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Money in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady

According to R. P. Blackmur, in Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, money is at the centre of the relations between the heroine, Isabel Archer, and the other characters:

Isabel is given a chance to do what she can with her life, thanks to her uncle's surprising bequest of some seventy thousand pounds . . . the whole novel shows people tamper with one another because of motives that pass like money between them. (Blackmur 193)

In this novel, Henry James is not only interested in people of private means who lead a life of leisure, but in their feelings, their worries, their conspiracies, their victories and above all their defeats. He discards the world of businessmen, lawyers, and even that of bankers. He merely mentions that the two Touchetts used to work in a bank without going into details as to that aspect of their lives. He tells us they have been successful in their career as clear evidence of the acuteness of their minds. He rejects the servants in the background: only one maid is briefly alluded to. The poor do not appear at all in the novel. Charity is more a psychological matter between spouses than a Christian duty to be accomplished in favour of the poor. According to Philip Sicker: "Paradoxically, this desire for continual self-development carries with it a need for almost self-induced blindness to particular realities in the outside world" (Sicker 55).

Although money becomes so important in her later life, Isabel does not seem to give it much credit at first: "I am not stupid; but I don't know any thing about money" (35), she says to her aunt Lydia at Albany on their first meeting. Lydia, a much more practical mind, is very surprised by this education for the daughter of a billionaire; but it is quite consistent with the way Henry James's father brought up his own children.

He had squandered a substantial fortune, he had been deplorably convivial, he was known to have gambled freely. . . . They had no regular education and no permanent home: they had been at once spoiled and neglected (40).

Veeder reminded us that Henry James offered “a fairy tale solution” (Veeder 742) to his heroine, quite different from his own financial anxieties in his early adult life. Lydia, happy to see such innocence in her niece, takes her back with her to England. As Veeder put it, “Isabel has achieved material independence without having to grub for it in business” (742). Isabel gladly accepts this arrangement, without apparently noticing that she is living at her aunt’s expense; she never seems to be anxious about earning her living, though the conditions of life of her two sisters might have induced such thinking. She appears to believe that she belongs to another world, that everything good coming to her is rightly due.

Spontanées et audacieuses, les jeunes filles américaines de James parlent, ont des idées sur tout, voyagent, commentent les différences entre l'Amérique et l'Europe, visitent les galeries de peinture et tôt ou tard s'installent. . . . Elles rêvaient de posséder une valeur, une essence idéale, et elles découvrent qu'elles ont une valeur, certes, mais marchande. (Durand-Bogaert 67)

1- MONEY AND ACTION

William Veeder also reminds us that James’s world was a world of pleasure, of leisure, of arts, inhabited more by women than by men who used to go to the town centre to do business.

Europe seemed to offer a better refuge to artists and to dilettantes than an America solely obsessed by economic achievements. James enjoyed England and Italy where he could meet the people that he referred to in his books. He met in the old continent some of his fellow countrymen, lost in a world which no longer needs them, going from one old palazzo to another ruined palace, visiting museums, admiring old paintings, trying to cling to the past of a Europe they do not understand and that they have not helped to develop. They forget that the artists, politicians, and merchants who created or wanted the works of art they

contemplate were the producing forces of their times. Consequently, the characters of the novel become shadows or mere appearances, like Madame Merle who identifies with the dresses she needs to be allowed in the mansions she visits regularly, or like Edward Rosier, another uprooted American, who takes pride in the lace and the bibelots he owns. Rosier acknowledges his own inability to have a job as a businessman or as a lawyer in America. He is a “useless” (349) dandy just as Osmond is, who claims he never worked an hour in his life.

While Rosier and Osmond share the same indolent vision of life, Pansy, who idealises her father and obeys him with utmost servility, falls in love with a man who pretends to do nothing more in life than contemplate antiques and who moreover shows her kindness and respect.

All those characters betray their native civilisation by refusing to contribute to the development of their own country. However, Henry James proved that one can love art and create a masterpiece such as *The Portrait of a Lady*. James did not reject the Puritan value of hard work. Shocked by such behaviour, so contrary to what America and Europe stand for, the writer allowed Daniel Touchett to put some blame on them:

When I was twenty years old . . . I was working tooth and nail. You wouldn't be bored if you had something to do; but all you young men are too idle. You think too much of pleasure. You're too indolent, and too rich (22).

Daniel Touchett is very worried by his nonchalant son; he does not understand him. He has offered him the best education in the most famous American and British universities but all he has in return is a deeply depressed son who uses his own illness to call on the pity of everybody who comes within his reach. At first, Lord Warburton is presented as an indolent young man who shares this lazy behaviour and encourages it. Throughout the novel, one wonders about this strange association because one discovers that this extremely rich British lord is actually quite active in politics and even holds a ministerial position in the

government. Although he truly likes his friend, Ralph offers him some kind of amusement as well, showing him what he could have become if he had betrayed his own true self. Is he not, as Ralph does with Isabel, playing a game of voyeurism with his friend to see how far his indolence will carry him? The pleasure they experience watching others following a plot they have designed for them may be one of their common points; in that case, Lord Warburton, who pays a visit to his friend from time to time, is a much better puppeteer than Ralph, whose plot sadly fails.

Remembering the death of his own very dear cousin Minny Temple, Henry James made Ralph die of tuberculosis, the plague so common at the turn of the century. But the disease is used much more as a psychological device in the novel than as a study in medicine. It helps the reader to understand the tyranny Ralph exerts on everybody and the perverse attraction he may have for some fortune hunters, such as Madame Merle who might have expected fast relief from a consumptive husband. Daniel Touchett is saying just as much to his son when they discuss the famous will. The father would have preferred to see Ralph married to Isabel who would then have inherited most of their wealth from both of them in due time. Ralph's warped mind wishes for another game and surprises his father once more.

Both Mr and Mrs Touchett have remained true to the American spirit of the Frontier, believing in business success. In Boston, Lydia had immediately seen the possibility for Isabel to live on her own income from new shops to be built and rented; but Isabel does not show any pioneering spirit. On the contrary, Lydia manages her own affairs and goes from one continent to the other to talk with bankers and lawyers on her behalf.

Henrietta Stackpole belongs to the same world: she is bursting with energy, she works as a travelling reporter for a famous American newspaper and pays for the education of three of her nephews since her sister is sick. She is an independent-minded woman who does not pay attention to what people might say of her behaviour and she tries to be true to her own moral values. As she is the epitome of the modern woman, she is made fun of by the major male characters, especially

Ralph. One has to remember that those men are not role-models but *fin de race* figures, and that the writer led a very different life from them, even though he enjoyed their company and great culture... In fact Henrietta does her duty; she even takes care of the dying Ralph despite what she thought of him earlier on.

Isabel, on the contrary, refuses to become another Henrietta, even when she has enough money to follow her whims. It is quite fitting that she meets Ralph, Warburton, then Rosier and finally Osmond: those men belong to a still world, that does not exist really. She was not made to fend for herself in America, nor in Europe for that matter, and her brother-in-law, in his funny way, says that Isabel is “written in a foreign tongue. . . . I can’t make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian or a Portuguese” (38). He feels she belongs to another universe, lost in day dreams of past glory.

Since she does not want to act, she is dealt with by plotters who can buy her time and who write a special play for her. Ralph understands immediately that his mother has something in mind when she suggests that Isabel come with her: “What do you mean to do with her” (46), he asks. Here is one of the keys of the novel; each character tries to use the others for his or her own purpose.

Mrs Toutchett, for instance, wants Isabel to be part of her little circle and amuse her last years, offering her the position of lady’s companion:

If you want to know, I thought she would do me credit. I like to be well thought of, and for a woman of my age there’s no greater convenience, in some ways, than an attractive niece. (47)

Mrs Toutchett “lends” her niece to her dying husband to entertain his last days. Both enjoy the conversation of that know-it-all young lady who still has to discover the world; but she is pretty and willing to play the part of the companion to the family members. Her coming to England

seems to be a perfect arrangement for everybody. Mr Toutchett warns Warburton not to fall in love with his niece; in fact he has another plan for her: he wishes her to become his sick son's nurse... But Ralph, with his funny ideas, ruins this project. Mr Toutchett hoped that Isabel would draw Ralph from his day dreaming stance. But he has no longer the strength to oppose his son's ideas. Ralph wants Isabel to be richly endowed so as to afford to follow her own whims, and above all not to be compelled to marry any rich man who might choose to propose to her. To observe the whereabouts of his cousin would bring him enough pleasure to carry him through the dreary years to come:

It even suggested there might be a compensation for the intolerable ennui of surviving his genial sire. . . . "I had never been more blue, more bored, than for a week before she came. . . . Suddenly I receive a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall." (63)

Ralph's extraordinary scornful attitude towards a next of kin — who is compared to a painting to be admired on a wall — is so shocking that it has to be punished, and, logically, the sophisticated plan of that perverted mind does not succeed. Ralph's mind is so twisted that he wants to buy another human being's future and make her act for his own good, but at the same time, he is sane enough to know that it is morally wrong; so he reveals his plan only to the person who is too weak to fight against it and whose approval is absolutely necessary: his father. Nobody really understands Ralph's perversity: as he obtains that a fortune be given to Isabel, he is considered a gentle and generous cousin who might have fallen in love with his cousin and prefers to see her rich and happy even without him. Actually, he wants nothing less than to witness the various proposals made to Isabel and to see her reject many more than merely three lovers. He enjoys watching while Warburton, very much in love, suffers from the immediate refusal of Isabel. So that each of the two friends is observing the other in his own torments.

Such a shrewd ploy will be thwarted by the coming of Madame Merle, excited at the news that the now rich Isabel could marry her own lover, Osmond, and grant a dowry to their illegitimate daughter, Pansy.

In fact, Henry James wrote a comedy of unhappiness, in *The Portrait of a Lady*. It is not a realistic novel based on the survival of characters who are down and out and will never get the chance to move up the social ladder, as Thomas Hardy did in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude's son commits suicide because his parents are so poor that he hopes his death will alleviate their burden. Henry James deals with much higher and gentler circles, in which money is never in want, even if wealth sometimes is. The tragic strain in his characters lies in them: society has bestowed on them a good position, allowing them to enjoy themselves, do useful things and lead a rewarding life. Nevertheless, they are too engrossed in their games of power.

2- MARRIAGE

The very idea of Isabel's possible marriage is rejected by Mrs Touchett: "Marrying her? I should be sorry to play her such a trick!" (49) The Touchetts are what might be called a dysfunctional family, where the "father, as he had often said . . . was the more motherly" and the "mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even to the slang of the day gubernatorial" (43). So the independent-minded lady suggests that Isabel take her friend Henrietta as her lady's companion; but Isabel needs to be advised, taken care of. She cannot live alone, away from a ruling hand. Madame Merle appears just when she needs to be put carefully in the "right" direction; without her noticing it, Isabel is made to do exactly what others have decided for her. All her friends are afraid of the increasing influence of the devious Madame Merle and of the arrival of a new character who might disrupt the balance of the little circle: Osmond; Henrietta, as a true friend, warns her in vain.

Mr Touchett anticipates the coming of the fortune hunters but Ralph, gambling on the future of his precious cousin, only considers it as a risk for his own mischievous plan; he shows no alarm for the inexperienced girl; she is expendable. "That's a risk, and it has entered into my

calculation. I think it's appreciable, but I think it's small, and I'm prepared to take it" (162). If the reader had thought him generous, he has to face the grim reality of the true feelings of that so delicate and learned man.

Madame Merle easily manages to draw the interest of the arch dilettante, Osmond, who spends his days day-dreaming among his antiques. Since he has no money, he agrees to the plot and seduces Isabel with his dark mansion and the mystery he surrounds himself with. He looks so different from the people she has met so far and so close to her heart, that she cannot resist his strange appeal. Isabel becomes a plaything in Madame Merle's and her former lover's hands. According to Leon Edel, Henry James used some traits of his benevolent friend Francis Boott, who loved antiques and collected them, to build the character of Osmond which he blackened considerably. Poor, idle and extremely arrogant, he contents himself with seducing women and obtaining from them the money necessary to his way of life. Madame Merle, on various occasions, found money for him to use, as she does with Isabel. He claims he has never worked and imagines that women, including his own daughter, are meant to serve his purpose of grandeur. Isabel is quite ready to answer this kind of man who fascinates and terrifies her altogether because she needs a languid but authoritarian master.

She proves that she is a true member of the Touchett family when she identifies love with money put in the bank: "there was terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out" (263). Both characters intermingle money, love, fascination and conflicts of power, each one trying to get more satisfaction than giving to the other. This endless fight creates frustrations and disappointment that they cannot cope with.

Their marriage has to be seen in this light of greatly complex personalities who have so many complementary and opposed needs that their union had to be both obvious and unhappy. Osmond saw Isabel, first of all, as his great opportunity to become rich and to lead forever his idle life. Neither had anticipated the psychological consequences of such an

alliance beginning with the immediate control of Isabel's mind. The first test comes when he orders her to visit his little daughter in Florence. She meets Pansy who wastes no time in conveying to her the message that she needs a dowry to marry: "it costs so much to marry" (268). So, Isabel is warned of every psychological danger and plot quite in advance; however, she does not recoil from that situation, because she knows she has the inner strength to meet the challenge.

Again, Isabel does not fulfil the hopes set on her by the other great puppeteer, Madame Merle: Pansy does not receive the dowry that her mother wished so much for her to obtain. Not aware of their psychological needs and failures, everybody in the novel has the exhilarating feeling of playing God with the others, though most plots are utterly defeated because of those deep and hidden forces that truly govern the characters of Isabel and Osmond.

By giving her a fortune, the author apparently allowed her to choose her own future and that of others. Since Osmond fascinates her she decides to buy herself a husband: "At the bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" (358). She wants him to become "her property" (358). That he has nothing and is nothing is a favourable circumstance in her eyes. Yet, again this plot does not meet with complete success: she did buy a husband but she bought herself a prison as well.

The Palazzo Roccanera might have come from gothic novels, with its dark corridors, dismal rooms, heavy gates and silent, shadowy servants who never appear to be made of flesh and blood; even the salons full of music and dancing are transformed into quiet battlefields for the major characters: Isabel, her lovers, Osmond, the desperate Pansy, and the love-stricken Rosier. All that is joyful and happy is rejected in the background as if it were unreal, just because of Osmond's tyranny: "He

was her appointed and inscribed master; she gazed at moments with a sort of incredulous blankness at this fact" (386).

But Osmond suffers from having sold himself and from having been manipulated by two women, Isabel and Serena; therefore, he tries to reassert his supremacy on both of them whenever he can. Before long he has terrorised his wife so much that she only tries to avoid conflicts: "Are you trying to quarrel with me? No, I'm trying to live at peace" (351) she says philosophically. At the end he even discards his former mistress, Serena, who has become useless in his eyes; he blames her for everything that turned sour in this carefully managed plot.

Osmond, who has been tricked, in a way, into his own marriage, wants to play God with the only person he can order about: Pansy. He rejects the proposal made by Rosier. As idle dandies, both men are too much alike and they understand each other too well; as to poor Rosier, he is too straightforward and kind: he is no match for Osmond who hopes for a better deal when he marries Pansy. Love is once more assessed in terms of money: "I've sold all my bibelots. . . . I have the money instead — fifty thousand dollars. Will Mr Osmond think me rich enough now?" (438). Much in love as he is, Rosier would gladly have accepted a dowry: "I esteem a dot very much. I can do without it, but I esteem it" (305) he says; however, he quite readily surrenders to the greedy father and proposes to marry Pansy without any dowry. Every marriage in the novel gives way to sordid discussions about money, love being a commodity necessary to hide that fact, acknowledged by everyone interested in the matter. Rosier is not rich enough for Osmond to accept his suit. He wants to marry his daughter to a very rich man, and he deludes himself into thinking that Warburton is sincerely in love with Pansy. But when Warburton comes to see Isabel, he is still in love with her, which Osmond perceives immediately, though he still believes he can marry Pansy to him: "My daughter has only to sit perfectly quiet to become Lady Warburton" (352). Osmond recognises he has made a fool of himself, so he becomes furious and punishes Pansy for the failure of his grandiose ambition.

Pansy is sent back to the convent, being of no more interest to him. Isabel, who had never offered to give Pansy any money, pretends to act as a dutiful wife and encourages Pansy to obey her father since she has no fortune — “Your having so little is a reason for looking for more” (392) — though she knows the situation is hopeless.

3- INHERITANCE

William James, the novelist's grandfather, was an Ulsterman and a Presbyterian who emigrated from Ireland in 1789; he began by selling tobacco in a store, became a successful entrepreneur and banker, and died in 1832, leaving an estate (a most sizeable one for that time) of three million dollars... Money permitted leisure, thought, travel, and experiment, permitted perhaps above all, the creative self-indulgence of words: written and spoken... William James's money — like the “wind” that Toutchett's legacy was deigned to put in Isabel Archer's “sails” in *The Portrait of a Lady* — allowed Henry James senior to become a philosopher, something of an intellectual dilettante, and a free-ranging, uncommitted critic of the human scene. The same money, distinctly reduced in sum by then and passed on during his lifetime and after his death to his son, helped make possible the novelist's lifelong activities as a “restless analyst” of the human predicament of action as against contemplation. (Graham 2-3)

Henry James uses this situation in his novel. Despite the awful loss Isabel may have felt at the death of her father — coming shortly after her mother's death —, everything went for the best financially speaking. Lydia opened to her the door of Gardencourt which allowed her to meet all her suitors. Then her uncle left her a fortune. But the feeling of uneasiness felt by the author about his money, earned by the hard work of others, reappears in *The Portrait of a Lady*; James had given his own share to his sister Alice thinking his duty was to take care of her. There is a price to pay for a fortune which is not deserved: that of unhappiness. Lydia, Mr Toutchett, and Henrietta escape from that fate because they have made their lives worthy of their positions. But pseudo-aristocratic languor and little games of power are no substitutes for a fulfilling life; depression comes along extremely fast: “I can't escape unhappiness” (119), says Isabel aware of her fate.

The novel begins and ends with a death. If the role of women in Osmond's life is to bring him money, the role of men in Isabel's is to provide for her thanks to their wills. The writing of a will is an exercise of absolute power over the future of others and Henry James gave us many details concerning Mr Toutchett's and his son's will.

Mr Toutchett knows the value of money and he puts in the writing of his will his last strength. It is not a whimsical game for him as is the case for Ralph: "What shall you do if I don't provide for you? You won't have anything to do with the bank, and you won't have me to take care of you. You say you've so many interests; but I can't make them out" (159). Mr Toutchett is at a loss with his son who, like Isabel, seems to believe everything must be done by others to satisfy his own wishes. Much to the despair of his father, whom he considers inferior to him because he did not go to university, he lives an extravagant life: he spends his time between England and Italy while he could take some real interest in a job or in art. Like Isabel, he refuses to accept that somebody has to pay for all that extravaganza; everything is supposed to come his way. When his father hopes that he will manage their estate properly and settle down with a wife, Ralph rejects his duties, hinting again at his sickness, though nobody is fooled by this childish ploy.

Isabel does not receive another share of the family's fortune, much to the apparent surprise of her aunt, because she has not followed the plot devised by Ralph, who somewhat resents this: "Apparently he thought you didn't like him, for he hasn't left you a penny" (482). This acrimonious sentence reveals how displeased her aunt is at Isabel's failure to comply with the Toutchetts' wishes.

Perhaps Isabel feels a twinge of regret when she realises that Ralph actually bequeathed his library to Henrietta: "Besides, she had never been less interested in literature than today, as she found when she occasionally took down from the shelf one of the rare and valuable volumes of which Mrs Toutchett had spoken" (482). One may consider that, even though she pretends that the books no longer hold any attraction to her, she mentions this fact at length only because she is hurt.

Henry James, who had been deeply shocked by the great many deaths in his family, wrote in *A Small Boy and Others*: “Our father’s family was to offer such a chronicle of early deaths, arrested careers, broken promises, orphaned children [that] so few of those that brushed by my childhood had been other than a tinkling that suddenly stopped” (quoted in Veeder 730). He puts Isabel in the same type of atmosphere where everybody who is supposed to be part of the scenery for many years just fades away; so he gives Isabel a survivor’s mentality. Death has to be tamed and to become useful to have a bearable and understandable purpose. But that strange link with death turns Isabel into a morbid character.

Even at Albany, Isabel rejoices at the thought of visiting museums and old houses: “I like places in which things have happened — even if they’re sad things. A great many people have died there; the place has been full of life” (35). She goes to places where other people have passed away; it is a way for her to prove to herself that she is alive and well. The quiet life she leads in Italy, where she seems barely alive compared to all the others, provides another twist to her special seduction and her suitors rush back to her. Her beauty develops when the idea of death surrounds her. She enjoys that twilight zone and she plays with that paradoxical feeling: “She had moments indeed in her journey from Rome which were almost as good as being dead” (456). Later, she has to rush to Ralph who is dying; it is her only forceful act against her domineering husband.

But Henry James warns the reader through Ralph that morbidity is wrong; life and love are what one should look for, despite the fascination death may elicit: “You’ve been like an angel beside my bed. You know they talk about the angel of death... Dear Isabel, life is better; for in life there’s love. Death is good — but there’s no love” (477). Both the film directed by Jane Campion and the novel insist on the dark drapes, the long corridors, the ruins of the Coliseum, the beds where Ralph and Osmond seem to spend their lives. But one can live another way.

Money gives the power to choose one's fate: that is Countess Gemini's message to Isabel when she still hesitates between a complete surrender to passivity and life: "Nothing's impossible for you... Why else are you rich?" (448) The Countess would have greatly appreciated the fortune that was given to her sister-in-law by chance. When she decides to marry Osmond, Isabel shows she understands quite well what that freedom is, but later she is satisfied with a passive role, accepting all the humiliations and limitations to her freedom imposed by Osmond. She lets him play the tyrant in her home while her aunt and Henrietta show her that a wife can be more than a mere object in the hands of a despotic husband. Earlier, her friends warned her of the trap she was setting for herself, but in vain:

The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You're not enough in contact with reality — with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you... Your newly-acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people who will be interested in keeping them up (188).

Such a warning, added to Ralph's last exhortation, may trigger off in Isabel's mind the will to change completely and to follow the advice of Countess Gemini. Will the curse which hangs over the fortune she has inherited be dispelled? Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is an open-ended narrative: everything is still possible, though the return to Osmond might allow us to think that Isabel will forever pay the price of the money she had no real right to receive. When she accepted her legacy she became demure and silent, as if she understood what her fate would be, discarding the Titian image she offered to the world during the first days at Gardencourt. She gave then another image of herself, quite in line with her coming future: she "has looked as solemn these days as a Cimabue Madonna" (182), says the astonished Mrs Touchett.

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