

What Makes the Beauty ---on *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract. Marxist philosophy insists that material comes the first, but consciousness does the following part, and contradiction is the force and motive for things' development. This paper is going to by Marxist philosophy present an in-depth analysis for Isabel's beauty, who is the heroine of Henry James' masterpiece *The portrait of a Lady*.

Introduction

Henry James' masterpiece *The Portrait of a Lady* presents the heroine Isabel, whose beauty wins much respect and admiration from people across the world. In addition, in the novel, Isabel has made three important decisions for her life, some of which surprises and puzzles many people. Many readers consider the novel as a tragedy and cannot understand why the heroine Isabel chooses to suffer instead of enjoying an easy living provided by her pursuers. Actually Isabel's beauty and life choices could be better understood by the Marxist philosophy. In another word, throughout the novel, Isabel is trying to coordinate the relationship between mind and matter, and her beauty and charm is best manifested by her evil husband and his mistress.

Material comes the First and Consciousness does the Following Part

Marxist philosophy believes that material comes the first as to the relationship between the physical and the mental. In the novel, Isabel shows her beauty firstly by her appearance and figure, as the following words says:

[His master now had time to follow and to see that Bunchine's new friend as a tall girl in a black dress, who at first sight looked pretty.(11)

...she was looking at everything, with a eye that denoted clear perception...

...her head was erect, her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and all reflected in a clear, still smile.

...her hair, which was dark even to blackness, had been an object of envy to many women; her light grey eyes, a little too firm perhaps in her graver moments, had an enchanting range of concession. (40)

...and our rustling, quickly-moving, clear-voiced heroine was agreeable to sense as the sound of flowing water. (49)

She turned her head with a glance of her clear, fair eyes...] (James 137)

Also, Isabel couldn't experience whatever her likes if her cousin Ralph haven't given her the fortune---seventy thousand pounds. The novel gives the description as following:

“I should like to put a little wind in her sails.”

“I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse.”(172)

Isabel thought very often of the fact of her accession of means, looking at it in a dozen different lights...the girl presently made up her mind that to be rich was a virtue because it was to be able to do could only be sweet. It was the graceful contrary of the stupid side of weakness---especially the feminine variety.... The acquisition of power made her serious; she scrutinized her power with a kind of tender ferocity...](James 199)

Isabel is not a snobbish girl, but she still knows that she has to go to England with her aunt if she wants to know the different world besides of America; she has to get enough money to realize her imagination and better her thinking. In a word, with mental things, it must be rooted from something physical, just like Isabel's intelligence comes from her rich readings apart from her genetic gene from her parents. And by the basic principle of Marxist philosophy, people could understand why the heroine Isabel chose to go to the England, to inherit the big fortune willingly, to travel to Rome and marry her hypocritical husband, all of which was in order to have a good insight into the world, to satisfy her curiosity, and to help her think more wisely.

Contradiction is the Force and Motive for Things' Development

About the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, probably it is Isabel's unusual choices that make many readers puzzled. Her refusal for the proposal from the wealthy American young man Caspar Goodwood and the gentleman Lord Warburton, her marriage with two-faced Osmond, and her return to the suffering marriage, all her choices in the novel get sympathy for her and leave arguments for the readers.

Marxist philosophy thinks that people's consciousness is very important for their happy life, it makes the great differences between human being and the animals, and sometimes it will react to the material world, even change it.

Firstly, Isabel's refusal to Lord Warburton's proposal makes a good explanation to the point. Lord Warburton is a wealthy noble gentleman of England, and marrying him will undoubtedly enjoy a well-to-do life, but will lose at the same time the chance to develop herself by her own will. Just like Isabel said in the novel:

[...at the cost of seeming both tasteless and ungrateful, i don't think I can marry Lord Warburton.”

...her uncle's mild acuteness with her dilemma seemed to prove that she was concerned with the natural and reasonable emotions of life and not altogether a victim to intellectual eagerness and vague ambitions---ambitions reaching beyond Lord Warburton's beautiful appeal, reaching to something indefinable and possibly not commendable.](James 107)

At the same moment, Isabel gives her reason for the refusal to Caspar Goodwood as:

[...for it was part of the influence he had upon her that he seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom. There was a disagreeably strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her...

...with his whole weight and force: even in one's usual contact with him one had to reckon with that. The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present...](James 108)

When Lord Warburton's big bribe encounters Isabel's liberty, she gets the chance to have a close eye to her spiritual pursue and her liberty. And when she finally has the courage to refuse the big temptation from the gentleman Lord Warburton, she actually has already developed herself. That is, the concept contradiction shows itself as difficulties in people's common life, and when Isabel solves her first difficulty in England, she defeats her vanity and grows to maturity a little.

Secondly, Isabel's biggest difficulty, her bitter marriage with Osmond helps her to grow quickly and gives her a force to mature her spirit, which is Isabel's original wish when she was a little girl.

Marxist philosophy believes that the two sides of a contradiction interact and the advanced side will finally get development.

Osmond in the novel is a two-faced hypocrite, and cheats Isabel to marry him, trying to make her as a soulless artwork, which actually gives Isabel a great urge to best her spirit. For the first step, Isabel starts to realize that the reality is not always as the same as what she has perceived at the first sight:

[she had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth. He was not changed; he had not disguised himself, during the year of his courtship, any more than she. But she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now--- she saw the whole man. She had kept still, as it were, so that he should have a free field, and yet in spite of this she had mistaken a part for the whole.](James 404)

Then she even can take advantage of Osmond's bad personality, she thinks by herself:

[She would gone with him even there a long distance; for he pointed out to her so much of the baseness and shabbiness of life, opened her eyes so wide to the stupidity, the depravity, the ignorance of mankind, that she had been properly impressed with the infinite vulgarity of things and of the virtue of keeping one's self unspotted by it. But this base, ignoble world, it appeared, was after all what one was to live for...](James 408)

Isabel and her husband's disagreement lead to their big fight when Isabel's cousin Ralph was dying. For Isabel, she desperately wants to visit her cousin, but Osmond disagrees with her wish. Then, Isabel suddenly realizes the fact:

[It was her honest belief that on the whole she was not defiant, but she certainly couldn't pretend to be indifferent to Ralph. She believed he was dying at last and that she should never see him again, and this gave her tenderness for him that she had never known before.]

And at this time, Isabel finally knows the two important men in her life:

[It was simply that Ralph was generous and that her husband was not. There was something in Ralph's talk, in his smile, in the mere fact of his being in Rome, that made the blasted circle round which she walked more spacious. He made her feel the good of the world; he made her feel

what might have been. He was after all as intelligent as Osmond---quite apart from his being better.](James 410)

Realizing the very fact, Isabel decides to visit her cousin regardless of her husband's opposition, for she has already known what really matters in her life, and what is the valuable thing she has always been pursuing. In another word, only by the suffering experiences offered by her husband, Isabel can be mature enough to distinguish fact from illusion, right from wrong.

What Makes Isabel's beauty?

Isabel is considered universally a beauty physically and spiritually, and people has different explanations for her beauty. By the detailed analysis for her life and experiences, this paper believes that Isabel's beauty results from her genuine, both physically and spiritually. She likes to cloth naturally and to behave according to her soul's call. Furthermore, Isabel's beauty also comes from her spiritual pursue instead of material chasing. In the ending part of the novel, at Ralph's funeral, Caspar Goodwood knows Isabel's bitter life and tells his love for her again, Isabel refuses to accept his welcoming offer and goes back to Rome. She will not force herself to give in and decides to go on with her pursue. And in this sense, *The Portrait of a Lady* is not a tragedy at all, it is a beautiful portrait of a beauty.

Conclusion

By the brief discuss above, people could have a better insight into Isabel's beauty according to the Marxist philosophy. In the first place, Isabel has her integrity inherited from her parents while she has read a lot attaining a good self consciousness and an ability of self-examination, which promote conversely her personality from naive into maturity. Secondly, Isabel presents her beauty at the very moment when she meets her greatest difficulty and fights courageously against with her husband and his mistress, which accords with Marxist's unity of contradiction.

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