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## A critical analysis of the characters of Isabel and Madame Merle and their conflict in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS OF ISABEL  
AND MADAME MERLE AND THEIR CONFLICT IN  
HENRY JAMES'S THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English  
University of the Pacific

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

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by  
Thomas Raymond Alderson  
August 1964

... she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant.

James, The Portrait of a Lady I., 69.

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## CHAPTER I

### AN INTRODUCTION TO ISABEL

The opening scene of The Portrait of a Lady takes place upon the broad, sunlit lawns of Gardencourt. Yet, even in this expansive setting, the most essential character in the novel, the protagonist, is, curiously, no more than a narrow, shadowy speculation symbolized by a few odd words found in a telegram of dubious value. The only worth of these words comes in the amount of curiosity they can arouse in the other characters and in the reader. For it appears that, with this slow but significantly unusual means of introducing Isabel, the author intends her for more than a mere foil in a worldly triangle.

Henry James does not squander his characters; and while the plot of this novel, for example, suggests a debt to the traditional sentimental novel, the characters transcend such a strict formula and take on great depth and mass. Thus, as the reader progresses through the tale, he is continually surprised, and gratified, to discover that the characters emerge as real personalities, each possessing his own set of ideas, sensibilities, and visions. When these personalities are brought together there can be no chance for a sentimental novel.

It must be noted that from the first chapter of this work, the author begins methodically to prepare the reader--by supplying a body of information concerning Isabel and, to a lesser extent, Madame Merle--for the moment when, in the climax, Isabel faces Merle alone and, unaided, is able to overcome her nearly crippling effects. That Isabel achieves a livable compromise rather than a total victory is a credit to the author's sense of reality and his ability, technically, to illustrate this sense. In explaining this compromise, then, James has created his finest feminine characters.

James initially had several choices concerning the personality of his protagonist: first, he could have created her as a very brilliant woman. Yet, had he taken such an alternative, he would have ruined the work, for no Merle, not even a super-Merle, could have overcome such opposition. Again, he could have made her an essentially simple-minded child; yet, such a character would make poor drama. An unintelligent person in the hands of a very clever manipulator makes a poor story indeed. In drawing Isabel with simply normal capacities for both thought and reflection; in describing her in the process of normal learning and growth; in showing her, in short, as an attractive and clever but thoroughly normal young American woman, the author leaves her portrait open to later embellishments, thus allowing her to mature into a wholly believable person around whom, in turn,

can be constructed a most realistic drama.

Isabel begins to emerge almost casually in a conversation held upon the lawn of Gardencourt involving the elder Mr. Touchett, his son Ralph, and their neighbor, Lord Warburton. Ralph, chiding his friend, recommends that Warburton should "...take hold of a pretty woman."<sup>1</sup> To this suggestion the old man adds later: "'Well, you may fall in love with whomever you please; but you mustn't fall in love with my niece.'<sup>2</sup> When asked for more information concerning this mysterious niece by both Warburton and Ralph, the old man can only draw upon a cryptic message sent to him by his wife in a telegram:

Tired America, hot weather awful, return  
England with niece, first steamer decent cabin.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even before this initial introduction, another message had foreshadowed Isabel's inauspicious entry into the story:

Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk,  
address here. Taken sister's girl, died last  
year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite  
independent.<sup>4</sup>

From this scanty information, Ralph, his father, and Lord Warburton set about trying to make an abstract Isabel become a

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<sup>1</sup>Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), I., 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I., 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I., 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

reality. The result of this "higher criticism" is the creation of an odd mixture of American girl "types." It is Mr. Touchett, with his warm, simple humor, who prevents this scene from becoming almost a burlesque:

"She hasn't come here to look for a husband, I hope; so many young ladies are doing that, as if there were no good ones at home. Then she's probably engaged; American girls are usually engaged, I believe."<sup>5</sup>

Though the conjectures of these three gentlemen are not intended to be taken seriously, they do serve, for the reader, to heighten a sense of expectation, a looking forward to a more thorough acquaintance with Isabel. As to what, in reality, this girl will actually be, there are two choices: one, that this niece will be a very conventional, very dull person; or, more hopefully, that she will be "...quite independent."<sup>6</sup>

James does not make the reader wait very long for an answer. In the second chapter of the novel Isabel's appearance at Gardencourt immediately establishes the direction in which her character will develop. The author observes: "The young lady seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others."<sup>7</sup> A second, more important insight comes from the subject herself. When Ralph tries to analyze his mother's

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., I., 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I., 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., I., 17.



actions toward his young cousin, he says, innocently: "She has adopted you."<sup>8</sup> To this Isabel instantly replies:

"Adopted me?" The girl stared, and her blush came back to her, together with a momentary look of pain which gave her interlocutor some alarm. He had underestimated the effect of his words. Lord Warburton, who appeared constantly desirous of a nearer view of Miss Archer, strolled towards the two cousins at the moment, and as he did so she rested her wider eyes on him. "Oh no; she has not adopted me. I'm not a candidate for adoption."<sup>9</sup>

To this unexpected seriousness Ralph manages only a stumbling apology. Isabel, however, is not to be deterred, for she continues to make her situation explicit; doing this, then, Isabel fulfills the probability established by Mrs. Louchett in her odd telegrams sent from America. Isabel says of her relationship with her aunt:

"You mean she has taken me up. Yes; she likes to take people up. She has been very kind to me; but," she added with a certain visible eagerness of desire to be explicit, "I'm very fond of my liberty."<sup>10</sup>

Having made herself keenly understood in these few words, the girl then advances upon her uncle. As she walks toward him, Lord Warburton delivers to Ralph an essential statement concerning Isabel's personality:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., I., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., I., 24.

"You wished a while ago to see my idea of an interesting woman. There it is!"<sup>11</sup>

Precisely how interesting Isabel actually is can only be guessed at by Lord Warburton, for he knows little about her. Only one other character at Gardencourt has a greater awareness of Isabel than the romantic peer, and that is Mrs. Touchett; for it was she who went to Isabel's home in Albany and confronted the girl, and it was she who first experienced Isabel's frankness:

"Ah, said Isabel slowly, "you must be our crazy Aunt Lydia!"

"Is that what your father told you to call me? I'm your Aunt Lydia, but I'm not at all crazy: I haven't a delusion! And which of the daughters are you?"

"I'm the youngest of the three, and my name's Isabel."<sup>12</sup>

In this short sequence there appears the emergence of Isabel's most noteworthy quality: her utter honesty and what appears to be her gross lack of delicacy. The frankness with which Isabel meets the world James can attribute to her youth; her apparent lack of delicacy is the result of a more intense and a more reasoned feeling than mere years alone could give her. When Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel that "...if you'll be very good, and do everything I tell you..."<sup>13</sup> she will be

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I., 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., I., 35.

taken to Florence, Isabel bluntly, though politely replies:

"Do everything you tell me? I don't think I can promise that."<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Touchett replies:

"No, you don't look like a person of that sort. You're fond of your own way; but it's not for me to blame you."<sup>15</sup>

Again, in order to draw Isabel's character into even sharper focus, James, in the next chapter, allows her sister, Lillian, to comment upon their early life:

"I've never kept up with Isabel--it would have taken all my time."<sup>16</sup>

Though true, this statement is deceptive too, for it gives the impression that Isabel was ignored by her sister. Nothing could be more erroneous; in saying "kept up" Lillian did not mean an inter-familial relationship--she always was concerned about Isabel--she meant, instead, "keeping up" intellectually. Lillian was not aware of what Isabel thought or of what Isabel did for the most part. Lillian, as a married woman, had her own limited life, her own friends, her own desires. Thus, Isabel found herself left to her own thoughts early in life. For adventure she turned to a collection of books in her father's library. Isabel's early drift towards such a direction was early pronounced, noted, and commented upon:

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., I., 39.

It had been a very happy life and she had been a very fortunate person--this was the truth that seemed to emerge most vividly. She had had the best of everything, and in a world in which the circumstances of so many people made them unenviable it was an advantage never to have known anything particularly unpleasant. It appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction.<sup>17</sup>

Yet it was this very real isolation from the life about her that was Isabel's most serious defect; and while she could indeed learn about evil, and eventually gain sufficient strength and depth of character to deal with evil (and is this not the major theme of this novel?), she found it difficult to overcome her tendency to conceive of everything she experienced in literary terms:

She had had everything a girl could have: kindness, admiration, bonbons, 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.<sup>18</sup>

She has everything, in fact, but the experience of living with the world on a first name, firsthand basis:

... but the depths of this young lady's nature were a very out-of-the-way place, between which and the surface communication was interrupted by a dozen capricious forces. She saw the young men who came in large numbers to see her sister; but as a general thing they were afraid of her; they had a belief that some special preparation was

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., I., 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I., 46.

required for talking with her.<sup>19</sup>

It must be considered that the first sight of Isabel comes when she is sitting in her father's library. Of these books, her favorites were fiction. From these books, then, Isabel draws her initial impressions; and it is from this same source that she extends her opinions of life. It is not surprising then, to realize that for Isabel, at this point, there is little difference between the secondhand world and the real; that the flesh of reality holds for her no more verisimilitude than the parchment of literature. To talk to Isabel, at this point, is to engage in an unreal dialogue where Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare may each have an opinion certainly as vivid and as valid as that of Mrs. Touchett, Warburton, and Madame Merle.

Upon quietly returning to Gardencourt with her niece, Mrs. Touchett, while talking with Ralph, outlines her plans for a European tour with Isabel. As a concession, Mrs. Touchett will even allow Isabel to choose two of the countries she would like to visit. To this proposal Ralph replies, not without concern: "That sounds rather dry--even allowing her the choice of two of the countries."<sup>20</sup> Ralph's hesitancy does not affect his mother who answers epigrammatically:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I., 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., I., 55.

"'If it's dry,' said his mother with a laugh, 'you can leave Isabel alone to water it! She is as good as a summer rain, any day.'" "'Do you mean she's a gifted being?'" Ralph asks. "'I don't know whether she's a gifted being,'" Mrs. Touchett answers, "'but she's a clever girl--with a strong will and a high temper. She has no idea of being bored.'"<sup>21</sup>

There are no two women in this novel who are more dissimilar than Mrs. Touchett and her niece. And yet, they have a very strong bond, a very common aspect, shared in almost equal quantities, which, eventually, will be responsible for their disagreement. Mrs. Touchett again comments:

"Do you mean by that that I'm a bore? I don't think she finds me one. Some girls might, I know; but Isabel's too clever for that. I think I understand her; I know the sort of girl she is. She's very frank, and I'm very frank: We know just what to expect of each other."<sup>22</sup>

As shall be seen later, and certainly as suspected, Mrs. Touchett is correct on one point only, and that concerns the frankness with which each is so richly endowed. Yet, though each, in a sense, shares in the other, Mrs. Touchett is incapable of understanding her niece. On the other side, Isabel's understanding of her aunt is, essentially, one of superficial respect. Though Mrs. Touchett cannot really understand Isabel, she is still capable of some judgment on

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

her own limited terms. She says of Isabel in America:

"She didn't know she was bored, but when I left her no doubt of it she seemed very grateful for the service. You may say I shouldn't have enlightened her--I should have let her alone. There's a good deal in that, but I acted conscientiously; I thought she was meant for something better. It occurred to me that it would be a kindness to take her about and introduce her to the world. She thinks she knows a great deal of it--like most American girls; but like most American girls she's ridiculously mistaken."<sup>23</sup>

There is, in this statement, almost an overt confession of an intuition on the part of Mrs. Touchett to overwhelm her niece, to take into her hands Isabel's free will. It is a mistake on Mrs. Touchett's part even to think in such terms; but, again, this woman is notable for her lack of perception. It is left, therefore, to her son, Ralph, whose mind stands behind nearly the entire novel with a penetrating, an uncanny correctness, to open to the reader more of Isabel's complex personality. When she suggests that she be shown the art gallery in Gardencourt, Ralph replies that the light is not good and that she would not appreciate the paintings properly. To this Isabel willfully answers: "'If you please I should like to see them just a little.'"<sup>24</sup> Ralph can only observe from this, flatly yet correctly: "'She doesn't take suggestions.'" When he at last conducts her into the hall, he notes

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I., 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Immediately that "...She was evidently a judge; she had a natural taste." Yet it is not until Isabel teasingly brings up the subject of a house ghost that Ralph is able to supply a brilliant insight not only to Isabel's character but to her future as well:<sup>25</sup>

Ralph shook his head sadly. "I might show it to you, but you'd never see it. The privilege isn't given to every one; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago," said Ralph.<sup>26</sup>

When Isabel insistently pursues the ghost, Ralph can only sadly wish: "'I hope you'll never see the ghost!'" Here Ralph is most strikingly ironic; for while his sad comment is certainly a deliberate foreshadowing of future events, his sadness is real and carries a great deal of meaning considering that it is he who provides the means for Isabel to suffer and becomes the house ghost or, more precisely, Isabel's ghostly perception of the tragedy in which she is a prime actor.

While James has allowed Mrs. Touchett some freedom in which to make an assessment of Isabel, and Ralph, a good deal more latitude and a great many more conclusions, it is the author himself who, in the sixth chapter, contributes the most significant series of comments upon Isabel's character. These

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., I., 64.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.



observations never could have come from the protagonist (they are much too personal and revealing), for they were nearly as unknown to Isabel as to those about her. James begins this chapter by seriously stating that "Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active."<sup>27</sup> Yet, within the same paragraph he cannot restrain himself from a very humorous, though certainly telling observation concerning her education:

It is true that among her contemporaries she passed for a young woman of extraordinary profundity; for those excellent people never withheld their admiration from a reach of intellect of which they themselves were not conscious, and spoke of Isabel as a prodigy of learning, a creature reported to have read the classic authors-- in translations.<sup>28</sup>

Here the author does not mean to depreciate Isabel's quality of mind; he means, instead, to focus attention upon some important facts that will grow exceedingly meaningful in the later parts of the novel. For example, from the earlier observations made by Ralph, the reader could be led into believing that Isabel possessed some kind of literary talent; that she had, possibly, the potential of an Anglo-American George Eliot. But this misconception the author clears up:

...the girl had never attempted to write a book and had no desire for the laurels of authorship. She had no talent for expression and too little of the consciousness

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., I., 66.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

of genius; she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior.<sup>29</sup>

One cannot avoid being made aware, throughout the first chapters, of Isabel's high self-regard: her confidence, her trust in her own taste, her fierce desire for liberty all radiated from this single bright source:

It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem... she treated herself to occasions of homage.<sup>30</sup>

Yet despite these moments, Isabel is, essentially, a normal, bright, very imaginative young woman with a few too many books and a few too little experiences:

her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags. At moments she discovered she was grotesquely wrong, and then she treated herself to a week of passionate humility.<sup>31</sup>

It must be noted that even as the author continues in this humorous vein, there are several important aspects of Isabel that are being revealed and which will later prove to be responsible for a great deal of unhappiness. Perhaps the most striking quality, beside her stubbornness, her pride, her lack of any real knowledge concerning the world at large, is her

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., I., 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

inconsistency:

Of course the danger of a high spirit was the danger of inconsistency; the danger of keeping up the flag after the place has surrendered; a sort of behaviour so crooked as to be almost a dishonour to the flag.<sup>32</sup>

There is no deep puzzle preventing the reader from understanding Isabel's eventual downfall at the hands of a worldly Madame Merle; at all times, from these initial chapters, the reader is fully aware of the folly into which the protagonist stumbles; yet, despite this superior knowledge, the reader must sit powerless and suffer, often unjustly, with Isabel. While suffering, then, it becomes apparent that Isabel's greatest appeal is emotional and not intellectual:

...she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant.<sup>33</sup>

If, at this point, there appears to be a foreboding of tragedy, it is remote and almost unlikely.

At Gardencourt, Isabel's major function seems not only to be amused but to amuse as well. It is to her uncle that she brings the most pleasant thoughts:

Like the mass of American girls Isabel had been encouraged to express herself; her remarks had been attended to; she had been expected to have emotions and opinions. Many of her opinions had doubtless but a slender value, many of her emotions passed away in the utterance; but they had left a trace in giving her the

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., I., 69.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

habit of seeming at least to feel and think, and in imparting moreover to her words when she was really moved that prompt vividness which so many people had regarded as a sign of superiority. Mr. Touchett used to think that she reminded him of his wife when his wife was in her teens. It was because she was fresh and natural and quick to understand, to speak--so many characteristics of her niece--that he had fallen in love with Mrs. Touchett.<sup>34</sup>

It was only natural, then, that the old man wished that there could be some memorable way to show her his appreciation: "He wanted to do something for her and wished she would ask it of him."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., I., 74.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., I., 75.

## CHAPTER II

### ISABEL AT GARDENCOURT: TWO THREATS

The author's initial characterization of Isabel, which takes place within the first seven chapters of this novel, is unique in that the impressions with which the reader is left have come, not from Isabel, but from those who surround her. Reading further into the work, one becomes aware, almost imperceptibly, of Mrs. Touchett's series of thoughts concerning her niece; in the same manner Ralph's witty observations are accepted. Each individual who deals with Isabel, then, is left with a distinct impression of her, and this impression in turn is revealed to the reader. This method is called "characterization by reflection." It should be noted here that the protagonist is not philosophical; she does not reflect overmuch; instead, she acts. Consequently, the running account of her development comes in terms of actions expressing a state of mind, and not a state of mind contriving actions. This difference is an essential distinction: the first view shows a character integrated in real life; the second, real life forced to conform to a specific philosophical proposition.

Isabel's first conquest at Gardencourt is Lord Warburton. This conquest is not wholly unexpected by the reader, though it has been considered improbable. Again the

scene is upon the lawn of Gardencourt, and again Ralph and his father are seen together, this time with Isabel in attendance. They have been discussing Warburton's political status as a liberal. Mr. Touchett genially observes:

"His views don't hurt anyone as far as I can see; they certainly don't hurt himself. And if there were to be a revolution he would come off very easily. They wouldn't touch him, they'd leave him as he is: he's too much liked."<sup>1</sup>

To this, Isabel ironically comments: "'Ah, he couldn't be a martyr even if he wished! That's a very poor position.'" And old Mr. Touchett adds: "'He'll never be a martyr unless you make him one.'"<sup>2</sup> As he says this, the old man knocks on wood. Again Isabel stumbles unwittingly into a situation where she is setting up a future series of actions: "'But you don't pity Lord Warburton then as Ralph does?'" she asks, and her uncle, realizing that Isabel had not understood the meaning of what he has been trying to tell her, retreated: "'Yes, I do, after all!'"<sup>3</sup>

The irony generated here by Isabel is dramatic. For when Mr. Touchett speaks of Warburton being martyred, he does not mean it in a political sense as Ralph does. When Isabel's uncle also says that it might be his niece who may martyr

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., I., 103.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Warburton, Isabel misses the drift of what is actually meant and takes the whole passage as a joke on her Americanism as opposed to Warburton's status as an English nobleman. Thus, when this gentleman invites her to visit his estate, she is unable to see his invitation romantically; instead, she sees it as a gesture, on Warburton's part, to show her something of English life. Charmed with the apparent innocence of this offer by Warburton, Isabel unthinkingly (or, more accurately, ignorantly) accepts and allows herself to be pulled unprepared into a romantic situation, a situation that she had not even remotely anticipated. The shock of this scene forces her to make a very hasty and, perhaps, a very ill-considered judgment. Warburton, alone with her for a few moments, tells her that she has charmed him. Isabel answers, almost coyly:

"You're easily charmed, my lord," said Isabel.

"No, I'm not easily charmed!" And then he stopped a moment. "But you've charmed me, Miss Archer."

These words were uttered with an indefinable sound which startled the girl; it struck her as the prelude to something grave: she had heard the sound before and she recognized it. She had no wish, however, that for the moment such a prelude should have a sequel, and she said as gaily as possible and as quickly as an appreciable degree of agitation would allow her: "I'm afraid there's no prospect of my being able to come here again."<sup>4</sup>

For Warburton this reply is a blow, inasmuch as the punishment is in proportion to the crime, too excessive. He can only

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., I., 110.

comment, after feebly gaining permission to visit Isabel at Gardencourt, that he could "...never feel safe around her". He sensed that she was always "'...summing people up.'"<sup>5</sup> Again, when Warburton presses Isabel about her purpose in coming to Europe, she puts him off by saying vaguely that she travels for "'...the purpose of improving one's mind ....'" To this the frustrated lord bitterly adds: "'You can't improve your mind, Miss Archer ... it's already a most formidable instrument. It looks down on us all; it despises us.'"<sup>6</sup>

Yet one cannot wholly sympathize with Warburton at the expense of Isabel. Isabel came to England not simply to be married, for, as she had said earlier, her independence meant a great deal to her.<sup>7</sup> She drew back from risking this freedom:

...her coldness was not the calculation of her effect-- a game she played in a much smaller degree than would have seemed probable to many critics. It came from a certain fear.<sup>8</sup>

It should have become manifest, by this time, that Isabel is not prepared to commit herself into any kind of arrangement that might suggest an impairment of her free will

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., I., 111.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., I., 59.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., I., 113.



other than that which she has conceded to her aunt. She is seen determined to maintain, at nearly all costs, her liberty and her independence and, most significantly, to continue with her travels in Europe. Yet even before Isabel sets foot on the continent, she must face two crises. Ironically, in trying to avoid their ramifications, she unknowingly places herself in a situation that will lead to her third, and most serious struggle, a struggle from which she cannot emerge unscarred. This final struggle does not move so quickly as the others, nor does it run so deeply; it begins subtly, quietly, noiselessly; yet, when compared with all of her previous relationships both at Gardencourt and in America, it seems to possess a quality of darkness and of dread to everyone but Isabel herself--she being, in her innocent desire to be free, unable to recognize and, hence, cope with such a subtle threat to this freedom.

The first of these crises is simple and points out the quick growth that Isabel has made at Gardencourt. She receives an unexpected letter from a former admirer in America, Cassar Goodwood. From this letter Isabel discovers that Cassar, who had been pressing her uncomfortably in America, has enlisted on his behalf the services of Isabel's best friend, Henrietta Stackpole. Henrietta's character fits the role she is to play in this episode, for she appears suddenly in a bustle of fresh, clean spangles. She is, in essence, a symbol of the innocent

young nation itself, and she illustrates its new, though often crude, vigor. The man she proposes is, as his name indicates, Goodwood, an individual who is the sum of all of the good qualities of America. The match that Henrietta proposes, then, is one in which the qualities of goodness, honesty, and vitality are to be brought together. Yet there is a negative side to such a match, for, as with America itself, such a combination would totally lack knowledge of evil and darkness, and, hence, would be incomplete. It is Isabel's express desire to grow and to learn; she shows this when she is able to feel uncomfortable in the face of Caspar Goodwood's single-minded virtue. For while Isabel has been only a short time at Gardencourt and, hence, in the world, she is capable already of disliking the total, almost childlike innocence of her lover. Further, when the threat to her freedom comes from a more worldly individual (Lord Warburton), she is able to meet it, if not gracefully, at least adequately:

By tacit consent, as he talked, they had walked more and more slowly, and at last they stopped and he took her hand. "Ah, Lord Warburton, how little you know me!" Isabel<sup>9</sup> said very gently. Gently too she drew her hand away.

Warburton should have been the one to withdraw; he should have found a more graceful way to express his feelings. More essentially, he should have been more certain of the true

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., I., 148.

nature of his feelings. But his own character--as a great landholder, as a liberal peer--does not allow him to accept his relationship to a clever middle-class American girl as ludicrous. When Warburton receives Isabel's answer, he surprises the reader with his unexpected self-indulgence:

"Don't taunt me with that; that I don't know you better makes me unhappy enough already; it's all my loss. But that's what I want, and it seems to be I'm taking the best way. If you'll be my wife, then I shall know you, and when I tell you all the good I think of you you'll not be able to say it's from ignorance."<sup>10</sup>

Isabel's annoyed reply to Warburton, after being prevented from delivering a graceful refusal, is nearly as unexpected as the lord's sudden pathos:

"I thank you more than I can say for your offer," she returned at last. "it does me great honour."<sup>11</sup>

With such a sudden dual revelation, James does not leave the reader to ponder alone; after Isabel's reply to Warburton, the author steps in and, first, interprets the scene and then, more significantly, prepares for more meaningful revelations:

Smile not, however, I venture to repeat, at this simple young woman from Albany who debated whether she should accept an English peer before he had offered himself and who was disposed to believe that on the whole she

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I., 149.

could do better. She was a person of great good faith, and if there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity.<sup>12</sup>

In refusing both Lord Warburton and Casper Goodwood, Isabel decisively cuts herself off from, first, a very old association and, second, a newer, more profound one. There is still, in her mind, something further ahead, something of which she knows very little, that stands as a challenge to her imagination. Upon having refused the English peer, Isabel attempts to give him a rational answer:

"That reason that I wouldn't tell you--  
I'll tell it to you after all. It's  
that I can't escape my fate."  
"Your fate?"  
"I should try to escape it if I  
were to marry you."  
"I don't understand. Why should not  
that be your fate as well as anything else?"  
"Because it's not," said Isabel femi-  
ninely. "I know it's not. It's not my fate  
to give up--I know it can't be."<sup>13</sup>

Warburton refuses to understand and even ignores such a purely intuitive reply. When he persists in demanding a more logical answer, she can only reply in a disturbingly mystic new key:

"I can't escape unhappiness," said  
Isabel. "In marrying you I shall be trying."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ibid., I., 144-45.

<sup>13</sup> ibid., I., 186.

<sup>14</sup> ibid.

Until this statement, there has been, on Isabel's behalf, no clear intimation of a disaster. Though fanciful, Isabel's imagination appears to be healthy, in as much as there is not a conscious effort to commit herself, willfully, to an unhappy situation. Yet even to say such a thing is to believe that such a possibility may exist. Isabel had indicated this feeling before when she gave Goodwood her reasons for not marrying him:

"--I can do what I choose--I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me."<sup>15</sup>

If this feeling has a logical basis then, and is not mystic, the basis must come in the guilt Isabel feels for her near total independence. Goodwood recognizes this guilt when he declares, prophetically: "'One would think you were going to commit some atrocity!'" Isabel cannot help herself from revealingly stating: "'Perhaps I am. I wish to be free even to do that if the fancy takes me.'"<sup>16</sup> There is in her a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., I., 248.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., I., 236.

willfulness that approximates a classical hybris--it is, in effect, Isabel asking to be punished by the world for defying the world. Even the not-too-perceptive Henrietta Stackpole is able to see this, if for only a moment: "'You're drifting to some great mistake.'" Yet even this admonition does not seem sufficiently grim for Henrietta: "'You're a creature of risks--you make me shudder!'"<sup>17</sup>

For Isabel there remains only one missing aspect to begin her punishment; this aspect is a guide, an agent to push her on, to inflate her pride, to make her overreach her freedom. This guide is Madame Merle. In spite of the dissimilarity between these two women, their resemblance is striking; for though they operate in nearly opposite regions (Isabel in the light of innocence and Merle lurking in the shadows of worldly knowledge) each is driven by a necessity and both are extremely strong. Most essential, however, is that each is, to the other, an agent of disaster.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., I., 235.

## CHAPTER III

### MADAME MERLE AT GARDENCOURT

It is not until the eighteenth chapter of this novel that the author, after having carefully delineated the character of the story's protagonist, introduces an antagonist to chastise her. For the reader the arrival of Madame Merle is sudden, though, unlike Isabel's surprise, not unexpected. In analyzing the development of Isabel, one can see in her not only an ability to acquire wisdom (that is to gain worldly knowledge), but also an inclination to insist that this wisdom must come without the sacrifice of her freedom. Essentially Isabel demands both qualities and both are nearly exhaustive, or, in other words, cannot be had at the same time. To attempt to possess both leads to a sense of pride, and from that pride a haughtiness which begs punishment. Thus, when Isabel does confront Madame Merle for the first time, her reactions to this woman are so submissive that it appears that she unconsciously perceives the instrument of her punishment.

Isabel first discovers Madame Merle when, hearing piano music coming from a drawing room in Gardencourt, she enters, expecting to see her cousin seated at the instrument. Instead of seeing Ralph's slight, emaciated figure, however,

she spies the "...ample and well-dressed" back of a strange woman.<sup>1</sup> If this first impression hints vaguely at the character of Merle (her back being in this case analogous with the unknown) the grand woman herself confirms it by continuing to play as though Isabel did not exist. Isabel first notes that this woman plays

... remarkably well. She was playing something of Shubert's--Isabel knew not what, but recognized Shubert--and she touched the piano with a descretion of her own.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of this impression is unexpected both for the reader and for Isabel; the reader is surprised to discover how really credulous the young woman is; and Isabel, for her part, is so overcome by her own imagination that she suddenly creeps to the nearest chair to wait silently until the music has ended. When Madame Merle ends her song, Isabel's first words indicate the extent to which she has been impressed:

"That's very beautiful, and your playing makes it more beautiful still," said Isabel with all the young radiance with which she usually uttered a truthful rapture.<sup>3</sup>

To this obvious overstatement the unknown lady, with what appears to be a casual unconcern for her artistry and which, in reality, is fairly laden with ironic understatement, asks:

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., I., 244.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., I., 245.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



"You don't think I disturbed Mr. Touchett then?" the musician answered as sweetly as this compliment deserved. "The house is so large and his room so far away that I thought I might venture, especially as I played just-- just du bon des doights."<sup>4</sup>

Upon this common, and even affected French cliché Isabel instantly and uncritically hangs a brass judgment of this stranger: "She's a Frenchwoman," she assumes, for "She says it as if she were French."<sup>5</sup>

After nearly seventeen chapters devoted to drawing out Isabel's determined character, her insistence upon her own free will, her desire for total freedom, and her pride too-- after all of this painstaking explanation, it is difficult to believe that the author allows Isabel, when confronted with a mysterious and somewhat theatrical woman, to collapse into impotent silence! Yet this is the very case, and it is not an example of a lapse in James's intentions. For though these various qualities are all a part of Isabel, her personality is so immature that, when faced with an unknown individual such as Madame Merle, she simply cannot function in any sure and positive manner. Also, one must not forget Isabel's unconscious but watchful predilection for some form of chastisement to pay for her growing, proud wisdom.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

Madame Merle is not aware of this lapse, though, indeed, she can sense an uncertainty in the young woman. Thus, at Isabel's request to continue playing, Merle dramatically, in the finest tradition of the closest romance, peers over her shoulder and begins to interrogate her young admirer. As the two speak, Isabel begins to recover her normal quickness. She is quick to see that Merle is not French but American; she is alarmed to discover that this woman has had some prior knowledge concerning her. Madame Merle tells her: "I'm very glad you've come back; I've heard a great deal about you."<sup>6</sup> To this comment Isabel abruptly asks, as though alarmed: "From whom have you heard about me?"<sup>7</sup> And Madame Merle, for just the slightest moment hesitates, as though trying to find the best reference possible: "From your uncle .... I've been here three days, and the first day he let me come and pay him a visit in his room. Then he talked constantly of you."<sup>8</sup> At this point, the possibility of confronting Madame Merle is still within Isabel's prerogative. Such a confrontation, at this moment would not be scandalous. But this single opportunity vanishes when two servants enter with candle and tea, followed briskly by the blunt Mrs.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I., 247.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Touchett. Her entrance marks the end of the first encounter between Madame Merle and Isabel, an encounter in which Isabel emerges decidedly in a subordinate position. It should also be noted here that, except for her mysteriousness, Merle leaves nothing but the finest inferences concerning herself.

It is Mrs. Touchett who has the honor of placing Madame Merle in a more realistic perspective. Though eminently literal minded, this very impediment in character works to an advantage in an examination of Madame Merle. Though Isabel is not aware of her aunt's limitation, she feels, or suspects it, nevertheless. "I suppose you two ladies have made acquaintance," she asks. "If you haven't I recommend you to do so; for so long as we continue--Ralph and I--to cluster about Mr. Touchett's bed you're not likely to have much society but each other."<sup>9</sup> Isabel innocently replies: "I know nothing about you but that you're a great musician." And Mrs. Touchett directly observes: "There's a good deal more than that to know."<sup>10</sup> As Mrs. Touchett utters these words she uses what James calls her "...little dry tone" to describe a mood which is not ordinary. The author gives no reason for this notation, but goes on to show Mrs. Touchett again acting as an inconvenience to her friend. When Isabel

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., I., 248.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

asks Madame Merle her place of birth and the woman answers "I was born under the shadow of the national banner,"<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Touchett is quick to comment openly to her niece that her friend is "'too fond of mystery ... that's her great fault.'"<sup>12</sup> That Isabel's aunt does come so close to unraveling the meaning of Merle's character is one of the deepest ironies of this novel; for with only a little less of her literalness she could have early exposed the antagonist and sent her harmlessly on her way.

Yet, even though Mrs. Touchett's observations may be "unconsciously" correct, they are obscure and indefinite enough to pass completely over the head of Isabel who, in her innocence, can view her new friend in the warm, uncritical enthusiasm of a romantic girl. To her, Merle was "...by no means of the sort which suggested a secretive disposition":<sup>13</sup>

It was a fact that told of an amplitude of nature and of quick and free motions and, though it had no regular beauty, was in the highest degree engaging and attaching.<sup>14</sup>

Even Madame Merle's physical features seem designed to carry out the general scheme of her personality:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., I., 249.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Her features were thick but in perfect proportion and harmony, and her complexion had a healthy clearness. Her grey eyes, were small but full of light and incapable of stupidity.<sup>15</sup>

All of these physical features Isabel sees merged, secondarily, into a character refined with enough years to leave her

... sympathetic and supple. She was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination.<sup>16</sup>

It remains for Ralph, not surprisingly, to present the most accurate view of the person of Madame Merle. When asked about her by Isabel, he replies with his usual subtle wit: "The cleverest woman I know, not excepting yourself."<sup>17</sup> There is a great deal of irony in this, for Ralph certainly means "clever"; it remains for the reader and, more importantly, for Isabel, to sort out which "clever" Ralph had in mind. When Isabel questions the use of "clever" and defends her new friend by saying that she seems to be "...very pleasant,"<sup>18</sup> Ralph, again ironically, assures her that he knew she would feel that way about Merle. Still unsatisfied, Isabel again presses Ralph for a more positive statement about the woman. Ralph continues his irony, but now it becomes more serious:

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<sup>15</sup> ibid.

<sup>16</sup> ibid., I., 250.

<sup>17</sup> ibid., I., 251.

<sup>18</sup> ibid.

"I didn't invite her, and when we came back from London I didn't know she was here. No one invited her. She's a friend of my mother's, and just after you and I went to town my mother got a note from her. She had arrived in England (she usually lives abroad, though she has first and last spent a good deal of time here), and asked leave to come down for a few days. She's a woman who can make such proposals with perfect confidence; she's so welcome wherever she goes."<sup>19</sup>

Still Isabel is not satisfied that Ralph is doing her new friend justice and insists, defensively: "'Well, she's very charming, and she plays beautifully.'" Ralph replies in summation: "'She does everything beautifully. She's complete.'"<sup>20</sup> Suffering from this rebuttal, Isabel would like to continue the argument, and she accuses Ralph of disliking Merle. But Ralph, desiring no longer to dwell on Isabel's friend, treats his young cousin to a series of waggeries which he ends, when asked about Madame Merle's husband: "'The husband of Madame Merle would be likely to pass away.'"<sup>21</sup> This is not a kind comment, especially when it comes from Ralph. While Ralph is ironic, as in his use of "clever," he is not often crude, and thus there is much more force in what he has said. Yet, just as he begins to expose some really significant aspects of Merle, he pulls back, as though he were

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<sup>19</sup> ibid.

<sup>20</sup> ibid., I., 252.

<sup>21</sup> ibid.

afraid to trust himself. It is ironic that Isabel must rely upon Ralph's ironies as her last refuge from a relationship, without limitations, with Madame Merle. Ralph, in this instance, must function like a court of last resort for his cousin, it is his specific function to be able to lay his finger precisely upon a problem, to be able to say that thus and thus is so; but with Merle he can do no better than his mother. Mrs. Touchett's literalness does not allow her to come to grips with Merle in her death; Ralph's death, paradoxically, prevents him from recognizing the superficial aspects of the gracious lady, and hence he stumbles over her suave cosmopolitanism. For Isabel there is no way out unless she can reassert her desire always to be able to exercise her free will.

It is Madame Merle who offers Isabel this opportunity. During the period in which Mr. Touchett was near death, Isabel and Merle were much together. While with the older woman, Isabel, one day, innocently comments: "I'm afraid you've suffered much."<sup>22</sup> Merle answers Isabel with unexpected truthfulness:

"I haven't always been happy," said Madame Merle, smiling still, but with a mock gravity, as if she were telling a child a secret. "Such a wonderful thing!"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., I., 274.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., I., 275

Though Isabel sees herself as rising up to meet Merle's irony, she misses the point that it may be she who is the child to whom the older woman is cryptically addressing herself: "A great many people give me the impression of never having for a moment felt anything . . .," Isabel platonically replies.<sup>24</sup> Merle answers Isabel's uncertain wisdom with a surer brand of knowledge:

"It's very true; there are many more iron pots certainly than porcelain. But you may depend on it that everyone bears some mark; even the hardest iron pots have a little bruise, a little hole somewhere. I flatter myself that I'm rather stout, but if I must tell you the truth I've been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I've been cleverly mended; and I try to remain in the cupboard--the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's an odour of stale spices--as much as I can. But when I've to come out and into a strong light--then, my dear, I'm a horror!"<sup>25</sup>

At one point in her confession Madame Merle states, oddly: "I . . . but if I must tell you the truth . . . ." <sup>26</sup> The author presents, at this point, an essential quality of Madame Merle's character: that of a nearly compulsive need to disburden herself, to tell, though often obliquely, the truth about

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



herself and her present intentions. This need to confess appears to be a flaw in Merle's character if this character is assessed as one expressing total evil. However, this same compulsion also operates in exactly the opposite direction, for, though it shall be seen that Madame Merle is driven by a great ambition, this ambition comes as the result of a basic love (that of Merle for her daughter Pansy). If all of Merle's actions against Isabel are considered as coming from a warped interpretation of this love, then Merle's confessions must be accepted not as a flaw in an evil disposition but as an expression of an essentially deep quality of humanity, this humanity springing from the once normal emotion of love. That Merle can still possess this emotion, in any form, after her association with Osmond, is credit to her basic humanity.

Ralph has warned Isabel about Madame Merle; Merle herself has given this young woman fair notice as to her intentions. For Isabel there is only one other individual able to help her avoid the older woman's designs: this person is Mrs. Touchett. Yet, though she may exert the greatest influence for her niece's good, Mrs. Touchett is guided not by conscience but by a grotesque self-interest that forces her to judge the entire universe in terms of the convenience or inconvenience to herself. To this woman, then, Madame Merle is good because she causes neither pain nor effort. Such a character receives, in fact, her finest tribute:

"She is incapable of a mistake; she's the most tactful woman I know. It's a favour to me that she stays; she's putting off a lot of visits at great houses .... She has her pick of places; she's not in want of a shelter. But I've asked her to put in this time because I wish you to know her. I think it will be a good thing for you. Serena Merle hasn't a fault."<sup>27</sup>

Isabel cannot understand the import of this tribute that comes from her aunt. To her over defensive ears it seems cold, emotionless: "'if I didn't already like her very much that description might alarm me."<sup>28</sup> Again, after Mrs. Touchett defends Serena Merle by telling Isabel that "'She's never the least bit off,'" she can only reiterate her first defense: "'I like her better than I like your description of her."<sup>29</sup> It appears that, for Madame Merle, there is a great need to respond, if even secretly, to the normal emotions of mankind. For Mrs. Touchett such a necessity does not exist; she seems to have throttled all of the normal reactions that she may at one time have had. Her sole basis for judgment comes in an evaluation of one's convenience or inconvenience to her. She calls this "duty." This duty (the same kind that drove her to import Isabel) is a cold thing, drawn with mechanical precision. Thus, when Mrs. Touchett judges Merle,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., I., 277.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

she does so excluding the woman's feelings and desires and disappointments; instead Mrs. Touchett grades Madame Merle's deportment, her quietness, and her lack of any trouble. It is to this kind of lifelessness that Isabel dislikes.

There is no rescue, then, for Isabel. Ralph's ineffectual ironies are as facile and as meaningless, in their own way, as his mother's total lack of perception or concern. The only individual to whom Isabel can turn, then, is Serena Merle who, though she demands the young woman's freedom, can at least return something more meaningful in terms of feeling and experience.

## CHAPTER IV

### MADAME MERLE'S DECEPTION OF ISABEL

With the death of Mr. Touchett, the author begins a new and a far more complex phase of his work. The character of Isabel has been, to this point, carefully explored; and Madame Merle has been allowed enough latitude to reveal herself in the role of the novel's antagonist. In so far as Isabel's insistence upon her free will constitutes an act of hybris and not simply empty-headed brashness, the agent who must act to punish her must possess more than an ordinary reason to bring her down. With Madame Merle's confessional warning to Isabel in the metaphorical "cracked vase" passage, then, James quietly but substantially introduces an element of questionable, if not sinister, intentions: "'--the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's an odour of stale spices--.'"<sup>1</sup> To begin this next phase, then, the death of Mr. Touchett is employed. His passing on serves as a purely mechanical plot device; the story cannot move forward until Isabel has acquired a fortune. With this fortune Isabel can then face a series of complications (brought on by the antagonist) which will result in, first, the young woman's downfall (with considerable anguish) and, more significantly, a crisis leading to a climax which

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., I., 275.

will show her capable of rising out of her anguish and achieving, if in even moderate proportions, a wisdom based not upon literary fictions but upon the reality of experience in real life. This wisdom is, in essence, a knowledge not merely of evil (the sinister in Madame Merle), but in virtue and selflessness as well (Isabel's promise to Pansy to return to her).

Though Madame Merle has, at this point in the story, made a nearly absolute conquest of Isabel, this conquest seems to her to be profitable in no other way than simply the stronger overcoming the weaker. Merle, therefore, does not shrink from telling her young devotee that she has troubled herself considerably in taking an interest in her:

"I've made a great exception for you. You must remember that and must think as well of me as possible. You must reward me by believing in me."<sup>2</sup>

Merle's insistence upon Isabel's belief (or, more meaningfully, her free will) as a condition of their friendship is not so absurd as it appears; it is an excellent way in which the older woman can measure her total effect upon Isabel. As for Isabel, who has been very adamant about her freedom, submission to Merle can mean nothing less than a total negation of her own personality. Still, there is, in Madame Merle, a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., I., 290.

desire for more than simply an intangible conquest of another individual. The author reveals: "I am far from wishing to picture her as one of the hungry mouths or envious hearts of the general herd, but we have already learned of her having desires that had never been satisfied."<sup>3</sup> That these desires are material cannot be doubted when she bluntly though not crudely speculates upon Isabel's worldly assets:

"You appear to have the vaguest ideas about your earthly possessions; but from what I can make out you're not embarrassed with an income. I wish you had a little money."<sup>4</sup>

Merle makes her desire no secret; for while a conquest of another personality is, for her, profitable, she would rather have her profit materialize more tangibly. It must not be thought, however, that Madame Merle goes about overcoming for no reason; she is bold, but also too shrewd to make a game of her abilities. For each of her conquests, there is a studied reason based upon a specific need; thus, Mrs. Touchett, for example, represents an open hearth. Isabel then, even before her fortune, is marked for some special role in Merle's own universe. When she acquires a fortune, this additional asset makes Isabel, in Merle's eyes, only more sharply desirable. Still, Madame Merle does not expect Isabel to acquire a

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I., 297.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., I., 298.

fortune, and when she learns of it, she is stunned, for a moment, into the use of an obvious crudity. Such a position, for Merle, is unnatural and acutely uncomfortable, especially when this lapse of decorum occurs before the chill eyes of Mrs. Touchett:

Madame Merle's hands were clasped in her lap; at this she raised them, still clasped, and held them a moment against her bosom while her eyes, a little dilated, fixed themselves on those of her friend. "Ah," she cried, "the clever creature!"

Mrs. Touchett gave her a quick look. "What do you mean by that?"

For an instant Madame Merle's colour rose and she dropped her eyes. "It certainly is clever to achieve such results--without an effort!"<sup>5</sup>

The implication that arises from Merle's ill-timed but nevertheless sincere exclamation is one of gross envy. Yet, she is never so foolish, even for a single moment, as to dream that such luck could ever come her way. If Merle were to achieve such a fortune, then, it would come to her from sheer effort. If Isabel's inheritance of seventy thousand pounds constitutes, for Madame Merle, unexpected luck, it is through her own hard work that such luck can yield more tangible results than simply an empty feeling of envy. That Madame Merle had already considered the possibility of Isabel's fortune before the death of Mr. Touchett is a credit to her deep insights into

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

people; that she had begun to work on her young friend at the time of this insight is a credit to her ambition.

Initially Madame Merle's introduction of Gilbert Osmond arouses in both the reader and in Isabel, no suspicions. First, Merle is not so clumsy that she would purposely allow herself the luxury of appearing anxious to put forward a particular candidate of hers; second, at the time Osmond is first mentioned there is no financial motive driving Merle; she can be relatively relaxed and also essentially truthful. She begins to present Osmond first by speaking generally of the American expatriates in Europe. Of them she asks, rhetorically:

"...je vous demande un peu, what do they make of it over here? I don't envy them trying to arrange themselves."<sup>6</sup> As an illustration of this type of lost individual she cites Isabel's cousin, Ralph:

"Look at poor Ralph Touchett: what sort of a figure do you call that? Fortunately he has a consumption; I say fortunately, because it gives him, something to do. His consumption's his carriere; it's a kind of position. You can say: 'Oh, Mr. Touchett, he takes care of his lungs, he knows a great deal about climates.' But without that who would he be, what would he represent? 'Mr. Ralph Touchett: an American who lives in Europe.' That signifies absolutely nothing--."<sup>7</sup>

It is with no love that Madame Merle speaks of Ralph Touchett;

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I., 280.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



for it should be remembered that it is Ralph only who seems able to break through Merle's propriety and to label her, not the most correct of women, but "clever." Madame Merle cannot forgive Ralph because not only does he refuse to submit to her desires, he flagrantly opposes her whole social philosophy. Thus, when Madame Merle presents Ralph to Isabel, she intentionally does him a great injustice when she ignores the fact that at one time he had a bright future in his father's bank. To Merle, Ralph has been always ill. Isabel makes no objection to this opinion. There is still another reason behind Merle's misuse of Ralph; for in using him as an illustration of an abject American failure in Europe, any other individual will benefit by comparison. Thus, when Osmond's case is brought up, an analogy is made in Isabel's mind between Ralph and this stranger in Italy. This analogy, with its overtones of sympathy, takes Isabel many years to discover as being fallacious:

"The worst case, I think, is a friend of mine, a countryman of ours, who lives in Italy (where he also was brought before he knew better), and who is one of the most delightful men I know. Some day you must know him. I'll bring you together and then you'll see what I mean. He's Gilbert Osmond--he lives in Italy; that's all one can say about him or make of him."<sup>8</sup>

This view of Osmond, as with the picture of Ralph, is essentially negative. But Merle does not stop at this point. She

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., I., 281.

goes on to draw out specific aspects of Osmond that seem unique, even exotic when placed against the drabness of simply living in Italy:

"He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished; but, as I tell you, you exhaust the description when you say he's Mr. Osmond who lives tout bêtément in Italy."<sup>9</sup>

There is a subtle alternation here between qualities accepted as favorable and those known as unfavorable. As Merle allows them to balance with one another, she creates, if even unconsciously, an image of ambivalence concerning Gilbert Osmond. In one instance, he simply "...lives in Italy." In another he is "...exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished." Again, "...he paints, if you please!" Again: "Fortunately he's very indolent ...."<sup>10</sup> This dialectic does not cease until Merle comes at last to Osmond's daughter:

"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. But I'm afraid that's no better than the snuff-boxes; perhaps not even so good."<sup>11</sup>

Though Merle ends this statement with a doubtful compliment, she has made her point, perhaps far better than even she could

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I., 282.

hope. For the image of a loving, widowed father must have touched Isabel in a truly Aeolian sense, giving Osmond a nearly poetic quality in her eyes. This impression is left for Isabel to ponder, for the unfortunate decline of Mr. Touchett overshadows and precludes all other considerations.

The death of Mr. Touchett, and Isabel's acquisition of a fortune, mark the end of the initial introduction of Isabel. She has been presented as a pure innocent (from an America which, in its remoteness, resembles Eden) and the author has noted the extreme pride generated from this innocence (which she calls freedom). Isabel's conception of freedom is fallacious, however, for it is based upon ignorance. If Isabel is to acquire true freedom (or, more correctly, free will), she must first acquire knowledge. This acquisition must be of a knowledge of evil as well as good. Isabel stands, then, in Gardencourt like Eve; with no evil, she sees but one side of the proposition.

Merle is Isabel's antagonist and temptress. Yet there is an important distinction here that prevents this novel from being a modern Paradise Lost. This distinction is that Merle does not base her actions upon evil intrinsically, but rather as a means to an end. It is the disquieting love that Merle has for Pansy that drives her into, if for only a short period, a Satanic role.

If Merle's description of Osmond to Isabel is poetic, her explanation of Isabel to Osmond is sheer prose. She simply and directly informs him that she intends to bring him into a relationship with Isabel. It is important to note here that for the first time the author allows the reader to view Merle openly with all of her careful poses dropped. As Merle's role of antagonist unfolds, there is, behind it, a more disturbing quality which lurks uneasily between a commitment to evil and a desire for a more normal approach to her fellow man. This quality is seen in her unique interpretation of the word "like" when used in reference to Isabel:

"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."<sup>12</sup>

Merle makes no attempt to define her use of "like." If she "liked" Isabel in a more normal manner, she would take pains to be sure that she avoided Osmond; or, at the very least, insure that her relationship with Osmond would be purely casual. Yet Merle cannot make a normal assessment of another's worth in any other way but upon a scale of usefulness to her. With her fortune, her youth, her essential goodness, Isabel can be of immense service to Madame Merle. Just as Merle confuses the meaning of "like," so she also seems to be

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., I., 344.

unaware of the word "admire." For as she uses it here it comes closer to sheer envy, the same kind of envy Madame Merle accidentally exposed before Mrs. Touchett when she learned of Isabel's new fortune.

It must not be thought that Madame Merle is unaware of this uniqueness. When she tells Osmond about Isabel, he asks her for a reason. Merle replies, simply, as though Isabel were an animal to be mated: "What you see. Put her in your way."<sup>13</sup> Osmond is not shocked; merely curious. When he questions Merle's reasons for sacrificing Isabel, she can only silence him by delivering a thumbnail sketch of her own philosophy of inter-personal relationships: "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for ... I only know what I can do with them."<sup>14</sup> This icy reply seems the very basis of Merle's evaluation of all mankind; but though it makes her appear to lurk outside the pale of normal human emotions; and though it seems to be evidence for accusing her of being essentially an inhuman force whose sole purpose is to capture and manipulate other individuals, this is not the case. There is a far deeper reason than simple megalomania for driving her into a Satanic role. This reason she gives in her "cracked vase" confession. For though Madame Merle has been

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

"...shockingly chipped and cracked" and though she is forced to dwell, for human understanding, in her own memory, "--the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's a odour of stale spices--" she is, basically, a human being suffering from a tenderness that she embraces as her final and most significant contact with humanity.<sup>15</sup> If Merle is obsessive, she is obsessive out of desperation; and if, at odd moments she blunders helplessly into confessions, she blunders not from carelessness but from a haunting spirit of past decency.

Isabel's first meeting with Gilbert Osmond comes when he pays a visit to Madame Merle while she is a guest of Mrs. Touchett in Florence. On this occasion Isabel remains watchfully silent:

...she scarcely even smiled when the others turned to her invitingly; she sat there as if she had been at the play and had paid even a large sum for her place. Mrs. Touchett was not present, and these two had it, for the effect of brilliancy, all their own way.<sup>16</sup>

Still Isabel had no reason to question the relationship between Merle and Osmond and even herself; for all appearances it was casual and superficial. It was for this reason that Isabel felt inclined to carry out only the vaguest kind of investigation concerning Osmond's character. At one time she asked Ralph what he knew about this nearly unknowable individual. Ralph was of little help to her:

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., I., 275.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., I., 355.

"Who is he, what is he? He's a vague, unexplained American who has been living these thirty years, or less, in Italy. Why do I call him unexplained? Only as a cover for my ignorance; I don't know his antecedents, his family, his origin."<sup>17</sup>

After drawing out a catalogue of some of Osmond's most obvious qualities, Ralph, in frustration, asks Isabel why she has not gone to her friend, Madame Merle, for information. Isabel replies very seriously: "I ask you because I want your opinion as well as hers."<sup>18</sup> Ralph once again refuses to expose his true suspicions; instead he answers her facetiously, just as he had previously answered Isabel when she inquired about Madame Merle. In refusing to overtly advise his cousin, then, Ralph becomes, in her eyes, one to be listened to for sheer entertainment only:

"A fig for my opinion! If you fall in love with Mr. Osmond what will you care for that?"

"Not much, probably. But meanwhile it has a certain importance. The more information one has about one's dangers the better."<sup>19</sup>

To Isabel's logical reasoning Ralph can only return with what appears to be an utter lack of concern in her life:

"I don't agree to that--it may make them dangers. We know too much about people in these days; we hear too much. Our ears, our minds, our mouths, are stuffed with personalities.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., I., 358.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I., 359.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Don't mind anything any one tells you about any one else. Judge every one and everything for yourself."<sup>20</sup>

Before Isabel can marry Osmond, however, she receives one final warning, this one coming from, ironically, Osmond's own sister, the Countess Gemini. If it seems odd that Ralph, as a pathetic figure, should take on the role of an articulate, an ironic, but very clownish seer, it is just as unexpected to see the fluttering Countess Gemini become a truly significant, serious prophet. While her observations are, by necessity, oblique, they are also uncannily correct. And, it must be noted, it is Gemini who brings about the eventual climax of this drama by informing Isabel of the true nature of the past relationship that existed between her brother and his former mistress,

Madame Merle:

"For me," she said, "one should like a thing or one shouldn't; one can't like everything, of course. But one shouldn't attempt to reason it out--you never know where it may lead you. There are some very good feelings that may have bad reasons. Don't you see what I mean? I know what I like."<sup>21</sup>

Isabel, "...suspecting that her acquaintance with this lightly-flitting personage would not lead to intellectual repose,"<sup>22</sup> retreated from her and thus abandoned her last real

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., I., 369.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



opportunity to escape from Osmond and Merle. Now truly perceptive the Countess Gemini is can be seen when, speaking of Isabel to Madame Merle, she says: "I've seen the girl but this once ... and the conviction has suddenly come to me. I like her very much."<sup>23</sup> When Merle replies that she too likes Isabel, the Countess shrewdly observes: "You've a strange way of showing it."<sup>23</sup> Again, during the same occasion, she and Madame Merle come to loggerheads, and the Countess shows no desire to be timid before the great lady:

"You had better leave us alone then," smiled Madame Merle.

"I don't mean to touch you--but I shall talk to that girl."

"My poor Amy," Madame Merle murmured, "I don't see what has got into your head."

"I take an interest in her--that's what has got into my head. I like her."

Madame Merle hesitated a moment. "I don't think she likes you."

The Countess's bright little eyes expanded and her face was set in a grimace.

"Ah, you are dangerous--even by yourself!"<sup>24</sup>

If it is seen here that the Countess is far wiser than she appears, it is also shown that Merle will hesitate at nothing to achieve her ends. She warns the Countess at the conclusion of their talk: "If you want her to like you don't abuse your brother to her."<sup>25</sup> Unable to act freely, the Countess Gemini

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., I., 386.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., I., 387.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

sulks out of the scene and will not be seen again until after Isabel's marriage to Osmond. The only other individual who could possibly prevent Isabel from stumbling into Merle's trap--that person being Mrs. Touchett--is found to be so thoroughly involved with her own colossal ego that she is not even aware, until told by Merle (who betrays her immediately) that Isabel and Osmond are even serious. Mrs. Touchett asks Merle:

"You who know everything," she said, "you must know this: whether that curious creature's really making love to my niece."<sup>26</sup>

Essentially abandoned, with no help from any direction, Isabel falls neatly and quietly into Madame Merle's carefully worked out contrivance. This plot was conceived and carried out with sheer, cold intelligence and hard work and, as earlier stated, was never made to depend, even slightly, upon the element of chance. That chance did play a part (the refusal of Ralph to take an active role and the collusion of Mrs. Touchett) did not materially aid the scheme other than accelerating it. Most significantly, it was Isabel herself, in a truly Eve-like state of haughtiness, who made the whole plot function so effortlessly; for though she was an innocent, her pride in that innocence would not allow her to accept other points of view; thus, instead of availing herself of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., I., 396.

experience of her cousin and Mrs. Touchett, she stood isolated, depending upon her own ingenuity. Though clever, Isabel could not at that time possess more than a superficial cleverness. When compared to Madame Merle's studied and deliberate machinations, Isabel's efforts were almost totally negligible.

Once Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond has been accomplished, she no longer needed to be so carefully deceived. The act was now forgotten in the press of other, more immediate concerns. Yet, little by little, Isabel became uncomfortably aware of some peculiar quality in the relationship between Madame Merle and Osmond that appeared to go beyond mere friendship. Her first clue came from Pansy who, in congratulating Isabel upon her marriage, placed her in a trio made up, not of Osmond and Pansy and Isabel but, of Osmond, Merle, and, now Isabel:

"You'll suit me beautifully; but what I mean is that you and papa will suit each other. You're not so quiet as he--or even Madame Merle ....<sup>27</sup>

To this strained admixture of the three principals, Isabel can feel nothing definite, nothing concrete. But when Pansy tells Isabel that she is pleased that Isabel will be her step-mother, Isabel answers with pure intuitiveness:

"My good little Pansy," said Isabel gently, "I shall be ever so kind to you." A vague,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11., 85.

inconsequent vision of her coming in some odd way to need it had intervened with the effect of a chill.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between Isabel and Madame Merle had begun to grow more strained as Isabel began to sense new insights into her older friend's character and the nature of her previous connections with Gilbert Osmond. Madame Merle's own belief that "...when a friendship ceases to grow it immediately begins to decline," seemed, to Isabel, never more true.<sup>29</sup> Yet when Merle suggested that Isabel might be suffering from a feeling of jealousy, Isabel knew quite well that that was not remotely the reasons for her feelings:

In Isabel's mind today there was nothing clear; there was a confusion of regrets, a complication of fears. She felt helpless as she turned away from her friend, who had just made the statements I have quoted: Madame Merle knew so little what she was thinking of! She was herself moreover so unable to explain. Jealous of her--jealous of her with Gilbert? The idea just then suggested no near reality.<sup>30</sup>

Yet this confusion was in part caused by Madame Merle herself who, in order to lighten slightly her load of guilt, once more indulged herself in one of her oblique confessions:

"I must be on my guard," she said; "I might so easily, without suspecting it, offend you. You would be right to be offended, even if my intention should have been of the purest. I must not forget

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., II., 86.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., II., 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., II., 160.

that I knew your husband long before you did; I must not let that betray me. If you were a silly woman you might be jealous. You're not a silly woman; I know that perfectly.<sup>31</sup>

Merle's confession, instead of alleviating the growing tension between the two women, merely sharpens it by supplying several essential points of contention, not the least important of which is the suggestion, hitherto not precisely defined, of a former romantic relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle. Ironically, this revelation to Isabel's thinking is directly the consequence of Merle's obsessive need to disburden herself, to be, if only in her own mind, forgiven and loved by her victims. If Merle had been truly wise and not simply intelligent, she would have altogether abandoned Osmond's home. But instead she allows herself to be seen, not simply in the presence of Osmond, but in this presence as though she belonged with it, in a not-at-all casual situation. As Isabel stumbles in on the two, she immediately notes an informality and a familiarity with "Madame Merle ... standing on the rug, a little way from the fire ... and Osmond ... in a deep chair, leaning back and looking up at her."<sup>32</sup> Isabel has been innocent, but not ignorant:

what struck Isabel first was that he [Osmond] was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, II., 157.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, II., 164.

anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them.<sup>33</sup>

There was, in each of these individual perceptions, nothing so astonishing. But the two most significant qualities that Isabel noted--their silent communication and their casualness--did impress her deeply: "But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., II., 165.

CHAPTER V

THE COLLAPSE OF MADAME MERLE'S PLANS

While Madame Merle's duplicity is being constantly shown to the reader, this exposure comes not from Merle herself (as in her own "cracked vase" confession) but from ancillary agents within the story's plot. Except in very unusual circumstances, Isabel is oblivious to any hints that point out Merle's devious intentions. Also, when Isabel is treated to a sharply negative comment upon Merle or Osmond, the comment seems as much the result of spite and peevishness as it does revelation. A fine example of this type of comment comes in Mrs. Touchett's sardonic observation upon Osmond's role in the courtship of Isabel:

"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."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, even this observation by Isabel's blunt aunt seemed to be unfairly distorted, especially in the light of the apparent tenderness and love he expressed to Isabel while they were in Rome. Further, after Isabel was married, Mrs. Touchett's

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., II., 54.

observation must have seemed especially cruel in light of Merle's quiet departure from their lives.

Madame Merle remained absent from the lives of Isabel and Osmond for nearly three years. She returned only when the arrangement she had so carefully contrived for Pansy seemed to be upon the brink of failure. Her fears were not unfounded; what she found was nearly a total wreck. Isabel seemed to be no longer able to abide Gilbert Osmond's intense, and in fact, carefully studied contempt for most of the world about him. For Isabel, this disinterest amounted to sheer vanity and, as such, irritated her: "Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peer down from a small high window and mock at her."<sup>2</sup> Yet for Isabel there was little tangible hurt upon which she could make out a case against Osmond unless it was this vanity:

She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent on a bank of flowers.<sup>3</sup>

This "bank of flowers" then began to gall from the friction of the serpent's coils. When Merle returned, therefore, she came as a lubricant and as a peacemaker. Her sole purpose was to keep Isabel in a state of blissful peacefulness.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II., 196.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



Yet it is Madame Merle's return to Rome (where Isabel and Osmond have been living) that causes Isabel to question seriously, for the first time, Madame Merle's true role in her marriage. The opportunity arrives when Merle becomes the go-between for the romantic Ned Rosier, a childhood friend of Isabel, and Pansy. Ned, at a loss as to how he should carry forward his courtship of Pansy, comes to appeal for help from Merle:

"I care more for Miss Osmond than for all the bibelots in Europe."<sup>4</sup>

Merle, caught off guard, listens to him for a moment, and then asks him:

"Do you wish me to intercede?" Madame Merle asked with her fine arms folded and her handsome mouth drawn up to the left.<sup>5</sup>

After agreeing to assist this young man, and after giving him a peculiar piece of advice--to say nothing to either Pansy or to Isabel--Rosier is sent on his way. Later, Merle carries to Osmond Ned Rosier's proposal and Osmond, conveniently prepared for the young collector of bibelots, is able to stop his progress with his daughter in its tracks. During one of Osmond's weekly open houses Ned comes, sees Osmond, and asks him, allegorically (using his bibelot collecting passion for

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., II., 92.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

his key symbol), about Fanny:

Rosier for an instant forget the self-  
of his position. "You're not thinking of  
parting with a--piece or two?"<sup>6</sup>

Osmond answers curtly:

"No, I'm not thinking of parting with  
anything at all, Mr. Rosier," said Osmond,  
with his eyes still on the eyes of his visitor.<sup>7</sup>

Continuing with his original metaphor, Rosier cannot resist  
the temptation of carrying his inquiry more deeply:

"Ah, you want to keep, but not to add,"  
Rosier remarked brightly.<sup>8</sup>

And with this Osmond delivers his most cutting remark toward  
the young man's hopes:

"Exactly. I've nothing + wish to  
match."<sup>9</sup>

Cut off so rudely, Rosier comes to Isabel and reveals to  
her of his harsh treatment. But for Isabel there is very  
little action she can take. Fanny is Oswald's child, and it  
is in his hands what future she will have. It is not until  
later that she discovers the role played by Madame Merle in  
Rosier's denial by Osmond.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., II., 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

This revelation comes incidentally--as a side-effect--of Isabel's more significant discovery of the peculiarly intimate relationship exhibited between Madame Merle and Osmond when Isabel blundered in upon them. Wonder followed her first reactions of shock. Merle, always cool, said nothing. It was Osmond who panicked and stumbled awkwardly out of the scene. At first Merle gave a reason for her presence within Isabel's home; but Isabel, with the advantage of surprise on her side, pressed her old friend in a fine, ironic manner:

"Didn't he ask you to sit down?" Isabel asked with a smile.<sup>10</sup>

Merle, after telling Isabel that she had originally come to visit her and not Osmond, subtly alters the import of Isabel's discovery by shifting to another subject: "I came for a reason; I've something on my mind."<sup>11</sup> Yet Isabel will not accept this feeble attempt and refuses to be starpeded. She replies in her most ironic tone: "I've told you that before--that it takes something extraordinary to bring you to this house."<sup>12</sup> Again Merle tries to divert Isabel, this time using an impressive air of nobility: "And you know what I've told you; that whether I come or whether I stay away, I've

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., II., 165.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

always the same motive--the affection I bear you." As though to make Merle manifestly aware of her now absolute cognition of Merle's awkwardness, Isabel, still ironically, replies: "Yes, you've told me that."<sup>13</sup>

Merle does not once falter before Isabel. Though it would be wiser for her to fade back quietly and allow her young victim to dominate the scene, she is caught up by her own obsessive need, first, to justify her actions and, second, to continue her total manipulation of Isabel. In attempting to disarm Isabel, Merle serves only to expose herself more thoroughly. Madame Merle asks, guiltily: "'You look just now as if you didn't believe it.'"<sup>14</sup> And Isabel replies, challenged: "'The profundity of your motives, that's the last thing I doubt.'"<sup>15</sup> The atmosphere is at last thoroughly clear between the two women, and Isabel, at this climactic moment, can bring Madame Merle to her knees. Instead of this, she, and not Merle, draws back. She allows the older woman to bring the subject around to a less strained situation. Merle, sensing a victory but not aware of her own need to remove her guilt, actively, begins to give an account of Ned Rosier's pursuit of Pansy. Referring casually to Rosier she says: "'He has

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., II., 166.

succeeded in saddling me with it [his troubled romance]."<sup>16</sup>

Isabel immediately lets Merle know that she is aware of Merle's broken confidence with Rosier: "Yes ... he wants to marry her. I know all about it."<sup>17</sup> Still Merle does not falter; with each comment she moves farther into the shadows of suspicion and away from the light of Isabel's trust and respect:

"I don't know what mysterious connection he may have discovered between me and Pansy; but he came to me from the first, as if I held his fortune in my hand. Now he keeps coming back, to spur me up, to know what hope there is, to pour out his feelings."<sup>18</sup>

Then, reconsidering and damning with faint praise after Isabel says that Rosier is "...very much in love,"<sup>19</sup> Merle concedes that "He's very kind, very honest ... and he's not such a fool as he seems."<sup>20</sup> With each statement Merle moves away from any honorable solution. Her only alternative lies in either drawing Isabel into the love plot of Ned and Pansy, or else accusing her of a chill lack of sympathy in not wishing to become involved in the affair:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., II., 168.

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"He Rosier assures me that she delights in him," said Madame Merle.

"I don't know; I've not asked her."

"You've never sounded her a little?"

"It's not my place; it's her father's."<sup>21</sup>

The obvious implication to Merle here is that it should not be her business either. But Merle, still driven by a need to purge her conscience, stumbles unwittingly:

"I notify you, at any rate, as I notified Osmond, that I wash my hands of the love affairs of Miss Pansy and Mr. Edward Rosier. Je n'y veux rien, moi! I can't talk to Pansy about him. "Especially," added Madame Merle, "as I don't think him a paragon of husbands."<sup>22</sup>

Merle takes a risk in what she declares, for when she says "Especially ... as I don't think him a paragon of husbands," she means that she does not, unconditionally, surrender any further interests in the affairs of Pansy Osmond; only those in which she has with Rosier. This is an essential distinction, for, in making no blanket promise, Merle takes the risk of further arousing Isabel's suspicions and distrust. This becomes manifest when she begins to scheme anew for Pansy's future, this time with Lord Warburton as the lover. Yet Merle is in a delicate position here, for, knowing that he was once in love with Isabel--and perhaps still is--she needs Isabel's help in securing him as a husband for Pansy. Merle begins to interrogate Isabel about her one-time lover from England until,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

like Merle, Isabel is forced to betray a confidence. What Isabel tells the older woman makes her fairly gloat:

"I see no reason why I shouldn't tell you that he likes my stepdaughter very much."

Madame Merle gave one of her quick looks again. "Likes her, you mean--as Mr. Rosier means?"

"I don't know how Mr. Rosier means; but Lord Warburton has let me know that he's charmed with Pansy."<sup>23</sup>

Without hesitating, without even stopping a moment to consider the feelings of poor Rosier, Merle quickly puts him out of the way with no other thoughts:

"That would be better than marrying poor Mr. Rosier."<sup>24</sup>

Isabel, seeing the complete deception and betrayal of her old friend take place before her own eyes, can only say, curtly: "Much better, I think." Not satisfied with Isabel's neutrality, Merle begins to draw her into the conspiracy. Initially Isabel resists; but finally Merle persists in convincing Isabel that only she can exert the proper influence that would interest Lord Warburton in Pansy. Isabel, who is quite fond of Osmond's daughter, finds herself placed in a delicate dilemma. With the prompting of Madame Merle, she concedes:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., II., 170.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

... in a moment she said, reasonably and gently enough: "I should be very glad indeed if, as regards Pansy, it could be arranged."<sup>25</sup>

As Isabel agrees,

... her companion, who seemed to regard this as a speech of good omen, embraced her more tenderly than might have been expected and triumphantly withdrew.<sup>26</sup>

Though Madame Merle has carried the day, she has by no means won; for she has allowed Isabel to witness, not simply the deception of Rosier, but the unaccountable lengths to which she will go in order to make a fine match for Pansy. Significantly, Madame Merle's reaction to Isabel's consent can be considered by no means typical for a woman who, a moment before, was willing (or appeared to be willing) to withdraw from the entire affair.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., II., 172.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER VI

### ISABEL'S EMERGENCE AND MADAME MERLE'S DEFEAT

Isabel's initial major insight into the character of Madame Merle came when Merle betrayed the confidences of Ned Rosier openly and even blatantly before her still quite innocent eyes. Moreover, while Merle's apparent rationale for this betrayal seemed based upon purely material considerations, these considerations were expressed, not by Merle, but by Osmond. Merle, while she did blunder in allowing Isabel to witness Rosier's betrayal, allowed it to be seen in the name of Osmond, thus removing herself one degree from the guilt and keeping her pose as merely an interested friend of the family.

The awkwardness of Merle's position in this betrayal did not register strongly with Isabel. Instead of seriously considering the motives underlying Merle's interference in Pansy's affairs (a move Merle might have expected), Isabel questioned Pansy's regard for Lord Warburton. Isabel, even though she alone chose her own folly (and Merle cannot be blamed for the ultimate choice), could not permit the removal of Pansy's free will on the grounds that she too might make a similar mistake. Though Isabel had made a commitment to Madame Merle and Osmond to intervene with Warburton on Pansy's

behalf, she had also made, at Gardencourt, a prior commitment in favor of her individual freedom. Though this prior declaration was based upon her ignorance of the world, and the pride generated from that ignorance, it was, nevertheless, binding. This predetermination then overrides all others, thus preventing Isabel from actively supporting Merle and Osmond in their encouragement of Warburton:

... and Isabel was trying as much as possible to take her husband's view. She succeeded after a fashion, but she fell short of the point I mention. After all she couldn't rise to it; something held her and made this impossible.<sup>1</sup>

In three years of marriage Isabel had matured very little and still remained uncomfortably innocent. For Isabel there was nothing more than a diffused feeling; while a scene like the betrayal of Rosier could impress her, this impression had no real solidity. To Isabel there was only

... a vague doubt that interposed--a sense that she was not quite sure.<sup>2</sup>

As a direct result of Isabel's reluctance, she becomes the object of Osmond's recriminations. Isabel, exposed to this shoddy treatment, does not suspect, even unconsciously, the cause; further, she does not faintly realize the magnitude of her crime against Osmond. If Madame Merle seems to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., II., 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

judge mankind coldly upon a scale of usefulness to her own ends, at least she has a scale, and she does compromise in her evaluations. Osmond has no such scale; instead he holds off the world with a thin, nearly diabolical line. Those who "fit into" Osmond's view of the world are "good" in so far as they do not disturb him; those who do not conform to his own vain conceptions are "bad" and their punishment is symbolic murder. For Osmond there is no compromise as there is for Merle. If he must have a compromise, it is in the noncorporeal nature of his violence to those whom he hates. Thus, for Osmond, words take the place of deadly missiles. When the subject of "arburton's supposed letter of proposal to Pansy is brought up, Osmond assaults his wife bitterly:

"Apparently he has forgotten it," said Osmond. "be so good as to remind him."

"Should you like me to write to him?" she demanded.

"I've no objections whatever."

"You expect too much of me."

"Ah yes, I expect a great deal of you."<sup>3</sup>

With this open defiance from Isabel, Osmond turns upon her savagely, accusing her of not merely being obstinate, but of being hateful as well:

For a couple of minutes Osmond answered nothing; then he said: "That

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II., 263.

won't be easy, with you working against me."<sup>4</sup>

Isabel, stunned, denies this. Osmond elaborates, and the utter inhumanity of his accusation places him, and not Merle as previously suspected, in a Satanic pose:

"I accuse you of not being trust-worthy. If he doesn't after all come forward it will be because you've kept him off. I don't know that it's base: it is the kind of thing a woman always thinks she may do. I've no doubt you've the finest ideas about it."<sup>5</sup>

If Isabel had been slightly more aware of the entire situation (Merle's ambitions for Fanny and Osmond's unique role) she would have been righteously infuriated by his villainess. Instead, she is forced, by her own innocence, to blunder along, asking what appears to be, to both Osmond and Madame Merle, stupid questions. During one conversation, Isabel naively asks the reason for Osmond's hostility towards her. He answers bitterly and sarcastically: "Of having prevented Fanny's marriage to Warburton. Are those words plain enough?"<sup>6</sup> Isabel cannot accept such a flat condemnation. Her pride fairly boils and, instead of taking her husband's answer and analyzing it, she tries to justify her position on Osmond's

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., II., 264.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., II., 275.

terms: "On the contrary, I took a great interest in it. I told you so; and when you told me that you counted on me-- that I think was what you said--I accepted the obligation. I was a fool to do so, but I did it." Osmond, reacting to this answer, becomes even more embittered: "You pretended to do it, and you even pretended reluctance to make me more willing to trust you. Then you began to use your ingenuity to get him out of the way." Isabel, shocked, can only reply in the most ironic manner: "I think I see what you mean."<sup>7</sup> What Isabel in essence means is that, finally, she is beginning to see the meaning of Gilbert Osmond. For, as he presses on, his voice uncloaks, to her, the hint of madness, the dread of too great an insecurity; a character which has reached the depths of vileness: "Where's the letter you told me he had written me?" Isabel answers openly: "I haven't the least idea; I haven't asked him." To this Osmond wildly replies: "You stopped it on the way."

Isabel slowly got up; standing there in her white cloak which covered her to her feet, she might have represented the angel of disdain, first cousin to that of pity. "Oh, Gilbert, for a man who was so fine--!" she exclaimed in a long murmur.

So warped has Osmond's ego become, so immense in fact, that he can not rationally accept a denial by Warburton of his

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., II., 276.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

daughter. Rather than accept this denial, which he feels to be indirectly a question of his own suitability, he seeks to mark out his wife, not merely as a scapegoat, but as an accomplice who seeks to assist the Englishman in punishing him for his deep concern for his daughter. Isabel, exposed to this brutal tirade, cannot long remain innocently oblivious to his true character. Yet, when this revelation came it came, not as anger, but as great pity: "'Poor little Pansy!'" is all that she can say.<sup>9</sup> Isabel's fundamentally good character emerges here. Instead of being embittered by this initiation into evil, Isabel becomes magnanimous; instead of stumbling into the fruitlessness of hatred, she ascends positively towards understanding.

That Isabel ever discovered Osmond's hateful resentment is the fault of Madame Merle. Once she had trapped Isabel into promising to intercede with Warburton in Pansy's behalf, she left for Naples and a vacation, confident that her machinations would go forward smoothly. Merle did not anticipate, even remotely, the determination Isabel had to maintain her own free choice even though that choice seemed based upon a fallacy. When Madame Merle first became acquainted with Isabel, she had every opportunity imaginable to discover that she was decidedly willful and stubborn. Merle's inability to

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<sup>9</sup> ibid., II., 277.

see this was not a lack of judgment; it was no judgment at all: this lack of judgment was the result of Merle's own inability to conceive of a friendship between two individuals on equal terms. Thus, instead of accepting Isabel as an adult equal, Merle "took her up" as though she were a lost waif. Significantly, from that moment onward, Isabel remained, in Madame Merle's eyes, a child. Rather than trouble herself with Isabel's growth, Merle immersed herself in her complex designs. It was not until she returned from Rome, that Madame Merle discovered that Isabel was capable of acting upon her own initiative. When she discovers this and the result of it, she is stunned. Confronting her new adversary with Pansy's failure to marry Warburton, she demands a reason. Isabel, ironically, points out to her that instead of congratulating Pansy on her marriage, she might "...congratulate Pansy still; but not on marrying Lord Warburton."<sup>10</sup> Isabel's irony is clumsy, but it carries the message. Stunned, Merle replies: "How do you say that! Don't you know I had my heart on it?" Isabel is shaken by her boldness. She can now no longer ignore any coincidental relationships between Merle, Pansy, and Osmond. If Madame Merle is to be simply a friend of the family, her concern must be far less crucial; for her to put such expectations upon the marriage of a friend's daughter is

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., II., 321.

is to beg the question. Shaken by Merle's intensity, Isabel none the less pushes forward: "'You shouldn't have gone to Naples then. You should have stayed here to watch the affair.'"<sup>11</sup> With this, Isabel allows Merle to know that she is aware of an odd relationship. In her own mind she begins to realize that she is drawing breathlessly close to the essential reason for Merle's intense interest in the fate of Pansy:

More clearly than ever before Isabel heard a cold, mocking voice proceed from she knew not where, in the dim void that surrounded her, and declare that this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny. She was nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident she had so long supposed.<sup>12</sup>

While this revelation of Merle's role in Isabel's life appears to be sudden, it is only in the sense that before this moment nothing existed but vague, indefinite presentiments. Essentially this one singular moment functions as a summation of a host of independent, specific occurrences that had remained quietly unconnected for several years. Until this confrontation, there appeared to be no need, on Isabel's behalf, to connect these suspicions because they seemed to fall short of probability. Yet, when Isabel's suspicions were reawakened, the connections began rapidly:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., II., 322.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



She moved quickly indeed, and with reason, for a strange truth was filtering into her soul. Madame Merle's interest was identical with Osmond's: that was enough.<sup>13</sup>

As Madame Merle angrily moved away from Isabel to Pansy's room in order that she might learn Pansy's side of the story (and also to imply that Isabel was guilty not only of maliciousness but perhaps untruthfulness), Isabel for the first time challenges Merle upon Merle's own terms: "'I think Pansy will tell you nothing that will make you more angry,' she said in answer to her companion's last remark."<sup>14</sup>

Madame Merle, until this moment, had always exercised the initiative in her relationship with Isabel. Thus, she could not, when threatened for the first time, concede defeat. More significantly, her vanity, based upon her ability to manipulate the lives of others, is struck a stunning blow which forces Merle, for the first time, to attempt brashly to discipline Isabel. She turns bitterly upon her young friend: "'Ah yes, your work's done."<sup>15</sup> It is Isabel, however, who seems victorious; sensing this victory, she is not afraid to warn Merle: "'Take care of what you say."<sup>16</sup> The older

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., II., 323.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., II., 324.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

woman, though nearly outraged, replies, mockingly at ease: "Oh, I take care; never perhaps more than when it appears least. Your husband judges you severely."<sup>17</sup> This final piece of information, designed to frighten Isabel into submission, or at least confusion, serves an unexpectedly ironic purpose for Isabel's quick mind. Her reply seems to take all of the fight out of Merle: "Should you like to know how I judge him?"<sup>18</sup> Still, the damage done by Merle's remark, though not so sharp, is more widespread; for it displays, positively, for the first time, an intimacy between Merle and Osmond. It is obvious that this intimacy is of sufficient depth to allow both to discuss, openly, Isabel. This fact alone serves to undercut any remnants of trust Isabel had in Osmond.

Madame Merle, stung by Isabel's quick reply, realizes that she has not won the day. Finding herself at nearly a total loss, she first relies upon her smooth disposition but finds that even that has collapsed in the heat of her obsessive concern over Lord Warburton's escape from her ambitious dreams. In desperation, Merle at last surrenders with nearly tragic plea:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., II., 325.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

"If Lord Warburton simply got tired of the poor child, that's one thing, and it's a pity. If he gave her up to please you, it's another. That's a pity too, but in a different way. Then, in the latter case, you'd perhaps resign yourself to not being pleased--to simply seeing your stepdaughter married. Let him off--let us have him!"<sup>19</sup>

Isabel, thoroughly stunned by the blunt and open revelation of this manipulative desire in Madame Merle, can only answer:

"Who are you--what are you? What have you done with my husband?"<sup>20</sup> Madame Merle slowly got up, stroking her muff, but not removing her eyes from Isabel's face. "Everything!" she answered.<sup>21</sup> For Isabel the secret that she had suspected, even dreaded, but never accepted, at last came out. At last, Isabel could see the role Merle played in her own life:

"Oh misery!" she murmured at last; and she fell back, covering her face with her hands. It had come over her like a high-surgng wave that Mrs. Touchett was right. Madame Merle had married her. Before she uncovered her face again that lady had left the room.<sup>22</sup>

Though Isabel has discovered the obvious role that Madame Merle has played both in her life and Osmond's (at least since she has known him), and though she realizes the unusually strong influence she wields over Pansy as well, she

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., II., 326.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., II., 327.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

still does not suspect the most essential motif underlying this intimacy. Though Isabel is indeed able to suspect what appears, to her, to be an isolated and unique situation, she is blind to the over-all picture. Thus, the revelation of this totality is left to the Countess Gemini who, as noted earlier, once threatened Merle with exposure only to be quelled with an equally painful threat by Merle. Intimidated at that time, but by no means permanently quieted, the Countess Gemini waited patiently for a more propitious moment. This moment comes in the collapse of the marriage of Isabel and Osmond. Isabel, still recovering her perspective after learning of the intimacy between Osmond and Madame Merle, is nearly unable to grasp the whole meaning of Gemini's revelation at first. Yet, as the Countess draws near the heart of her meaning, Isabel is able to react. Rising, she says, almost in terror: "You're going to tell me something horrible."<sup>23</sup>

Unperturbed, Gemini pushes forward:

"You can call it by whatever name you will!"  
And the Countess rose also, while her gathered perversity grew vivid and dreadful. She stood a moment in a sort of glare of intention and, as seemed to Isabel even then, of ugliness; after which she said: "My first sister-in-law had no children."<sup>24</sup>

Isabel, puzzled, is unable to answer at first. For though the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., II., 363.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Countess has nearly drawn her a picture, Isabel can make no connection between such an enormous fact and the more subtle, more cryptic confessions that have come from Merle, as in the "cracked vase" admission. Yet, in Isabel's mind these confessions have formed a definite, though delicate, series of probabilities that lead up to this single moment when they are to be fused into an overwhelming necessity: "'Pansy's not my husband's child then?'"<sup>25</sup> The Countess, impatient with Isabel's credulity, mocks her:

"Your husband's--in perfection. But no one else's husband. Some one else's wife's. Ah, my good Isabel," cried the Countess, "with you one must dot one's i's!"<sup>26</sup>

The Countess is correct about Isabel's naïveté but only when it is viewed in her own peculiar terms. It must be remembered that she has been the sulking victim of Merle's scorn and dislike for many years. When Gemini's moment for revenge at last comes, she is impatient and does not wish to squander it with a recitation of what is, to her, common knowledge. Further, the Countess cannot at all interpret Isabel's reactions in as much as they have such a vastly different foundation. Thus, while Gemini waits anxiously for some sign of anger from Isabel, Isabel is assessing the information in

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<sup>25</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>  
Ibid.

her mind and drawing her own unique conclusions. It becomes obvious, then, that it is the Countess who needs her "i's" dotted. This is seen even more clearly when one remembers that she held her silence for several years (since Isabel's marriage to Osmond) because Merle threatened to turn Isabel against her and thus, indirectly, bring about an end to the Countess's social activities in Rome. It must not be forgotten that Gemini, though she functions crucially in this novel, is little more than an agent; in character she is sharp, accurate, and totally unbearable.

It is essential to note Isabel's first reactions to the Countess's story. At first it seems surprising that she feels pity, and that this pity is felt for Osmond's first wife:

"Ah, poor, poor woman!" cried Isabel, who herewith burst into tears. It was a long time since she had shed any; she had suffered a high reaction from weeping, But now they flowed with an abundance ...<sup>27</sup>

This pity does not arise from despair but from an overwhelming sadness that comes when she at last faces the tragic circumstances in life that force individuals like Madame Merle and Osmond to behave in such a brutal, self-defeating manner. It must be remembered that when Isabel learned of Merle's role in Pansy's life she had felt this same emotion though not quite so totally. This reaction is warmly human. It is derived

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., II., p. 366.

from a sensitivity that is now mature. With her tears comes Isabel's recognition of the meaning of Madame Merle's sordid efforts and what these efforts accomplished and symbolized: "--the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's an odour of stale spices--." <sup>28</sup> It is the futility more than the crime that overcomes Isabel's heart. Yet there is, too, the sadness of her own personal hurt as expressed in her sympathetic recognition of her similarity with Osmond's first wife: "He must have been false to his wife--and so very soon!" <sup>29</sup>

As the scene between the Countess Gemini and Isabel is played out for the benefit of Isabel, and equally significant parallel action has already taken place between Osmond and Madame Merle. This scene takes place for Madame Merle; in it she at last reveals the oppressive misery she has held in her heart as a result of the evil role she has chosen to play for Pansy's advancement. From the moment Merle confesses herself openly and literally, all subsequent revelations serve to illustrate this sudden but no unexpected reversal in situations between Madame Merle and Isabel. At this point the reader becomes aware of the loss of Isabel's prideful innocence and her attainment of a more genuine, if moderate, wisdom; at the same moment one must note a corresponding failure in Merle's worldly knowledge which renders her, ironically, ignorant.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., I., 275.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., II., 367.

In this new state Madame Merle cannot realistically cope with the demands made upon her for a more fundamental, a more real compromise with the world. Tragically, Merle is aware of this failure. When Osmond asks "I should like to know what's the matter with you,"<sup>30</sup> she can only cry with unhappiness:

"The matter--the matter--!" And here Madame Merle stopped. Then she went on with a sudden outbreak of passion, a burst of summer thunder in a clear sky: "The matter is that I would give my right hand to be able to weep, and that I can't!"<sup>31</sup>

The use of tears is significant, for they symbolize a soul still alive to human feeling, still not totally dried up with the dry heat of evil. Merle sees this clearly, and in her desire to weep hopes to find a cleansing spirit, hopes to find, if not redemption, at least consolation. Osmond cannot understand such a human need. With his characteristic sarcasm he replies: "What good would it do you to weep?"<sup>32</sup> This dreadful question is his dreadful condemnation of Merle. Faced with this prospect, Merle struggles towards some kind of understanding, not with Isabel, or Osmond, or Pansy, but with herself. Her struggle is, for her, as tragic as her crimes have been perverse:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., II., 333.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



"Oh, I believe you'll make me cry still. I mean make me howl like a wolf. I've great hope, I've a great need, of that. I was vile this morning; I was horrid."<sup>33</sup>

Osmond thoroughly misses the point of Merle's struggle and assures her that Isabel, in her stupidity, did not see villainess. Merle's whole meaning must refute this totally evil solution:

"It was precisely my deviltry that stupefied her. I couldn't help it; I was full of something bad. Perhaps it was something good; I don't know. You've not only dried up my tears; you've dried up my soul."<sup>34</sup>

Osmond remains unmoved. Instead of assuming his share of the guilt, he breezily avoids involvement with a facetious philosophical sophism about the soul. This comment is designed to quiet her annoying self recriminations:

"I don't believe at all that it's an immortal principle. I believe it can perfectly be destroyed. That's what has happened to mine, which was a very good one to start with; and it's you I have to thank for it. You're very bad," she added with gravity in her emphasis.<sup>35</sup>

"Is this the way we're to end?" asks Osmond as he coldly awaits Merle's solution. Instead of a solution, he receives a bitter condemnation. This condemnation, for Merle, is her first step back into the folds of humanity:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

"I don't know how we're to end. I wish I did! how do bad people end?--especially as to their common crimes. You have made me as bad as yourself."<sup>36</sup>

Merle at least admits her wickedness. This alone removes her one step from Osmond; though their crimes were committed in concord, and though their souls may be tied forever together for this reason, at least Madame Merle has stated her desire to be no longer a part of such a totally evil contract. Like Faustus, she seems, at the last knell, to cry out for mercy. The final irony of their crimes is even more depressing to her, for she realizes that, for all her evil manipulations, she has gained little more than her own possible damnation:

After he [Osmond] had left her she went, the first thing, and lifted from the mantle-shelf the attenuated coffee-cup in which he had mentioned the existence of a crack; but she looked at it rather abstractly. "Have I been so vile all for nothing?" she vaguely wailed.<sup>37</sup>

At last Merle weeps, and though her soul is indeed nearly dried up, she is alive enough to feel the whole blow caused by her own tragic manipulations. Madame Merle's single consolation comes with her knowledge that what she has done is for her own daughter. In a vague way, this sole fact puts her above Osmond who moves others only to satisfy a grotesque ego. Merle possesses, in a small degree, positive virtue.

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<sup>36</sup> ibid., II., 335.

<sup>37</sup> ibid., II., 338.

The final confrontation between Madame Merle and Isabel takes place in the convent to which Pansy had been sent by her father. The convent possesses, in this scene, definite symbolic value; for as a direct link to the value around which both have functioned, it serves as a common, neutral ground. Most essentially, the convent is a place of peace and contemplation, of devotion and self-abnegation. Yet in this final scene it is Osmond who interjects the final, vile, irony. For he has sent Pansy into this place, not to contemplate the state of her soul, but to punish her for wishing to accompany Isabel to Gardencourt. Unlike the exciting action in the scenes between Gemini and Isabel, and between Osmond and Madame Merle, this meeting is marked by its quietness. There exists, in addition, a tone of sympathy and understanding that transcends the differences between the two women and links them together. As they meet, Merle quickly takes the initiative as if she were trying to throw Isabel off the scent. She speaks

... with much of the brilliancy of a woman who had long been a mistress of the art of conversation. But there were phases and gradations in her speech, not one of which was lost upon Isabel's ear, though her eyes were absent from her companion's face. She had not proceeded far before Isabel noted a sudden break in her voice, a lapse in her continuity, which was in itself a complete drama. This subtle modulation marked a momentous discovery--the perception of an entirely new attitude on the part of her listener.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., II., 377.

One must remember that while Madame Merle was having her own recriminations, she was having them privately, with Camond; for her, the deceit was still not over and, further, she did not choose, at that moment, to abandon her plans for rancor. Yet, even as she begins to speak, she falters, for she suspects Isabel's knowledge; her rapid speech is used, unconsciously, to overwhelm and reassert her dominance over Isabel. Further, this brilliancy serves the darker purpose of obscuring, so far as possible, her own unaccountable presence in the convent; for Merle still must function as merely "a friend of the family." Thus, her appearance must not arouse too much interest from Isabel.

Despite Madame Merle's nearly supreme confidence, the moment that she perceives Isabel's awareness of her situation, she seems to collapse totally:

... from the moment she made it [the discovery] the most accomplished woman faltered and lost her courage.<sup>39</sup>

There is, for a moment, an attempt to regain her former control, but, unable to grasp the situation, she again collapses, and the

... tide of her confidence ebbed, and she was able only just to glide into port, faintly grazing the bottom.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., II., 378.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Merle, by this point, is fully convinced of Isabel's knowledge, not simply of her own role in the affair, but of the desperation with which she attempted such a scheme. As for Isabel, her pride and ignorance, jolted so thoroughly by the Countess Gemini's blunt revelation, had collapsed and from their wreck she found the first signs of true wisdom. There is, in Isabel, a momentary swelling victory when she realizes the reversal she and Merle have undergone. Further, there is the immediate recollection of the pain which she has had to endure at the hands of Madame Merle. Isabel's first reaction, rightly, is one of anger: "All the bitterness of this knowledge surged into her soul again; it was as if she felt on her lips the taste of dishonour."<sup>41</sup> Yet, Isabel overcomes this feeling, just as she had when she discovered Pansy's total submission to Osmond and as she had learned of Osmond's quick betrayal of his first wife. The feeling of anger is replaced with one of compassion. Before Isabel there stood, in complete confusion,

... the cleverest woman in the world ...  
 within a few feet of her and knowing as  
 little what to think as the meanest.  
 Isabel's only revenge was to be silent  
 still--to leave Madame Merle in this  
 unprecedented situation.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., II., 379.

While Isabel cannot love this woman, she cannot hate her either. Merle is aware of this and makes no obvious effort to apologize for her behavior. Her silence alone is an admission of her guilt. She has put her shrewd, hard knowledge of the world up against an essentially good innocence, and she has lost. Isabel's potentiality for growth is seen to be unlimited, while Merle has failed to live up to her own worldly expectations. Merle, dishonored, leaves. As Isabel is about to go, she realizes that it is now she who must be, to fancy, the teacher. The young girl asks:

"You'll come back?" she called out in a voice that Isabel remembered afterwards.<sup>43</sup>

Isabel's answer is not rational: "'Yes--I'll come back.'" Later, when she tries to analyze this answer to Fanny, she can find no logical reason standing behind it. When Henrietta Stackpole accuses Isabel of making a stupid promise based upon a stupid choice, Isabel does not bother to defend her choice: "'In default of a better my having promised will do.'"<sup>44</sup> Isabel cannot consciously mark the change through which she has passed. For her to do so would be foolish. Her only expression of any new wisdom, then, must come in her actions, and these actions (such as her promise to return to

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<sup>43</sup> ibid., II., 386.

<sup>44</sup> ibid., II., 398.

Pansy) is an affirmation, no matter how silent, of her growth into a mature, experienced, wisdom.

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