isabel who is earlier ensnared by a surface glitter now realizes that the world is not all bright and too simple. Her absolutism is destroyed by Osmond’s damaging narcissistic egotism which reduces her merely to a portrait of Osmond’s gallery.

This encounter with European experience proves almost traumatic for the American innocence perhaps because Isabel wants “to see, but not to feel” 159. Ralph makes a very significant commentary on all this saying – ‘to know about life’s realities’ is the privilege “not

given to everyone; ... innocent persons like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge” 57. For Isabel who is “not enough in contact with reality – with the toiling, striving, suffering” 223, Italy proves to be a land of experience and human realities. Isabel’s innocent assertion of her freedom and enthusiastic confidence, no doubt, leaves her trapped and powerless but also makes her aware, concerned as well as sensitive to her surroundings. Now she begins to know the complexities of life, the intricacies of the world and the responsibilities of an individual but only after her fall from innocence. Now she recognizes that she has chosen a wrong corner and mistaken a part for the whole. Her attraction for the appearances, in fact, becomes a price paid for an intense knowledge of life. It is, in fact, a ‘give and take’ relationship which we observe in the real life as well.

It can favourably be said that Isabel moving from her innocence gains a deeper moral and human vision through her sufferings. Her sense of duty and love for her step –daughter Pancy clearly shows what critics like F.O. Matthiesson also feel that she is gifted with qualities of pity and compassion through which a higher form of humanity take birth in her soul. 185-86. Now she understands that life is not so pleasant and happy as she has earlier comprehended it and that, to use Oscar Cargill’s phrase, “sheer liberty had none” 104-05, while duty has some meaning. Of course, after her painful experiences, Isabel with this moral understanding becomes mature enough to face risks and unknown trials. No doubt, she suffers but with a moral and spiritual enlightenment. After her departure from romantic idealization, imaginative colourful visions and mere bookish knowledge all based entirely on earlier immaturity and innocence, Isabel experiences the basic contradictions of human life. During her odyssey from illusion to reality, she feels the existence of the good with the bad, of the simple with the complex. She now perceives the selfishness underlying human relationships in the form of the sinister egotism of her husband named Osmond and of the calculated steps of Madame Merle.

While having a desire to experience life in all its varieties and colors, in its complexities and fullness, Isabel forgets that an all-inclusive view of life can never exclude the experience of its negative aspect also. It seems as if Isabel wants only to recognize the realities of life but not to taste them as they appear to her ‘a poisoned drink’. This very innocence of her romantic enthusiasm leads her to unexpected experiences full of miseries and sorrows. However, it is unfavorable to completely deny the fact that Isabel has some inkling of another side of the coin, that is, suffering. Her awareness of this is evident when she says, “I can’t escape unhappiness” 142. What actually she thinks is:

It’s not absolutely necessary to suffer;

We are not to made for that 58.

But she has to suffer and the point here to be noted is that her pains, despite having a ruining effect, make her more mature with the bitter taste of realities of actual human life. It is this which enables Isabel to have grace enough to accept and not to escape the results of her own choices. Her quest for a more meaningful life ends, in a way, with certain acceptance and also with a kind of compromise with the life- forces.

Thus in *The Portrait of A Lady*, Henry James effectively presents how Isabel moves physically from a fixed center to different larger areas and intellectually from prior innocence to later experiences. The novelist obviously propagates the idea that suffering is a supreme discipline and one has to undergo pains to be able to feel intensively. Similarly, the painful experience of Isabel, to use Dorothy Van Ghent’s words, “by providing insight through suffering

and guilt, provides also access to life – to the fructification of consciousness”²²⁸. Isabel walks out of her shattered romantic prismatic illusions of life and finds a clear mirror-image of the human nature which is always a mixture of good and bad. Her voyage from innocence to experience, in fact, results in her expanding consciousness. No doubt, she has to renounce her comfortable life to gain knowledge of the human world but it is, actually, what Tony Tanner says, “the birth of a conscience out of a waste of life”¹⁵⁰. To sum up, in *The Portrait of A Lady*, Henry James through Isabel presents man’s inevitable journey from illusion to reality during which man comes out from his self-made cocoon and feels life in all its totality.

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