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## *Short Stories*

NORMA KLEIN . . . . .	THE END OF THE HOLIDAY
MYRON TAUBE . . . . .	THE STUDENT
ZENA COLLIER . . . . .	THE CHIMNEY
JOYCE CAROL OATES . . . . .	THE WOMAN WHO DISAPPEARED
ROSEMARY SILVERMAN . . . . .	LIGHTS
NATALIE KIRSTEIN . . . . .	THE POLICELADY ON THE CORNER

## *Poetry*

SAM BRADLEY	LISA GRENELLE	JOYCE ODAM
FLORENCE UNGAR	ANDREW NEIDERMAN	PAUL B. NEWMAN
CELESTE T. WRIGHT	LILLIE D. CHAFFIN	
DONALD J. PAQUETTE	LAWRENCE SPINGARN	
DAVID FRANCIS	ROY CHANG	DONALD G. FINCH

## *Articles*

RICHARD L. MICHENER . . . . .	APOCALYPTIC MEXICO
JOHN FREIMARCK . . . . .	PUDDN'HEAD WILSON: BLOOD AND BROTHERHOOD
ABIGAIL HAMBLÉN . . . . .	FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S OF INNOCENCE AND EVIL
W. E. YEOMANS . . . . .	T. S. ELIOT, RAGTIME, AND THE BLUES
VICTOR H. STRANDBERG . . . . .	ISABEL ARCHER'S IDENTITY CRISIS

# Isabel Archer's Identity Crisis: The Two Portraits of a Lady

VICTOR H. STRANDBERG

HENRY JAMES'S *The Portrait of a Lady* gives us two portraits or conceptions of a lady. One of them is the result of Isabel's deliberate and splendid artifice in emulating her model of Europeanized ladyhood, Madame Merle; the other—and more important—conception results from the development of Isabel's essential character in facing a series of harsh and unexpected crises. One portrait, that is to say, is Isabel's creation of an identity, and the other is her discovery of what her true identity has been all along, underneath the glamorous surface she has so assiduously been cultivating. In this paper, I should like to trace out this double pattern of developing conceptions and especially to note the conflict between them that gives James's masterpiece much of its structure.

Isabel Archer, at the beginning, is an unknown quantity whom even the clairvoyant Ralph Touchett regards as a lovely but inscrutable mystery. For this reason he compares her personality to a mansion with locked doors: "He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. The door was fastened, and though he had keys in his pocket he

had a conviction that none of them would fit." (p. 63)<sup>1</sup>

What is more significant is that Isabel is equally a mystery to herself. In her highest moments of crisis, when she rejects her two ardent suitors, she herself doesn't understand why she would do such a thing, and her prevailing mood is one of fear and bewilderment as to what sort of a person she must be to have acted so perversely. When Lord Warburton asked to visit her, for example, "she made answer to his declaration, coldly enough, 'Just as you please.' And her coldness was not the calculation of her effect . . . It came from a certain fear." (p. 77)

The fear, it becomes evident, is fear of herself, of her intrinsic identity, for after rejecting Warburton's proposal of marriage a bit later (p. 101) "she was wondering if she were not a cold, hard, priggish person, and . . . felt, as she had said to her friend, really frightened at herself." Later, after rejecting Caspar Goodwood, she would similarly drop to her knees before her bed and hide her face in her arms—"not praying . . . [but] trembling all over" for a good ten minutes of uncontrollable psychic turmoil.

Her problem, then, is the ageless one of finding or establishing a satisfac-

<sup>1</sup>Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1963 impression). This text is the source of all subsequent page references.

tory role and identity, something to justify her irrational behavior: "Who was she, what was she, that she should hold herself superior? What view of life, what design upon fate, what conception of happiness, had she that pretended to be larger than these large, these fabulous occasions?" (p. 101)

As though bestowed by the hand of Providence, Madame Merle makes her superb entrance almost in answer to Isabel's question. Born in the Brooklyn navy yard, Madame Merle shows everything Europe can do for the American woman of true cultural potentiality. A musician, painter, artist of the needle, master of several languages, Madame Merle is so endowed with all the arts and graces as to pass for European aristocracy—"a Frenchwoman," Isabel thinks, or "a German of high degree, perhaps an Austrian, a baroness, a countess, a princess. It would never have been supposed she had come into the world in Brooklyn." (p. 152) And so our title theme gets underway, Isabel's search for identity having found its perfect objective correlative in her new friend's magnificent bearing: "she had yet to Isabel's imagination a sort of greatness. To be so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it—that was really to be a great lady . . ." (p. 164)

To become a Madame Merle in her own right is now Isabel's manifest destiny, the new purpose of her existence, the "design upon fate" by which she would justify her rejection of an English lord and an American millionaire. Thus "she wandered, as by the wrong side of the wall of a private garden, round the enclosed talents, accomplishments, aptitudes, of Madame Merle. She found herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways this

lady presented herself as a model. 'I should like awfully to be so!' Isabel secretly exclaimed." (p. 163)

So there develops before our eyes one portrait of a lady, the glamorous, graceful, Europeanized creature who fulfills half of the meaning of James's title. For a start, in pursuing the cultural fulsomeness of her model, Isabel ingests all she can of Europe, taking in the Pyramids, the Acropolis, Constantinople, and so forth, "like a thirsty person draining cup after cup," (p. 268) and as a result she feels "as if she were 'worth more' for it, like some curious piece in an antiquary's collection" (p. 270)—which is exactly how Gilbert Osmond would regard her, perceiving "a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects." (p. 253)

The culmination of this Europeanization of Isabel is seen in the splendid full-length portrait that we encounter, through Edward Rosier's eyes, as Isabel stands framed in the doorway at the outset of Chapter 37: "He . . . met Mrs. Osmond coming out of the deep doorway. She was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid . . . The years had touched her only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem . . . Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady." (p. 303) So Isabel Archer has achieved her secret ambition; she has become, to all appearances, an even finer version of Madame Merle.

But this development, impressively as it strikes the eye, has sinister implications. In fitting herself to the portrait

of a European lady, Isabel has become tainted with the European duplicity. Like her model, she has become a social actress, a careful and willing performer in the play that is staged and directed by Gilbert Osmond. It is not so bad that she lies to Lord Warburton, about her marriage, telling him "Fortunately, I'm very happy," (p. 317) but it does become very unconscionable that she maintains her act in Ralph's presence, thus causing a tragic deterioration in her relationship with the man who has so loved and befriended her.

In place of her original identity, all she will permit him to see now is a mask, the synthetic self which the European code requires from the leaders of its social hierarchy. This, alas, is not the portrait of a genuine lady: "He should see nothing, he should learn nothing; for him she would always wear a mask . . . if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said—it was a representation, it was even an advertisement." (p. 323)

Being a generous spirit, Ralph does not blame Isabel for this perversity, but rather looks to its source, the stagecraft of Gilbert Osmond—"Ralph, in all this, recognized the hand of the master; for he knew that Isabel had no faculty for producing studied impressions." (p. 323) Nevertheless, Isabel's aloofness from him is deeply wounding, and provides the most profound moral crisis of the book until its resolution in the next to the last chapter. Until then, Isabel's synthetic identity as a fine lady is, for Ralph, far from satisfactory: "Poor human-hearted Isabel, what perversity had bitten her? . . . The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what

he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond." (p. 324)

So Ralph must wait, perforce, until the final crisis of his deathbed to see Isabel's true identity re-emerge at last—the warm, spontaneous creature he had known earlier. And right up until that final crisis, neither he nor Isabel knows her true identity well enough to predict what her behavior will be:

"It was very good of you to come," he went on. "I thought you would; but I wasn't sure."

"I was not sure either till I came," said Isabel. (p. 469)

Until this final epiphany, poor Ralph is doomed to play out his lonely waiting game, uncertain whether Isabel's stubborn facade has become so fixed that this is all he will ever see of her: "What kept Ralph alive was simply the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested; he was not yet satisfied . . . This was only the first act of the drama, and he was determined to sit out the performance." (p. 326)

Originally, however, Isabel Archer was not given to making performances. On the contrary, before her metamorphosis into the European lady had ever presented itself as an object of her desiring, she had determined that "she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was." (p. 54) "It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel," she had decided, and "the chance of inflicting a sensible injury upon another person . . . struck her as the worst thing that could happen to her." (p. 53) This, as

we have seen, is exactly what does "happen" to her, the injury being inflicted upon not just "another person" but upon her kindly benefactor that loved her "as if he had been her brother." (p. 357)

To be sure, she rationalizes her mask as a kindness to Ralph, which calls forth a wry editorial intrusion from the author: "Women find their religion sometimes in strange exercises, and Isabel, at present, in playing a part before her cousin, had an idea that she was doing him a kindness. It would have been a kindness perhaps if he had been for a single instant a dupe. As it was, the kindness consisted mainly in trying to make him believe that he had once wounded her greatly [in warning her not to marry Osmond] and that the event had put him to shame, but that, as she was very generous and he was so ill, she bore him no grudge." (p. 357) Rather an ironic form of kindness, it must be admitted. But in Ralph's deathbed scene, she admits that this "kindness" had been a rationalization all along:

"... I always tried to keep you from understanding; but it's all over."

"I always understood," said Ralph.

"I thought you did, and I didn't like it..." (p. 470)

Prior to this last-minute confession, as time wears on and Ralph's illness worsens, the falsity of Isabel's pose parallels the deterioration of his health as an aggravation of his suffering, such that the smallest glimpse through her mask is, to him, pathetically exciting:

"Ah, Ralph, you give me no help!" she cried abruptly and passionately.

It was the first time she had alluded to the need for help, and the words shook her cousin with their violence. He gave a long

murmur of relief, of pity, of tenderness; it seemed to him that at last the gulf between them had been bridged. It was this that made him exclaim in a moment, "How unhappy you must be!"

He had no sooner spoken than she recovered her self-possession and the first use she made of it was to pretend she had not heard him. (p. 381)

So the gulf is not bridged; the moment of real warmth and honesty is supplanted quickly by the synthetic portrait so important to Isabel's pride as a woman. "Her mask had dropped for an instant, but she had put it on again, to Ralph's infinite disappointment." (p. 382) He "had caught a glimpse of her natural face," but now the public portrait would be all he would see until his dying hour.

So much, then, for this portrait of a lady, the beautiful actress who must at all costs preserve her splendid public image, her dearly bought artificial identity. But this is only half the portrait. In counterpoint with the story of Isabel's creation of an identity is the theme of self-discovery, Isabel's search for whatever true identity underlies the pose of a gracious and happily married woman. This, of course, is James's real portrait of a lady, for it is only in ethical character, not in the acquired glamour of Europe, that one's bedrock identity may be found. Madame Merle demonstrates the obverse of this truism, for in lacking an ethical character she must remain "a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character and costume" (p. 269); too perfect an actress, she simply does not have an off-stage identity, and so must return to America after her exposure a hopeless, hollow woman. In place of Isabel's garden of the soul, Madame Merle has cultivated only a weed patch, a "dusky pestiferous tract . . . planted thick with

ugliness and misery." (p. 55) Her story is thus more tragic than Isabel's.

As in actual life, Isabel's ethical character can be defined and clarified only in action, in the unpredictable contingencies of whatever crisis happens to be looming at hand. This is why her emulation of Madame Merle turns out to be unsatisfactory; the identity it can give is only for the outer world, while within her inner psyche she must still confront the sense of fear as to who and what she really is. Thus the anxiety which had followed her rejection of Goodwood and Warburton follows her to the end, as she admits in her conversation with Ralph just before his final journey home from Rome:

" . . . I'm afraid," said Isabel. After a pause she repeated, as if to make herself, rather than him, hear the words: "I'm afraid."

Ralph could hardly tell what her tone meant . . . "Afraid of your husband?"

"Afraid of myself!" she said. (p. 412)

What she fears, it turns out, is that her ethical character will be found lacking. It is a fear that is finally resolved only in the last two chapters, when Isabel at last flings aside her pride and her mask to claim Ralph as her "brother" and then proceeds to fight off the two supreme temptations of the concluding pages. But although Isabel herself cannot be sure of how strong her character will be under pressure, there is no doubt that James laid a subtle and careful groundwork to prepare for and justify Isabel's victory of character in the closing pages.

That groundwork begins in the first chapter when old Touchett, voicing the American ethic, tells Warburton, "you young men are too idle. You think too

much of your pleasure." (p. 22) His antidote for Warburton's boredom is the exhortation to "take hold of something," a bit of advice which Henrietta Stackpole, that spirit of pure Americanism, later repeats verbatim to Ralph ("Take right hold of something."—p. 84) Ralph, of course, does take hold of something, taking his lovely cousin Isabel under his benevolent wing, while Isabel at this time appears interested only in taking hold of the aesthetics of Europe, under her program of emulating Madame Merle's spectacular cultural metamorphosis. Isabel's propensity to take hold of something more important than Europe's cultural feast lies dormant and waiting, however, for "Deep in her soul—it was the deepest thing there—lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely." (p. 55)

Isabel's clear-sighted aunt sees this element in Isabel's nature with prophetic accuracy some time later (but before Isabel has decided to marry Osmond), when she complains that "we shall have my niece arriving at the conviction that her mission in life's to prove that a stepmother may sacrifice herself—and that, to prove it, she must first become one." (p. 232)

Such an awareness of her true nature dawns more slowly on Isabel herself, as she senses that something is wrong with the splendid surface portrait she has so successfully been cultivating—that perhaps her real identity is not found in that picture: "The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point." (p. 291) What that private duty will be emerges slowly into clarity in fragmentary intuitions such as the follow-

ing premonition that little Pansy will stand in need of a friend and protector: "My good little Pansy," said Isabel gently, "I shall be ever so kind to you." A vague, inconsequent vision of her coming in some odd way to need it had intervened with the effect of a chill." (p. 293)

As Isabel's awareness grows continually keener, Pansy looms larger and clearer as the object of her search for "some private duty" to fill the inner vacancy. Led by "her tenderness for things that were pure and weak," Isabel comes to think of Pansy as her personal responsibility, something to take hold of: ". . . the girl's dependence was more than a pleasure; it operated as a definite reason when motives threatened to fail her. She had said to herself that we must take our duty where we find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible." (p. 334) From here it is but a short step to give her commitment a religious sanction: "not to neglect Pansy, not under any provocation to neglect her—this she had made an article of religion." (p. 334)

"Not under any provocation" is strong language, and put to the severest imaginable test in the twin temptations of the final chapter, but Isabel does live up to this "religion" of sacrifice and renunciation. She does bear out her promise, "I won't desert you," (p. 455) at whatever cost to herself, and so merits the full tribute of James's title.

That title assumes its positive meaning only in this second portrait, then, not in the portrait of a beautiful lady dressed in black velvet whom Edward Rosier saw framed in the gilded doorway and whom Ralph Touchett saw cruelly hidden behind a mask. The one portrait derives from her setting in Italy, Catholic and aesthetic ("a land

in which a love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge"—p. 190), while the other comes from Isabel's origins in America, Protestant and ethical in its insistence on one's private duty.

This Catholic-Protestant discrepancy is nowhere more intolerable than in Isabel's observation of Pansy's incarceration in the convent-prison, where Osmond is walling her away from Rosier's ardent courtship. Isabel sees clearly the sinister function of the convent—"It produced today more than before the impression of a well-appointed prison; for it was not possible to pretend that Pansy was free to leave it" (p. 448)—but Osmond is most happy to use this venerable institution as a doubly safe extension of his wax museum: "Convents are very quiet, very convenient, very salutary. I like to think of her there . . . among those tranquil virtuous women." (p. 434)

So Isabel's Protestant conscience asserts its latent authority: "The old Protestant tradition had never faded from Isabel's imagination, and . . . poor little Pansy became the heroine of a tragedy. Osmond wished it to be known that he shrank from nothing, and his wife found it hard to pretend to eat her dinner." (p. 435) Isabel's behavior in the book's closing paragraphs is anything but the gratuitous impulse it appears, then, for her character has been shaped and nurtured towards just such a gesture of sacrifice.

Rounding out this spiritual portrait of a lady are two other notable virtues evidenced in her attitudes toward the two co-conspirators who have ruined her life. Her sacrifice for Pansy is supplemented by fidelity toward Pansy's father and by charity toward Pansy's

mother. Osmond may think himself sincere when he says "I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing," (p. 438) but for him, after all, the "consequences of his actions" is the rather pleasant fact of being married to a woman of great wealth, and the "honour of a thing" is for him the integrity of the surface facade so important to his status in European society. He has no more appreciation of those fine phrases than he had when he spoke of "my wilful renunciation" (p. 253) during their courtship. It remains for Isabel to give meaningful content to his "observance of a magnificent form." (p. 439)

Isabel's charity toward Madame Merle is also remarkable; although Isabel herself had been ready to apply "the great historical epithet of *wicked*" to her arch-deceiver (p. 424), she will not allow Pansy to speak ill of her—"You must never say that—that you don't like Madame Merle." (p. 455) In her last encounter with Madame Merle Isabel does not even allow herself the modest comfort of verbal retaliation, though for a moment she veers close to it:

She saw . . . the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron. All the bitterness of this knowledge surged into her soul again . . . There was a moment during which, if she had turned and spoken, she would have said something that would hiss like a lash. But she closed her eyes, and then the hideous vision dropped . . . Isabel's only revenge was to be silent still. (p. 451)

This is a portrait of true ladyhood.

For all her vague, uncertain fears as to her interior identity, then, Isabel's character through test after test proves

to be strong and attractive, marked by an uncommon charitableness, fidelity, and self-sacrifice. Even while her surface portrait is leading to the deterioration of her relationship with Ralph, her interior character portrait is building steadily towards the ultimate revelation of her spiritual ladyhood, hitherto an uncertain matter to herself, to Ralph, to Pansy, and to all involved in the story. Out of this carefully etched complex of motivations, Isabel arrives at the concluding scenes strongly armored in virtue against the final supreme temptations, the escapism of a death wish beckoning from one side of the path and that of Caspar Goodwood's "life force" calling from the other.

Of these two climactic temptations, the death-wish is the most difficult to resist: "She envied Ralph his dying, for if one were thinking of rest that was the most perfect of all. To cease utterly, to give it all up and not know anything more—this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land." (p. 457) But Caspar's enormously powerful and logical appeal is almost as tempting, as her American suitor nearly wins her over: "she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying." (p. 481) And when he does take her in his arms, with a kiss "like white lightning" and with a passion that made "each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her . . . justified of its intense identity," she is saved from yielding only by an ethical character that James had subtly and carefully threaded in all his previous chapters.

So, in response to the kiss, "she darted from the spot . . . She had not known where to turn; but she knew now.

There was a very straight path." (p. 482) The Biblical echo in this phrase about a straight path is not an accident, for this final portrait of a lady, the lady of ethical character, is established upon the Christian paradoxes concerning sacrifice and renunciation: he who would save his life must lose it, and she who loses her life will save it. The Christian paradoxes having prevailed over escapism, Isabel has safely survived her identity crisis. That gnawing fear of herself, of a failure in her character, has proved unfounded in the crucible of actual experience.

Perhaps in keeping with the Christian paradoxes, the culminating imagery of Isabel's character is that of angel and Madonna to the two people who mean the most to her. For Ralph she becomes "an angel beside my bed" because she has finally achieved the nec-

essary humility to lay down her social mask, the artificial portrait, so as to bridge the gulf between them: "She had lost all her shame, all wish to hide things. Now he must know; she wished him to know, for it brought them supremely together." (p. 469)

Likewise, she has become comparable not just to a painting of a Madonna, which Mrs. Touchett had compared her to ("She has looked as solemn, these three days, as a Cimabue Madonna"—(p. 179), but to the spiritual status of a Madonna, as Pansy would have it: "'I wish you would try to find one [a way to help Rosier's courtship of Pansy], the girl exclaimed as if she were praying to the Madonna.'" (p. 385) In her final sacrifice, Isabel has indeed become Ralph's angel and Pansy's Madonna. There can be no finer portrait of a lady than this, no better discovery of identity.