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Barbara Lee St. Clair

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Isabel's Sexual Drama

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Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Barbara Lee St. Clair Pinson

December 1983

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ISABEL'S SEXUAL DRAMA

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Isabel's Sexual Drama

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Henry James, Jr. (1843-1916) has had a greater impact on the world of the novel than any other writer. The greatest controversy surrounding this most prolific of American authors and critics concerns the area of sexual passion. The most insidious criticism leveled against James is that he and his characters lack sexuality. The whole problem is epitomized in this perusal of the sexual consciousness of Isabel Archer Osmond, the famous heroine in The Portrait of a Lady. While many critics simply ignore Isabel's sexuality, many others are less discerning than they should be, and some are absolutely mistaken: they appreciate the chaste, innocent young virgin with blue-blooded ties, but they fail to recognize the healthy, red-blooded woman who is of greater depth in the very real "Lady" she becomes. James allows the observer to glimpse the white purity and strength of the young girl who is described as being independent

or self-reliant and full of spirit in the beginning of the novel--there is a sexual aura in the sense of anticipation created here--but, while this first impression is a correct one and purposefully remains with the reader, James goes much further in brush-stroking in impressionistic details as Isabel's senses are whetted and her character and feelings are further revealed through her relationships and growing experiences. Implicit in some critics' views is the assumption that Isabel can be placed on a pedestal of purity in men's minds and held there as some ideal of the eternal virgin awash in the white light of her intelligence precisely because she remains for them untainted by earthy sexuality. They see her as a cold work of art not vulnerable to carnal concerns. Those men fail to recognize that the experiences that contribute to her expanding sexual awareness detract from her personal beauty no more than the blooming of a rose detracts from the integrity of the tightly furled bud. The first chapter presents pertinent views of the critics. Most critics in finding Isabel either "sexually cold" or "frigid" point to the many instances in the novel when Isabel exhibits caution or fear of one kind or another and ultimately find

in them all a "fear of sex." The second staccato-like chapter reveals Isabel's "fear" for what it is. Isabel's experiences and relationships with men and women are viewed under the microscope of the third chapter. The observer's growing awareness of the development of Isabel's sexuality is truly a process of accretion as James allows his reader glimpses of Isabel in different settings ranging from her chaste New England room to her husband's somewhat sinister home in Rome. This concluding chapter illustrates that anyone who will conscientiously scrutinize the ample details that James provides will find Isabel Archer Osmond in no way lacking in sexuality.

Chapter I. The Controversy
Concerning Isabel's Sexuality

Probably no one person has had a greater impact on the world of the novel than Henry James. One of the greatest controversies found in studies of James concerns the area of sexual passion. The most insidious criticism leveled against James is that he and his characters lack sexuality. The whole problem can be epitomized and the unjust criticism set right by a perusal of the sexual consciousness of Isabel Archer Osmond, the famous heroine in The Portrait of a Lady.

In the beginning Isabel Archer is portrayed as an intelligent, beautiful, radiantly vivacious, exotic, strong, self-reliant but presumptuous, egotistical, selfish, greatly innocent, and vulnerable young girl who has had a happy, carefree childhood (even though her mother died when Isabel was at a very early age) and whose spirit now cries out for adventure and excitement. Her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, rescues her from the boredom of her New England life that includes her American industrialist suitor Caspar Goodwood by taking her to England,

where she begins her European adventures. As other men succumb to her charms, the question becomes, "Who will this fresh young virgin choose?" There is a definite sexual aura in the sense of anticipation created here. To the dismay of her friends and of the critics, she rejects both Goodwood and the English gentleman Lord Warburton, and chooses to marry the American-become-Italian Gilbert Osmond. Leon Edel in his introduction to the Riverside Edition of the novel says that Isabel's story,

At moments . . . verges on melodrama when it isn't pure fairy tale: a rich uncle, a poor niece, an ugly sick cousin who worships her from a distance, three suitors, a fairy-godfather who converts the niece into an heiress, and finally her betrayal by a couple of her cosmopolite compatriots into a marriage as sinister as the back-drop of a Brontë novel.¹

Edel admits, however, that this is a "gross caricature of a warm and human work" and he points out, ". . . it was the way in which the story was told, the qualities of mind and heart that flowed into it, suffusing it with the warmth and texture of life itself, that made it real to the imagination of the reader" (p. ix). And it is the way in which the critics have interpreted how James handles the quality of Isabel's sexuality that needs to be pondered.

Peter Buitenhuis, editor of Twentieth Century

Interpretations of THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY: A Collection of Critical Essays, in his introduction to that volume says, "The Portrait of a Lady has provoked scores of scholars and critics into commentary and counter commentary."² This "commentary and counter commentary" ranges over a very broad spectrum with the least satisfying conclusions being reached about the most controversial and perhaps the most important issue in the novel--that of Isabel's sexual attitude. Because of wrongly drawn assumptions concerning both James's and Isabel's sexual attitudes, many mistaken conclusions have been reached about the novel and about the author. There clearly is need, then, for further investigation and clarification of Isabel's attitude toward sexual matters: an attitude integrally at the heart of all other matters and concerns. While ideas of human sexuality, ideas and understanding of morality, religious convictions, political and economical concerns, all manner of knowledge and beliefs are interdependent and cannot be entirely separated from one another, insofar as possible in this treatment of James's The Portrait of a Lady, the curtain will be drawn on all aspects other than those essential for investigating the development of Isabel Archer Osmond's sexual attitude.

While many critics simply ignore Isabel's sexuality, many others are less discerning than they should be, and some are absolutely mistaken: most appreciate the chaste, innocent young virgin with blue-blooded ties, but they fail to recognize the healthy, red-blooded woman of greater depth in the very real "Lady" she becomes. In this study, it is only fitting that those critics who ignore Isabel's sexuality should be ignored except to note in passing that many of them see her as not vulnerable to carnal concerns: these critics assume that Isabel can be placed on a pedestal of purity in men's minds and held there as some ideal of the eternal virgin awash in the white light of her intelligence precisely because she remains for them untainted by earthy sexuality. These men fail to recognize that the experiences that contribute to her expanding sexual awareness detract from her personal beauty no more than the blooming of a rose detracts from the integrity of the tightly furled bud.

Some of Peter Buitenhuis's comments represent quite well the opinion of the majority of Isabel's critics. On the one hand, he pays her great tribute:

There is scarcely a finer conscience
in all fiction than that of Isabel Archer.

She belongs in that great gallery of women of world literature who have lived intensely--women like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Richardson's Pamela, Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, and George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke. These are characters so vitally at the center of their fictional world that they become part of the landscape of the reader's mind. The literary tradition to which Isabel and her story belong springs undoubtedly from the sentimental form invented by Samuel Richardson in Pamela, in which the innocent and good heroine is betrayed by the smooth villain. Isabel herself, however, has more affinities with intellectual heroines like Dorothea Brooke. The reader experiences the analytical consciousness of these women rather than sharing their emotional vicissitudes, as he does with earlier heroines. In writers with the skill of George Eliot and James, the drama of consciousness is just as exciting to the aroused reader as the drama of emotional action. (p. 6)

Buitenhuis, unfortunately, suggests that an "intellectual heroine" cannot also be a sensual woman. Isabel is like Dorothea Brooke in many ways. What Buitenhuis does not point out is that Dorothea, physically healthy and sexually aware, discovers to her sorrow that the pedantic old fraud Casaubon (in real life, cads like him cause true scholars to be mistakenly held in disrepute) is sexually cold and physically lacking. The drama of consciousness for both Isabel and Dorothea includes sexual concerns as well as intellectual ones.

Later, Buitenhuis says,

The most obvious predecessor of Isabel in American fiction is Hester Prynne of The Scarlet Letter. At the end of the novel she, like Isabel, refuses the easy way out and chooses to return to the town where she had made her original decision and live out its consequences. (p. 9)

It is again unfortunate that Buitenhuis does not recognize other--perhaps more important--similarities between these two characters. Neither does Leon Edel, who says Isabel "in no way resembled" Hester (Intro., p. v) and that her drama is one of "suppressed passion" (Intro., p. xx). When all is said and done, Buitenhuis, Edel, and many others find Isabel--unlike Hester--"sexually cold." (Later, in The Grasping Imagination: The American Writings of Henry James, Buitenhuis says Isabel shares the "Puritanism and sexual coldness" of the Wentworth girls in The Europeans.³) Buitenhuis specifically states, "Isabel was, James noted, 'a weak agent'--and surely he had in mind far more than the usual Victorian stress on 'the weaker sex'" (p. 7). Buitenhuis's conclusion here goes awry. Based on this mistaken premise, like many before him, Buitenhuis draws other wrong conclusions. He correctly states, "Another romance element in The Portrait

is the awakening of the sleeping beauty. Isabel's European experience awakens her to the richness and complexity of life, as well as to its evil" (pp. 9-10); but then, he is again mistaken when he goes on to say, "The one kiss mentioned in the novel--at the very end--awakens her in another way, to the power of sexuality, which she rejects in fleeing back inside the house of Gardencourt" (p. 10).

Isabel's reactions to this famous kiss and her final rejection of Caspar Goodwood have been widely misconstrued by numerous critics. Fred B. Millett in his introduction to the novel comments on Isabel's "shocking experience of receiving Caspar Goodwood's first kiss."⁴ It is ridiculous to assume that this is the first time Goodwood has kissed Isabel just because this is the only kiss actually described by the author. It is the first time he has kissed her since she became another man's wife: a pertinent issue here that many of the critics evidently deem of small significance. Of the kiss Edmond L. Volpe in "James's Theory of Sex" says, "Her reactions reveal . . . perhaps, as some critics have suggested, her fear of the sexuality Caspar represents."⁵ What sexuality? Sexuality has to do with sensitivity, feeling,

consideration of another person--attributes which the selfish, hard-headed Caspar Goodwood knows little to nothing about. As Professor William E. McMahan of Western Kentucky University says, Caspar Goodwood has the sexuality of "an iron nail." Illogically, many critics continue touting Caspar's "sexuality" while proclaiming the fear or lack of sexuality in Isabel. Leon Edel in "Two Kinds of Egotism" proclaims, "Her flight from honest Caspar may be in part the sexual inhibition of a puritanically-bred girl in Victorian times" (TCI, p. 111). Dorothea Krook in "Two Problems in The Portrait of a Lady" says, "Isabel's revulsion from the 'violence' of the sexual passion itself . . . is so clearly apparent in the final episode with Caspar Goodwood" (TCI, p. 104). Arnold Kettle says, "The scene with Goodwood is indeed very remarkable with its candid, if tortured, facing of a sexual implication which James is apt to sheer off."⁶ Kettle should reread James as should Albert Mordell who says, "James skirted around the aspects of life and love."⁷ While Dorothy Van Ghent does not see Isabel as naturally "cold," and even though she notes some of Goodwood's obvious shortcomings, she still concludes, "Isabel's final refusal of Caspar and of sexual possession is tragic, for it is to

a sterile marriage that she returns" (Perspectives, p. 129). Tony Tanner in "The Fearful Self" says that Isabel rejects Goodwood "out of a distinct disinclination to enter a firm physical embrace" and he, too, perceives this action as a rejection of the sexual. He characterizes Isabel as "cold and dry." Then of the actual last episode with Goodwood Tanner says, "I am not fully certain of James's intention here, but the effect is this. For a long time she has wondered if her true fate, the true realization of her self, should not have been with Goodwood. Now for the first time she is subjected to the full force of his sexual claims. It is a shattering experience, but it is also a release. She was not made to go that way" (TCI, pp. 70, 72, 80). Richard Poirier in "Drama in The Portrait of a Lady" summarizes the opinion of the majority of Isabel's critics on this issue when he states, "The suggestions of sexual fear in her reactions to Caspar begin very early, they are too recurrent to be ignored, and they reach a melodramatic climax at Gardencourt when he makes his final appeal for her love" (TCI, p. 34).

Several critics even see Isabel as "essentially virginal" in her behavior with Goodwood at the end. For example, Charles Roberts Anderson in Person, Place and Thing in Henry James's Novels says, "Her

resistance suggests she is still afraid of sexual love, still essentially virginal in spite of years of marriage."⁸ F. O. Matthiessen in "The Painter's Sponge and Varnish Bottle" also sees her as "essentially virginal" (Perspectives, p. 82). R. W. Stallman in "Some Rooms from 'The Houses that James Built'" also says Isabel "even after her marriage . . . remains essentially virginal," but--more devastating than that--he finds her sexually frigid (TCI, p. 42). Seemingly in direct opposition, Oscar Cargill perceptively states, "James drew from the start a heroine capable of deep sexual arousal, but cautious also,"--then he is less than truly perceptive as he continues--"and inhibited." Recouping, Cargill says,

Quoting Gide's stricture, "They (James's heroines) are only winged busts; all the weight of the flesh is absent, all the shaggy, tangled undergrowth, all the wild darkness." Dupee writes, "And James himself seems to acknowledge the limitation, when, at the peril of retroactively compromising his portrait of Isabel, he shows her fleeing from Goodwood's kiss. With all his wider experience, James is more Puritan--if not simply less human--than Hawthorne, for whom, in The Scarlet Letter, the color of adultery is also the color of life-blood and of roses." Nothing could be more mistaken than Dupee's hasty romantic impression in this instance; on the other hand, nothing could be much closer to the scent of truth than Matthiessen's suggestion. . . . Bookish and without passional experience, she had married

Osmond out of illusion, but even though she had given him a child, he had never really touched the core of her nature--it needed Goodwood's kiss to do that, and Matthiessen is right in testifying to its effectiveness in revealing the virginal nature of the heroine; indeed, when the handicap of Victorian reticence is remembered, no brief episode ever revealed more, for is not the "whole shaggy, tangled undergrowth," the abhorrent darkness of her private life instantly laid bare? To the attentive reader it has already been disclosed that her relations with her husband are no longer intimate in his insistence that she knock before entering his room and in her cry, "We don't live decently together!" Yet it is to this fleshless existence that Isabel elects to return . . . rather than to surrender to the pleasure that union with Goodwood holds out. This is central, whatever other factors enter in. But to assume that the heroine has the novelist's approval in her dramatic return is to assume much too much. Here, the first use James made of some of the essential material of The Portrait in "Longstaff's Marriage" is very helpful: Diana is punished by violent sexual desire for coldly treating the appeal of a dying man. James was no Puritan--eight years earlier he had censured George Eliot for making Lydgate so sexless--but he certainly understood the ascetic temperament, the dreadful limitations of which he presents as boldly as the conventions of his day allowed. (Perspectives, p. 284)

So, in the final analysis, even Cargill sees Isabel--because of what he considers her ascetic nature--as choosing not to have a life of sexual fulfillment.

In the light of so many critics who find Isabel as sexually lacking, based on this kiss particularly, it is very interesting to find that a woman (Lady

F. P. Verney) writing in 1882 saw in this same incident ample indication for proclaiming that Isabel was no lady at all. Donald M. Murray in an unpublished dissertation "The Critical Reception of Henry James in English Periodicals, 1875-1916" states:

An amusing article which appeared in the Contemporary Review . . . "The Americans as Painted by Themselves" . . . contained an attack on all James's heroines, and especially on Isabel Archer. Written by an English noblewoman whose complacency rivaled that of James's Lady Barb, the article had as its thesis that American women, as revealed in the works of James and others, were so vulgar as to be beneath the contempt of well-bred folk and unworthy of the attention of artists. Prominent among the offenders was Isabel, who had allowed one man after another to propose to her; who had gone to the deathbed on one of her "lovers" in a way "not usual with well-conducted young brides"; and who, according to the insinuations at the end of the novel, was finally revealed as no "lady" at all. (Perspectives, p. 37)

Laughable as Lady Verney's comments may be in our day, it is quite likely that many Victorian ladies responded to the novel in a similar manner: the clear implication being that Isabel's behavior with the opposite sex bordered on the scandalous.

Writing as early as 1916, a woman who clearly does not agree with Lady Verney is Rebecca West. West feels James limits woman's options to those of a "sexual being" rather than those of a human

being.⁹

H. G. Flinn and Howard C. Key precipitated a raging though short-lived controversy in "Henry James and Gestation" by first asserting that Isabel's baby was born "just six months after her marriage to Osmond," and then by speculating on possibilities:

First, the baby was perfectly legitimate but premature--not unlikely at all, since it died an early death. This explanation is such an easy, obvious way out, that it is disconcerting to find James not using it. The baby gets scarcely any mention.

The second assumption is that James knew exactly what he was doing and that he intended the baby to have been conceived out of wedlock. In other words, Isabel married Gilbert Osmond because she had to. Pregnancy begins to be visible to the naked eye after three months. This interpretation puts an entirely different light not only upon the novel but upon James's conception of fresh, young American character in mortal combat with the insidious subtleties of European refinement. Isabel Archer can no longer be the spotless Diana, the high-principled, noble example of American womanhood betrayed by the machinations of both her well-wishers and her not-so-well-wishers. She becomes just another high-spirited young girl who played with fire and almost got burnt, who was perhaps blackmailed into marriage. At first blush, the patriotic mind shrinks from this spectacle of semi-depravity. The ironies of the situation reach out in all directions, and one cannot help feeling that James might well have been tempted into this purposeful ambiguity as he was tempted into others.¹⁰

Jack E. Wallace in "Isabel and the Ironies" and John C. Broderick in "'Henry James and Gestation': A Reply" refute the evidence and claims of Flinn and Key. Broderick adamantly states:

May I speak out in defense of the honor of a lady, Isabel Archer, the lady of American fiction? In doing so, I would simultaneously exonerate her from the suspicion of premarital dalliance and her author, Henry James, from vagueness "on gestational processes," sinister diabolical intentions respecting his heroine, and/or carelessness in the art of fiction. . . . Although some references are in round numbers, Isabel's marriage and the birth and death of her child are all dated with precision and propriety. . . . If objection be made to the reference to the child, it is that this potentially meaningful detail is casually handled, not that it contains too deep ironies and too fruitful ambiguities. . . . To reduce The Portrait of a Lady to a paltry tale of "playing with fire" and being "blackmailed into marriage" is unworthy. Not only would this be inconsistent with Isabel's "virginal" nature, a recognizable facet of her character not necessarily approved by James; it also defames a fictional character of dignity and nobility, whatever her limitations. Her marriage is a tragic involvement in circumstances, not to be accounted for so simply. I do not mean, of course, that premarital sexual activity cannot be treated in fiction with dignity; I merely insist that James's novel is something else again.¹¹

Howard C. Key gets in the last word in "Author's Comment":

Messrs. Wallace and Broderick are correct in their contention that we over-

looked James's setting Isabel's marriage in the month of June. It seems to me, however, that our correctors have overstated their case when they refer to James's handling of the time element in this affair as precise, obvious, or even casual. . . . The only figures (round, unimaginative, or otherwise) in the immediate vicinity of the 40-month gap bear out the main thesis of our article: that an inexact reference at this point is, to rephrase a borrowed "Jamesism," something less than felicitous--but certainly not calamitous.

It is regrettable that Messrs. Wallace and Broderick read into our article a malicious attack upon James's literary artistry. Even were we not the ardent admirers of James that we are, we would scarcely have the temerity to undertake the impossible task of diminishing such a universally recognized reputation. By treating the apparent oversight in a light manner and indulging in some obviously far-fetched speculation, we had hoped to indicate that we considered the whole matter trivial and inconsequential. Our efforts in this direction were mistaken, alas, for an irreverence toward James and Isabel which neither of us feels.¹²

Most interesting in this exchange is the sincerity and height of the feelings involved on the part of the critics, especially the demand for a reverent homage toward Isabel Archer.

No reverent homage for Isabel is forthcoming from critics who agree with William Bysshe Stein and Henry Adams. No pedestal either. Stein quotes Henry Adams's words of 1881: "James knows almost nothing of women but the mere outside; he never

was married. This new writer not only knows women, but also ladies; the rarest of literary gifts" (Perspectives, p. 166). Stein continues in his "The Portrait of a Lady: Vis Inertiae" with,

As the subversive italics of "ladies" suggest, Adams looks upon the title with humorous suspicion as if it were treason against the nature of woman, a betrayal of the lineage of Eve. And so, too, he views Isabel, or so one might guess. He assumes that James wants the reader to take her suffering seriously and to steep himself in her moral predicament. Logically, Adams resents this defamation of woman. Isabel, in his eyes, is a fleshless robot, a contemptuous prig who flaunts her impotent femininity in the guise of innocence. Thus he feels that James knows nothing about woman's instinctual life. (Perspectives, p. 166)

Stein agrees with Adams in this estimation of Isabel, but he disagrees with him in his assessment of James: Stein feels James does a superb job in The Portrait of a Lady of deliberately presenting a "comedy of self-deception," and Stein shares Adams's cynical view of the nineteenth-century American woman as portrayed in Adams's The Education (Perspectives, pp. 166-183). Stein describes this view:

In a world created by male ingenuity there is no place for woman. Where before she shaped her life in accordance with the demands of nature and her own human nature, **she** now seeks to understand her destiny in the abstractions of art and religion.

Her ancient primordial energy, over the centuries gradually enervated by participation in the affairs of the masculine world, has at last reduced her to the innocuousness of static electricity. Her ardors are inflamed by the affectations of thought, not by the fever of blood. No longer is she the aggressive proponent of instinctual values; she has been forced into retreat by disloyalty to her invulnerable sexuality. . . . Lurking behind . . . culture is the wild, rebellious primitive, the force within herself and without herself in the shape of her lovers from which she flees. Ashamed of the Eve in her genetic constitution, she affects a self-blinded innocence; she assumes the role of woman which has been assigned to her by, to use Adams' pertinent phrase, "the monthly-magazine-made American female." . . . She declines to acknowledge the biological vis inertiae of her sex, a force far stronger than any with which the male can affront nature in her eternal garden. (Perspectives, pp. 172, 180)

Stein says, "Isabel . . . is a product of a later generation's indiscriminate meddling with the natural impulses of the female nature; . . . it has given the young girl . . . a distorted notion of what demands life made upon her sex." He says, "She invariably self-dramatizes her unhappiness before her friends, in her studied reticence perversely enjoying her role of a Victorian Griselda" (Perspectives, pp. 179, 167). Stein goes on to say that Isabel has

traits which Adams associated with the evolution of the sexless woman. She was

oblivious to her role in nature, the vis inertiae with which the female had long controlled the world. Instead, like the male, she was obsessed with the abstraction of independence and freedom. Indeed, she wanted to compete with the male on his terms and with his kind of power. She . . . resented any surrender to the primal instincts of her sex. . . . She has ceased to believe in the drive of female sexuality. Or perhaps, as in her early exhibitions of Victorian priggishness, she had unconsciously willed herself into sexlessness to achieve the relationship between the sexes which Adams so aptly describes: "Already the American man sometimes felt surprised at finding himself regarded as sexless; the American woman was oftener surprised at finding herself regarded as sexual." . . . The heroine's attitude toward normal emotions figures a betrayal of her womanhood, for she relinquishes nature's definition of her authority. . . . Less and less, the magnetism of primitive woman is permitted to express itself in a prosperous and artificial society; more and more, it compromises itself and is compromised. (Perspectives, pp. 168, 169, 171, 172)

Stein concludes his scathing criticism of Isabel with the pronouncement: "The promiscuous charity of a rootless and sterile commercialism passes a sentence of doom upon the redemptive feminine in twentieth-century culture. James's portrait of Isabel, like Adams' Education, is certainly a prophecy that has come true in our own times" (Perspectives, p. 183).

Poor Stein is hopelessly chauvinist. He insultingly implies that while a man can be both

intelligent and instinctively sexual a woman cannot. He seems to lack the ability to discriminate between unbridled, uncontrolled lust and the free and natural sexual passion of love. Poor man, what sad experience must he have had to cause him to judge all women by such bitterly distorted perception? Annette Niemtow in "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady" avers, "Stein is suffering from historical parochialism as well as from an odd, if not untypical, fantasy about women's sexuality."¹³ The conscientious reader must disagree with Stein and agree with James G. Moseley, Jr. in A Complex Inheritance: The Idea of Self-Transcendence in the Theology of Henry James, Sr., and the Novels of Henry James when he says, "James obviously regards his heroine with tenderness, respect, and fascination, and he means to elicit such a response from the reader also."¹⁴

There is both insight and error--especially error concerning Isabel's sexuality and James's attitude toward it--in Richard Chase's statement in "The Lesson of the Master":

Is James himself subtly vindictive in his attitude toward Isabel? . . . Even supposing, as there is some speculative ground for doing, that James has a neurotic involvement with his heroine which leads him to fear her female aggressiveness and thus to take satisfaction and

to derive a feeling of security in showing her, though possessed of animal spirits, to be sexually cold, and in leading her, finally, to her cruel fate--even supposing on these or other grounds a genuine animosity on the part of James toward his heroine, the fact remains that this is surmounted by his admiration of her and his profound sympathy with her. And in any case Isabel is so completely created a character that she lives her life independently of the approval or disapproval the author may feel toward her, whether we deduce his feeling from the novel itself or from our knowledge of his life and temperament.

Sometimes moved, as one must be, by a desire for a more earthly and simple morality than James's usually is, one wishes that Isabel Archer were more like Kate Croy of The Wings of the Dove or even the unpleasantly named Fleda Vetch in The Spoils of Poynton, girls in whom the general quality of self-assertion has a sexual component. But despite her deeply repressed sexuality, Isabel remains among the most complex, the most fully realized, and the most humanly fascinating of James's characters. (TCI, p. 23)

What damage Chase's "just supposing" does to the uninitiated reader of James in predisposing him to view The Portrait of a Lady in this way! Chase clearly presumes too much. He is one of those critics who have reached the wrong conclusions based on the wrong assumptions concerning the sexuality of both James and his character Isabel.

There is an essential similarity in Arnold Kettle's observation:

If we are to isolate in James's novels the quality that is ultimately their limitation, it is to the core of his point of view, his philosophy, that we are led. The limiting factor in The Portrait of a Lady is the failure of James in the last analysis to dissociate himself from Isabel's errors of understanding. (Perspectives, p. 110)

Maxwell Geismar in "Nostalgic Poison" agrees with Kettle. Geismar asserts, "The first major heroine of James's was a woman who teased, flirted with and then fled from all of her possible lovers; while she took the one man who would never awaken her, and who had to destroy her" (TCI, p. 50).

Geismar's scathing criticism of James continues:

On the conscious level The Portrait of a Lady must be viewed only as a kind of superior romance melodrama which is entertaining to read, and completely inadequate as serious literary commentary on the life of James's period, or certainly our own. That the novel has another hidden source of interest is due simply to the unacknowledged conflict between the intuitions of the artist, including his own sexual fears, inhibitions, and aversions which are projected through his revealing heroine, and the "literary intention" which he consciously rendered to his readers and, yes, to himself. (TCI, p. 50)

Thus Geismar thinks James was unaware of what he had done with Isabel.

While Peter Buitenhuis is correct in his supposition that James "knew perfectly well what he

was doing," Buitenhuis, because of his wrongly pre-conceived ideas concerning Isabel's sexuality, reaches conclusions that instead of correctly interpreting James's meaning are actually antithetical. Buitenhuis says,

The reasons for Isabel's decision to return to her husband do not take us beyond the book's conclusion but back to its contents. I would stress only one aspect of the meaning of Isabel's return to Osmond. Partly because of his own temperament and partly because of the reticence of the publishers of the time, James did not spell out the sexual elements of his situation. All the same, he knew perfectly well what he was doing, and it would be a mistake to assume that he was not aware of the sexual coldness of Isabel Archer (whose surname suggests the chaste Diana, goddess of the hunt). As her most sympathetic but most acute critic, Ralph, remarks to her: "You want to see, but not to feel." Isabel is a true descendant of the Puritans, whose distrust of emotions led them to rely too much on the analyzing intellect. She shies away from the sexuality in Lord Warburton and particularly in Caspar Goodwood. She commits herself to Osmond at least in part because he is a "sterile dilettante," as Ralph calls him, and offers no sexual threat. It seems to me that through this theme in the novel, James is making not only an evaluation of his heroine but also a criticism of the effect that American life has on some of its citizens in suppressing and distorting natural sexuality. (p. 12)

Still again, Buitenhuis refers to Isabel's American "faults" that lead to her "personal tragedy," such

as "her innocence, her emotional coldness, and her slightly chauvinistic confidence and pride" (pp. 12-13). Seeming mainly to agree with Buitenhuis, Fred B. Millett declares,

Isabel Archer's choice of Gilbert Osmond as a husband is a result . . . of both the admirable and the not so admirable elements in her nature. Her excessive confidence in her own judgment, her sense of her own superiority, her shying away from indications of violent passion, are no less weighty elements in her decision than her eagerness for experience, the liveliness and freshness of her responses, her admiration for what seems to her unworldliness, the superiority to things material, a devotion to things beautiful. (p. xxxii)

But, while Buitenhuis thinks that James is using his heroine to point out weaknesses in sexuality and sexual attitude engendered by a Puritan society, Millett, of a contrasting opinion, goes further in attributing some of those same shortcomings to James himself:

In the essay, "The Art of Fiction," James said that the aim of fiction is to give an illusion of life; in Isabel Archer, he has created a personality that lives, in her complexity, her curious blend of strength and weakness, her markedly individual view of herself and of her relation to life, and her painful fidelity to the ideal she has set for herself. . . . Another possible source of the living quality James was able to impart to Isabel Archer is his bestowal on her of a con-

siderable number of traits and experiences of his own younger self. . . .

It might even be argued that James bestowed on Isabel Archer some of his own reluctance to involve himself in gross emotions, some of his own fastidiousness in the face of passional experience. One of the earliest notes James strikes in his characterization of his heroine is the "pure and proud" virginal note: "she held 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 the other sex." A certain shrinking fastidiousness is one of the deeper elements in Isabel Archer's personality. In every crisis that involves a strong sexual emotion, her reactions are tinged with fear. Thus, when Lord Warburton makes it evident that he is "interested" in her, she experiences "a certain fear." Again, when Caspar Goodwood follows her to England, proposes for a second time, and is rejected, "She stood still for a moment, listening, and at last she heard Caspar Goodwood walk out of the sitting-room and close the door behind him. She stood still a little longer and then, by an irresistible impulse, dropped on her knees before her bed and hid her face in her hands. She was not praying; she was trembling--trembling all over." Later, when she begins to be moved by the charms of Gilbert Osmond, she responds to his declaration of love with "an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread--the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in the bank--which there was a terror of having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out." In the light of this attitude, her cli-

mactic reaction to the only occasion when she is confronted by a profoundly felt passion is not surprising. (pp. xxv-xxix)

Apart from gross misinterpretation of some passages of the text here, the question of Isabel's "fear of sex" that has been touted by numerous critics needs to be examined and seen for what it actually is--but, later.

For now, this survey of the critics' opinions concerning Isabel's sexuality--which has inevitably included some discussion of James's attitude toward sex--will conclude with Dorothea Krook's assessment. Krook in "Two Problems in The Portrait of a Lady" concurs with most of the other critics insofar as Isabel's sexual awareness is concerned. Krook goes further and explains how--in her view--Henry James shared his heroine's distaste for the carnal (In a note here, Krook comments on "James's own imperfect capacity for love at this period of his life and the similar defect in his heroine Isabel Archer."), but then she concludes:

His life's experience, it seems, contrived to teach him what he appears not to have known at the time he wrote The Portrait of a Lady--that passion, with all its dangers, **is the** sacred fount of all creative endeavor, and that to deny or sacrifice it in the name of any ideal, however noble,

is a delusion which succeeds only in defeating the noble end for which the denial or sacrifice was made. The Beast in the Jungle is . . . Henry James's most poignant testimony to this hardest, most painful lesson of his life; and having learnt it, he characteristically redeems his tragic error in the most important works of his late period--The Sacred Fount to begin with, followed by The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl--in which the power of sexual passion to redeem (as well as destroy) is exhibited with a fullness of knowledge to be found nowhere else in the English novel. (TCI, pp. 97-106)

A careful reading of The Portrait of a Lady provides ample internal evidence that James was aware of the importance of sexual passion at the time he wrote it. The foreshadowing of the later, more clearly developed and restated theme of "the power of sexual passion to redeem" is present in The Portrait of a Lady to anyone who will read carefully and fairly.

Chapter I.

Notes

¹ Introd., The Portrait of a Lady, by Henry James (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), pp. viii-ix. All further references to this work appear in the text.

² Twentieth Century Interpretations of THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 1. All further references to this work appear in the text; when referring to the works of writers other than Buitenhuis, the further clarification of TCI will be used.

³ The Grasping Imagination: The American Writings of Henry James (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 109.

⁴ Introd., The Portrait of a Lady, by Henry James (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), p. xxix. All further references to this work appear in the text.

⁵ "James's Theory of Sex," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 13 (Spring, 1958), 46.

⁶ William T. Stafford, ed., Perspectives on James's THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 108. All further references to this work appear in the text. When referring to the works of writers other than Stafford, the further clarification of Perspectives will be used.

⁷ Ed., Discovery of a Genius: William Dean Howells and Henry James (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961), p. 12.

⁸ Person, Place and Thing in Henry James's Novels (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 119.

⁹ Henry James (1916; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1968), pp. 53-54.

¹⁰ "Henry James and Gestation," College English, 21 (Dec. 1959), 174.

¹¹ "'Henry James and Gestation': A Reply," College English, 21 (May 1960), 497-499.

¹² "Author's Comment," College English, 21 (May 1960), 499-500.

¹³ "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady," American Literature, 47, No. 3 (Nov. 1975), 383.

¹⁴ A Complex Inheritance: The Idea of Self-Transcendence in the Theology of Henry James, Sr., and the Novels of Henry James (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press and the American Academy of Religion, 1975), p. 39.

Chapter II.

Isabel's fear

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.
--Emily Dickinson

Most critics in finding Isabel either "sexually cold" or "frigid" point to the many instances in the novel when Isabel exhibits caution or fear of one kind or another and ultimately find in them all a "fear of sex." More than this, these critics usually begin with Isabel's last episode with Caspar Goodwood, using it as a touchstone upon which to base all further assumptions and conclusions concerning what they deem to be Isabel's aversion for, even revulsion of, sexuality. For example, Richard Poirier in "Drama in The Portrait of a Lady" cites "the supposition that Caspar's kiss in the garden is what impels her to leave for Rome almost immediately." He also notes "the suggestions of sexual fear in her reactions to Caspar"; then, he further proclaims,

We have here another case where particular

psychological suggestiveness is more inviting than the expressive rhythm of the whole novel allows us to admit. If Isabel is motivated by sexual fear in this scene, then all previous acts of high principle might equally be explained . . . as evasions of psychological distress.¹

In partial conjunction with Poirier, Dorothea Krook also alleges:

The last encounter between Isabel and Goodwood is not only peculiarly significant in itself but also illuminates previous, less conspicuous, episodes bearing on the sexual theme; and by tracing these connections one can . . . arrive at a reasonably complete view of James's treatment of this theme. (TCI, p. 101)

Krook and others approach the sexual theme backwards as if this final episode with Goodwood had the most telling significance of all: as if their twisted interpretation of it were a key to crack the code of the sexual significance of the entire novel.

While Krook (convinced that James was projecting his own sexual attitude at the time through his heroine) is wrong in her ultimate conclusion that Isabel not only is intensely afraid of violent sexual passion but is enveloped by a sense of utter distaste and repugnance for it, she is correct in some of her explanations of Isabel's "fear in

general":

That a young woman of Isabel Archer's sensibilities should, in that time and place in particular, feel a fear of the sexual need cause no surprise. Its mystery and terror is something that not only the young and immature experience; and only the most doctrinaire of modern theorists would want to dispute the naturalness of the fear, and to that extent also its "rightness," in someone like Isabel. This, however, seems not to be the whole explanation. The rest has to do with what we feel in Isabel as a tendency to withdraw--a tendency to withhold herself, to refuse to surrender herself to the relationship as a whole and a fortiori to its sexual demands. . . . The question for us is whether this seeming coldness and hardness are due to what would nowadays be called sexual frigidity, or, if they are not due to this, what their cause in fact is.

I believe it has nothing to do with frigidity, either in intention or effect, and has everything to do with that aspect of Isabel's nature . . . which James himself saw as the center of interest in his engaging young woman. When a young woman is so constituted as to have, besides an enquiring mind and an independent spirit, an unquenchable passion for knowledge derived from direct, firsthand experience, the most serious threat to such aspirations . . . is that constituted by marriage and the completeness of the surrender it involves--for someone at any rate who, like Isabel Archer, takes this absolute view of the marriage bond. . . . The seeming coldness and hardness are accordingly to be seen as self-protective indeed; but the end for which the self is being protected is . . . in the highest degree noble and worthwhile, and as such invites not censure but compassion for the means--the "coldness" and the "hardness," and the fear from which they spring--to which Isabel must have recourse in order to safeguard that precious end.

This . . . is James's principal intention

in emphasizing his heroine's "fear" at certain crucial moments in the story.
(TCI, pp. 101-105)

The case against Isabel's being frigid is more directly and more astutely argued by Annette Niemtzw in "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady":

The charge often levelled at James's heroine, that she suffers from a near psychotic fear of sexuality, is hopelessly misplaced. . . . To Henry James . . . Isabel was a delightful, albeit difficult, rebel. The Portrait of a Lady is not "James's treatment of the stagnant emotions of the Victorian female"; rather, it is a study of how a woman is to behave if she is to be a "lady." While the novel begins as a study of a single woman, searching for options other than marriage, who must control her sexuality because it could shatter her and society's notion of what is "decent," it ends as a study of the same woman, now married, who continues to control her sexuality because it threatens her respectability, morality, and marriage. When Isabel asserts, "I don't want to begin life by marrying," she is adventurous, not frigid.²

Niemtzow is absolutely correct. Those critics who label Isabel as frigid are not simply wrong, they are ludicrously wrong.

While Tony Tanner in "The Fearful Self" declares, "The feeling which Isabel Archer most consistently experiences is fear," he uses the term to cover a much broader compass. He states,

She is frightened by Warburton's offer, of Caspar Goodwood's persistence, and Gilbert Osmond's anger; she is frightened of sexual passion, of her unexpected wealth, of her 'freedom'; but beneath all these specific apprehensions there is, she admits, a deeper, radical fear--fear of herself. . . . Her fear, her error, and her final resolution are . . . crucial stages on a psychic journey which forms the very heart of the novel. This journey is the journey of an uncommitted, undefined self which sets out to find the right house to live in and the right partner to live with. (TCI, p. 67)

Tanner, too, perceives Isabel as "frightened of sexual passion," and this is not completely in error, but the problem becomes one of qualification--of perceiving just "how" she is apprehensive.

Is this fear so touted by the critics actually indicative of natural sexual coldness in her nature? No. Of course not. Apart from the fact that there is no such thing as "natural sexual coldness," the "fear" of a virgin, whether male or female, is not so much fear as anxiety, or rather not fear of sex per se, but a kind of fear of the unknown: a fear grounded in anticipation--a kind of deep and meaningful excitement that emphasizes the importance of this awesome unknown. It is in no way an indication of revulsion. Richard Adams, in a contemporary work of fiction, states the case rather well--with shades of William Blake--in the following

passage:

I recall an old man, a friend of our family, once telling me that what he remembered most vividly about the 1914-18 War was the frightening realization, upon reaching the front, that here all lifelong assumptions --the safety and predictability one had always taken for granted and come to rely upon--did not apply. Continuous danger and uncertainty altered the very eyes through which one saw the world and affected everything one thought and did. A few years later I heard a man who had worked down a coal-mine say almost exactly the same thing. That great area of life dominated by Aphrodite--the area of sexual passion--is very similar; or so it has often seemed to me. What is it like? It is like a deep wood at night, through which virtually everyone has to pass; everyone, that is, who lives to grow up. There are no generally accepted rules. Certainly there are paths--well-beaten paths--and many are able to keep to them uneventfully, or at any rate to look as though they were doing so, and to appear, outwardly, to know what they are doing. Some--how deliberately and how much in control of themselves none can tell--leave them, calling out that they have found better; and others fall in behind, while the rest shout angrily that they ought to come back and desist from such foolish and dangerous goings-on. Some sit down on the outskirts of the wood, preferring not to venture at all into so frightening a place; and several of these are nevertheless attacked and injured by wild beasts. Everywhere is confusion and tumult--people calling to one another in encouragement, reproach or desperation; would-be leaders shouting follow them--they know a sure track; people who have decided to break away and are stumbling against others, or simply falling down in the dark among nettles and brambles. In glades, fires are burning, giving out warmth and light, and round these people

are gathered for reassurance--cooking, singing, resting--sincerely feeling (largely owing to respite from the surrounding darkness and danger) that they are having the time of their lives. There are bodies in that wood, too; some of them murdered, or dead by their own hand. It is not a bit like Midsummer Night's Dream. And if it were not for Aphrodite, none of this would happen. There would be no forest: a plain, perhaps, or mountains, with dangers of their own; but not the dark forest by night.³

With her strong will and energetic spirit, Isabel does not fit the part of one who would not "venture": with her background and her personality, this healthy heroine is capable not only of picking herself up when she stumbles but of blazing new trails in the "dark forest by night" or the dark sinister abode of Gilbert Osmond. Before her marriage, Isabel is attracted, not repelled, by the mystery and intrigue that surrounds Osmond. Her anxiety or "dread" at Osmond's proposal merely indicates how seriously it affects her. Her feelings for Osmond are what ultimately slips the bolt that guards her innocence.

Isabel's "fear" for the most part has been explained, but some further elaboration of its nature may help to remove doubts of those who persist in having them. Her anxiety or "fear" here is actually a good sign. A subject of great per-

sonal importance is not to be taken lightly. Whether she accepts or rejects Osmond's proposal, her decision will affect her whole life. As is true of anyone, the greatest gift she has to offer is herself. Once given, it cannot be taken back.

In a television discussion of amoro-phobia or the "fear of love," Roger Callahan--who has been practicing psycho-therapy for over 30 years--recently said,

It's actually a very good symptom. If you had no capacity for intense passion, you couldn't be hurt. It's the protection against really being hurt, to be very specific about amoro-phobia. . . . You have to take the risk. . . .

It's a sign of life. It's a sign that you have . . . an enormous capacity to be in love and to be vulnerable.⁴

In the same conversation, Dr. Callahan also said that the absence of "this anxiety or this phobia . . . means there's nothing there." So, in actuality, the evidence that the critics point to when declaring Isabel "sexually cold" refutes their interpretation and makes a substantial case for the argument that Isabel, capable of great sexual passion and romantic love, is wise to be afraid.

With this much of a background, and a general suggestion of why so many critics have misread the

nature of Isabel Archer, it is now time to make a careful investigation of Isabel's sexual drama as it is actually presented by James in the novel.

Chapter II.

Notes

¹ Peter Buitenhuis, ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 34. All further references to this work appear in the text accompanied by the further clarification of TCI.

² "Marriage and the New Woman in The Portrait of a Lady," American Literature, 47, No 3 (Nov. 1975), p. 383.

³ The Girl in a Swing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 135.

⁴ "Amoro Phobia," Donahue, ABC, 28 April 1982.

Chapter III.

The Men and Women in Isabel's Life

Many critics fall into the trap of letting other mistaken--although perhaps renowned--critics predispose them toward The Portrait of a Lady so that instead of actually experiencing for themselves all the "felt life" emanating from the novel, they simply tread what they perceive to be the safer, well-worn pathway--no matter how far astray it leads them. The reader must suspend all prejudices to view the magic of Aphrodite's realm in the novel for what it is. All the available men we come to know within Isabel's sphere fall under her spell. Her suitors perseveringly pursue this young vivacious girl who is full of the promise of woman's potential.

Although the good Caspar is chronologically Isabel's first suitor, James initially introduces the Lord Warburton as he is enjoying the hospitality of Ralph Touchett and his father at tea on the grounds at Gardencourt. Even in James's descriptions of the appearances of the characters he gives definite clues to personalities and dispositions. While the elderly

Mr. Touchett's most important act is that of dying and leaving Isabel a fortune, he, too, has a bearing on the sexual connotation of the novel: first in his playful sparring with Warburton, in his comments on women in general and those on his wife specifically, and later in the hint of a possible past relationship between himself and the family friend Madame Merle. In his close-up of Mr. Touchett, James says,

He certainly had a great experience of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye.¹

James describes Warburton himself as,

a remarkably well-made man of five-and-thirty . . . with firm, straight features, a lively grey eye and the rich adornment of a chestnut beard. . . . He was booted and spurred . . . he wore a white hat, which looked too large for him; he held his two hands behind him, and in one of them--a large, white, well-shaped fist--was crumpled a pair of soiled dog-skin gloves. (p. 19)

The reader cannot miss the pretentiousness in this gentleman's appearance. Shortly after when the American reader learns that this man is an English Lord, the slight ostentatiousness is understood, though not completely forgiven. In direct contrast is Ralph Touchett:

Tall, lean, loosely and feebly put together, he had an ugly, sickly, witty, charming face, furnished, but by no means decorated [as Warburton's obviously was "decorated"], with a straggling moustache and whisker. He looked clever and ill. . . . His gait had a shambling, wandering quality; he was not very firm on his legs. (p. 19)

So, while Warburton flaunts his physical beauty to a fault, the one thing poor Ralph Touchett lacks is physical health. This lack renders Ralph impotent insofar as the role of active suitor is concerned. Ralph can love Isabel--as he does from the first meeting with his cousin--but it is to his eternal frustration that he can only love her platonically.

In turn, only pages later, it becomes clear that Ralph Touchett possesses the most important attributes that Warburton lacks. Warburton's grand outward appearance belies his lack of spirit and zest for living. The ironic dimension in James comes into obvious play here: the physically ill young man finds life "only too interesting" while the beautiful physical specimen is "bored," even proclaiming he is "sick of life" (p. 21). Mr. Touchett points out some of Warburton's obvious faults, "You wouldn't be bored if you had something to do; but all you young men are too idle. You think too much of your pleasure. You're too fastidious, and too indolent, and too rich" (p. 22).

Under the good-natured and teasing quality of Mr. Touchett's words to Warburton lies truth in assessment of character. The following episode provides further illustration of this:

"You ought to take hold of a pretty woman," . . . said Ralph to Warburton. "He's trying hard to fall in love," he added. . . .

"The pretty women themselves may be sent flying!" Lord Warburton exclaimed.

"No, no, they'll be firm," the old man rejoined; "they'll not be affected by the social and political changes. . . ."

"You mean they won't be abolished? Very well, then, I'll lay hands on one as soon as possible and tie her round my neck as a life preserver."

"The ladies will save us," said the old man; "that is the best of them will--for I make a difference between them. Make up to a good one and marry her, and your life will become much more interesting." . . . "There's no knowing what an interesting woman might do with me."

"I should like to see your idea of an interesting woman," said his friend.

"My dear fellow, you can't see ideas--especially such highly ethereal ones as mine. If I could only see it myself--that would be a great step in advance."

"Well, you may fall in love with whomsoever you please; but you mustn't fall in love with my niece," said the old man.

His son broke into a laugh. "He'll think you mean that as a provocation! My dear father, you've lived with the English for thirty years, and you've picked up a good many of the things they say. But you've never learned the things they don't say!"

"I say what I please," the old man returned with all his serenity. (pp. 22-23)

While Warburton may accept Mr. Touchett's advice as a challenge, the reader must conclude that Mr. Touchett sincerely meant simply what he said. Also, for all Warburton's physical attributes, the reader must wonder how literally to take this lord's comments on his "highly ethereal" ideas on women and especially his statement, "The pretty women themselves may be sent flying!" One would expect any normal man of 35 years to be more interested in the opposite sex. Warburton--perhaps rising to what he considers Mr. Touchett's bait--at least does indicate an interest in meeting Isabel and asks, "Don't you think me good enough [to fall in love with her]? Mr. Touchett replies, "I think you too good--because I shouldn't like her to marry you. . . . Moreover I'm not sure . . . that you'd be a remarkable husband" (p. 25). Further, the reader notes that Warburton is very easily influenced in changing his mind. Which leads to the question: Does he have a mind of his own or is he mentally a reflection of others' thoughts? Also, he seems quite lazily willing to consider the possibility of an "interesting woman" for his entertainment; one wonders how soon he would become "bored" when the newness wears off this toy. Later, this man who is accustomed to having everything he wants seems to grow stronger

in his pursuit of Isabel in direct proportion to her rejection of him. He has finally found "something to do," and it is much like a game of chess for him. His interest is avid so long as he fails to capture the queen.

James conveys so much in so little as when Isabel and Ralph first meet on the lawn at Gardencourt:

The girl spoke to Ralph, smiling, while she still held up the terrier. "Is this your little dog, sir?"

"He was mine a moment ago; but you've suddenly acquired a remarkable air of property in him."

"Couldn't we share him?" asked the girl. "He's such a perfect little darling."

Ralph looked at her a moment; she was unexpectedly pretty. "You may have him altogether," he then replied.

The young lady seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others; but this abrupt generosity made her blush. (p. 26)

So simply, seemingly so easily, James shows that Isabel has won Ralph's regard. The reader comes to know that Ralph has given her his heart as easily and as generously as he gave her his dog. The reader must notice, too, the contrast between Warburton's "soiled dog-skin gloves" and Ralph's living "little dog." Ralph is capable of great warm feeling while Warburton's feeling seems superficial at best.

Shown as intelligent, interesting, independent, of high spirit, and--at the moment--excited, Isabel surveys her British surroundings while Mr. Touchett takes her measure:

Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile. "I've never seen anything so beautiful as this."

"It's looking very well," said Mr. Touchett. "I know the way it strikes you. I've been through all that. But you're very beautiful yourself."

. . . What degree of alarm this young person took need not be exactly measured; she instantly rose, however, with a blush which was not a refutation. "Oh, yes, of course I'm lovely!" (p. 28)

Shortly after, Warburton announces to Ralph that Isabel is his "idea of an interesting woman." Thus Isabel's conquest of the men she has met at Gardencourt is complete and practically instantaneous. How can the critics see this girl as unemotional, cold, even sexually frigid? From the very beginning, James presents her as a girl whose passions run high. Note the examples given of her blushing. Certainly neither shame nor embarrassment is indicated here--neither is real modesty or shy confusion, though the critics persist in misreading the text in this way. Clearly in the cited instances, Isabel blushes with pleasure. Clearly, too, her male observers

acknowledge her response to them with mutual pleasure. Isabel's blush no doubt causes her face to glow with rosy, fresh color. There is nothing wrong with her circulation, and-technically speaking-sexual response is physiologically due in part to a healthy circulatory system. The fire of her passionate emotions is apparently easily stirred and, because of her expressive face, not easily hidden. The reader finds Isabel blushing often throughout the novel; her blushes always signify heightened feeling of one sort or another.

Once again, a blush does not necessarily signify guilt, shame, embarrassment, painful modesty or shy confusion; rather it can signal all sorts of emotions. It always does show a rise in passionate feeling. It always does indicate physical response. Isabel's passions burn brightly as in the Old High German "bluhhen." Note the Old Norse "blys" (torch); the Low German "blüse" (flame), "blüsen" (to set on fire), and "bleusteren" (to inflame, glow, become red). Note, too, that "blush" may mean "to shine forth, to cast a glance." Further illustrating the case, examples from various sources abound in The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary [In every case, the form is exactly that given.]:

"Anone she blusshed revolvynge in her mynde . . . That it was token of to great carnall lust."

"She changed coloure and blussyd as rudy as a rose."

"To the Nuptial Bowre I led her blushing like the Morn."

"And virgins smiled at what they blushed before."

"Catharine blushes a blush of anger."

"The young blush much more freely than the old. Women blush much more than men."

"She blushed a pretty red rose."

"She blush't out beauty."

"Ile blush you Thanks."

"Pass the happy news, Blush it through the West."

"To blush and beautifie the Cheeke again."

"Their Prerogative, which is not a blush from the people, but 'tis a beam resultant from Gods Majestie, and reflects upon the people for their good."

"The hero's warmth o'erspread His cheek with blushes."

"But her blushes are joy-flushes."

"And light's last blushes ting'd the distant hills."

"Go to, little Blushet, for this, anan, You steal forth a Laugh in the shade of your Fan."

"The peculiar blushiness of pretty servants when they have a message to deliver to nice gentlemen."

"Blushing is the most peculiar, and the most human of all expressions."

"Her blushing eyes were shedding tears of delight."

"Blossoms . . of Apples, Crabbs, Almonds, and Peaches, are Blushy, and Smell sweet."

"Black sparkling eyes, and a fresh blushy complexion."

"She answered . . with a very pleasant blushy smile."

Enough said. Case closed. Above average in so many ways, Isabel is a normally (at the very least) hot-blooded woman. While many mistaken man-made myths about woman's sexuality prevail even today, the issue was even cloudier in James's time. Perhaps even more amazing than the critics' misunderstanding the situation is James's apt insight into the simple truth of the matter. Isabel is no shrinking violet (or Pansy as the unfortunate case may be); alone on the lawn at Gardencourt in the company of three men--no matter that one is her cousin and one her uncle--whom she has just met, she revels in her element.

Isabel has largely been spared the indoctrination of women's passivity and submissiveness that Victorian culture usually dictated. Ironically much of that cultivated passive and submissive

attitude is passed on from mother to daughter. With the loss of her mother early in her childhood, Isabel was usually allowed to do just as she pleased. This was part of the reason that Isabel had not previously met her cousin Ralph and her uncle:

The aunt had quarrelled years before with her brother-in-law, after the death of her sister, taking him to task for the manner in which he brought up his three girls. Being a high-tempered man he had requested her to mind her own business, and she had taken him at his word. For many years she held no communication with him and after his death had addressed not a word to his daughters. (p. 34)

When Isabel's "crazy Aunt Lydia" does come to take her niece to Europe with her, the girl is eager for the adventure. She thinks about her life up to that time and especially remembers her much-adored father:

It was a great felicity to have been his daughter; Isabel rose even to pride in her parentage. Since his death she had seemed to see him as turning his braver side to his children and as not having managed to ignore the ugly quite so much in practice as in aspiration. But this only made her tenderness for him greater; it was scarcely even painful to have to suppose him too generous, too good-natured, too indifferent to sordid considerations. Many persons had held that he carried this indifference too far, especially the large number of those to whom he owed money. (p. 39)

At this point, James breaks in to give the reader some very important background information:

He had squandered a substantial fortune, he had been deplorably convivial, he was known to have gambled freely. A few very harsh critics went so far as to say that he had not even brought up his daughters. They had had no regular education and no permanent home; they had been at once spoiled and neglected; they had lived with nursemaids and governesses (usually very bad ones) or had been sent to superficial schools, kept by the French, from which, at the end of a month, they had been removed in tears. This view of the matter would have excited Isabel's indignation, for to her own sense her opportunities had been large. Even when her father had left his daughters for three months at Neufchatel with a French bonne who had eloped with a Russian nobleman staying at the same hotel--even in this irregular situation (an incident of the girl's eleventh year) she had been neither frightened nor ashamed, but had thought it a romantic episode in a liberal education. . . . She had had everything a girl could have: kindness, admiration, bon-bons, bouquets, the sense of exclusion from none of the privileges of the world she lived in, abundant opportunity for dancing, plenty of new dresses, the London Spectator, the latest publications, the music of Gounod, the poetry of Browning, the prose of George Eliot. (pp. 39-41)

Despite the father's ineptitude at dealing with the practical, financial matters of the world, he--more importantly for Isabel's sake--was a great success as a father. Psychologists agree that a daughter's relationship with her father in a very large degree determines how she will relate to other men. If

there is no physical abnormality, no physical or mental abuse, no obsessive fear ingrained by a mother's inordinate warnings, then psychologists often look for a bad relationship with a father as reason for a girl's sexual frigidity. Clearly none of these applies to Isabel: there is no logical reason found in her background for any paralyzing fear of sex under the right circumstances. Protected--even indulged--by her doting father, Isabel expects a certain homage as her right. Even though Isabel had lost her mother, she was not without a woman's love and companionship as a little girl. Her happiest childhood memories were of the many weeks she had spent at the New England home of her gentle grandmother, old Mrs. Archer in Albany: "somehow all her visits had a flavour of peaches" (p. 32). Of Isabel's life with her grandmother the reader is told:

The manner of life was different from that of her own home--larger, more plentiful, practically more festal; the discipline of the nursery was delightfully vague. (p. 32)

With discipline practically non-existent, this little girl grew up relatively uninhibited. Because she was not brainwashed into believing a woman is less

than she is (as many women and men have been in the past and as they still are being today, though the modern methods are more subtle and--perhaps--even more insidious), she feels she is entitled to life's adventure.

It must be noted that Lydia Touchett tried to make up for lost time in what she considered her niece's lack of a proper young lady's education. An example of this attempt and of Isabel's reactions and attitude toward it is given in the following passage during Lord Warburton's first visit back to Gardencourt after having met Isabel:

Mr. Touchett went to bed at half-past nine o'clock, but his wife remained in the drawing-room with the other members of the party. She prolonged her vigil for something less than hour, and then, rising, observed to Isabel that it was time they should bid the gentlemen good-night. Isabel had as yet no desire to go to bed; the occasion wore, to her sense, a festive character, and feasts were not in the habit of terminating so early. So, without further thought, she replied, very simply--
"Need I go, dear aunt? I'll come up in half an hour."

"It's impossible I should wait for you," Mrs. Touchett answered.

"Ah, you needn't wait! Ralph will light my candle," Isabel gaily engaged.

"I'll light your candle; do let me light your candle, Miss Archer!" Lord Warburton exclaimed. "Only I beg it shall not be before midnight."

Mrs. Touchett fixed her bright little eyes upon him a moment and transferred

them coldly to her niece. "You can't stay alone with the gentlemen. You're not--you're not at your blest Albany, my dear."

Isabel rose, blushing. "I wish I were," she said. . . . Can't I stay with my own cousin?" Isabel enquired.

"I'm not aware that Lord Warburton is your cousin."

"Perhaps I had better go to bed!" the visitor suggested. "That will arrange it."

Mrs. Touchett gave a little look of despair and sat down again. "Oh, if it's necessary, I'll stay up till midnight."

Ralph meanwhile handed Isabel her candlestick. He had been watching her; it had seemed to him her temper was involved--an accident that might be interesting. But if he had expected anything of a flare he was disappointed, for the girl simply laughed a little, nodded good-night and withdrew accompanied by her aunt. . . .

"Of course you're vexed at my interfering with you," said Mrs. Touchett.

Isabel considered. "I'm not vexed, but I'm surprised--and a good deal mystified. Wasn't it proper I should remain in the drawing-room?"

"Not in the least. Young girls here--in decent houses--don't sit alone with the gentlemen late at night."

"You were very right to tell me then," said Isabel. "I don't understand it, but I'm very glad to know it."

"I shall always tell you," her aunt answered, "whenever I see you taking what seems to me too much liberty."

"Pray do; but I don't say I shall always think your remonstrance just."

"Very likely not. You're too fond of your own ways."

"Yes, I think I'm very fond of them. But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do."

"So as to do them?" asked her aunt.

"So as to choose," said Isabel. (pp. 65-67)

Isabel is right to wonder at the strange restrictions placed on females in our society, especially in the light of the corresponding freedoms enjoyed by males. Of course, Ralph believes his mother is right because it is what he has been taught. However, Isabel does reserve the right to make her own choices. She wants to make a mark, not just be marked upon, which is something her first serious suitor Caspar Goodwood fails to understand--to Caspar, a woman's rightful destiny is to place herself in the care of a man such as himself who will know what is best for her whether she agrees or not.

It should be obvious to any reader from the beginning that Caspar Goodwood is not what Isabel wants. Her rejection of him is not so much a rejection of his sexuality as a ~~re~~jection of his style--or lack of it: it is not so much what he does as how he does it that repels her. More than that, it is a rejection of his whole mental attitude. James's description of Caspar's appearance is once again the tip-off to this character's disposition:

He was tall, strong and somewhat stiff . . . his physiognomy had an air of requesting your attention, which it rewarded according to the charm you found in blue eyes of remarkable fixedness, the eyes of a complexion other than his own, and a jaw of the somewhat

angular mould which is supposed to bespeak resolution. (p. 42)

Caspar unfortunately carries the qualities that make him a successful American industrialist over into his relationship with Isabel. That domineering, inflexible, insensitive attitude (denoted by his appearance) that overcomes competitors in a business world leaves a lover cold. Isabel had then known Caspar for a year when her aunt arrived on the scene in Albany. When Mrs. Touchett unexpectedly visited Isabel for the first time, she found her niece "seated alone with a book. . . . Her love of knowledge had a fertilising quality and her imagination was strong. There was at this time, however, a want of fresh taste in her situation" (p. 33). Notice that Caspar Goodwood is a part of her "situation" at this time. Notice her boredom with her life in Albany at this time and that when Caspar came to visit her, "she felt no eagerness to receive him" even though, "He was the finest young man she had ever seen" (p. 42). She clearly does not love him, however. In fact, he is a part of her boredom. Three months later when Caspar arrives in England, Isabel's feelings for him have not changed in spite of all the plotting and arguing for him by her hard-headed American journalist friend

Henrietta Stackpole:

"There's nothing so simplifying as a grand passion."

"It's not a grand passion; I'm very sure it's not that."

"You don't say that as if you were sure."

"Isabel gave rather a cold smile, 'I shall say it better to Mr. Goodwood himself.'"

"He'll soon give you a chance. . . . He is a man of high, bold action. Whatever happens to him he'll always do something, and whatever he does will always be right."

"I quite believe that." . . .

"Ah, you do care for him!" her visitor rang out.

"Whatever he does will always be right," Isabel repeated. "When a man's of that infallible mould what does it matter to him what one feels?"

"It may not matter to him, but it matters to one's self."

"Ah, what it matters to me--that's not what we're discussing," said Isabel with a cold smile. (pp. 90-91)

Many critics are also guilty of Henrietta's mistake. They pay too much attention to Goodwood's feelings for Isabel and far too little to Isabel's feelings for him. Later, the reader will have occasion to remember, after Isabel marries Osmond, she is hurt by him, perplexed by his actions, puzzled by his attitudes, angry with him, but she is never bored with him. However, it is reasonable to assume in the above conversation that Henrietta is referring to a time when Isabel perhaps had a more passionate feeling for Mr. Goodwood. This is touched upon in this same conversation when Henrietta

says, "My dear child, you certainly encouraged him." And Isabel answers, "It's very true. I did encourage him." As Isabel "mechanically" folds Goodwood's letter, the reader is once again shown that whatever feeling she may have had for Caspar in the past, she no longer has any passionate emotions for him now. At the very end of the novel, when Isabel does respond physically to Caspar, it is only because she is vulnerable at this time and because she has been away from her husband who has been withholding his sexual favors. (Now that is a twist; is it not? James is really before his time.) Isabel has no intentions of following in her sister-in-law's path, though she now recognizes how easy it would be to console herself in this way. James clinches the idea with, "She put the letter into her pocket . . . exhibiting no trace of discomposure and half surprised at her coolness" (p. 93). Over and over the author makes it clear that Isabel is no longer thrilled by Caspar's company. Though many of the critics misconstrue this to mean that Isabel is somehow sexually lacking, this is not the case at all. Why is it that men seem to understand and sympathize completely with the idea that a man can naturally tire or become bored with a woman, but do not recognize that a woman is at least

as human in this regard? James goes to great lengths to spell out the situation between Isabel and Caspar. Isabel has grown abominably tired of Caspar's overbearing ways during the time she has known him:

He seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom. . . . She wished him no ounce less of his manhood, but she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked . . . a little differently. His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life. . . . She was not in love with him. (pp. 104-106)

Why do the critics persist in lending so much weight to Caspar's feelings for Isabel and to other people's opinions on how Isabel should feel about Caspar when the author removes all doubt about Isabel's feelings in what he himself terms the reader's "right to a nearer and a clearer view"(p. 104)? After all, Isabel's feelings dictate her decisions and her actions. She says, "These things cannot be reasoned about. . . . We see our lives from our own point of view; that is the privilege of the weakest and humblest of us" (p. 106).

Intellectually butting heads with Goodwood is somewhat draining for Isabel, but her strength prevails. What she is completely vulnerable to is the almost opposite approach of the subtle, charming Gilbert Osmond, who has attempted to make his life a study in art rather

than in business. Of course, Madame Merle--for her own selfish reasons--has paved the way for both Osmond and Isabel to see each other in the most favorable light from the beginning. It is because Madame Merle knows Osmond and Isabel so well that she seems to practically arrange their marriage. The innocent, young Isabel Archer was taken in by the more experienced, older woman in many ways. At Gardencourt, Madame Merle seemed to be the personification of the poised, self-confident, well-educated, truly independent and worldly woman Isabel wanted to become. Isabel admired and respected her friend Madame Merle. On the other hand, Madame Merle used Isabel's gullibility to help weave her web for her own designs. When Isabel received her inheritance, Madame Merle became the young girl's traveling companion and "guide." Lest too much be made of Madame Merle's guiding Isabel into Gilbert Osmond's arms, the reader must recall a conversation early in the novel when Ralph says, "I don't believe you allow things to be settled for you." And Isabel answers, "Oh yes; if they're settled as I like them" (p. 29).

Madame Merle shows her talent as a match-maker in her conversation with Isabel:

A friend of mine, a countryman of ours . . .

is one of the most delightful men I know.
 . . . He's Gilbert Osmond--he lives in Italy.
 . . . He's exceedingly clever. . . . No
 career, no name, no position, no fortune,
 no past, no future, no anything. Oh yes, he
 paints. . . . He never speaks of his
 painting--to people at large; he's too
 clever for that. But he has a little girl--
 a dear little girl; he does speak of her.
 He's devoted to her, and if it were a career
 to be an excellent father he'd be very
 distinguished. (p. 169)

Madame Merle describes a man much like Isabel's own
 father. When all the world might criticize Isabel's
 father, she held him in great esteem. Later, this
 defensive position is one she again assumes when her
 friends and suitors attempt criticism of Mr. Osmond.
 Madame Merle also prepares Osmond's reception of
 Isabel when she visits him and acquaints him with
 her plan:

"She's a great friend of mine. I met her
 for the first time in England, several months
 ago, and we struck up a grand alliance. I
 like her immensely, and I do what I don't
 do every day--I admire her. You'll do
 the same."

"Not if I can help it."

"Precisely. But you won't be able to help
 it."

"Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid,
 universally intelligent and unprecedentedly
 virtuous? It's only on those conditions
 that I care to make her acquaintance.
 You know I asked you some time ago never
 to speak to me of a creature who shouldn't
 correspond to that description. I know
 plenty of dingy people; I don't want to know
 any more."

"Miss Archer isn't dingy; she's as bright as the morning. She corresponds to your description; it's for that I wish you to know her. She fills all your requirements."

"More or less, of course."

"No; quite literally. She's beautiful, accomplished, generous and, for an American, well-born. She's also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune."

Mr. Osmond listened to this in silence, appearing to turn it over in his mind with his eyes on his informant. "What do you want to do with her?" he asked at last.

"What you see. Put her in your way."

"Isn't she meant for something better than that?" . . . I don't see why you think Mrs. Touchett's niece should matter very much to me, when--when--" But he paused a moment.

"When I myself have mattered so little?"

"That of course is not what I meant to say. When I've known and appreciated such a woman as you."

"Isabel Archer's better than I," said Madame Merle.

Her companion gave a laugh. "How little you must think of her to say that!"

"Do you suppose I'm capable of jealousy?"

"With regard to me? No; on the whole I don't."

". . . Come and make a beginning; that's all I ask of you."

"A beginning of what?"

Madame Merle was silent a little. "I want you of course to marry her."

"The beginning of the end? Well, I'll see for myself. Have you told her that?"

"For what do you take me? She's not so coarse a piece of machinery--nor am I."

"Really, said Osmond after some meditation, 'I don't understand your ambitions.'"

(pp. 203-206)

Madame Merle is clearly the master-mind of this "plot," but her real reasons are not unselfish; her mistake is

in over-estimating herself while under-estimating both Isabel and Osmond. Osmond is the more honest of these two conspirators. More important is Osmond's effect on Isabel: "There was something in the visitor that checked her and held her in suspense. . . . He was fine. . . . His very voice was fine" (p. 209). With the exception of his somewhat heinous duplicity with Madame Merle, Osmond seems to be honest with Isabel,

Mr. Osmond talked of Florence, of Italy, of the pleasure of living in that country and of the abatements to the pleasure. . . . Italy . . . had spoiled a great many people; he was even fatuous enough to believe at times that he himself might have been a better man if he had spent less of his life there. . . . "We're sweetly provincial," said Mr. Osmond, "and I'm perfectly aware that I myself am as rusty as a key that has no lock to fit it. It polishes me up a little to talk with you--not that I venture to pretend I can turn that very complicated lock I suspect your intellect of being! (p. 217)

Even Osmond's speech is filled with sexual imagery.

Notice Isabel's response:

Isabel waited, with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed; she liked Mr. Osmond's talk, his company: she had what always gave her a very private thrill, the consciousness of a new relation. (p. 218)

Isabel's fascination with Mr. Gilbert Osmond grows:

His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him. He resembled no one she had ever seen; . . . she said to herself that this "new relation" would perhaps prove her very most distinguished. . . . She had never met a person of so fine a grain. The peculiarity was physical, to begin with, and it extended to impalpabilities. . . . These personal points struck our sensitive young woman as signs of quality, of intensity, somehow as promises of interest. (pp. 219-220)

Everything about Osmond, including his surroundings, intrigues Isabel. Physically attracted to him from the beginning, Isabel finds everything about him interesting. Madame Merle's plan for Osmond's marriage works, but because what happens far surpasses anything this sorceress had imagined, a death knell is sounded for her own selfish hopes. The gentleman prince of darkness Gilbert Osmond and the lady angel of light Isabel Archer fall in love. The "heartless" Gilbert Osmond has finally met what he considers the ideal woman except that, as he confides in Madame Merle, Isabel has only one fault: she has too many ideas. But he does not consider this fault an obstacle; he feels her "bad" ideas will simply have to be "sacrificed." Note Warburton's unhappy observation of Isabel in

Osmond's company: "Miss Archer had . . . a radiance, even a slight exaltation; as she was, however, at all times a keenly-glancing, quickly-moving, completely animated young woman, he may have been mistaken on this point" (p. 249); Warburton wanted to be mistaken. Significant passages show the reader that James clearly intends portraying these two people falling in love. During Osmond's courtship of Isabel, notice that both are at their happiest. Concerning Isabel:

By her own measure she was very happy; she would even have been willing to take these hours for the happiest she was ever to know. . . . Her consciousness was so mixed that she scarcely knew where the different parts of it would lead her, and she went about in a repressed ecstasy of contemplation. (p. 240)

Concerning Osmond:

He was pleased with everything; he had never before been pleased with so many things at once. Old impressions, old enjoyments, renewed themselves; one evening, going home to his room at the inn, he wrote down a little sonnet to which he prefixed the title of "Rome Revisited." A day or two later he showed this piece of correct and ingenious verse to Isabel, explaining to her that it was an Italian fashion to commemorate the occasions of life by a tribute to the muse. (pp. 253-254)

While James may not be intending to show Osmond quite following the Petrarchan tradition, the analogy is

obvious, and so is Isabel's effect on this man. When Isabel announces to Osmond that she is resuming her world travels with her aunt, the following occurs:

It might be months . . . before he should see her again. This exchange took place in the large decorated sitting-room occupied by our friends at the hotel. . . . Osmond had found the girl alone. . . . For Osmond the place was ugly to distress; the false colours, the sham splendour were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk. . . . Isabel was thinking that the pleasantest incident of her life--so it pleased her to qualify these too few days in Rome . . . was coming to an end. That most of the interest of the time had been owing to Mr. Osmond was a reflexion she was not just now at pains to make; she had already done the point abundant justice. . . . She might come back to Italy and find him different--this strange man who pleased her just as he was; and it would be better not to come than run the risk of that. But if she was not to come the greater the pity that the chapter was closed; she felt for a moment a pang that touched the source of tears. The sensation kept her silent, and Gilbert Osmond was silent too. . . . "What I wish to say to you," he went on at last, looking up, "is that I find I'm in love with you."

She instantly rose. "Ah, keep that till I am tired!"

"Tired of hearing it from others?" He sat there raising his eyes to her. "No, you may heed it now or never, as you please. But after all I must say it now." She had turned away, but in the movement she had stopped herself and dropped her gaze upon him. The two remained a while in this situation, exchanging a long look--the large, conscious look of the critical hours of life. Then he got up and came near her, deeply respectful, as if he were afraid he had been too familiar. "I'm absolutely

in love with you."

He had repeated the announcement in a tone of almost impersonal discretion, like a man who expected very little from it but who spoke for his own needed relief. The tears came into her eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine bolt--backward, forward, she couldn't have said which. The words he had uttered made him, as he stood there, beautiful and generous, invested him as with the golden air of early autumn. . . . "Oh don't say that, please," she answered with an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread--the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in a bank--which there was a terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out. . . .

"For me you'll always be the most important woman in the world. . . . If we meet again you'll find me as you leave me. If we don't I shall be so all the same."

. . . When he had gone she stood a moment looking about her and seated herself slowly and with an air of deliberation. . . . Her agitation--for it had not diminished--was still, very deep. What had happened was something that for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet; but here, when it came, she stopped--that sublime principle somehow broke down. . . . Her imagination . . . now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn't cross--a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet. (pp. 255-260)

These passages could be lifted from the present novel and placed inside the covers of one of the Gothic

mystery-romance novels (by the better writers such as Mary Stewart and DuMaurier) that are immensely popular today. Certainly Gilbert Osmond is a forerunner of the "hero" of that type of novel. While all men have something of Satan in them to one degree or another, the Gothic hero is usually presented as a dark, slightly sinister character who, nevertheless, has an irresistible appeal for the ladies. He usually harbors some deep, dark secret (or secrets) that must be ferreted out by the heroine who falls hopelessly and madly in love with him even while her better judgement causes her to suspect she is making a dire mistake. Why is it that men who are described as "wickedly attractive" and "devilishly intriguing" are the ones least often refused by "innocent and pure" women? Is there a contradiction in terms or perhaps merely hypocritical subterfuge due to the Puritan-Victorian influence that hovers over us even today? There is much imagery in this novel of Osmond's (serpentine "s"--hiss in the middle of his name) being the snake that enlightens Isabel Archer. As anyone can see who pays careful attention to the details that James provides, this is Genesis material: Eve was certainly enlightened. It is only after the marriage that Isabel--to her great sorrow--learns

the secret shared by Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle. Also, while Isabel is touched by Osmond's tender regard for his daughter, it is ridiculous to suppose that Pansy was a reason for Isabel's marrying Osmond. It is true that Osmond goes to some lengths to assure that Isabel and his daughter will be compatible and that Isabel especially will care for Pansy. But Osmond is uppermost on Isabel's mind when she visits Pansy at Osmond's request just before beginning her travels:

She kissed the child good-bye, held her close, looked at her long. "Be very good," she said; "give pleasure to your father."

"I think that's what I live for," Pansy answered. "He has not much pleasure; he's rather a sad man."

Isabel listened to this assertion with an interest which she felt it almost a torment to be obliged to conceal. It was her pride that obliged her, and a certain sense of decency; there were still other things in her head which she felt a strong impulse, instantly checked, to say to Pansy about her father; there were things it would have given her pleasure to hear the child, to make the child, say. But she no sooner became conscious of these things than her imagination was hushed with horror at the idea of taking advantage of the little girl--it was of this she would have accused herself--and of exhaling into that air where he might still have a subtle sense for it any breath of her charmed state. . . . She was obliged to confess it to herself--she would have taken a passionate pleasure in talking of Gilbert Osmond to this innocent, diminutive creature who was so near him. (pp. 263-264)

The reader cannot really blame Osmond for putting Isabel in this spot. All suitors wish to present themselves from their best perspective. Pansy's deep regard for her father has its accompanying effect on Isabel.

A year later, at age 24, Isabel is somewhat changed:

She had ranged . . . through space and surveyed much of mankind, and was therefore now, in her own eyes, a very different person from the frivolous young woman from Albany who had begun to take the measure of Europe on the lawn at Gardencourt a couple of years before. She flattered herself she had harvested wisdom and learned a great deal more of life than this light-minded creature had even suspected. (p. 265)

The reader is allowed further insight into Isabel's feelings through her reminiscences of her journey. Those feelings chiefly concern Mr. Osmond. And notice how Paris, the City of Love, pales for Isabel without Osmond:

Lily and the babies had joined her in Switzerland in the month of July, and they had spent a summer of fine weather in an Alpine valley where the flowers were thick in the meadows and the shade of great chestnuts made a resting-place for such upward wanderings as might be undertaken by ladies and children on warm afternoons. They had afterwards reached the French capital, which was worshipped, and with costly ceremonies, by Lily, but thought of as noisily vacant by Isabel, who in these days made use of

her memory of Rome as she might have done, in a hot and crowded room, of a phial of something pungent hidden in her handkerchief. . . . Isabel's silence about Mr. Osmond . . . was in direct proportion to the frequency with which he occupied her thoughts. . . . The world lay before her--she could do whatever she chose. There was a deep thrill in it all. (pp. 265-267)

It was just after this that Isabel had visited Madame Merle and invited her to travel with her. In their three months' journey through Greece, Turkey, and Egypt, Isabel comes to know a great deal--though not enough--about Madame Merle: "She liked her as much as ever, but there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted" (p. 269). Nothing in Greece, Turkey, or Egypt is able to blot out Isabel's thoughts of Osmond:

Madame Merle had once declared her belief that when a friendship ceases to grow it immediately begins to decline--there being no point of equilibrium between liking more and liking less. A stationary affection, in other words, was impossible--it must move one way or the other. However that might be, the girl had in these days a thousand uses for her sense of the romantic, which was more active than it had ever been. I do not allude to the impulse it received as she gazed at the Pyramids in the course of an excursion from Cairo, or as she stood among the broken columns of the Acropolis and fixed her eyes upon the point designated to her as the Strait of Salamis; deep and memorable as these emotions had remained. She came back by the last of March from Egypt and Greece and made another stay in Rome. A few days after her arrival Gilbert Osmond descended from Florence and remained three weeks, during which the fact of her being with his old friend Madame Merle, in

whose house she had gone to lodge, made it virtually inevitable that he should see her every day. (pp. 269-270)

Of course James "alludes" to the sense of the romantic inspired by thoughts of Gilbert Osmond that Isabel has been experiencing the whole year through all of her travels.

Since Gilbert Osmond solely has been responsible for Isabel's lovelorn behavior all these months; it should be no surprise to the reader that Isabel chooses to marry this man for whom she has "feelings" stirred by no other lover. What is missing from her interesting and intellectual relationships with her other suitors is the main ingredient of deep physical attraction for them on her part. Isabel disregards the opinions of her friends and of Mrs. Touchett and feels secure in her decision to marry Gilbert Osmond: "all clearness reigned in her; she . . . walked in no small shimmering splendour" (p. 270). Pertinent dialogue takes place between Caspar Goodwood and Isabel:

"You think he's grand, you think he's great, though no one else thinks so."

Isabel's colour deepened; she felt this really acute of her companion, and it was certainly a proof of the aid that passion might render perceptions she had never taken for fine. "Why do you always come back to what others think? I can't discuss Mr. Osmond with you." (p. 273)

Isabel is in love because she thinks she is. She says so; she has all the symptoms. Her view is simply, "How do you know you're in love? You're in love when you think you are."

Mrs. Touchett is not surprised at Isabel's announcement:

"Aunt Lydia, I've something to tell you."

Mrs. Touchett gave a little jump and looked at her almost fiercely. "You needn't tell me; I know what it is."

"I don't know how you know."

"The same way that I know when the window's open--by feeling a draught. You're going to marry that man."

"What do you mean?" Isabel enquired with great dignity.

"Madame Merle's friend--Mr. Osmond."

"I don't know why you call him Madame Merle's friend. Is that the principal thing he's known by?"

"If he's not her friend he ought to be--after what she has done for him!" cried Mrs. Touchett. "I shouldn't have expected it of her; I'm disappointed."

"If you mean that Madame Merle has had anything to do with my engagement you're greatly mistaken," Isabel declared with a sort of ardent coldness.

"You mean that your attractions were sufficient, without the gentleman's having had to be lashed up? You're quite right. They're immense, your attractions, and he would never have presumed to think of you if she hadn't put him up to it. He has a very good opinion of himself, but he was not a man to take trouble. Madame Merle took the trouble for him."

"He has taken a great deal for himself!" cried Isabel with a voluntary laugh.

Mrs. Touchett gave a sharp nod. "I think he must, after all, to have made you like him so much. . . . I shall talk

to Madame Merle."

"I don't see why you keep bringing her in. She has been a very good friend to me."

"Possibly; but she has been a poor one to me."

"What has she done to you?"

"She has deceived me. She had as good as promised me to prevent your engagement."

"She couldn't have prevented it."

"She can do anything; that's what I've always liked her for. I knew she could play any part; but I understood that she played them one by one. I didn't understand that she would play two at the same time."

"I don't know what part she may have played to you," Isabel said; "that's between yourselves. To me she has been honest and kind and devoted."

"Devoted, of course; she wished you to marry her candidate. She told me she was watching you only to interpose."

"She said that to please you," the girl answered; conscious, however, of the inadequacy of the explanation.

"To please me by deceiving me? She knows me better. Am I pleased today?"

"I don't think you're ever much pleased," Isabel was obliged to reply. "If Madame Merle knew you would learn the truth what had she to gain by insincerity?"

"She gained time, as you see. While I waited for her to interfere you were marching away, and she was really beating the drum."

"That's very well. But by your own admission you saw I was marching, and even if she had given the alarm you wouldn't have tried to stop me."

"No, but some one else would."

"Whom do you mean?" Isabel asked, looking very hard at her aunt.

Mrs. Touchett's little bright eyes, active as they usually were, sustained her gaze rather than returned it. "Would you have listened to Ralph?"

"Not if he had abused Mr. Osmond." (pp. 276-278)

Later, Mrs. Touchett's words concerning Madame Merle will have ominous significance for Isabel; before her marriage, however, no one can sway Isabel in her decision to marry Mr. Osmond. Poor Ralph worries about Isabel: "To try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decently discreet only in the event of her being persuaded. . . . Meanwhile . . . he supposed--that the affianced pair were daily renewing their mutual vows" (p. 281). And Ralph is correct in his sad supposition:

Osmond at this moment showed himself little at Palazzo Crescentini; but Isabel met him every day elsewhere, as she was free to do after their engagement had been made public. She had taken a carriage by the month, so as not to be indebted to her aunt for the means of pursuing a course of which Mrs. Touchett disapproved, and she drove in the morning to the Cascine. This suburban wilderness, during the early hours, was void of all intruders, and our young lady, joined by her lover in its quietest part, strolled with him a while through the grey Italian shade and listened to the nightingales. (p. 281)

In vain, Ralph tries to dissuade Isabel:

"I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily and so soon."
 "Come down, you say?"
 "Well, that renders my sense of what has happened to you. You seemed to me to

be soaring far up in the blue--to be, sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly some one tosses up a faded rosebud--a missile that should never have reached you--and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me as if I had fallen myself! . . . He's the incarnation of taste," Ralph went on, thinking hard how he could best express Gilbert Osmond's sinister attributes without putting himself in the wrong by seeming to describe him coarsely. He wished to describe him impersonally, scientifically. "He judges and measures, approves and condemns, altogether by that."

"It's a happy thing then that his taste should be exquisite."

"It's exquisite, indeed, since it has led him to select you as his bride. But have you ever seen such a taste--a really exquisite one--ruffled?"

"I hope it may never be my fortune to fail to gratify my husband's."

At these words a sudden passion leaped to Ralph's lips. "Ah, that's wilful, that's unworthy of you! You were not meant to be measured in that way--you were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante!" (pp. 285-286)

Poor, poor Ralph. If circumstances were different and he were physically healthy, he would not object to Isabel's keeping guard over his own "sensibilities." At this point, Isabel makes it clear that she is not only willing, but anxious, and--more than that--eager to satisfy Osmond in every way. She goes on and on extolling Osmond's virtues as she sees them; she concludes with, "What sort of a person should you have liked me to marry? . . . You talk about one's

soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth. One has human feelings and needs, one has a heart in one's bosom, and one must marry a particular individual" (p. 287). Isabel's sexual attitude is evident in these passages. James goes to great length to handle the subject of sex with exquisite taste, but it is in no way lacking for that reason. However, it may be partly for that reason that the obvious is not obvious at all to some readers. Those readers should go back and re-read Chapter 35 in its entirety; those pages 288 through 295 show that both Isabel and Osmond are in love and that the physical basis of that love is not lacking. Those readers also should pay careful attention to the first part of Chapter 36, particularly where Madame Merle has seen that Osmond really is in love with Isabel. Realizing that her attempt to further ingratiate herself with Osmond (thereby causing their past relationship to grow once more instead of decline) has been foiled, Madame Merle becomes more jealous and less discreet almost to the point of being vindictive when she realizes that her former lover really is in love with his wife--that Isabel has accomplished what she herself could not accomplish. Isabel has touched Osmond's heart. Madame Merle realizes, too, that Isabel has been accepted

as a mother and is loved accordingly by Pansy. Poor Madame Merle is truly left with nothing--not even Osmond's gratitude, since he feels guilty in any association with her; this is not the way she had intended her plan would end.

In the novel itself, there is no reason to suppose that Isabel and Osmond have anything other than a rich and full physical relationship during those first years of their marriage: those easy years when all problems seem small and disintegrate on physical contact. It is only after each realizes the differences in the other's ideology--the Catholic Latin temperament versus the New England protestant one, each deposited in seemingly equally strong, egotistical individuals--that real trouble looms in their marriage: Osmond had recognized Isabel's "bad ideas" as something that would have to go once they were married, but he underestimated Isabel's tenacity in holding onto those ideas. Isabel is devastated by the discovery of the duplicity practiced by Madame Merle and Osmond before her marriage. When she learns the full truth, that Madame Merle is Pansy's mother and that her "great friend" had a selfish hand in the arrangement of her marriage after all, this Cinderella is not only unappreciative of her "fairy godmother's securing

the prince for her," but turning the tables, she banishes her from the prince's kingdom. (Even more complicated irony abounds in the fact that the stepmother is the good and true benefactress of the daughter while the actual mother is a culprit disliked by her own daughter.) Unlike the fairy tales and the earlier romances, in this novel, marriage and "They lived happily ever after" is not the end of the story; instead marriage is the beginning of a new kind of story--a more complicated one. While it is true that sunshine and laughter do not reign supreme in the land of Isabel's marriage, it is not true that Isabel's sexual attitude is anything other than what it should be. There is no sexual dysfunction, no frigidity. Irrefutable evidence on page after page in this novel affirms the truth of the matter: Isabel is vitally alive and responsive. Her passions stand remarkably intense, physically as well as spiritually. As it is with many other promising women, the fault lies in her stars, if they are responsible for putting in front of her a group of men who are all far more deficient than she. They are the ones poorly suited to the erotic life. She, on the contrary, has every trait one might hope to see in a prospective wife.

Chapter III

Notes

¹ Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, introd. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 19. All further references to this work appear in the text.

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