

An Exploration of the Causes of Isabel's Tragedy in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract: Isabel Archer, the female protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, ends her life with a tragedy. Quite a large number of scholars and critics have concentrated on the inner factors or mainly relied on her personal causes to explain her tragic life. In this essay, the author intends to find out that the outer forces of the 19th century society and environment to explain Isabel's tragedy best. The author explains the outer forces in three aspects. They are the influence of Puritanism, the influence of Feminism and the influence of the Victorian Masculinity. This essay is largely a rudimentary step to explore the outer forces that drive Isabel's tragic life with an analytical approach employed.

1. Introduction

Henry James is one of the most famous realistic writers in American in the 19th century. He contributed a lot to the development of modern novel with his 22 novels and hundreds of short novels and reviews. By his mid-twenties, James was considered one of the most skilled writers in America. As a stylist James earned consistent admiration, and he is often considered to be a "writer's writer." His prose is remarkable for its elegance of balance, clarity, and precision.

First written in the 1880s and extensively revised in 1908, *The Portrait of a Lady* is often considered to be James' greatest achievement. He explores many of his most characteristic themes, including the conflict between American individualism and European social custom and the situation of Americans in Europe. With its story of a young American woman asserting her independence and, in the words of the author, "affronting her destiny," *The Portrait of a Lady* tells a story of Isabel Archer's European journey with her aunt Mrs. Touchett^[1].

2. Literature review

Some critics think that the main reason for Isabel's tragedy is her own attitudes and thoughts of the world. Peter Rawlings says that her misery mainly accounts on her individual exploration of the world^[1]. He thinks that it is only Isabel's own interpretation of freedom that drives her own behaviors, and finally leads to her tragic destiny. In addition, Liu Beichen explains her tragedy in the way of psycho-analysis^[2]. In professor Liu's opinion, Isabel's psychological activities fully elaborate the conditions and changes of her own inner world, and that is the main reason for her tragic life.

At the same time, other scholars also explain reasons to Isabel's tragedy. Chen Zhanyan explains that Isabel's defects of her personality foreshadows her tragic fate, which made her a victim of the marriage without love^[3]. Professor Chen explains that Isabel's tragic marriage is the result of her so called free personality. Similarly, Wu Ling sees the tragic life of Isabel in another point of view. She tries to illustrate Isabel's tragic life at the approach of existentialism, pointing out that the tragedy of her marriage is actually the tragedy of her so-called freedom^[4]. From Wu's point of view, Sartre's theory of existentialism best explains Isabel's freedom and her tragedy. Like Sartre, she thinks that everybody is born to be free, which is a power of nature. However, Isabel takes it as a privilege. She thinks that nobody or nothing could disturb or interfere her freedom and independence, which are her own affairs and private things. She does not realize that she is just one component of the whole society, so she must adapt into it. She only regards her freedom as the supreme thing in her life.

Therefore, with this idea, it is not surprising to see Isabel's behavior --- the direct reaction of her own freedom, which leads to her tragic life.

This essay, inspired and enlightened by the valuable analyses done by many scholars, and John Locke's theory of tabula rasa ^[5], intends to explore the reasons of Isabel's tragedy in the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. According to the theory of tabula rasa, John Locke argues that every human being's mind is a blank page at birth, and all knowledge comes from experience. By analyzing the outer factors in three aspects: Puritanism, Feminism and Victorian Masculinity, the author wants to draw the conclusion that while the internal factors contribute to Isabel Archer's misery, the external forces of the western world in the 19th century play a key role in driving the final tragedy of her life.

3. Influence of Puritanism

3.1 Ralph's influence

Puritanism originates in New England and it makes a great influence on American culture. The Puritans hope to build "a city upon hill"—an ideal community. Since that time, Americans have viewed their country as a great experiment, a worthy model for other nations. They believe firmly that they are the chosen people of God, while others are predestined to be damned to hell. They are hard-working and studious. They do have the sense of mission to spread their holy belief.

Ralph is one of the most important men in Isabel's whole life. His influence on her has both positive and negative sides in the work. And he is a man who is deeply influenced by Puritanism. Although he is weak and has a poor health, he is intelligent enough to perceive every detail in their lives. He loves her in his own way --- disabled and fraternal way. Like Isabel, Ralph loves freedom, so he tries to persuade his father to give his fortune to Isabel. He says to his father, "I call people rich when they are able to meet the requirements of their imagination; she must be rich in order to be free of the material world. She must be free in order to live" ^[6]. He wants to give Isabel more space to pursue what she wants. Nevertheless, he does not realize that it is just the fortune that will make her life bitter. A beautiful but innocent young lady with a large fortune will unavoidably be a prey for fortune hunters. Alwyon Berland calls Isabel's fortune a "curse in disguise" ^[7] because it is the money that causes Isabel's all tragedy. Arnold Kettle also claims that "it is Ralph's mistake that ruins Isabel" ^[8]. From the novel, it could be read that Ralph really wants to help Isabel and has no intention to act on her or shape her as what he likes. However, deep in his mind, he wants to direct Isabel; he wants Isabel do what he wants, even unconsciously.

3.2 Madame Merle's influence

Madame Merle, who is also deeply influenced by Puritanism plays a crucial part in Isabel's life and in her tragedy. She is the direct person who leads Isabel into the trap, and she is the person who has a vicious heart. She is intelligent and knows how to deal with others properly. Everyone who knows her thinks she is flawless. Isabel finds that everything Madame Merle does is attractive and perfect. She thinks "she does everything beautifully. She's complete", and she even considers Madame Merle a perfect model. It is just Isabel's admiration for her to become a complete woman like her that makes Isabel succumb to Madame Merle's influence. Their intimate relationship just offers Madame Merle a very good opportunity to know more about her.

Isabel comes to Europe to see more and learn more, but what for? She is too innocent and arrogant to know it; she has no idea about it, and she has not figured it out. But Madame Merle sees clearly that Isabel is just too proud to know clearly what she really expects from life. Such a woman who is deeply influenced by Puritanism has a great influence on Isabel. She tries to persuade Isabel to marry Osmond by saying "only don't keep on refusing for the sake of refusing. It is a pleasant exercise of power; but accepting is after all an exercise of power as well". Isabel is so innocent and immature that she falls deeply into the trap made by Madame Merle and her lover Osmond.

4. Influence of Feminism

4.1 Influence on her interpretation of freedom

Feminism is the belief that women should have equal political, social, sexual, intellectual and economic rights to men. Influenced by this general mood, Isabel grows up to a self-renewed and confident lady, just like the Statue of Liberty in New York. However, women at that time still had little social and economic freedom. The American society was male-dominated and chances for women to pursue rights were very rare. So feminists were just individual challengers against the traditional confinements. Their strength could not change or even influence the whole society. Therefore, it is easy to see that there are many paradoxes in her personality. For instance, she always claims that freedom and liberty is the most and only important thing in her life, but deep in her mind, she is influenced by the traditional values for women, which could be clearly seen from her return to Osmond at the end of the story.

4.2 Influence on her choice of marriage

Isabel's physical attractiveness can be easily seen from the impression she makes on her three suitors---Caspar Goodwood, Ralph Touchett, and Lord Warburton. She walks away from all of them proudly, arrogantly and innocently, claiming that "I do not wish to marry any one just now".

However, deep down in her heart, does she know clearly what she really wants? She stubbornly believes that she is a new woman. Everything that a new woman could do is to live freely. She thinks she must fight against the old tradition. On the way of feminism, Isabel just goes too far. She believes herself completely free to choose anything that appears most attractive to her. She just holds her feminist idea that she could do everything well, and what she thinks is utterly right. And this is exactly what she thinks when she decides to marry Osmond --- a romantic guy with artistic taste. Her arrogance and innocence are evidently shown in her decision of marriage. But she does not know that her desire for total freedom and her feminist idea will eventually lead to her failure.

5. Influence of the Victorian Masculinity

The United Kingdom in the 19th century was prosperous, for it was enjoying the Victorian Era. This was a long period of prosperity for the British people, as profits gained from the overseas British Empire, as well as from industrial improvements at home, allowed a large, educated middle class to develop. Women at that time tried their best to improve their social status; they never stopped fighting for their rights. Great progress had been made during the reign of Queen Victoria, and the views on women of all classes had been altered considerably in the 19th century.

However, the main stream of that time was still men. In such a well-developed country, women were still being regarded as inferior to men. UK as well as in the US was still a male-dominated society. Therefore, the concept of Victorian Masculinity exists. In that period of time, the role of women was to have children and tend to the house. Women had been discriminated simply because of their sex. And women were taught and even they thought that they were inferior to men, and marriage was their natural destiny.

As a 19th century American girl, hoping to see and feel the big world, goes to Europe. The European culture is much longer and sophisticated than American, especially in the Victorian Era. Due to her narrow knowledge and free mind, when she contacts with the Continent, she immediately shows her worship to it. The European culture and civilization appeal to her mind and spirit. Male-dominated society makes her paradoxical mind even worse. On the one hand, the Victorian society helps her quest for freedom with those new women in the UK, but on the other hand the old side of the society teaches her to be a good traditional wife. Isabel is holding two flags on both hands, one says "new" and the other says "traditional".

6. Summary

Isabel Archer, a pure heart at the very beginning, changes according to the environment. What she claims is only freedom, and she even thinks marriage as an obstacle in the way of her freedom pursuing. However, later in her life, she breaks her own words by marrying Osmond, a man she thinks is perfect enough and at the same time she could still act as what she wants, but the fact proves that she is totally wrong. A pure heart like Isabel's cannot stay like that all the time. All of the outer factors have influence on her. Puritanism, Feminism and the Victorian masculinity are all the factors. They all have great impact on her. Like Yang Yu and Hu Cheng say, "all the human beings are just one part of the operating system. If you want to change the human's behavior, the only thing you need to do is just change the environment"^[9], which means clearly that for everybody, his behavior will change in a new environment. And of course, Isabel is not the exception. In addition, John Locke's theory tabula rasa also offers another evidence to prove that experience and environment change people. Isabel Archer, a girl in pursuit of independence and freedom, is deeply influenced by the outer world and becomes a victim of her own thought and marriage. She suffers from the environment and the social reality of her time. In one word, it is the outer forces that ultimately lead to her tragedy.

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