

## Dreams and Traps in Growing Up—an analysis of the “development” motif and the female image in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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**Abstract:** *The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the representative work of American writer Henry James. This thesis deals with the growth of Isabel and the blow and misfortune she has suffered in her pursuit of an independent life by analyzing the images of the three women who have influenced Isabel in this literary work. The end of Isabel’s return to her family is her dedication to an independent life. Compared with other women, it also shows her noble spirit of kindness and dedication, and represents the image of the new female created by the author.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the representative works of American writers. The work focuses on the experience of Isabel, who lost her parents and lived alone in the old house left by Albany’s grandmother in the United States, after her aunt Mrs. Touchett took her to the Gardencourt, thus depicting the beauty and misfortune of her growing up. It shows the appreciation and attachment of Americans living in Europe to the culture and art of the Old World, and teases and criticizes Britain, a class society with aristocrats and queens. Thus showing the faces of Americans living in Europe. In this work, through the story of the main character Isabel, the author exposes and criticizes the ugliness of human nature centered on money in that era, and also shows women’s beautiful dream of pursuing independence and freedom.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel of initiation. Isabel’s growth is closely related to the images of several women she met in her life. This paper intends to analyze their influence on Isabel’s growth from the three women in this work: Mrs. Touchett, Mrs. Mayer and Isabel. And how the women reflected in *The Portrait of a Lady* should move towards the road of independence.

### 1. Bildungsroman and Its Models

In the western literary theory, the novel of initiation, also known as Bildungsroman, in which growth is an important motif of the novel, has a long history. The earliest novel of initiation is German writer Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. This work tells the story of a middle-class-born young Werther who came to a remote mountain village while dealing with his mother’s legacy. When he met the local beautiful young girl Lotte, he fell in love with her, but failed to get married for various reasons. Finally, Werther committed suicide after experiencing a series of setbacks in society. Immediately after its publication, the novel caused a great sensation, in which the personal emotion and enterprising spirit also formed the characteristics of the rapid advance movement at that time. Genius, freedom, personality liberation and returning to nature have become some slogans and goals that everyone yearns for. With the continuous development of literature, the novel of initiation is in the ascendant, from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by the American writer Mark Twain to *The Catcher in the Rye* by Jerome Salinger, the novel of initiation has become prosperous in American literature, which also makes it more distinctive.

Most of the novels of initiation follow such a pattern: the protagonist is tired of the current life, runs away (escapes), goes through a series of setbacks and sufferings, meets an experienced life mentor, and returns (bravely assumes his own responsibility). The return and responsibility of the protagonist marks the protagonist’s maturity and realizes the growth and transformation in life.

Different from other initiation stories, *The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel of initiation with women as the main body. In this novel, Isabel’s growth begins with her desire and hope for future life. She is exploring her own life, and for her, the future life is a dark secret garden, a fate she can’t get rid of, and her courage to reject Lord Warburton, a diamond bachelor with money, status, character and

handsome appearance. Isabel's choice of husband is a satire on her good hope, and her pursuit of independence and freedom has come to naught in her life bound by her husband, but in spite of this, Isabel still returned to her family when she had a better choice to get rid of all these misfortunes, and her choice drew a perfect end to her growth, because this choice is her nature. Therefore, *The Portrait of a Lady* is a praise for the growth of women.

Isabel's pure, beautiful and noble image is shown in comparison with several other female images in this article. At the same time, several other female images also suggest different endings in the growth of women.

## **2. Mrs. Touchett—a Guide to a New Life**

Mrs. Touchett was an important turning point in Isabel's growth. Because it was with her that Isabel said goodbye to her original life and started her journey to Europe, so in a sense she was the guide to Isabel's new life.

Mrs. Touchett is a typical female image who pursues independence and freedom and achieves independence and freedom. She has a unique American arrogance, stubbornness and willfulness, and does not care about the feelings of others. She is experienced, picky to others without losing kindness. She blamed Isabel's father for his mistakes in educating his children, which worsened the relationship. But after Isabel's father died, she inquired about the living conditions of Isabel's sisters, though they had been out of touch for years. But she knew their sisters like the back of her hand; she saw Isabel reading alone in her old house and decided to take her to Europe. She complained about the bad waiters in the hotel and insisted on her etiquette in social interaction, but she did not force Isabel to marry an English aristocrat; she did not interfere in Isabel's personal life, just as she did not interfere in the personal lives of her son and husband.

She was such a woman: eccentric, interesting, well-informed, indifferent to European court anecdotes, turning a blind eye to dignitaries, and talking about these bigwigs as if there were no one there. First of all, the reason why Mrs. Touchett is able to act in this way is that she is an American woman, a person who came to the "Old World" from the "New World", with a unique independent American spirit and a sense of superiority. This feeling was also reflected in Isabel, who had just arrived in England, as she asked Lord Warburton if he was willing to give up his knighthood, and as the American friend Henrietta showed: there should be no servants to take care of his life.

The reason why Mrs. Touchett can move freely is that she is financially independent. Although her husband is a high-ranking banker in the financial world, Mrs. Touchett takes care of her own investments in the United States, and her investments have nothing to do with her husband. She is a very economic-minded woman who owns her own property in Florence and only goes to the Gardens and Villa in England to live with her husband for a while every year. It can be seen that it is her independent financial situation that determines that she is a woman who can enjoy spiritual independence.

There is another connection between Mrs. Touchett and Isabel: maybe Mrs. Touchett is what the future Isabel is going to be. After all, Isabel will not overcome the estrangement after seeing through the true face of her husband Osmond, but for various reasons, it is impossible for them to get rid of the shackles of marriage, so Isabel may spend the rest of her life like Lady Touchett. For Mr. Touchett had thought that Isabel had the shadow of the young Lady Touchett. She reminded him of his wife when she was a teenager. She was fresh, naturally understood and spoke quickly, and there were many similar characteristics between them.

## **3. Madame Merle—a Mentor and Nightmare on the Way to Growing Up**

Madame Merle was Isabel's mentor and friend on the way she grew up, as well as the poisonous snakes and nightmares she met. Compared with Mrs. Touchett's mediocre appearance, Mrs. Merle's decency and elegance are more attractive. She pays attention to detail, decoration and likes to show her good artistic taste, and it is by such ingenuity and means that Isabel worships Mrs. Merle. Isabel was completely attracted to her when she met when she played the piano, and they became friends.

Mrs. Merle told her about the regret of her youth, introduced her to European art, and introduced her to her friends and artists. In short, her words and thoughts have a great influence on Isabel.

Isabel's mother died at an early age, and Mrs. Touchett was her aunt, but her stubborn behavior and indifference to others made her by no means a close friend and a mentor to consult and learn on Isabel's way of growing up. In unfamiliar circumstances, the vacancy was replaced by Mrs. Mayer. In fact, Mrs. Merle secretly manipulated Isabel's life, just like a parent.

When Mrs. Mayer showed Isabel around Europe, she also fell into a trap. The trap had begun when Mrs. Merle learned privately that Isabel had inherited Mr. Touchett's estate of seventy thousand pounds. That is, let his secret lover Osmond marry Issa herself in order to realize the possession of this wealth.

Like Mrs. Touchett, Mrs. Mayer is an American living in Europe. Her father was a naval officer, but unlike Mrs. Touchett, Mrs. Lamore had an embarrassing financial situation: she had to secretly take advantage of herself by packing herself in and out of dignitaries' mansions. When she heard that Mr. Touchett had left Isabel a legacy of seventy thousand pounds, her sentence "she is so clever" undoubtedly exposed her disappointment. She planned for Osmond and persuaded him to pursue her, in order to make the seventy thousand pounds in her pocket, so how beautiful she had been in Isabel's eyes, how much harm she would do to her in the end.

Mrs. Mayer represents the hypocritical, cunning, evil image of Europeanized Americans of the "Old World". In their eyes, aristocrats are disgraceful; but in their hearts, it is their dream to become aristocrats and live like aristocrats, and they are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve this goal. When Osmond knew that his daughter's dream of dating Lord Warburton was shattered, his anger at Isabel undoubtedly exposed his nature, and Mrs. Merle was always his accomplice. This is a way and means for her to realize her ambition. She can only survive by relying on others to be their accomplices.

Mrs. Mayer is as clever as Isabel, a combination of beauty and intelligence, and the difference between them is that Isabel adheres to the quality of kindness and does not use her clever mind to plan her own self-interest. On the other hand, Mrs. Mayer's selfishness, ruthlessness, hypocrisy and cunning are the means for women to seize certain economic interests and status for themselves.

#### **4. Isabel—a new female in Pursuit of Independence and Freedom**

All the initiation stories revolve around the theme that the protagonist is tired of the old living environment and explores a new life. In their exploration of a new life, they will encounter constant failures and sufferings, and only through these can people become mature and become their true selves. The growth of Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* coincides with this model.

Isabel is a new female image in pursuit of independence and freedom in the nineteen seventies and eighties. It is her dream to explore life. She is smart, beautiful, innocent, kind-hearted, dares to pursue the life she desires, and it is very important that she never loses her good nature no matter what she encounters on the road of growing up. She married Osmond partly out of admiration and love for art and partly out of pity for a fallen artist. Her love for Pansy, her stepdaughter, was great, and although she was only five years older than her, she put herself in her shoes and encouraged her to pursue her love bravely. Although she already knew that Pansy was the illegitimate daughter of Osmond and Mrs. Merle, she finally returned to the family and continued to bear the responsibilities of her mother, rather than running away from that indifferent home to pursue her own happiness. Because of the loss of her, Pansy lost a safe haven, that is, to go to her economic status and a rich dowry. After all, in Britain at that time, women's dowry was the way for them to gain economic status and the guarantee for their happy marriage life. However, Isabel's sacrifice is based on her abandonment of the independence and freedom she pursues, and she will face the difficulties in her future life with greater courage. From this point of view, Isabel's return is even more commendable. She represents the lofty quality of indomitable, brave and kind-hearted women, which only appears in the new females who dare to pursue independence and freedom.

## 5. Conclusion

Isabel was undoubtedly lucky. With the help of her aunt, she could start a new life and lead an independent life with the help of the 70,000 pounds bequeathed to her by her uncle Mr. Touchett. However, in the process of moving towards independence, she made a self-choice willfully. Although this choice was later realized to be a mistake, Isabel always retained her own innocence and kindness. She was not as freewheeling as Mrs. Touchett, unwilling to be kind to others, nor a hypocrite like Mrs. Merle who did whatever it took to do whatever it takes for her own good. She explores her own way and pursues her own life. Although she falls into the trap designed by others, she still does not lose her own kind-hearted nature, showing the lofty beauty of women's courage and strength and the courage to take responsibility.

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