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SELF-AWARENESS OR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE VOWS IN *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

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ABSTRACT: *Many critics have long questioned as to whether Henry James had adequately justified the paradoxical contradiction of freedom in his novel, The Portrait of a Lady. In their views, the last scene of the novel in which James's heroine, Isabel, goes back to her husband emphasises the solemnity of the vows of marriage in the nineteenth century. This study's interpretation of James's character is that, besides the idea of solemnity of the vows or publicity, she herself fears making another wrong choice if she should choose divorce. To provide a richer cognition of the heroine's personal fear, this paper draws the readers' attention to Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of punishment and possession.*

KEYWORDS: Self-Awareness, Vows, Portrait of a Lady, Solemnity

INTRODUCTION

Many critics have long questioned as to whether Henry James had adequately justified the paradoxical contradiction of freedom in his novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*. In their views, the last scene of the novel in which James's heroine, Isabel, goes back to her husband emphasises the solemnity of the vows of marriage in the nineteenth century. For instance, Alfred Habegger observes that "[d]ivorce as a topic is strangely absent from Isabel's life and mind" (163). Likewise, Allen F. Stein notes that divorce is "out of the question as both [Isabel] and James see it" (139). Debra MacComb delves deeper into the examination of this question than most critics but in the end draws the same conclusion, that divorce is inconceivable in the novel. Delineating the differences between the English and the American stance on marriage, MacComb upholds the view that the novel criticises the Americans' "celebrated tenancy" to raise personal freedom over social responsibility thereupon turning to divorce to achieve such freedom.[1] It seems that these critics have dismissed the idea that the text offers divorce as an alternative to Isabel, but this very topic is fully covered in the excellent article by Milissa Ganz in 2006 on *ThePortrait of a Lady*. Ganz's "'A Strong Opposition': *The Portrait of a Lady* and the Divorce Debates" shows very nicely how Henry James allows Isabel to toy with the idea of divorce and why she steps back from it, which is mainly to do with the *publicity* that attached to a divorce court hearing. Ganz upholds her emphasis on the idea that James detested publicity and insisted on the sanctity of privacy. Hence his decision to burn all letters addressed to him and his request that his friends destroy his letters to them. Adding to Ganz's view, this study's interpretation of Isabel is that, besides the idea of publicity, she herself fears making another wrong choice if she should choose divorce. To provide a richer cognition of the heroine's personal fear, this paper draws the readers' attention to Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of punishment and possession. Certain reasons can be drawn for considering Schopenhauer's philosophy to analyse Isabel's character: one, that his philosophy is closely linked to certain

[1] "Divorce of a Nation" 129, see also *Tales* 53-77.

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nineteenth century attitudes towards love and marriage. Due to the same reason it was very well adapted with the modern day writers; two, although biased, it represents the status of women at that time; three, there is important evidence that shows James would have been interested in the high currency of Schopenhauer's name in the 1880s.

Henry James first heard about Schopenhauer from his older brother, William. As Thomas Sergeant Perry writes in his diary about a day that he spent with his friend Henry James and the two other James brothers in Newport (1858), it was William who first read for them Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea.* After many years, Perry wrote of their days together: "We fished in various waters, and I well remember when William James brought home a volume of Schopenhauer and showed us with delight the ugly mug of the philosopher and read us amusing specimens of his delightful pessimism" (Matthiessen 89). The other documented evidence which points to James's understanding of Schopenhauer is *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). James's work alludes to Schopenhauer many times. As J. Firebaugh states in "A Schopenhauerian Novel: James's *The Princess Casamassima*," the novel gives "his readers a hint that the philosophy of Schopenhauer was not far from his mind as he wrote *The Princess Casamassima*, and granted a kind of permission to read the book as an objectification of many Schopenhauerian ideas" (178).[2] It would appear that James was likely in accord with the concepts of Schopenhauer, viewing them as a possibility for the advancement of artistic skills. James may have read a little about Schopenhauer in his teenage years but from the repeated use of the philosopher's name in *The Princess Casamassima*, it seems that the influential name of Schopenhauer in the 1880s would have been of great interest to him. By technically analysing *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is possible to say that Schopenhauer's ideas may have been in James's mind during his early writing career, long before writing *The Princess Casamassima*.

In *The Portrait of a Lady,* Isabel thinks she "ha[s] a certain way of looking at life which [Osmond takes] as a personal offence" (James 429); "the whole thing – her character, the way she [feels], the way she judge[s]" is "so different" from Osmond's. Nevertheless, she insists on keeping her conjugal tie and emphasises that "certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage, and were quite independent of the quality of enjoyment extracted from it" (James 581). The question becomes: what are these "certain obligations" or the cultural factors militating against divorce in the nineteenth century? In the nineteenth century, it was in women's best interest to honour her vows and remain in a marriage. Once a woman was married everything she owned became her husband's, including her land and her life savings. The woman also lost most, if not all, respect in society through divorce. Further, if a married couple divorced, then the husband kept custody of the children. That is probably one of the reasons that, through the last chapters, Isabel is questioned by the others as to why she does not divorce while she has no child to worry about. The final suggestion comes from Goodwood: "You have no children; that perhaps would be an obstacle" (James 590). Moreover, Isabel appears to be a woman of honour, high standards, strong principles and full of compassion. For her, "marriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar" (James 540). Next to all these ideas, when Isabel marries Osmond, she is entirely deceived about his actual intention. "[She] had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence" (James 424). She thinks she is marrying someone whose mind is curious, generous and expansive; however, after her marriage she finds that she has been absolutely betrayed. In the narrator's words, "she had suddenly found

[2] For further details and Schopenhauerian concepts in this novel see Firebaugh's article.

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the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end" (James 424). This discovery does not cause her disappointment; rather, it creates a fear in her character for later movements and actions. But one may suspect that further to the social perspective of the nineteenth century that men were considered dominant at home and women were passive, is Isabel's fear the general fear of women in the nineteenth century that they were almost afraid of their husbands because of their superior role or there is another separate reason for her to remain in her marriage?

The answer to the question posited above and its connection with Schopenhauer's idea of punishment help us to discover a Schopenhauerian concept in the novel. In fact, although there is a gulf of difference between them, she is not afraid of "her husband – his displeasure, his hatred, his revenge; it was not even her own later judgment of her conduct – a consideration which had often held her in check; it was simply the violence there would be in going when Osmond wished her to remain" (James 540). To this I may add the main point that she is however "afraid of [herself]" (James 503), anxious of acting upon her desire to leave her spouse. I take Isabel's anxiety in consideration by interpreting it through Schopenhauer's thoughts on punishment. In Schopenhauer's opinion, once we make a choice, "we assume as necessary that decision was preceded by something from which it ensued, and which we call the ground or reason, or more accurately the motive, of the resultant action" (*Fourfold* 212). In this process, choices are not made liberally and our actions are obligatory and made because "every human being, even every animal, after the motive has appeared, must carry out the action which alone is in accordance with his inborn and immutable character" (*Fourfold* 49). Accordingly, a person's final action forms when a specific motive affects his immutable character. So, one can avoid repeating something wrong by placing "beside every possible motive for committing a wrong a more powerful motive for leaving it undone" (*World 1*: 62). Indeed, by considering the cost (punishment) that one has to pay for his action then he can stop doing it again. This idea comes across in the novel when Ralph shows sympathy and tells Isabel the origin of her misery: "you wanted to look at life for yourself – but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish." And Isabel admits that she has "been punished" (James 577). Isabel states that she is afraid to divorce Osmond because, aside from her possible motive for divorce, she has a more powerful motive for not leaving her husband. That powerful motive comes from her previous experience. Our unthoughtful Isabel is now more conscious about the evil side of the world. She is afraid of her own "strong will" (James 42) because she has already paid once for it by marrying Osmond and she does not want to experience that traumatic situation again by accepting Goodwood's offer.

The traumatic circumstance that Isabel experienced with Osmond not only teaches her that each person has to pay for his own actions but also highlights her pursuit of illusory independence. She has an infinite hope to retain her freedom even after marriage and is unaware of the truth of marital possession. This idea is sophisticatedly depicted in Isabel's character development throughout the novel, not only in her relationship with Osmond but also with other lovers. Schopenhauer in his essay on "Metaphysics of Love" pays great attention to the matter of possession in marriage. He believes that "the fundamental fault in the character of women is that they have no 'sense of justice.'" This arises from their "deficiency in the power of reasoning" (*Women* 44). Regarding the limited reasoning power in women, he continues that

> Woman is by nature intended to obey is shown by the fact that every woman who is placed in the unnatural position of absolute independence at once attaches herself to some kind of man, by whom she is controlled and

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> governed; this is because she requires a master. If she, is young, the man is a lover; if she is old, a priest. (*Women* 51)

Schopenhauer had an unambiguous hatred and fear of women. As Thomas Grimwood states in "The Limits of Misogyny: Schopenhauer, 'On Women'" (2008), "such 'information' is often purely hypothetical and speculative, rarely based on any substantial empirical evidence" (134).[3] But the above quality in some degree applies to Isabel's attitudes. She always returns to her theory that a woman "ought to be able to live to herself, in the absence of exceptional flimsiness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex" (James 53). It is this idea that comforts her in "being independent" (James 52). But after receiving the opportunity for independence through the fortune of her heritage, she continues pursuing her ideal mate. Although Isabel insists on retaining her independence, she is simultaneously drawn towards her inescapable destiny, marriage. Thus, her unique desire for freedom turns out to produce possession in marriage.

Shortly after her marriage, Osmond's interest in his wife becomes a kind of possession and dominance. He sees her exclusively as an acquisition to be controlled and he wants to stifle her freedom. Osmond's exploitive manner in marriage shows that by profitably possessing Isabel, then restricting her into his own views rather than leaving her free to go after her desires, she is imprisoned by him instead of gaining more freedom. His egoistic love of authority disassembles Isabel in what Ralph, Isabel's cousin, names "the very mill of the conventional" (James 577). Nevertheless, Osmond admires Isabel's mind but only when her thinking reflects back his opinions. This arises from his sense of possession and superiority. His ignorance of her separate identity, or mind, resembles Schopenhauer's belief that women lack objectivity of mind and that is why "they always stick to what is subjective" (*Women* 47).[4] Accordingly, he claims that a woman's sense of fairness is weaker than a man's because "their attention [is] fixed upon what lies nearest" (*Women* 44). Schopenhauer compares a woman in this respect to "an organism that has a liver but no gall-bladder" (*Women* 44). The relationship between Isabel and her husband easily presents this idea because throughout the novel we discover that she has "lived with [Osmond's mind], she [has] lived in it almost – it appear[s] to have become her habitation" (James 428). By conflating Isabel's thoughts and theories with Osmond's mind and "habitation" (James 429), James reveals the reality that Osmond not only has the possession of her wealth but also Isabel's mind and liberty:

> Her mind was to be his – attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nose-gay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching. He didn't wish her to be stupid. On the contrary, it was because she was clever that she had pleased him. But he expected her intelligence to operate altogether in his favour. (James 432)

The relativity of such terms as "small garden-plot" and "deer-park," which Osmond emphasises are inseparable, is characteristic of Schopenhauer in his treatment of a woman's mind where

[3] From the 1930's and thereafter, Schopenhauer's total despisement of women has gone relatively unchallenged in philosophical literature. Biographers of Schopenhauer have recognised and criticised his misogynistic character, so this study uncover no new biographical data.

[4] "This is most striking in regard to painting, the technique of which is as much within their reach as within ours; this is why they pursue it so industriously. Still, they have not a single great painting to show, for the simple reason that they lack that objectivity of mind." (Schopenhauer 47)

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he considers a woman as a liver without a gall-bladder and believes that she should constantly stick "to what is subjective." Even at the catastrophic moment in which Isabel informs Osmond that Ralph is ill and she wants to meet him before his death, Osmond reiterates that they are "indissolubly united" as husband and wife. He has an ideal of what his wife "should do and should not do" (James 536).

The novel reveals the true nature of matrimony through Osmond's character when he tells Isabel that "*we, we*, Mrs. Osmond, is all I know. I take our marriage seriously" (James 536). Osmond's deliberate use of "Mrs. Osmond" states his belief of possession of Isabel, in every facet that one can be possessed. He self-consciously refers to Isabel as "Mrs. Osmond" during their verbal exchange, to demonstrate the loss of her former identity. James is remarkable in this instance of masculine superiority, as he boldly paints the strokes of the theme of possession in marriage. The novel shows Osmond's claim of authority over Isabel, by seemingly stripping away even the right for debate, or discussion with him. James boldly exhibits that Isabel is either naive, or has no free will of her own. Based on this assertion of marital unity and masculine superiority, Osmond plays a role of superiority, and labels Isabel's idea of independency in marriage as superficial.

From the beginning Isabel is afraid of custody in marriage. The idea of any marriage, whether to Warburton or Goodwood, upsets Isabel, who looks at matrimony as possession. Goodwood "seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom" (James 114). Warburton occupies a position that appeals to Isabel's imagination. "Great responsibilities, great opportunities, great consideration, great wealth, great power, a natural share in the public affairs of a great country" (James 71) but he negates Isabel's mind and knowledge. Isabel feels that he thinks that she is a "barbarian … and that [she has] never seen forks and spoons" (James 70). That is the point that makes her disqualify him for she does not "need the aid of a clever man to teach [her] how to live" (James 158). Before marriage Osmond treated her "so completely as an independent person" (James 350) with a personal mind. Not long after marriage, she realises that she was deceived. Due to the same acknowledgment, when in England Goodwood asks her to leave Osmond and to come away with him she knows now the fact that there is also no freedom even in Goodwood's "act of possession" (James 591).

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