
'The Portrait of a Lady': A Case Study of Flawed Will and Imagination

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The Portrait of a Lady 1996. Director Jane Campion. Producers Monty Montgomery and Steve Golin. Screenplay Laura Jones, based on the novel by Henry James. Composer Michael Nyman. Nicole Kidman as Isabel Archer. John Malkovich as Gilbert Osmond. Viggo Mortensen as Caspar Goodwood. Martin Donovan as Ralph Touchett.

If the nineteenth century was the Age of Romanticism in fitting antithesis to the preceding Age that had worshipped Reason, we seem to be witnessing now an anti-synthesis. "The Age of Aquarius" might be a fitting name for the somewhat deplorable epilogue to the second millennium. The song that so labeled the sixties meant to capture un-reason, a sense of living in a sea of blissful confusion, the deliberate abandonment of all ideals, romantic or otherwise. Aquarius is an astrological sign, meant to symbolize the return to a premodern mentality superimposed upon postmodern secularism. In sum, it captured a puerile cosmological nihilism, the stuff of popular tunes that lines the fabric of our times, so devotedly dedicated to escapism. Technology, meanwhile, has rendered the worship of gratification more efficient, if not necessarily more satisfying. We want to be ourselves, without a clear idea of why or where we are going, or even whether we should

seek to know. The Will as Pure Idea: we are who we want to be, whatever that may mean. Often, of course, it is nothing much. Liberation without a sense of purpose is an empty promise.

This message is perhaps especially acute for the female of the species, who is often so fiercely intent on obtaining liberation that she forgets just why she craves the privilege, and seems to foster grand illusions about its value as an end in itself. Much to her surprise, she finds herself free only to wonder why she ever fought so hard. The road ahead is still fraught with mystery, and choice can be a frightening thing. This is not to say that liberation cannot be both thrilling and eminently worth obtaining. It is merely to underscore that it is no more than the first step; it is nothing but potentiality. The hard work is still ahead. All too often, that important message is not only forgotten but deemed irrelevant.

On occasion, popular culture sus-

pend its quasi-religious commitment to commercial escapism and manages—quite against itself—to admit the truth of the human condition. Such an example is the recent motion picture *The Portrait of a Lady*, a deft adaptation of the novel by Henry James. It is one of several felicitous efforts to resurrect literary classics in film format, of which we hope to see more, since they present a good excuse to resurrect topics with a rather more universal quality than the usual Hollywood fare. And while *Portrait* was released two years ago, it seems worth revisiting, for it appears that a significant part of its moral has gone unnoticed.

Its theme seems politically correct enough: here is an independent-minded woman choosing her own course of life long before the women's liberation movement made the practice popular with a vengeance. The idea fits our times well enough; and it is to the credit of the filmmakers that they allow—however unwittingly perhaps—the story to carry its own refutation, for the existence that Isabel ends up defining for herself is fraught with disaster. While the result is not necessarily spellbinding, it is both believable and ultimately engaging, presenting a picture of human fallibility, the drawbacks of a stubborn will wedded to an impoverished imagination.

Isabel Archer, the Lady in the Portrait, is not painted harshly; but neither does she emerge as a grand heroine. She attempts to be true to herself, and that alone should assure her sufficient sympathy. Admittedly, it is a truth that, when faced, leaves us—as, eventually, even her—rather disappointed. Her commendable desire to know too much leaves her in fact knowing too little. In the search for pas-

sion and the veneer of excellence, she ends up missing what matters most—at least until near the end. If she is admirable for having tried, it is also true that she knew too little of why she was trying, and what it takes to succeed.

Were this movie simply a story of an unsuccessful life led by a rather uninteresting woman, however beautiful, it would merit no more than a mention in the pages of *Vogue* devoted to the hot topic of updating period dresses. But, conceivably despite itself, the movie offers more than meets the eye: self-delusion is treated kindly; obsession is allowed to blend imperceptibly into almost selfless affection; while love is acknowledged, and even—however belatedly and briefly—ultimately rewarded.

The story succeeds in part because it is for the most part frankly anticlimactic: the heroine's willful personality is bound to fail her and those who happen to care for her, because her goal seems altogether without substance. She chases illusions, and is mainly certain of what she wants not. It turns out not to be enough. Her main redeeming quality is that she does seem to find this out herself.

To be sure, rejecting what one does not want is at least a start toward self-realization. In the opening scene we watch a distraught Isabel facing a marriage proposal from an eminently eligible English nobleman, Lord Warburton. The proposal is presented perhaps too much like a business merger, complete with description of the proposed lodging quarters, but absent even so much as a kiss to underscore the suitor's urgency. The apparent absence of passion assures sympathy for the reluctant heroine. She refuses him flatly and categorically, and

no wonder. She says she still has much living to do—and it seems impossible to disagree.

The fact that most of her female compatriots would have jumped at the offer—as is made abundantly clear by most of the supporting characters—sets her apart and above at the outset. She will not be bought; she will not be captured and displayed, her life over before it ever began. Hence she is defined mainly by her will: the will to be. Unfortunately, the substance of this form, the “what” of this “being” eludes her. What she lacks is a picture of herself, a picture of what matters; in short, she lacks a sense of value. In this sense at least, Isabel is a thoroughly modern existential figure: she knows not why, nor where, nor whence, and, above all, not wherefore. The categorical imperative of her will is wanting precisely because it is merely categorical: to be in the abstract is ultimately to be nothing at all.

Her luck (although, as Fate would have it, classically enough, also her greatest misfortune) is that her adoring cousin Ralph Touchett who is dying of consumption respects (indeed, worships) Isabel for her decision, and persuades his father to leave Isabel a huge fortune. Since he must face apocalyptic questions by reason of his infirmity, he far more than others appreciates that life is precious and infinitely worth exploring during the brief moment we are privileged to be in its precarious possession. The dilemma of crafting content of choice seems less important to someone for whom choice itself is soon to be unattainable.

Isabel naturally decides that she will travel: to see the world, of course. What

else? Meanwhile, however, there is one more offer she will refuse: an American suitor, Caspar Goodwood—to whom we are led to understand she had given some encouragement at an earlier time—pursues Isabel on her voyage, to offer his heart and soul. While Caspar happens to be wealthy, what he offers above all, and one would think most relevantly for our heroine, is raw passion: the young man, handsome, disheveled, burning with want, is desperately in love with Isabel. He simply must have her or die. Yet he too is coldly rejected, this time for no obvious reason.

What Isabel rejects in Caspar is not simply another marriage proposal. Since there is a clear implication that he had been given reason to hope before, and is given such reason again, is Isabel rejecting her own femininity? Does she deny her passion in order to create an androgynous persona that has chosen an abstract—and empty—sense of freedom? While Warburton had been rejected because she did not seem to love him, Caspar is rejected because she did not seem to want to love, period. The difference is categorical—and seems to render Isabel closer yet to the feminist ideal of a century later.

The movie deliberately paints Isabel’s portrait in relation to Caspar with Impressionist brushstrokes: imprecise, ambiguous, tantalizing. Thus, immediately after he leaves, Isabel has a vision; she imagines herself with her three suitors (Warburton, Ralph, and Caspar) in a powerful erotic encounter that takes place on her bed. The camera follows the hands of the elegant young men as they reach for her slowly, deliberately, touching her slender figure as she lies motionless yet surely

aroused, available, eminently desirable. For a few long seconds the impression of raw sexuality is unmistakable. The hands touch her, and she responds. There is no doubt that Isabel is not frigid. And yet there is no resolution; she ends her own daydream abruptly and fiercely, leaving the audience to wonder whether the lasting image was one of fear or of want. It is impossible not to believe that it was actually both. So is she afraid of Caspar's passion even as he arouses in her feelings she really did not know she had? Did not wish to have? Wishes she had for someone else? For all three men? If so, is she unable to accept that? Or does accepting mean she cannot love only one man? Or does she not know which one? Is she unable perhaps to distinguish love from desire? Does she reject both? Or either? She does not know; and neither does her counterpart of a century later, the woman who chases pure choice as such, with no clear substantive content.

Isabel's unsolicited wealth inevitably causes her demise. For it attracts a man of little worth, albeit capable of projecting a refined veneer—the effete, lazy, deceptively clever would-be painter Gilbert Osmond—who is an odd choice, but not implausible. He is not wealthy, thus satisfying her strong intention to defy conventions. And while he is incapable of love, so, it appears, is she. The scene where Isabel dreams that Osmond seduces her is strikingly unromantic, a kind of self-imposed (and hence especially pathological) imagined rape. And perhaps subliminally she senses that Osmond is just as incapable of formulating an ideal for himself in life as she is. He's seen it, been there, done that, there is nothing he wants. Appearances to the

contrary notwithstanding, the same is true for her; for by wanting everything in general she cannot want anything in particular.

Osmond turns out to be cruel, heartless, crass. The pain she had caused those who had courted her is thus returned, in spades, by the husband she knows full well she chose freely. The Fates thus proved, after all, to have been mercilessly yet scrupulously fair.

This, at least, is the moral at first blush. But the movie, to its credit, allows for a more compassionate approach to the complex nature of human intentions. Isabel is, after all, generous and willing to find good in others, her idealism both genuine and endearing. And however wrong her choice of mate turned out to be, as it was *her* choice she never shows the slightest sign of self-pity. On the contrary, she seems absolutely prepared to live out her self-inflicted sentence, with courage and determination.

The final resolution emerges as Isabel proceeds to disobey her husband's strongly expressed desire that she not travel to be by her dying cousin's bedside. There seems to be little doubt that Isabel would have done absolutely nothing about her marital situation, nothing to confront Osmond, had she not received word of Ralph's imminent death. Isabel is thus largely rescued by destiny, although she does have the courage to embrace it and follow its course. It turns out that she is then given a chance to show that she is, after all, capable of genuine love and gratitude.

And so there is in the end a truly touching moment. As she lies next to her moribund cousin, the two baring their souls to each other and themselves, she finally

realizes what they had meant to one another for a lifetime. She embraces Ralph in his last minutes on earth, with infinite affection. The camera discreetly closes in on the embrace, then gently turns away. And while admittedly it is difficult to imagine a union that is nearly necrophilial, the elliptical image is sublime. Isabel has finally known, for a few infinite moments, what it is to love someone absolutely. She found what she had perhaps been looking for, however clumsily and unconsciously, in the most unlikely place: in her dying secret benefactor, who had never stopped adoring her even though he had inadvertently provided the instrument of her own destruction. And to his astonishment—as well as hers—she is able to reciprocate. In the process, she saves not so much his soul as her own. The fact that it takes place as he is close to the grave reinforces its decidedly spiritual quality. Their love is almost literally conceived in heaven.

Not quite the end. Enter Caspar Goodwood once again—who had never given up on her, and has followed Ralph, whom he had befriended, to his death. (The friendship itself is intriguing: two men who become bonded largely because of their love for the same woman.) As Isabel walks into the woods, alone, after Ralph's burial, it seems almost inevitable that she would be followed by her passionate admirer. It is impossible not to hope that she will succumb here, that she must allow Caspar to comfort her, that in her vulnerable state she can only let herself be seduced. When he embraces her and kisses her passionately, one waits for her to hunger for more. The fact that despite the electrifying kiss she does not allow herself to want him, that she runs

from him, almost in desperation, is at first somewhat inexplicable and even disconcerting.

It takes only a moment's reflection to realize that what holds her back is her recently rediscovered love for her cousin, who after all had just died, his embrace still fresh in her mind, his hands so recently having touched her body. But her flight from Caspar has a completely different meaning now than it did when she first rejected the passionate young man just prior to her marriage. She does not perhaps so much abhor Caspar as revere the memory of the one whom she had recently resurrected (or rather, the one who had resurrected her) to a paradise that neither of them had imagined existed. That paradise was not quite ready to be exchanged for another of more dubious serenity. Incandescent, the paradise that Caspar offers is sexually unambiguous. While Ralph was dying, Caspar could not be more alive. He demands, categorically, all of Isabel, and now. No more fantasies or daydreams; Caspar's need is real, not imagined, and will wait no longer. His being is on fire. Thus Isabel is finally tested; so surely she must hesitate.

And here the movie decides to end enigmatically, and hence on one level unsatisfyingly, but on a deeper level the ending is a stroke of cinematic genius. Just as she reaches the house, having fled from the embrace of young Caspar who was obviously willing to worship her forever, meet her every desire, be hers to the end of his days, instead of going in, she stops. She stops, and she turns. She turns, in effect, to Caspar, the man who had pursued her all his life with love and lust. She seems to consider his challenge, and seems to find herself up to it. Or does she?

Will she follow him or not? It is entirely possible, even probable. For surely she is now transformed: Isabel has learned what it is like to live unloved; the haughty young beauty who simply assumed that everyone would adore her had in fact been rudely, violently rejected by her own husband. More important, she has now learned that she herself could love, however briefly. If she does in fact eventually succumb to the embrace of the young American, she will do so fully aware that her self-conception has been cut down to size, humbled, having learned that she could feel true affection. In other words, she has finally become a woman, who has known pain and loneliness; she is no longer simply a willful spoiled young thing. One senses that whatever her decision, on that doorstep, Isabel has now discovered what perhaps she needs in order to find some sort of solace. She knows now that she must prize genuine devotion and affection, and also that life sometimes presents us with decoys that we mistake at our peril. She may even be able to accept a man's passionate love, and reciprocate.

The resolution of Isabel's life can only be obscure. Perhaps—who knows?—she will end up choosing a life of promiscuity; perhaps (though this seems unlikely) she will return to her husband; or perhaps she will choose Caspar and be able to know happiness at least for a while. Her choice will be in large part a function of her character and the nobility or mediocrity of her imagination. The movie will have fulfilled its purpose by showing that even Isabel, haughty, beautiful Isabel, can

catch a glimpse of eternity. She does so less *because* than *despite* her determination to carve out her own destiny; she escapes her fate almost in spite of herself. In the end, she shows herself capable of salvation.

That salvation requires that at the very least she embrace her femininity, her ability to desire, and to feel. To return, then, to the larger picture: the Age of Aquarius might offer a glimmer of hope. If so, it lies in the ability to attach oneself to one's own soul and to that of another, to the truth of gentleness, and in the rare commitment of love, even of the all-consuming kind. If in this age man (and, yes, woman) can still love, both passionately and devotedly, using both reason and sentiment, he (and perhaps even more so, she) is not entirely lost. But is it possible? Or have we lost the ability to define our selves in terms both transcendent and human? Can we affirm the mystery of life when we no longer quite know the meaning of the word "mystery"? Can we tell real art from mere titillation? Can we be both thrilled and fulfilled, not merely entertained? It isn't clear. The jury is still out. In the Age of Aquarius, it seems to be all in the swimming. The Lady in James's portrait reminds us however that there must be a reason for our strokes. Willfulness is not enough; the imagination, its content informed by history and a sense of genuine value, must inform our will. Our imaginations must embrace our humanity, not redefine it in androgynous terms. Otherwise love—and therefore life—can mean but little.