

## Problems of human identity in the James Henry's novel "Portrait of Lady"

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### ABSTRACT

Though most generally considered *The Portrait of a Lady* to have been published simultaneously in the United Kingdom and the United States, controversy surrounds the true publication history. Macmillan (London) published the first UK edition of the book in three volumes in November 1881, just as the story was concluding its run in the eponymous house monthly magazine. However, Macmillan's second edition — its first single-volume edition — was not published until June 1882. In the mean time, Houghton, Mifflin, and Company (Boston) published the first US and first single-volume edition, which became available on November 16, 1881, though the date on the title page states 1882.

*The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James was initially published as a serial in Macmillan's Magazine (UK) and *The Atlantic Monthly* (US) in 1880–81. The story tells of a spirited young American woman, Isabel Archer — arguably one of Miller's most memorable characters — as she affronts her destiny only to find it overwhelming. *The Portrait of a Lady* is James' most popular novel and is regarded by critics as one of his finest, exploring his characteristic theme of conflict between American individualism and European social custom.

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### 1. Introduction

Of the many contributors who supported and found support from the *Atlantic Monthly*, Henry James stands apart. James, who came into his own in the pages of the magazine, published stories, reviews, and novels through half a century—and with the Atlantic ocean between himself and the editors in Boston. The second son of the eccentric Swedenborgian philosopher for whom he was named, James spent his peripatetic childhood traveling between the United States and Europe, studying with tutors in Geneva, London, Paris, Bologna, and Bonn. About people raised abroad like James and herself, Edith Wharton would say that they had been “produced in a European glass-house.” They were “wretched exotics,” none of them American; “We don't think or feel as the Americans do.” In 1864, the James family moved to Boston, before putting down roots in Cambridge. Two years earlier, James had followed his older brother, William, to Harvard, where he studied law until literature asserted itself as his calling.

Inheriting his father's wanderlust, James visited London in 1869 and made the acquaintance of artists and intellectuals, including George Eliot, William Morris, Gabriel Rossetti, and Leslie Stephen. After extended periods in Paris, where he wrote letters for the *New York Tribune*, and Rome, James moved permanently to England in 1876. His house in Rye, purchased in 1898, became a center for friends as different as Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane.

Today the broader public knows James through films of his novels, notably Merchant Ivory productions of *The Golden Bowl*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Europeans*. He holds a special place in the *Atlantic's* pantheon of writers for a number of reasons, chief among them the many novels that explore the cultural and psychological differences between Europeans and Americans. To his contemporaries, James represented the

quintessential artist, laboring at his craft to the exclusion of much else. In a May 1885 *Atlantic* review of a biography of George Eliot written by her husband, John Cross, James presents the author of *Middlemarch* as many saw James himself. The “creations” which “possessed” her and “brought her renown,” James wrote, “were of the incalculable kind, shaped themselves in mystery, in some intellectual back shop or secret crucible, and were as little as possible implied in the aspect of her life.

What is remarkable . . . is that this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures, without extravagance, assumption, or bravado, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multifold life of man.

Mere living might suit others, but, as James told H. G. Wells in 1915, “It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.” Wharton addressed her letters to James as “Cher Maître” because she bowed to his mastery of form. James's experiments with limited third-person narration place the reader in the consciousness of a narrator—him or herself an actor in the story. The process allowed readers to see the narrator's process of thinking, the slow dawning of consciousness, accompanied by a loss of innocence.

James's first signed story, “The Story of a Year” appeared in the *Atlantic's* March 1865 issue. Though melodramatic, it mimics and rejects the conventional endings of Civil War fiction by not having the pretty, young heroine immolate herself on the altar of her fallen lover's memory. Those who associate James with ambiguous prose and drawing-room dramas might be surprised to think of him beginning his career like any hack

writer intent on boiling the pot, or plot. In 1871, the *Atlantic* serialized *Watch and Ward*, a novel that pushed conventional boundaries of fiction by having a bachelor adopt and groom a twelve-year-old girl for later marriage. A friend of the James family, Charles Eliot Norton would have preferred for the beginning author to avoid sensation by pursuing his acquaintance with Homer and Virgil. Neither he nor James Russell Lowell, his coeditor at the *North American Review*, saw promise of a great career for James. That prediction fell to James's friend William Dean Howells, who bet on him "to do better than any one has yet done toward making us a real American novel." James fulfilled that promise when *Daisy Miller* set readers on both sides of the Atlantic debating its heroine's morals. James told her story through the jaded eyes of an American expatriate named Winterbourne, who does not know how to interpret Daisy's flirtatious behavior any more than readers do. Readers fell into opposing camps: the "Daisy Millerites," who thought her virginal, and the "anti-Daisy Millerites," who knew her to be lost. The argument soon extended to the manners of American girls generally.

Over the years, the *Atlantic* accepted as much work from James as it could reasonably print without seeming to be a vanity press. *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1876–1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), a dramatization of *Daisy Miller* subtitled "A Comedy" (1883), after being rewritten to end with Daisy's and Winterbourne's engagement, *The Princess Casamassima* (1885–1886), *The Aspern Papers* (1888), *The Tragic Muse* (1889–1890), and *The Old Things* (1896), later titled *The Spoils of Poynton*, all appeared in the magazine. If with time, the young, dark-bearded author of controversial early tales like *Daisy Miller* bore little resemblance to the round-bellied author of *The Princess Casamassima*, who, according to critics, buried his tale of political intrigue and assignation under layers of wooly prose, the *Atlantic* remained respectful. The majority of its editors (though not all) stood by him, rightly predicting that his achievement would reflect on its own. Today Ted Gioia's "Great Books" list of the hundred greatest novels lists Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* first and James's *The Ambassadors* fourth. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ranks tenth. A similar Modern Library list places James's *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Ambassadors* at twenty-six and twenty-seven. Such arbitrary lists have little value except to highlight the vagaries of taste and time, which in this case served James well enough, but if there were records of America's best-known, least-read authors, James might win the prize.

James has always been a writer's writer. His novels in the *Atlantic* formed the next generation's sense of what a novel was and was not. Willa Cather, who praised *Atlantic* readers for having some familiarity with French, took James as her example. "For me," she remembered, "he was the perfect writer . . . the foremost mind that ever applied itself to literature in America." "All students imitate," she told an interviewer, and "I began by imitating Henry James." James's wish, as expressed in "The Art of Fiction," to render "the look that conveys . . . meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human

spectacle" foreshadowed Cather's belief that "realism" was "an attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material."

The expatriated James might be thought of as an odd regular for a magazine that promised to advance the "American idea." Founded in 1857, as the United States staggered toward civil war, the *Atlantic Monthly* proposed to serve the cause of freedom through literature. The goal was great, but so were the people dedicated to its achievement. In bringing together the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the *Atlantic* played its appointed role in its appointed city. Perhaps only Boston could have given rise to a magazine whose cornerstone rested on the principles of public service, intellectual honesty, and democracy. Without neglecting its commitment to national life, the magazine went far beyond the United States to the British Isles and the rest of Europe in its continuing search for authors. And James, though too slow-moving for many twenty-first-century readers, provided a feast for nineteenth-century readers used to savoring long books. He had a large appeal for *Atlantic* editors and readers, who saw his straddling of the Atlantic as a strength because it fostered comparisons between Europe and the United States.

In his autobiography, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), James credited his detachment to his rootless early years. "The effect of detachment," he wrote, "was the fact of the experience of Europe." Not surprisingly, his novels deal with themes that have bearing on his own life: liberation, entrapment, exile, and artistry. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, Ralph Touchett experiments with his cousin Isabel Archer by convincing his father to make her a rich woman. From his sickbed, Ralph watches what she will make of the freedom money confers. Isabel's moment of recognition comes when she sees her husband, Osmond, sitting in the presence of her friend, Madame Merle, and realizes their intimacy. The marriage that she thought of as her own artistic experiment in changing human destiny has been false from its beginning, a convenience Madame Merle contrived to benefit the daughter she conceived with Osmond. At Isabel's last meeting with Ralph, he tells her that he believes his gesture has ruined her. However, James would have readers see that in an odd way he has brought her into fuller if sadder understanding of herself. Having learned that freedom imposes its own restrictions, Isabel returns to the diminished life she chose. Whatever freedom James accords his protagonists comes with profound loneliness. To James, "the free spirit, always much tormented, and by no means always triumphant, is heroic, ironic, pathetic . . . and 'successful' only through having remained free."

Apart from the many stories and novels he published in the *Atlantic*, James wrote a copious number of reviews, many of them unsigned. Along with those of Howells and other *Atlantic* critics such as J. T. Trowbridge, E. P. Whipple, Barrett Wendell, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, James's reviews helped to formalize the aesthetics of literary studies. An *Atlantic* reviewer of James's *Partial Portraits* (1888)—which includes chapters on Emerson, Trollope, and Robert Louis Stevenson, as well as his landmark essay "The Art of Fiction"—called him an excellent "talker about books. . . . His

knowledge is of the fullest, his resources of allusion and comparison are endless, [and] his demarcation of different schools of literature is exact." James seemed "so perfectly at home in criticism," said another reviewer, that he found it hard to remember he was also a productive novelist. James saw the "critic's first duty" to be finding "some key to method, some utterance of his literary convictions, some indication of his ruling theory." Looking at books from both a reader's and a writer's point of view, he shared with other *Atlantic* reviewers the belief that art and criticism went hand in hand.

Despite his life abroad and his diminishing familiarity with American ways, James contributed to the *Atlantic's* founding goal of shaping a national literature. From Howells's perspective, "literary absenteeism" was "not a peculiarly American vice or an American virtue," but "an expression and a proof of the modern sense which enlarges one's country to the bounds of civilization." Right or wrong, he could point to the long tradition of American expatriation, which extended back to travelers like Benjamin Franklin and James Fenimore Cooper. He could not, of course, have anticipated those who followed in the next century. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Richard Wright thought of an apprenticeship in Europe as a rite of authorship. Unlike that war-weary generation of writers, James—heartbroken by America's refusal to enter World War I—renounced his U.S. citizenship in July 1915. For some Americans this gesture seemed like treason. James's loyal friend Howells disagreed. He defiantly titled the last essay he wrote "The American James."

The James-Howells relationship offers a glimpse into the working of the *Atlantic* and what amounts to the international politics of letters. Shrewdly predicting that James would have to create an audience if he were to continue to develop as an artist, Howells helped James as he helped Mark Twain by actively soliciting and reviewing his work. Howells's thinking about the novel and American fiction generally grew from his reading of James's evolving versatility. In January 1882, a reviewer for the *Atlantic*, who compared Howells's *Dr. Breen's Practice* to James's *Portrait of a Lady*, noted similarities in the two writers' focus on social forces and on characters typical of an entire class. The writer felt that James showed "how the complex and firmer life of the Old World acts upon Isabel, with her free and generous nature, and how the crude, experimental, yet largely ethical elements of New England society have conspired to confine and torture the honest spirit of Howells's *Dr. Breen*." The difference between the two authors lay in suggestions always seeming "to come from within, and to work outward" in James, while the process worked just the opposite in Howells, who was "frank, humorous, and sympathetic," if less "subtle and refined" than James.

The men's success at stamping the *Atlantic* with their own imprints excited criticism as well as envy. In "Miss Grief" (1880), the story of a would-be Emily Brontë who labors in obscurity and dies from poverty and frustration, Constance Fenimore Woolson noted the extent to which "private relations" determine success. Some readers thought Woolson's condescending male protagonist, a successful if far from

brilliant writer, to be a slap at her friend, James—or was it Howells?

In 1882, the two men found themselves at the center of an international slugfest when Howells claimed in *Century Magazine* that "the art of fiction has . . . become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray." Dickens, Thackeray, Richardson, and Fielding, he wrote, are "great men," but men "of the past." In their stead, Howells offered Henry James, the leader of a new school of American fiction, largely influenced by the French realism of Alphonse Daudet. It was not just that names like Howells and James had replaced those of Thackeray and Dickens, or that one national literature had superseded another. Howells jettisoned a whole system of values associated with British culture and represented by the Church, the aristocracy, Oxford and Cambridge, Epsom and Ascot. To suggestions of a decline in the supremacy of British letters, the English novelist George Moore retaliated by mocking the lack of American originality: "James went to France and read Tourguéniéff," he wrote. "W. D. Howells stayed at home and read Henry James. . . . [When] Henry James said, I will write the moral history of America, as Tourguéniéff wrote the moral history of Russia—he borrowed at first-hand, understanding what he was borrowing. W. D. Howells borrowed at second-hand, and without knowing what he was borrowing." From one perspective, Howells's *Century* review extended the sentiment of Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa address on the responsibilities of the American scholar—or, to borrow Oliver Wendell Holmes's metaphor, it proved to be Howells's Emancipation Proclamation to Emerson's Declaration of Independence. From another, it underscored not only the transatlantic complexities of authorship and publishing in the late nineteenth century, but also the degree to which a country's national pride resided in its authors.

Like James, *Atlantic* contributors repeatedly returned to the question posed by the title of an unsigned May 1875 article, "What Is an American?" The author speculated: "Is he an Adams, a Jefferson, a Lincoln, a Barnum, a Butler, or a Fisk? Are Longfellow and Lowell, Hawthorne and Emerson, our representative literary men, or Bret Harte and his followers?" Looking at *Atlantic* reviews, or the international focus of Henry James's serialized novels in the 1870s, a reader might be struck by the range of offerings about other cultures, which James and his friend and editor saw as contributing to larger discussions about American identity. This is perhaps most evident in James's travel writing for the *Atlantic*. "Why is it," he asks in "Recent Florence" (May 1878),

"that in Italy we see a charm in things which in other countries we should consign to the populous limbo of the vulgarities? If, in the city of New York, a great museum of the arts were to be provided, by way of decoration, with a species of veranda inclosed on one side by a series of small-paned casements, draped in dirty linen, and . . . the place being surmounted by a thinly-painted wooden roof, strongly suggestive of summer heat, of winter cold, of frequent leakage, those amateurs who had had the advantage of foreign travel would be at small pains to conceal their contempt."

The answer for James lay not in the veranda itself, or indeed in what was visible, but in “the historical process that lies behind it,” in the accretion over time of the manners, values, rituals, and thinking that make one country this and not another. Culture for James came best into relief through comparison, with Europe and America providing the other’s measure. His own “*dépaysement*”—as the French call a queasiness of soul in a strange place—both fed his art and formed its basis. It seems fitting that a magazine that began by defining itself in comparison and opposition to English counterparts should nevertheless count James among its most loyal contributors.

In 1904, the long-expatriated Henry James would board the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* and disembark in Hoboken, New Jersey. He had not stepped on native ground for over twenty years. The book that grew out of his visit, *The American Scene* (1907), captures the drama of returning to places changed beyond recognition or simply obliterated in the name of progress. James poses a number of questions about the workings of human memory and the relationship between history and place, but above all he wonders whether there is such an entity as an “American character,” and how it might be found. James sought an answer in New York’s Washington Square and the Bowery, at Grant’s Tomb and in Central Park. He pondered New Hampshire’s White Mountains and its summer watering holes. At Harvard’s Union Hall, he gazed at John Singer Sargent’s portrait of the philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson and felt transported as if by magic carpet face to face with the historical forces that led to Higginson’s founding of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The mansions of Newport, the battlefield at Concord, Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary, and the Confederate White House—these are just a few of the sites that to James symbolized the American

endeavor. Allowing his mind to play “freely” like a riffing jazz musician, he ruminated on the speech of American women, businessmen commuting on the Staten Island ferry, and the spectacle of exceptional wealth—on anything that would distinguish America from his adopted Europe. In the end, he posed more questions than he may have answered, for though he believed it was better to know than to remain ignorant, true knowing involved surrendering himself to the finally unknowable welter of life. Perhaps it was impossible to grasp what America meant to him beyond its play on his imagination.

## 2. Conclusion

Henry James’s novel *Portrait of a Lady* published in 1881, presents more than the portrait and the destiny of Isabel Archer transposing the ideas of the late nineteenth century in a strong and intense literary work. The elements of the American society from the last decades of the nineteenth-century meet the European society: America, natural, attractive by vitality and by novelty, and Europe, old and sophisticated, but artificial and decaying. The novel treats, in parallel, two key themes - in the foreground is Isabel Archer and her life story (Bamberg, 2003).

In Henry James’s novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, two characters, Madame Merle and Isabel Archer, discuss what constitutes the self. Madame Merle states that the things we chose to surround ourselves with, our clothes and our hobbies, are what make up one’s self. Isabel Archer states that nothing other than herself, her thoughts and feelings, expresses who she is. I agree with Isabel Archer that one should be seen for how one acts or thinks, but I also agree with Madame Merle that what we chose to surround ourselves with is an extension of oneself..

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