

# Isabel's philanthropic marriage in the portrait of a lady



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The characters in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* long for a way into Isabel Archer's mind. They are particularly curious about her decision to marry her husband, the self-centered and manipulative Gilbert Osmond. James offers more of his characters' accusations than Isabel's defenses, but he does give readers glimpses into why she chooses Osmond. She marries him in part because he lacks a strong fortune, and she has money. She believes that her marriage can serve as philanthropy and that giving her wealth to Osmond and his daughter Pansy is the "right" thing to do. In a time where women were expected to be moral beacons and nearly angelic housewife figures, Isabel feels herself divided between these moral expectations and her own desires for independence. Ultimately, she chooses to fulfill societal expectations, and, through her marriage, she molds herself into an "angel of the house." However, her philanthropy ultimately goes against her values of freedom and independence, leaving her unsatisfied.

From the early descriptions of Isabel's character, we see that she is deeply concerned with her own virtue. In one of the first lengthy descriptions of her character, the narrator describes her as "stoutly determined not to be hollow" (65). Isabel's determination manifests in a constant self-evaluation. Isabel prays earnestly for deliverance from dwelling her thoughts on vulgarity (65). And she worries whether she is an "egoist." She is "always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (65). Isabel's determinate nature may make her unique, but her questions about virtue are not out of line for her time period. In the Victorian period society was hyper-focused on virtue, particularly women's virtue. "The woman question," what a woman could or should do in society, attracted

debate in the 19th century. And some answered this question by focusing on women's moral roles. Victorian essayist Sarah Stickney Ellis claims that a woman's main priority in life should not be wealth or education, but "disinterested kindness" (1722). Men, she argues, should focus on "worldly aggrandizement." Ellis describes how a man is thrust into the corrupt working world, and his wife's responsibility is to stay home and be the moral center of the household. She writes of a tired husband, "he has thought of the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty, has scattered the clouds before his mental vision, and sent him back to that beloved home, a better and wiser man" (1722). The answer to the woman question, for Ellis and others, is that women concern themselves with their moral character, rather than education, wealth, or independence. Thus, Isabel, in her concerns with virtue, may seem to fall in line with an ideal Victorian woman.

However, we also see early on in the text that one of Isabel's highest values is independence. Rather than wanting to find a husband, Isabel wants to focus on personal freedom and well-being. It is said about her:

Something pure and proud that was in her. . . had hitherto kept her from any great vanity of conjecture on the article of possible husbands. Few of the men she saw seemed worth a ruinous expenditure, and it made her smile to think that one of them should present himself as an incentive to hope and a reward of patience. (65)

Not only does Isabel value the “ pure and proud” desire for independence within herself, but she even considers it “ vanity” to focus on the possibility of a husband. The men she knows do not seem “ worth a ruinous expenditure.” She would rather focus on her own self-improvement.

She “ always returned to her theory that a young woman whom after all every one thought clever should begin by getting a general impression of life” (66). This “ impression” comes with independence- the ability to be on your own, travel, and learn about the world. Isabel does value morality, but she also has a strong desire to be a learned and independent person.

Holding both morality and independence highly, however, sets Isabel up to be self-divided in a Victorian society. Victorian notions of women's morality are always within a marriage. Ellis claims that a woman holds the “ high holy duty of cherishing in protecting the minor morals of life” (1722). But this duty only manifests itself in marriage. A woman becomes the beacon of character for her husband and her children, not for a larger realm of society. Isabel, wanting desperately to be good but also wanting to be independent, feels she must choose between these two values.

Isabel is given an opportunity to be independent, at least financially, through her cousin Ralph. However, in this position of power, she feels incredibly uncomfortable and undeserving. Isabel presses her cousin Ralph on why his father gives her his money (not knowing that it was Ralph's decision to give it to her). Ralph remarks that it was father's generous gift to her, just for “ beautifully existing” (227). But Isabel persists that she is undeserving of such a gift. “ He liked me too much,” she responds (227). A paradox in her value

system, Isabel cannot accept the generosity of others. But she feels like she has to be generous to other people. Victorian women are taught that they must be givers, rather than receivers. They must be the generous ones. As a receiver, Isabel feels useless. Her new-found wealth is not a gift but a burden she must bear. She believes that the more she has, the more she has to give away in order to feel satisfied. Ralph sees the money as a chance for Isabel to be independent, but Isabel sees it as a burden she must give away.

Isabel cannot see independence as being part of the moral good. In Victorian times, independence in women was thought of as uncouth and even frightening. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the Victorian notions of independence in their feminist criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The "angel in the house" mentality is an idea "imposed" on 19th century women. But this imposed angel has a "necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house" (17). The independent woman, Gilbert and Gubar argue, is thought of as a "monster" in society. The necessary solution for the independent woman is to "kill" the angel image. They argue that for a woman, "it is the surrender of herself...that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely the sacrifice that dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless and noble is to be dead. A life like that has no story." These critics argue that an angelic life is no life at all.

Killing the angel in the house, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is the only option for the independent woman. But Isabel does not want this death. To become independent and kill the angel would be to go against her values of morality. She does not want to be a "monster" with no use and no

contributions to society. While Isabel does wish for independence, there is no  
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room for her in society to be both independent and good. So a marriage to someone that needs her becomes Isabel's solution. Rather than kill the angel, Isabel will seek to embody it.

Isabel's wealth does puts her in a position to be generous. She now has the power to do good in the world. If she can give money to a man who needs it, perhaps someone with a family, Isabel can feel she is making a difference. Gilbert Osmond is presented as the perfect person to whom Isabel can give. He lacks the prestige and appeal that Isabel's other suitors have, but strangely, this is what draws him to her. Madame Merle describes him as a man with "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" (203). While her description is deprecating and extreme, it is true that Osmond is without a fortune. Other characters look down on him for his lack of wealth. But the fact that he does not have much money actually attracts Isabel. Osmond is missing something that Isabel feels she can provide. Her other suitors are well off financially and do not need her, and Isabel wants to go where she feels she is needed. In a marriage to other suitors such as Warbenton or Goodwood, Isabel would feel useless; in a marriage to Osmond, she can feel useful.

Osmond also has a daughter, Pansy, who needs support, both financially and also maternally. In a marriage to Osmond, Isabel could help Pansy. Isabel could ensure that Pansy is financially supported, but she can also be a female role and maternal figure to her. She sees Pansy as an innocent girl that she can shape: "Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so" (315). Pansy is, in a sense, a blank canvas, someone who needs to be affected. Isabel can help mold Pansy and give her a

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successful life. Isabel knows that her money could open up more marriage prospects for Pansy. She wants to give her plenty of opportunities. Earlier in the text, Ralph says about Isabel, " She's as good as her best opportunities" (192). Isabel does believe this, but not for herself. She believes it about Pansy. Isabel's wealth can serve as fuel for better opportunities.

Isabel's marriage could not only give Pansy more opportunities, but it could protect her from becoming a victim. Pansy is described as vulnerable, someone who needs care and protection. It is said about her, " To be so tender was to be touching withal, and she could be felt as an easy victim of fate" (315). Isabel wants to protect Pansy from being made a victim. She does not want Pansy to be taken advantage of, and in a sense, money can protect her from that. If she marries Pansy's father, Isabel can protect Pansy and add to her prospects. And Isabel can add to her personal feelings of validation and fulfillment.

Isabel can thus serve as a benefactor to Osmond and his daughter. The nature of her relationship with Osmond is drawn out in a conversation Isabel has with Mrs. Touchett. Critical of Osmond, Mrs. Touchett says something similar to what Madame Merle said earlier: " He has no money; he has no name; he has no importance" (333). Mrs. Touchett does not see Osmond as a viable suitor for Isabel because lacks wealth and prestige. But Isabel sees all of these " no's" as an opportunity for giving. She says, " I think I value everything that's valuable. I care very much for money, and that's why I wish Mr. Osmond to have a little" (333). Marriage is an opportunity for Isabel to make good use of the money Ralph has given her. Mrs. Touchett responds to Isabel, " Give it to him then; but marry someone else" (333). Isabel,  
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however, cannot separate marriage and giving; they are one in the same to her.

Mrs. Touchett goes so far to ask Isabel if her relationship with Osmond is based on pity: "Do you marry him out of charity?" (333). Isabel dodges this question: "It was my duty to tell you, Aunt Lydia, but I don't think it's my duty to explain it to you" (333). The fact that she does not answer the question shows that she is avoiding the truth. She is marrying Osmond for charity but does not want to admit it. Isabel knows that others would look down on her if she admits to this kind of charity. They will see her marriage as nothing but a financial agreement that provides no benefit to Isabel. Mrs. Touchett does tell her, "In your partnership, you'll bring everything" (333). But Isabel does not see this as a problem; that is precisely what she wants. Isabel only feels satisfied if she is being of use to others. And in her marriage, Isabel feels she is serving the good and helping others, even if it is at a cost to herself.

Isabel uses these justifications while she is deciding to marry Osmond. But she also uses them on the back-end, when she reflects on why she married him and why she chooses to stay. Even into her marriage, Isabel continues to see Osmond as needing her help. It is said of Isabel, "She would launch his boat for him; she would be his providence" (423). Isabel sees Osmond as a passive object without agency, someone who needs his boat launched. She can be his "providence" all throughout her marriage. And the primary means of this providence is through her financial support. She had always thought of her money as "a burden," and she "was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared  
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receptacle" (423). And that someone is Osmond, a person who needs it and a man who can actually use it. The language describing Osmond as a passive object or "receptacle" continues when he is called a "charitable institution" in Isabel's mind (423). He is literally an institution to whom she can contribute. And the "transfer" of the "weight" of her money to this "institution" effectually "lighten(s) her own conscience (423). Osmond's marriage relieves Isabel of the burden of her wealthy position, and it fulfills her desire to be useful. Isabel stays with Osmond because she believes she has done good in marrying him.

Isabel even equates the good with love. She believes, "It would be a good thing to love him" (423). On the other end of marriage, Isabel still sees love as a selfless act. She still refuses to describe it in terms of feeling or affection. It is said of her, "And she had loved him, she had so anxiously and yet so ardently given herself—a good deal for what she found in him, but a good deal also for what she brought him and what might enrich the gift" (423). Isabel sees giving herself away as the same thing as love. She does not seek any mutuality in love, only to give of herself generously. And a "good deal" of why she marries Osmond is for "what she brought him," not what he could give to her. Isabel seeks out the opposite of what many people would look for in a marriage. She ignores what Osmond could do for her and solely focuses on how she can benefit him and Pansy. She seeks always to be a benefactor.

Some may read Isabel's philanthropic marriage as weak. She is not strong enough to kill the angel image and become independent. But this is not how Isabel views it. In her position as a benefactor, she is actually the more

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powerful player. She is the one with money, and Osmond is in debt to her. She has brought everything to the marriage, and in her giving, she holds some power over Osmond. In Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House," from where Gilbert and Gubar take their criticism, he describes women as the "best half of creation's best" (19). Gilbert and Gubar interpret this poem as caging women inside the home. But if women are the "better half" and are solely responsible for morality in marriage, they do hold some power. Isabel has the position of benefactor and moral beacon, and this gives her some power in her marriage. It is thus possible to read Isabel's marriage as somewhat subversive.

But the question remains whether this is satisfying. Isabel wants control in her marriage, but she ends up relinquishing it. When Isabel marries Osmond, the money is no longer hers, according to Victorian customs. The money belongs to Osmond, and it is his to manipulate as he pleases. And Isabel is left tied to Osmond and unhappy in her marriage. Her equations of the good and love catch up to her, and she finds herself dissatisfied in a loveless marriage. She has given herself away, and while she can say she did the "right" or "good" thing in giving money to a man and daughter who needed it, she sacrifices personal and financial independence. She betrays one value in seeking another.

James thrusts Isabel into what seems a hopeless situation. She must sacrifice one value to fulfill another. But he limits Isabel's options to argue for more room in society. We need to see independence as part of the moral good for women and give them space in society to affect spheres outside the home.

Otherwise we will be left with women who never meet their full potential, women like Isabel, who are lifeless angels.

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