



HAL
open science

The "High Flight of American Humour" in The Portrait of Lady (1881) by Henry James

Jacques Sohier

► **To cite this version:**

Jacques Sohier. The "High Flight of American Humour" in The Portrait of Lady (1881) by Henry James. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2003, Henry James and Other Essays, 23, pp.145-157. hal-02344248

HAL Id: hal-02344248

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344248v1>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The “High Flight of American Humour” in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by Henry James

In the critical analysis devoted to Henry James's first masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, considerable attention has been paid to the heroine's tragic choice of a suitor. Valuable observations have also been made on Isabel Archer's complex relation to her femininity, on the role of the commodity culture and James's reaction to it.

Many comments have brought to light the influence literary currents such as “art for art's sake” can have exerted on the master himself. However, it seems that interwoven with these serious issues, James's text is also very often “bristling,” to use a Jamesian phrase, with sheer humour and a spirit of wantonness. A playful mood plays on many of the scenes in the novel and brings a welcome relief to readers of a novel so deeply involved in exposing the evil of the world and the rape of innocence.¹

We shall begin by highlighting James's intense interest in humour by confronting his intentions with previous writers he found deficient in humour. Then, we shall concentrate on different aspects of James's humour as he tackles national differences, gender power-politics or his *bête noire*, “the modern woman.” Lastly, we shall postulate that James's irony is intentionally sadistic.

¹ See for instance, J. Porte ed., *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady* (Cambridge, CUP, 1990); W. Veeder, *Henry James: The Lessons of the Master; Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1975); J. Freedman, *Professions of Taste, Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, Stanford UP., 1990); S. Geoffroy-Menoux ed., *Lectures d'une œuvre, The Portrait of a Lady* (Paris, Editions du Temps, 1998). Of special relevance, too, is R. Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James* (London, 1960) in G. Clarke, *Henry James: Critical Assessments*, vol. IV (Helm Information, Mountfield, 1991).

THE SERIOUS AND THE PLAYFUL

Henry James was fully aware of the advantage he could gain in lacing his novel with humorous descriptions or verbal play. In a Bildungsroman that has a generic link with *The Portrait of a Lady*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, James enjoyed but deplored the exclusive weight given to the serious, to "the pages of disquisitions which cannot be too deeply studied."² In this 1865 review James regretted that there was "not a ray of humour in the pages before us and hardly a flash of wit." The lesson from Goethe seemed to have meant to James that the central figure of a novel could not simply be the occasion to write "a treatise on moral economy" (LC 948). *Wilhelm Meister* was written "not to entertain, but to edify" (LC 945), James wrote. His main preoccupation in writing *The Portrait of a Lady* may well have been to edify the romantic *jeune fille* without neglecting for that matter the entertainment of his reader.

This overriding concern for the pleasurable entertainment of the reader never lies quiescent in James's reviews. It crops up again in James's well-known review of Zola's *Nana* (LC 861-69). James gave vent to his preoccupation for the proper education of the *jeune fille*: "Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only with half of life?" (LC 869) And to damn even more the impure writer, James connected Zola's want of artistry to "the extraordinary absence of humour" (LC 869). In fact, James sent Zola's naturalism to a Puritan's hell for the perversion of the serious and the lack of humour that could have acted as a disinfectant for his immorality: "M. Zola disapproves greatly of wit; he thinks it is an impertinence in a novel, and he would probably disapprove of humour if he *knew* what it is" (LC 869).

A dual interest informs his 1908 preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of The Lady*. On the one hand, James dwells on the architectural ingenuity shown in the organisation of his novel and on the thematic novelty of dealing with a presumptuous girl as a central character. He presents his endeavour as a task unattempted by the greatest writers before him, "even Shakespeare" (PL 10),³ forgetting in the sweep of his claim *All's Well That Ends*

² L. Edel and M. Wilson ed., *Henry James: Literary Criticism* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 945-48. Subsequent references to this book will be included in the text and abbreviated as LC.

³ The edition used is the 1995 Norton Critical Edition edited by Robert D. Bamberg. All page references are integrated into the text and abbreviated as PL.

Well, a play with a clever, complex woman as main character, a character who overcomes social barriers and the Count of Rossillion's youth and inexperience.

On the other hand, James shows himself much concerned and uncertain about "[his] relation with the reader" (PL 13). And this self-doubt which coexists with a wonderful writerly arrogance is expressed in this fashion:

That precautionary spirit, on re-perusal of the book, is the old note that most touches me: it testifies so, for my own ear, to the anxiety of my provision for the reader's amusement. (PL 11)

The word "anxiety" is expressive of James's uncertainty on how his humour might be received and appreciated by his reader. Nevertheless, from the writer's point of view, the striving at humour is manifest: "the thing was under a special obligation to be amusing" (PL 15).

MY WONDERFUL NOTION OF THE LIVELY⁴

In spite of, or perhaps because of, James's anxiousness to provide entertainment, *The Portrait of a Lady* is amusing not through and through, but in the very fashion that James relished applauding "the lighter forms of irony" in Gustave Droz's *Around Spring* (LC 269).

In the first part of the novel, the light touches of humour derive from the very nature of language, which is seen as an intersubjective process with gaps and indeterminacies. When Mrs. Touchett is abroad, she communicates with her family by means of inscrutable telegrams. Her son, Ralph Touchett, explains this to Lord Warburton:

... my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation. "Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer decent cabin." That's the sort of message we get from her—that was the last that came. But there had been another one before, which I think contained the first mention of the niece. "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent." (PL 24)

On the face of it, Mrs. Touchett's telegrams mean what she means them to say. She does not seem to sense the possible ambiguities that are evoked by her son and her husband, Daniel Touchett,

⁴ This expression is used in James's preface to the novel and is associated with Henrietta Stackpole.

... it seems to admit of so many interpretations. "There's one thing very clear in it," said the old man; "she has given the hotel-clerk a dressing."

"I'm not so sure even of that, since he has driven her from the field. We thought at first that the sister mentioned might be the sister of the clerk; but the subsequent mention of a niece seems to prove that the allusion is to one of my aunts. Then there was a question as to whose the two other sisters were; they are probably two of my late aunt's daughters. But who's 'quite independent,' and in what sense is the term used?—that point's not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterise her sisters equally?—and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense?" (*PL* 24)

The two receivers of the telegram start diverging about their interpretations. Daniel Touchett grounds his reading on his knowledge of his wife, whom he knows wants respect and even submission from servants. Ralph, on the other hand, decodes the segment "impudent clerk" differently. He deduces from the change of hotel that his mother is the one who lost face. The light touch of humour lies in the reversal of situation. The imperious Mrs. Touchett is suddenly toppled from her position of social eminence that works well enough in Europe but fails in America. She is depicted as an eccentric lady who deliberately constructs her social self to inspire dignity in others. She is a snob who relishes the cards that symbolize her social value, those "oblong morsels of symbolic pasteboard" (*PL* 60). In America, she ends up being the one who receives the dressing down. Her self-image is denied by the disrespectful clerk who seems to indulge in what Mikhael Bakhtin calls "the ritual of charivari" when the high and mighty in the land receive a temporary comeuppance.⁵

Unbeknownst to her, Mrs. Touchett also receives a proper dressing from her own son, who implies that his mother's message is somewhat incoherent. Ralph takes the position of what Freud calls "misleading naïveté" in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud says, "children often represent themselves as naïve, so as to enjoy a liberty that they would not otherwise be granted" (*Jokes* 244). Ralph enjoys this mischievous liberty to present his mother's message as a real accomplishment. Condensation is elevated to the status of an art: "my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation" (*PL* 24).

The art of expansion, on the other hand, will be demonstrated by the prankster himself. Ralph Touchett revels in the possible ambiguities that proliferate in the telegram. The uncertain identities of the persons referred to

⁵ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, H. Iswolsky (transl.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 147.

and the indeterminate meaning of the word "independent" are questioned. Uncertainty and lack of relevance turn out as positive values in the creation of humour. The constraints of textual space in a telegram contribute to the ambiguities, too, since "clearness is too expensive," as Mrs. Touchett says (*PL* 49). Freud repeatedly associates the play on words with an economy or an expenditure of psychical energy, "the pleasure arises through the internal lifting of inhibition" (*Jokes* 244). In every sense of the expression, Mrs. Touchett economises her words while Ralph Touchett, and the reader, too, are rather concerned with spending what is patiently economised by the writer.

Henry James also shows he is far from being deficient in humour in the construction of dialogue. For instance, when the young American girl Isabel Archer, fresh from Albany, meets the sisters of the British aristocrat Lord Warburton, a misunderstanding ensues:

"Do you suppose your brother's sincere?" Isabel enquired with a smile.

"Oh, he must be you know!" Mildred exclaimed quickly, while the elder sister gazed in silence.

"Do you think he would stand the test?"

"The test?"

"I mean for instance having to give up all this."

"Having to give up Lockleigh?" said Miss Molyneux, finding her voice.

"Yes, and the other places; what are they called?"

The two sisters exchanged an almost frightened glance. "Do you mean—do you mean on account of the expense?" the younger one asked. (*PL* 74-5)

The situation comedy is produced by the three women talking at cross purposes. While Isabel Archer's opening question could be construed as a very direct way of questioning the purity of Lord Warburton's marital intentions, she means in fact to fathom his political commitment. He has been presented to Isabel as "a nobleman of the newest pattern, a reformer, a radical, a contemner of ancient ways" (*PL* 68), and so, quite logically, the American revolutionary she thinks she is asks Lord Warburton's sisters about the extent of this radicalism. The Misses Molyneux, on the other hand, cannot see what Isabel Archer is driving at because their view of their brother and of their family is not radical but liberal: "I think one ought to be liberal, Mildred argued gently. We've always been so, even from the earliest times" (*PL* 75).

The misunderstanding is complete since the Misses Molyneux's reaction revolves around the financial obligation to give up their hereditary seat, not as an ideological choice, but by the force of circumstances outside their control. In a novel that depicts the lives of the leisured classes and evokes

a coming social revolution, it is amusing to see the representatives of the dominant classes jump at the fearful prospect of having to live in reduced circumstances.

In the same playful spirit, James pokes fun at national prejudices or ignorance of the other. For instance, Henrietta Stackpole has lost her appetite since she came to England: "I don't care much for these European potatoes" (*PL* 116), she says in a very jingoistic fashion. The Englishman Bantling is the butt of a Jamesian joke for failing to know his geography and regresses to the status of a little boy, a Huckleberry Finn in disguise:

They had travelled from New York to Milwaukee, stopping at the most interesting cities on the route; and whenever they started afresh he had wanted to know if they could go by the steamer. He seemed to have no idea of geography--had an impression that Baltimore was a Western city and was perpetually expecting to arrive at the Mississippi and was unprepared to recognize the existence of the Hudson and obliged to confess at last that it was fully equal to the Rhine. (*PL* 410)

This is a form of hackneyed humour that was practised on both sides of the Atlantic, as we know from James's review of correspondence of the tit-for-tat type between the American William Ellery Channing and the British Lucy Aikin: it was "amusing in the light of our present easy familiarity with the topic."⁶ "The international light", as James puts it in his preface to the novel, can easily turn into a comedy of manners, allowing James to capitalize on the public interest in the relationship between the two nations.

The opposition between America and Europe is ideal for the creation of humorous situations, especially if the contrast in manners is intensified by the complex nature of the relation between the sexes. For instance, when the American professional journalist Henrietta Stackpole advises marriage to the completely Europeanised Ralph Touchett, the situation is likely to go awry. To the injunction "It's every one's duty to get married" (*PL* 86), Ralph mischievously reacts by immediately deciding to act on it, seeing behind the generality an indirect proposal of marriage. Henrietta is flabbergasted and hurt that her suggestion could have been construed as having implied such a thing: "We take everything more naturally over there" (*PL* 87), she tells him. Two different ways of apprehending life are revealed by this comic failure in communication. The American directness in manners is opposed to the

⁶ The correspondence of W. E. Channing and L. Aikin, from 1826 to 1842 (1874). *Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, p. 216.

tortuous-minded European bent on making a dupe of the gullible. Here again Ralph Touchett chooses to play prankster in his verbal conduct. He deliberately subverts conventions by assuming that a statement like "everyone ought to marry" cannot simply be read for its truth-value, but must be acted upon urgently. Rather than oppose the totalitarian ideological mandate of the statement, he decides to react as a true Kantian would by obeying the moral voice of authority. The comic aspect is that the voice of authority backs up when Henrietta is faced with a specific case of her imperative.

This exchange is manifestly unfelicitous, but the infelicity produces laughter. Ralph Touchett has entangled himself with what H. G. Grice has called "an implicature." In "Logic and conversation," H. G. Grice defines an implicature as a computation done by the receiver of a message:

A general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature might be given as follows: He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or at least is willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*.⁷

Ralph has reasoned along the same lines; he has reckoned that if a young unmarried woman says to you "every one ought to marry," she necessarily means she wants to get married to you, a bachelor. The real difficulty for an unconventional implicature is to stand unnegated. An unconventional implicature can become null and void when submitted to the process of defeasibility. Henrietta Stackpole does just that by refusing to endorse what Ralph takes her to have implied. The working of humour lies in this zone identified by H. G. Grice's formula as: "he knows (and knows that I know that he knows)." This interdiscursive plane of language shifts its ground at sight and makes for irreducible equivocation between what one thinks one knows of the other and vice versa.

When Ralph acts upon Henrietta's statement, he turns a blind eye to what he knows of her. He exclusively privileges the sentence-meaning of what she says at the expense of the utterer's meaning. For his own entertainment, it seems, Ralph Touchett violates H. G. Grice's maxim of quantity. This maxim

⁷ H. G. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 31.

requires that a speaker should not say that for which he lacks adequate evidence or believes to be false (Grice 27). Ralph does not have clear evidence that Henrietta Stackpole is attracted to him, so he acts for his own fun; along with his father, he has a “humorous eye” (PL 19).

This theme of the specifically sexual relationship between the sexes is further exploited when James reverses gender roles. When Henrietta and Isabel are about to go to London for a visit, Ralph wishes to accompany them: “let me take advantage of her protection to go up to town as well. I may never have a chance to travel so safely” (PL 115). The conventional distinction between masculine protector and feminine protected undergoes a revolution, and both exchange places for the pleasure of the reader.

Ralph, of course, is the one consistently humorous character in the novel. Knowing that his death is in sight, he has developed a sense of humour as an antidote to demoralization and melancholy: “he had long since decided that the *crescendo* of mirth should be the flower of his declining days” (PL 83). This is a mood he shares with his father who is able on his deathbed to quip: “It won't matter if it does [tire me talking with you]. I shall have a long rest” (PL 157).

Ralph is a good stoic because he has learnt to live philosophically and accepts death as inevitable. He is a “good” stoic above all because he refuses to ignore his injuries by imposing on himself a lack of imagination. In his review of *The Works of Epictetus*, James found the great stoic moralist unphilosophic because his system “simplifies human troubles by ignoring half of them. It is a wilful blindness.”⁸ Ralph Touchett is the positive side of Epictetus because he refuses to ignore his coming demise and spices the remaining time with humorous comments, “laughing at all things, beginning with himself” (PL 61).

AUTHORIAL IRONY

James, however, is not out to make his characters into good philosophers with an argumentative mood combined with a sense of humour aimed at disarming the opponent. But he does so once when Ralph answers Henrietta's question, “do you consider it right to give up your country?” (PL 85) by saying: “Ah, one doesn't give up one's country any more than one gives up one's grandmother. They're both antecedent to choice—elements of one's

⁸ Review of April 1867. *Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, p. 9.

composition that are not to be eliminated" (PL 85). This is the elegant way to dispose of national prejudices and narrow-mindedness, by reducing nationality to the chances and vagaries of genealogy.

In this case, it seems, the question is put so that the sparkling wit of Ralph can find an occasion to be exercised. This is also the reason why Henrietta Stackpole is used by James as "the light *ficelle*, not the true agent" (Preface 13). Since Isabel Archer is deficient in humour, being of a puritan frame of mind, other characters come in to relieve the denseness of the heroine's tragic fate. For instance, Henrietta, who works for the American *Interviewer*, belies the title of her newspaper. Rather than interviewing people she meets in order to gain a view of English life, she comes to them with ready-made answers. This modern woman has clear-cut views on most subjects and is therefore turned into an object of ridicule by James.

It is doubtful whether James really had in mind the noble aim of correcting the foibles of the modern woman. He practises with Henrietta Stackpole a form of overkill of satire, something like an extended lampoon dissolving the object of his satire into the wealth of his own imagination. For instance, Henrietta apprehends people according to strictly defined categories. She perceives the American banker Daniel Touchett as "the American faithful still," while Ralph is for her "the alienated American" (PL 82). She categorizes people simply because of her professional need, since "there is a great demand just now for the alienated American" (PL 82). In keeping with her prejudices, she has what D. Van Ghent has summarized as "a button-sight."⁹ Henrietta succeeds in objectifying the gaze of the masculine other by "the remarkable fixedness of that organ" (PL 80), thereby taking the position of an autonomous subject. However, as the reflection of other objects on her pupil suggests, she fails to take into account the feelings and sense of privacy of others, particularly of her friend, Isabel, who complains she interferes with her life. Henrietta is the comic version of the dark manipulatress Madame Merle. While the latter's manoeuvres are tragically successful, Henrietta's activities as a match-maker leave much to be desired. When Isabel decides to return to Rome after Ralph's death, Henrietta comically urges patience to the frustrated Caspar Goodwood: "... she stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life" (PL 490).

⁹ D. Van Ghent, "On The Portrait of a Lady", Norton Critical Edition, *op. cit.*, p. 687.

In his preface, James explicitly links Henrietta Stackpole with his endeavour to be amusing:

They [Maria Gostrey and Henrietta Stackpole] then are cases, each, of the light *ficelle*, not the true agent; they may run beside the coach “for all they are worth,” they may cling to it till they are out of breath (as Miss Spackpole all so visibly does), but neither, all the while, so much as gets her foot on the step, neither ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road. Put it even that they are like the fishwives who helped to bring back to Paris from Versailles, on the most ominous day of the first half of French Revolution, the carriage of the royal family. (Preface 13)

Interestingly, even as James comments on what he sees as a form of creative deficiency, he manages to infuse his own observation with satire. Henrietta Stackpole is compared to a long-distance runner who cannot keep up with the rest of the characters and is lost along the way. The analogy turns her into a revolutionary fishwife with “a voice not rich but loud” (*PL* 80), as James says in the novel. James’s satirical thrust at this independent woman is particularly felt when he levels two sarcastic arrows at her. When Henrietta visits Versailles with Bantling, she expresses her contentment that the old regime has passed away, but earlier James ironically has her say: “I’m drifting to a big position—that of queen of American journalism” (*PL* 147). Unconsciously, she uses the word “queen,” which clashes with her revolutionary stance.

James’s second arrow is subtler and could go almost unnoticed, since critics have rightly focused on Gilbert Osmond’s aestheticism, turning Isabel Archer into a beautiful tool for his use and self-aggrandizement. But Henrietta has a characteristic of Osmondism, that of seeing the other in utilitarian terms. Henrietta finds Bantling agrees with her tastes because, as she says, “he isn’t a bad pun—or even a high flight of American humour” (*PL* 470). For Henrietta, Bantling is a good pun, perhaps because he is servile enough to “laugh immoderately at everything Henrietta said” (*PL* 126). This indiscriminate and unconditional laughter makes of him an admiring supporter of an active woman who finds him agreeable: “Henrietta, on the other hand, enjoyed the society of a gentleman who appeared somehow, in his way, made, by expensive, roundabout, almost ‘quaint’ processes, for her use” (*PL* 189). It is the expression “for her use” that suggests that in Henrietta lay the seeds of Osmondism.

As suggested earlier, the other object of ridicule whom James enjoys portraying is Lydia Touchett. She could be seen as “a humour” in Ben Jonson’s

sense of the term, since her eccentricity is almost enough to define her. Mrs. Touchett is a vanity fair unto herself, seeking social distinctions above everything else. Her model is Madame Merle, who is very competent as a social performer, while Lydia Touchett is the comic version of that competence. Mrs. Touchett apes social distinctions by retiring to her room on arriving at Gardencourt instead of directly meeting her son and husband whom she has not seen for months. Like Osmond, with whom she has many common points, she takes herself very seriously. She gives precedence to form and to the consecrated over simplicity and affection. In the private sphere, where emotions are not expected to be stilted, she reintroduces distance and formality by having her son meet her in her room at a quarter to eight. She is a burlesque version of the great lady surrounded by a ceremonial like a queen. With her behaviour that veers at sharp angles, she is an amusing cross-breed between Lewis Carroll's queen of hearts and a dowdy and flustered queen Victoria: "the edges of her conducts were so very clear-cut [...] it sometimes had a knife-like edge" (*PL* 30).

Mrs. Touchett is also an out-and-out egotist who has adopted a marital solution which she is the only one to appreciate. She lives in Florence most of the year and spends a month with her husband in England: "this arrangement greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite. It struck her husband in the same light, in a foggy square in London, where it was at times the most definite fact he discerned" (*PL* 31). By making literal the circumstances of Daniel Touchett's confusion at his wife's determination and his realization of its inevitability, James succeeds in comically deflating the potentially sentimental way of portraying an abandoned disabled husband. The matrimonial knot can stylistically be tied when James has Ralph comment: "There's no more usual basis for matrimony than a mutual misunderstanding" (*PL* 129). This epigrammatic wit calls to mind Oscar Wilde, whom James satirizes through the portrayal of the aesthete Osmond.

Osmond's portrait is so consistently dark that it belongs to the serious side of the novel. It can only be enjoyed humorously in the very excess of this seriousness that turns Osmond into a caricatural version of the abominable male. The heroine's portrait, on the other hand, is more complex in this regard. For instance, in the famous Chapter XLVII which James called "the best thing in the book" (Preface 15), his writerly style makes the presentation of this character very subtle.

In this famous chapter, Isabel Osmond practises “the vigil of searching criticism” (*PL* 14). She conducts a self-analysis to identify the causes of her marriage. Three years after her momentous decision to marry Osmond she takes stock of her unenviable situation: “Ah, she had been immensely under the charm!” (*PL* 357). The reader is invited to embed himself in an interior monologue. But James, in the very process of immersing his reader in another consciousness, manages to produce another discourse. For instance, when the heroine thinks,

What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it [her inherited wealth] over to the man with the best taste in the world? Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond [...] But to marry Gilbert Osmond and bring such a portion—in that there would be delicacy as well. There would be less for him—that was true; but that was his affair, and if he loved her he wouldn't object to her being rich. Had he not the courage to say he was glad she was rich? (*PL* 358)

In the reader's participation in the heroine's thoughts, which normally encourage sympathy for her ordeal, one can also read “the flashes of humour” James means. Alongside the heroine's anguished regrets, James produces an ironical subtext to be retrieved. By hesitating to endow a hospital or to marry a man with the best taste in the world, Isabel unwittingly reveals the superficiality of her dilemma, which incidentally shows that the basis of her decisions is worldly. Associating in the same breath generosity to the dispossessed and marriage to an impoverished but cultured man amounts to revealing that Isabel wanted a worldly acknowledgment of her financial power. There is also a sweeping authorial irony in the statement: “there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond.” When one conjures up Osmond's paranoiac and sadistic tendencies, the mention of a “hospital” and a “charitable institution” creates an appropriate “droll pathos,” James would say.¹⁰ Here, it seems, the reader cannot help but feel pity for the innocent victim, yet at the same time, as Freud has it, the reader performs “an economy in expenditure upon feeling.”¹¹ This pitiful

¹⁰ This expression is used to qualify a summary of Frédéric Moreau's life in Flaubert's *Education sentimentale*: “il connut alors la mélancolie des paquebots,” *Literary Criticism*, p. 340.

¹¹ *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 302.

emotion is then converted into a rather sadistic discharge of laughter, which corresponds to a negation of empathy with the sufferer.

The last sentence of the quotation ("Had he not the courage to say he was glad she was rich?") also enables the reader to appreciate the limitations of the heroine's self-analysis. If she has correctly identified that the money she inherited has propelled her into a gilded cage, she is still unwilling, at this moment, to see Osmond and, by implication, her self-image in uncompromising terms. Isabel presents him as having had the courage of marrying her in spite of her wealth. She completely alters the reality of Osmond's desire, turning him into a dedicated man, willing to deny himself for the love of her. Of Edmond Schérer, James said: "A literary critic who does not enjoy Thackeray has certainly a limp in his gait."¹² Because of his superfine shifts in meaning, James certainly has no limp in his gait.

Jacques SOHIER
Université d'Angers (France)



¹² Review of Schérer's *Etudes Critiques de Littérature* (1876), L. Edel and M. Wilson ed., *Henry James: Literary Criticism* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 807.