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The Character of Ralph Touchett:  
Mere Spectatorship at the Game of Life?

by  
Timothy Brent Wuchter

A Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate Committee  
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in Candidacy for the Degree of  
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in  
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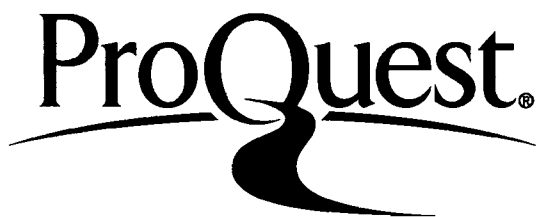
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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

8-30-83  
(date)

Professor in Charge

Chairman of Department

For John,  
with love and thanks

## Abstract

The character of Ralph Touchett in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady is often only briefly treated in James scholarship because most critics believe he is nothing more than the typical James observer. Ralph is undoubtedly the James observer in the novel, but, more than this, he serves another, more significant role. With Isabel's arrival at Gardencourt Ralph not only comes back to life but also begins to see a part of himself in her, and thus throughout the novel the two function as alter-egos of one another--passivity/action, perception/delusion, inward feeling/outward expression--so that as the novel progresses, the two slowly move together (spiritually more than physically) and reach their union in the death scene. Both celestial/terrestrial imagery and images of ascending and descending are associated with Ralph and Isabel and significantly so since, for the most part, Isabel is aspiring (ascending) to great heights and Ralph is declining (descending) toward death during the course of the work. All in all, Ralph Touchett is an important and integral character in The Portrait of a Lady.

## The Character of Ralph Touchett:

### Mere Spectatorship at the Game of Life?

Although Henry James's later novels are considered by most critics to be his most significant, one should not overlook the earlier novels, for in them James was to introduce and refine his craft. For anyone making his first acquaintance with "The Master," the early works, such as Roderick Hudson (1876) and The American (1877), offer the accessibility the James initiate needs and the groundwork he wants.

Of the early works The Portrait of a Lady (1881) is perhaps the greatest and most often read. The portrait of Isabel Archer and her growing awareness forms the basis for one of James's most prominent themes: the young innocent's first encounter with Europe. In addition, the novel contains a number of other elements that James was to develop in his fiction: manipulative characters, elaborate image patterns, various types of comedy. One of the most obvious recurring devices, however, is the observer, the person content to observe and comment on life without becoming actively involved. Ralph Touchett is obviously the observer in The Portrait of a Lady, but Ralph also seems to serve another, more important function in the novel, a function nonetheless inextricably bound with his role as observer. What one sees in Ralph Touchett is a man who comes back to life with the arrival of Isabel at Gardencourt and who begins a steady decline both physically and spiritually

after her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, but Ralph also seems to function as the alter-ego or ego-ideal of Isabel--passivity/action, perception/delusion, inward feeling/outward expression--so that at the end of the novel the two seem to complement each other and thus naturally come together.

In the reams of James scholarship Ralph Touchett has elicited relatively little attention. Those critics who do consider Ralph usually focus on his role as observer.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a number of scholars discuss possible sources for the character. Ernest Sandeen, for example, points out the parallel between the Henry James/Minnie Temple and

<sup>1</sup> Among the critics who discuss Ralph as the typical James observer are Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), p. 41: "The sensitive and sick Ralph Touchett is the familiar Jamesian observer in the novel"; Sheldon W. Liebman, "The Light and the Dark: Character Design in The Portrait of a Lady," Papers on Language and Literature, 6 (Spring 1970), 171: "Ralph is the observer who permits all of the characters to become what they may, to flower into form"; Ellen Douglass Leyburn, Strange Alloy: The Relation of Comedy to Tragedy in the Fiction of Henry James (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 40: Ralph's illness "condemns him to a spectator's place in life"; Ora Segal, The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James's Fiction (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. 34: Ralph is "the novel's central observer . . ."; Tony Tanner, "The Fearful Self: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady," in Henry James: Modern Judgements, ed. Tony Tanner (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 156: "Ralph is of course a recurring Jamesian figure--the subtly debarred spectator who enjoys everything in imagination and nothing in action"; Ronald Wallace, Henry James and the Comic Form (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1975), p. 62: "Ralph is the recurring Jamesian artist figure, enjoying everything in his imagination . . ."; and Philip M. Weinstein, Henry James and the Requirements of the Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 48-9: Ralph is "[r]educed by his illness to being a spectator with only an aesthetic interest in life. . . ."



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the Ralph Touchett/Isabel Archer relationships. Obviously James draws upon his relationship with his cousin since the fiction writer's two most valuable assets are imagination and personal experience. Robert Emmet Long considers two possible sources for Ralph: the character of Sir Ralph Brown in George Sand's Indiana, Brown being a cousin of the heroine, Isabel, who by the end of the work finds out that Isabel loves him, and the character of Daniel Deronda in George Eliot's novel of the same name. Although all of these studies are valuable and relevant, many of them stop short of discussing Ralph's true significance and of seeing that he is an important character in and of himself.

The reader first encounters Ralph in what might be called the tableau that opens the novel, a tableau in which the ceremony known as afternoon tea is sketched against "the lawn of an old English country-house" in "the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon." The artist's

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Sandeen, "The Wings of the Dove and The Portrait of a Lady: A Study of Henry James's Later Phase," PMLA, 69 (December 1954), 1060-75.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Emmet Long, Henry James: The Early Novels (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), pp. 104-7. Long says that Sir Ralph Brown is "a shy man, awkward, and introverted, but sincere in his feelings for her [Isabel]." Of Daniel Deronda Long says that "as Gwendolyn looks at last to the large spirited Daniel Deronda for understanding, so Isabel reaches out finally to Ralph Touchett."

<sup>4</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), p. 17. All further references will be to this edition.

brush skillfully contrasts the images of light and dark to focus the reader's attention on "an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him" (p. 17), one of the "younger men" being Ralph. The overall feeling one gets from this "painting" is that of ennui, the feeling that life has somehow or other passed by these individuals and that they have settled into this "eternity of pleasure." This feeling is not coincidental; James seems to go to some lengths to create it so that the arrival of Isabel and her enthusiastic outlook will have more force.

The initial description of Ralph is accurate and consistent, and it strengthens Ralph's melancholy mood at the beginning of the novel:

Tall, lean, loosely and feebly put together, he had an ugly, sickly, witty, charming face, furnished, but by no means decorated, with a straggling moustache and whisker. He looked clever and ill--a combination by no means felicitous; and he wore a brown velvet jacket. He carried his hands in his pockets, and there was something in the way he did it that showed the habit was inveterate.<sup>5</sup> His gait had a shambling, wandering quality; he was not very firm on his legs. (p. 19)

<sup>5</sup> Ralph's habit of putting his hands in his pockets is one of his most distinguishing characteristics, and both Long, Henry James: The Early Novels, p. 115, and Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 127-30, see the gesture as

Part of Ralph's melancholy is undoubtedly caused by his illness, which the reader later learns is the result of "a violent cold, which fixed itself on his lungs and threw them into dire confusion" (p. 45), even though Mr. Touchett tells Lord Warburton that "'it doesn't seem to affect his spirits'" (p. 21). <sup>6</sup> Seem is the key word, for like many other characters in the novel, Ralph wears a mask. He hides his feelings about his illness--and a number of other

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"indicating paralysis through sexual fear" and impotence. These observations may indicate why Isabel feels so comfortable around Ralph; he does not threaten her sexually. One must recall her repulsion of Caspar Goodwood's kiss at the close of the novel and also her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, whom Ralph calls "'a sterile dilettante" (p. 292, my italics). Both Long's and Porter's observations are interesting but perhaps a bit strained. Considering Ralph's sensibility, one can conclude that love for him will always be on a higher plane than the physical. (Note Ralph's last words to Isabel: "'And remember this . . . , that if you've been hated you've also been loved. Ah but, Isabel--adored!" [p. 479]. The last word says everything.) What Ralph's habit seems to represent is his general inability to actively participate in life. Thus, being the artist figure that most critics believe he is, Ralph "sculpts" his model--Isabel--with his imagination rather than with his hands.

<sup>6</sup> Even midway through the novel, the narrator says of Ralph, "The personality resulting was delightful; he had remained proof against the staleness of disease; he had had to consent to being deplorably ill, yet had somehow escaped being formally sick" (p. 285). James himself comments on Ralph's state of health in the "Preface" to The Wings of the Dove: "To Ralph Touchett in 'The Portrait of a Lady,' for instance, his deplorable state of health was not only no drawback; I had clearly been right in counting it, for any happy effect he should produce, a positive good mark, a direct aid to pleasantness and vividness."

things--behind his witty banter and cynical humor.

<sup>7</sup> Most critics agree that Ralph uses irony and humor to hide his feelings about his illness and by extension to survive: Leyburn, Strange Alloy, p. 40: Ralph "indulges the inclination to irony most fully at his own expense since it is only by self-mockery that he makes bearable the illness which condemns him to a spectator's place in life"; Gordon Pirie, Henry James (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), pp. 76-7: Ralph's sense of humor is "a weapon of survival: if he took himself too seriously he would long ago have succumbed to despair"; Richard Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 235: "Even the comedy in which he [Ralph] indulges is a social device, a way of releasing himself from anyone's odious supposition that his illness has mastered his spirit"; and Wallace, Henry James and the Comic Form, p. 62: "Capable of joking at his own death, Ralph attains the serious wisdom of high comedy. . . ."

Ralph's humor does not stop with ironic self-mockery but finds expression in his cynicism, sarcasm, and witty banter as well. Nowhere is his humor more obvious than in his dealings with Henrietta Stackpole. When Isabel and Ralph are discussing Miss Stackpole in Chapter Ten, for example, Ralph's play on words is quite humorous:

"Ah," said Isabel with a kind of joyous sigh, "I like so many things! If a thing strikes me with a certain intensity I accept it. I don't want to swagger, but I suppose I'm rather versatile. I like people to be totally different from Henrietta--in the style of Lord Warburton's sisters for instance. So long as I look at the Misses Molyneux they seem to me to answer a kind of ideal. Then Henrietta presents herself, and I'm straightway convinced by her; not so much in respect to herself as in respect to what masses behind her."

"Ah, you mean the back view of her," Ralph suggested. (pp. 87-8)

Even more blatant is the scene in which Henrietta mistakes Ralph's banter for a marriage proposal (Chapter Thirteen). For a discussion of Ralph's comedy in relation to Henrietta Stackpole, see Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James, pp. 197ff. Poirier says that "[m]uch of the broadest comedy in the first half of the novel derives from the conversations between Ralph and Henrietta and the contrast between his supple and extemporizing mind and her attempts to confine him within the limits of her doctrinaire and superficial categories."

James masterfully develops this idea of the mask or false front by using what might be termed "facade" imagery. In a conversation between Isabel and Ralph near the beginning of the novel, Ralph says,

"I keep a band of music in my ante-room. . . . It has orders to play without stopping; it renders me two excellent services. It keeps the sounds of the world from reaching the private apartments, and it makes the world think that dancing's going on within." (p. 61)

James quite obviously uses this passage as a metaphor for Ralph's personality, an idea further substantiated by Isabel's thought as related by the narrator: "she would have liked to pass through the ante-room, as her cousin called it, and enter the private apartments" (p. 61). The suggestion is that Isabel wants to get to know Ralph better, to penetrate the mask.

James uses the same type of imagery a few pages later in Ralph's thoughts about Isabel:

He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the window and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. The door was fastened, and though he had keys in his pocket he had a conviction that none of them would fit. (p. 64)

At the end of the novel, however, when Isabel and Ralph are facing the moment of truth, the doors to each others' "private apartments" are finally unlocked.

The reader gets an intimation that Ralph's illness is on his mind in the first chapter when he responds to his father's persistent referrals to Ralph's malady. Mr. Touchett says, "'Well, we're two lame ducks; I don't think there's much difference,'" and he continues,

"Oh no, he's [Ralph's] not clumsy--considering he's an invalid himself. He's a very good nurse--for a sick-nurse. I call him my sick-nurse because he's sick himself."  
"Oh, come, daddy!" the ugly young man exclaimed.  
"Well, you are; I wish you weren't. But I suppose you can't help it."  
"I might try: that's an idea," said the young man. (p. 21)

One gets the impression that Ralph would like not to be reminded of his illness.

The greater part of Ralph's somber mood, however, is caused by his father's failing health. Ralph's relationship with his father is quite interesting because, in a sense, Mr. Touchett has become both mother and father to him, Mrs. Touchett living on the continent most of the time.

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<sup>8</sup> James's short story "The Jolly Corner" deals with this same idea, the penetration of inner chambers, and might be considered in relation to the "facade" imagery. For an excellent study of this imagery in The Portrait of a Lady, see R. W. Stallman, The Houses that James Built and Other Literary Studies (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 4ff. See also Dennis L. O'Connor, "Intimacy and Spectatorship in The Portrait of a Lady," The Henry James Review, 2, No. 1 (Fall 1980), 33: "In James's fiction, houses and rooms often serve as metaphors or synecdoches of characters and their psychic spaces."

So what Ralph sees in his father is actually both parents, and thus his affection is--if you will--double. Ralph even goes so far as to see a complete role reversal between Mr. and Mrs. Touchett: Ralph's "father ministered most to his [Ralph's] sense of the sweetness of filial dependence. His father, as he had often said to himself, was the more motherly; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial" (p. 43). This description of Mr. and Mrs. Touchett is quite accurate because Mrs. Touchett is definitely the stronger of the two.

The father/son relationship is also one of admiration and apparent emulation. For one thing, the two resemble each other not only in their sickness but also--as is implied--in their looks. As the narrator says near the end of the opening tableau, ". . . with their faces brought into relation, you would easily have seen they were father and son" (p. 20). Ralph also regards his father as his "best friend," and, according to the narrator, "Ralph was not only fond of his father, he admired him--he enjoyed the opportunity of observing him" (p. 44). This observation establishes both Ralph's relationship with his father and his role as observer. When Mr. Touchett's health begins to decline, then, it is only natural that Ralph's spirits should do the same:

Poor Ralph had been for many weeks steeped in melancholy; his outlook, habitually somber, lay under the shadow of a deeper cloud. He had grown

anxious about his father, whose gout, hitherto confined to his legs, had begun to ascend into regions more vital. (p. 62)

With Isabel's arrival at Gardencourt, Ralph's spirits seem to lift, and, in essence, he comes back to life. Throughout the novel Isabel is associated with the life force, and nowhere is this more evident than in the stir she creates at Gardencourt. Upon her first appearance the dogs begin to bark, Ralph lights up at her beauty, and Mr. Touchett almost immediately says that he will "'be the better for having [her] here'" (p. 28). The narrator says, "She carried within herself a great fund of life" (p. 41),

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that father and son are so much alike, there is one important difference as noted by F. W. Dupee, Henry James (n.p.: William Sloane Associates, 1951), p. 116. Dupee agrees that Ralph is more devoted to his father than his mother and says that Ralph "is so imaginative, so full of his father's goodness and sentiment, but so deficient in his father's sense of purpose . . . that he is obliged to wear the double mask of the invalid and the cynic." Dupee's comment is quite accurate, for if there is one thing Ralph lacks at the beginning of the novel, it is a sense of purpose, which is supplied when Isabel arrives. Another difference between the two may be their feelings about responsibility. Daniel Touchett apparently had been a responsible and hard-working businessman; Ralph, however, seems to fear his father's death because of the responsibility it will throw upon him. Consider the narrator's comment, "The father and son had been close companions, and the idea of being left alone with the remnant of a tasteless life on his [Ralph's] hands was not gratifying to the young man, who had always and tacitly counted upon his elder's help in making the best of a poor business" (pp. 62-3). One might also see Ralph's transferral of most of his inheritance to Isabel as a transfer of responsibility. (Note that Isabel, in turn, transfers the money and by extension the responsibility to Osmond. See note twenty nine.)



and Mrs. Touchett notes her revitalizing quality when she says to Ralph, "'If it's dry . . . you can leave Isabel alone to water it! She is as good as a summer rain, any day'" (p. 47). A few pages later Mr. Touchett again notes Isabel's vitality when the narrator says, "The old man was full of kindness for her; it was a long time, as he said, since they had had any young life in the house; and our rustling, quickly-moving, clear-voiced heroine was as agreeable to his sense as the sound of flowing water" (p. 57). The metaphor of flowing water is quite appropriate because it contrasts nicely with the rather stagnant atmosphere of Gardencourt.

Ralph also notes Isabel's vital quality in a number of places, the most important and relevant being the scene in which Isabel asks him whether Gardencourt can boast of a ghost. In their exchange Ralph remarks about the house, "'It's not a romantic old house. . . . You'll be disappointed if you count on that. It's a dismally prosaic one; there's no romance here but what you may have brought with you'" (pp. 50-1). Ralph's observation is accurate because Gardencourt and its inhabitants are rather dull and life-<sup>10</sup>less, especially when contrasted to Isabel's home in Albany, a home that had been "full of life" (p. 35). John P. O'Neill agrees that Gardencourt is "an environment which stands<sup>11</sup> badly in need of energy," and thus Isabel becomes a bright<sup>12</sup> spot in a rather dark existence.

Isabel becomes not only a bright spot in a dark existence

but also a pleasant diversion for Ralph. As the narrator says, "He thought a great deal about her; she was constantly present to his mind. At a time when his thoughts had been a good deal of a burden to him her sudden arrival, which promised nothing and was an open-handed gift of fate, had refreshed and quickened them, given them wings and something to fly for" (p. 62). The perceptive reader will note that Ralph uses the same type of language in reference to Isabel later in the novel. Isabel's arrival diverts Ralph's melancholy thoughts about his illness and his father, and

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<sup>10</sup> The narrator relates Ralph's assertion that fortune has dropped Isabel "into the dullest house in England" (p. 60). Even Mr. Bantling calls Gardencourt "'a dreadfully dull house'" (p. 127).

<sup>11</sup> John P. O'Neill, Workable Design: Action and Situation in the Fiction of Henry James (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 28. O'Neill also notes the passivity of the characters at Gardencourt: "Mr. Touchett is an invalid, Ralph, although clever, is sick; and Warburton amuses himself with indecision."

<sup>12</sup> Dorothea Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (Cambridge: The Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 27-8. Krook agrees that Isabel enchants everyone at Gardencourt and becomes a bright spot for all, especially for Ralph. Stallman, The Houses that James Built, p. 4 says that "[e]nergy is not manifested in Isabel, except in her 'ridiculously active' imagination." Stallman seems to overlook the fact that Isabel pursues her affairs actively and energetically at Gardencourt. Consider some of the adjectives used by various characters and the narrator to describe her: "fresh," "rustling," "quickly-moving," "spontaneous"; these are very energetic words. Even so, however, the energy exuded by her "ridiculously active" imagination is enough to stir the stagnant atmosphere of Gardencourt.

he becomes the spectator of this "really interesting little figure": "If his cousin were to be nothing more than an entertainment to him, Ralph was conscious she was an entertainment of a high order" (p. 63). Richard Poirier agrees that Isabel "offers such a prospect of original accomplishment that bored and worldly Ralph Touchett is able to believe that here at last is something worth staying alive to witness."<sup>14</sup>

Isabel is worth staying alive to witness because she is, as Lord Warburton says, "an interesting woman." Contrary to what Dorothea Krook suggests, however, Ralph's interest in Isabel is not love,<sup>15</sup> for as the narrator says of Ralph,

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<sup>13</sup> "You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue--to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men" (p. 291). The image of soaring--celestial imagery if you will--is associated with Isabel throughout the novel: "she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion of irresistible action . . ." (p. 54); Lord Warburton says that she has "'vast designs'" and that her mind "'looks down on us all'" (p. 77); Ralph says to her, "'Spread your wings; rise above the ground'" (p. 192); while Isabel is strolling through St. Peter's, the narrator says of her, "her conception of greatness rose and dizzily rose. After this it never lacked space to soar" (p. 251); and during some of Isabel's thoughts about Madame Merle, the narrator says, "Her [Isabel's] poor winged spirit had always had a great desire to do its best, and it had not as yet been seriously discouraged" (p. 340).

<sup>14</sup> Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James, p. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James, pp. 27-8. Krook says that "Ralph is an immensely clever, imaginative, passionate young man, who instantly falls in

"He wondered whether he were harboring 'love' for this spontaneous young woman from Albany; but he judged that on the whole he was not" (p. 63). Despite all of his romantic notions, Ralph is still realistic enough to know that he can never love Isabel in the sense in which the term is usually taken. During the conversation with his father in which he persuades Mr. Touchett to give Isabel the money, Ralph again avows that he is not in love with her: "'No, I'm not in love with her; but I should be if--if certain things were different'" (p. 159); Ralph is undoubtedly referring to his health here. Later in the novel, however, Ralph does come to love Isabel, but it is an idealized love, a "'love without hope,'" to quote Ralph, adoration, the love of a sibling rather than a lover.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, at this point Isabel is more of a curiosity because she seems so

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love with Isabel. But being consumptive, he cannot propose to her, chooses instead to conceal his passion behind a smokescreen of witty disenchanted levity." Perhaps Krook's estimation is a bit strained. Ralph does not "instantly" fall in love with Isabel as the narrator's comment quoted in the text substantiates. The word passion seems to be an extremely strong word to use in regards to Ralph, too, especially since this study is trying to portray the melancholy, apathy, and passivity of the character. Maybe Krook should qualify her comments.

<sup>16</sup> Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites, p. 44: "The touching relation of Isabel and Ralph becomes that of brother and sister. . . ." Consider also the narrator's comment during Isabel's midnight vigil: "She felt to-day as if he [Ralph] had been her brother" (p. 363); and Isabel's final words to Ralph, "'Oh my brother!'" (p. 479).

different from other women, and also at this point one can see the idea of Ralph and Isabel being alter-egos begin to emerge.

Because of his illness, Ralph has become a very passive individual, a person who has accepted his role as an observer and has taken up the pleasures of contemplation. According to Robert Emmet Long, "As a consumptive he [Ralph] is 'honorably' disqualified from an active life," and most critics agree that Ralph is a passive character. Ralph even admits his passivity during a conversation with Henrietta Stackpole:

"Ah," said Ralph, "I'm only Caliban; I'm not Prospero."

"You were Prospero enough to make her [Isabel] what she has become. You've acted on Isabel Archer since she came here, Mr. Touchett."

<sup>17</sup> Long, Henry James: The Early Novels, p. 115. Other critics who discuss Ralph's passivity include Charles R. Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1977), p. 82: Ralph is "relegated from the active role of suitor to the passive one of appreciator by his disabling invalidism"; Alwyn Berland, Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 124: "If Ralph is the most appealing, and central, representative of the civilized among the men who surround Isabel, he is also the most passive"; William J. Maseychik, "Points of Departure from The American," in Henry James: Modern Judgements, ed. Tony Tanner (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 121: "Ralph sits quietly drawing the world into himself"; and J. A. Ward, The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 45: Ralph's "incurable illness, which associates him with those Americans who are denied experience by physical, economic, or other handicaps, symbolizes impotence. Touchett can live only vicariously; he is, in effect, outside the action of the novel."

"I, my dear Miss Stackpole? Never in the world. Isabel Archer has acted upon me--yes; she acts on everyone. But I've been absolutely passive." (p. 109)

These lines reveal not only Ralph's passivity but also Isabel's vitality, and the Shakespearean references further enhance this idea, Caliban being acted upon by Prospero throughout The Tempest. Even the narrator says that Ralph is "gratefully, luxuriously passive" (p. 415).

Being excluded from actively participating in life, Ralph has turned his attention to the passive exercise of contemplation. As the narrator says, "it seemed to him [Ralph] the joys of contemplation had never been sounded" (p. 46). With the decline of Ralph's physical faculties, his sensory perception becomes sharper so that, as we shall later see, unlike Isabel, who is deluded by Osmond, Ralph can clearly see him for what he is.

One should not overlook the fact, however, that Ralph's perception is not always clear. He cannot, for example, see what his bequest is doing to Isabel. As Granville H. Jones says, "The unselfish, charitable, renouncing aspects of his [Ralph's] own character he fails to recognize in Isabel. Perhaps he is blinded by her beauty, perhaps he nurtures a desire for her that he realizes to be unfulfillable; regardless, while intending only to do Isabel good, Ralph does not read accurately the signals of her constitutional reluctance to indulge fully in experience." 18

One should also note that Isabel is presented as having clear perception in the beginning of the novel. Upon her arrival at Gardencourt the narrator says, "She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception . . ." (p. 26). This comment becomes extremely ironic as the reader finishes the novel, for clear perception is one of the qualities Isabel lacks. Ralph picks up on Isabel's perception a bit later when he says with his characteristic note of irony, "'Good heavens, how you see through one!'" (p. 51). And a few chapters later Lord Warburton accurately observes that Isabel judges only from the outside (p. 77), an observation substantiated by her marrying Osmond.

Tony Tanner agrees that Ralph is "the subtly debarred spectator who enjoys everything in imagination and nothing in action."<sup>19</sup> But Ralph was not always like this, and this fact is important. During his college years he was quite different: "His outward conformity to the manners that surrounded him was none the less the mask of a mind that

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<sup>18</sup> Granville H. Jones, Henry James's Psychology of Experience: Innocence, Responsibility, and Renunciation in the Fiction of Henry James (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Tanner, "The Fearful Self," p. 156. See also O'Connor, "Intimacy and Spectatorship in The Portrait of a Lady," p. 33: "With Ralph we are back in the 'theatre of the imagination,' that idealist's excuse for a life-world."

greatly enjoyed its independence, on which nothing long imposed itself, and which, naturally inclined to adventure and irony, indulged in a boundless liberty of appreciation" (pp. 43-4). Except for the irony,<sup>20</sup> this description sounds very much like Isabel so that perhaps Ralph sees in Isabel a part of himself, attributes that he once had.

Isabel, on the other hand, seems to be more of an active agent, more inclined to act than to think, to see than to feel. Indeed, Isabel's independence is the quality that Mrs. Touchett hits upon in her telegram: "'Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent'" (p. 24). According to the narrator, too, "It was one of her [Henrietta Stackpole's] theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent" (p. 55). Isabel even says soon after her arrival at Gardencourt, "'I'm very fond of my liberty'" (p. 30), and during a conversation with Caspar Goodwood later in the novel, she asserts, "'If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of . . . it's my personal independence'" (p. 142). In fact, her love of independence is one of the main reasons for her refusing

<sup>20</sup> Ralph's ability to laugh at himself, to look at his situation with self-mockery, irony, and humor is a positive quality of his character. (See note seven.) Isabel, however, seems to lack this quality. Instead of irony and self-mockery about her disastrous marriage to Osmond, for example, antipathy and brooding seem to be her way of handling the situation. See Wallace, Henry James and the Comic Form, p. 62: ". . . the reader perceives that one important positive quality which Isabel lacks is just this ability to laugh at herself."



Lord Warburton's marriage proposal: "She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favor of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining" (p. 101).

Perhaps the passage best characterizing Isabel, however, is in Chapter Seven during an exchange between Isabel and Ralph:

She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. (p. 64)

Charles Anderson says that with this "irregular" question Ralph, at least at this point, is functioning as the author's mouthpiece.<sup>21</sup> This is true since the entire novel is actually a working-out of this idea; thus, the question might be considered a type of thesis for James. According to Richard Chase, Ralph "often speaks with the wisdom of the author. . . ."<sup>22</sup> And one might also consider

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1957), p. 131.

a line from James's Notebooks in which he says that Isabel is "ground in the mill of the conventional," a line that James gives to Ralph in the novel (p. 478). Although a number of instances in which Ralph does seem to function as James's mouthpiece can be found, one must agree with Christof Wegelin, who says that Ralph "dramatizes merely James's expectant sympathy with the American quality which Isabel represents--the imagination, as he keeps calling it, which is really a kind of spiritual energy."<sup>23</sup>

Isabel does have intentions of her own, and she carries them out with little or no regard to others' advice. To Caspar Goodwood, for example, she says, "'I don't need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live: I can find it out for myself'" (p. 140) and "'I wish to choose my fate'" (p. 143). Isabel wants, as Ralph says, "'to see, but not to feel'" (p. 134), and thus, in a sense, she too becomes an observer.

One should note that Isabel seems to admire Madame Merle's ability to feel. As the narrator says of Madame Merle,

Of course, too, she knew how to feel; Isabel couldn't have spent a week with her without being sure of that. This was indeed Madame Merle's great talent, her most perfect gift. Life had told upon her; she had felt it strongly, and it was part of the satisfaction to be taken in her

<sup>23</sup> Christof Wegelin, The Image of Europe in Henry James (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1958), p. 67.

society that when the girl talked of what she was pleased to call serious matters this lady understood her so easily and quickly. (p. 164)

At this point and until the end of the novel, however, Isabel cannot "feel"; she is capable only of outward expression. Only after she has suffered--like Madame Merle and Ralph--only after she has drunk of the cup of experience, only after she has seen the ghost can she begin to "feel," begin to synthesize outward expression and inward feeling. In response to Ralph's remark, Richard Chase comments, "Ralph has hit upon a truth about his cousin. The kind of cold, amoral aloofness, the possibly morbid passion for observing life at a distance--these are the real traits of Isabel's character."<sup>24</sup> So Isabel becomes a curiosity, and Ralph is going to spend the rest of his life pursuing her fate.

Ralph will not only spend the remainder of his life<sup>25</sup> observing Isabel, but he will also aid her, financially, Why? He may simply be curious to see what a woman who refuses Lord Warburton will do with her life. More impor-

<sup>24</sup> Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> Some further examples of Ralph as an observer of Isabel include the following: "Ralph noticed these quaint charities; he noticed everything she did" (p. 126); "'What's the use of adoring you [Isabel] without hope of a reward if I [Ralph] can't have a few compensations? What's the use of being ill and disabled and restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life if I really can't see the show when I've paid so much for my ticket?'" (p. 132); and "' . . . I [Ralph] content myself with watching you [Isabel]--with the deepest interest'" (p. 133).

tantly, however, Ralph seems to see a part of himself in Isabel, and through her, in essence, he can live. James provides numerous hints that Ralph is not only interested in Isabel but also willing to help her. When Mrs. Touchett tells Ralph about Isabel's financial status, for example, the narrator says, "Ralph had listened attentively to this judicious report, by which his interest in the subject of

26 See Leon Edel, Henry James: The Conquest of London: 1870-1881 (New York: Avon Books, 1978), p. 423: Ralph "knows he has not long to live; and he wishes to see how Isabel's large nature will profit by endowment. If this is a sign of his love for her, and the sole way in which he can be symbolically united to her, it is also Ralph's way of living vicariously in Isabel's life . . ."; William H. Gass, "The High Brutality of Good Intention," Accent, 18 (Winter 1958), 68: "It is Ralph who sees the chance, in her [Isabel], for the really fine thing; who sees in her his own chance too, the chance at life denied him"; Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites, p. 41: "The spiritual guardian of Isabel, and then her material benefactor, he [Ralph] is really the other half, the conscious half of Isabel . . ."; Jones, Henry James's Psychology of Experience, p. 43: "To Ralph, who is physically unattractive and wasted by an incurable illness, Isabel represents vibrancy and potentiality . . ."; Donald L. Mull, Henry James's 'Sublime Economy': Money as Symbolic Center in the Fiction (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973), p. 61: "For Ralph, whose awareness of the limitations which conditions have imposed upon his own freedom is strong, Isabel is largely the aspiring spirit of expansive possibility . . ."; S. Gorley Putt, Henry James: A Reader's Guide (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966), p. 138: Ralph recognizes in Isabel "a similar but potentially more active sensibility" than his own; Charles Thomas Samuels, The Ambiguity of Henry James (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 115: "Too sick to enter life himself, he [Ralph] figuratively lives off Isabel . . ."; and Philip Sicker, Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 59: "Actually, Ralph hopes that Isabel will fulfill the requirements of his own imagination by living the kind of vital, free-wheeling life that illness has denied him."

it was not impaired" (p. 48). In the exchange between Isabel and Ralph immediately following, Ralph says, "'I wish you all success, and shall be very glad to contribute to it'" (p. 52).

One might also consider Ralph's remark after Isabel tells him that she wants "'to see for [her]self'": "'You've told me the great thing; that the world interests you and that you want to throw yourself into it'" (p. 134). Could this be the point at which Ralph actually decides to aid Isabel financially? Even during Ralph and Isabel's conversation about Madame Merle, the narrator says, "Ralph had other things to think about" (p. 155). Obviously he is thinking about his father's illness and imminent death, but the suggestion seems to be that he is also thinking about giving Isabel the money since he proposes the idea to his father a few pages later. "Ralph Touchett's plan," according to Laurence Bedwell Holland, "is founded on renouncing prospects of marriage with Isabel and on transferring his affection into something paternal and fraternal instead."<sup>27</sup>

What Ralph finally decides to do is, in the words of Iago, to "'put money in her purse'" (p. 160); he wants to give Isabel the freedom to do whatever she wants, thinking that she will consistently do the right thing, and to give

<sup>27</sup> Laurence Bedwell Holland, The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 28.

himself the pleasure of seeing what she does. As Lyall Powers says, "Ralph is indeed an apostle of freedom, but for Isabel he is much more than that: for her he is virtually the author of her freedom."<sup>28</sup> By giving her the money,<sup>29</sup> Ralph allows Isabel to experience the dreams inherent in her "ridiculously active imagination," and in return he will satisfy his own imagination. As he tells his father, "'I shall get just the good I said a few minutes ago I wished to put into Isabel's reach--that of having met the

<sup>28</sup> Lyall H. Powers, "The Portrait of a Lady: 'The Eternal Mystery of Things,'" in Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism, ed. Lyall H. Powers (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Of the number of critics who discuss Ralph's endowment, the following are the most significant: Jones, Henry James's Psychology of Experience, p. 43: Ralph's "endowment of her [Isabel] . . . reflects much the same spirit she has when she takes up Osmond as a 'charitable institution.'" (This observation is quite accurate since both Ralph and Isabel feel uncomfortable with large sums of money, and thus both transfer the responsibility to someone else. Consider the narrator's comment during Isabel's midnight vigil: Isabel "was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of [her inheritance] to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" [p. 358].) Arnold Kettle, "The Portrait of a Lady," in Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism, ed. Lyall H. Powers (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 64: "It [the endowment] is Ralph's one supreme mistake in intelligence and it is the mistake that ruins Isabel"; Liebman, "The Light and the Dark," p. 171: "The gift . . . is a manifestation of his [Ralph's] own passion for her [Isabel] but gives her the power to act with complete freedom, to fulfill the possibilities projected by her 'ridiculously active imagination'"; Mull, Henry James's 'Sublime Economy,' p. 75: "The gift is in effect the bestowal upon Isabel of the very freedom he [Ralph] lacks, the projection upon her of his own unrealizable potential . . ."; and O'Neill, Workable Design, p. 35: Ralph "weighs her [Isabel] down with gold which must be spent in order to have meaning."

requirements of my imagination'" (p. 163). Through Isabel, then, Ralph will be able to live. One should note that both Isabel and Ralph have rather active imaginations: Isabel wants to satisfy hers by seeing Europe, and by extension by experiencing life, and Ralph wants to satisfy his by giving her that opportunity and by observing what she does with it. The difference between the two is that Isabel actively goes about satisfying her imagination while Ralph passively satisfies his.

Ralph makes his mistake not so much by giving Isabel the money, as a number of critics suggest, but by thinking that she will always do the proper thing, for both Isabel and Ralph have a rather inflated and romantic view of freedom, a view that seems to be based on a lack of responsibility. Arnold Kettle agrees that "freedom to Isabel and Ralph (for he has been as much concerned in the issue as she), has been an idealized freedom." Kettle goes on to say that both "have sought to be free not through a recognition of, but by an escape from, necessity. And in so doing they have delivered Isabel over to an exploitation as crude and more corrupting than the exploitation that would have been her fate if Mrs. Touchett had never visited Albany." <sup>30</sup> Instead of putting wind in her sails, Ralph has anchored Isabel in "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (p. 360).

<sup>30</sup> Kettle, "The Portrait of a Lady," p. 66.

After Mr. Touchett's death and Isabel's subsequent inheritance, Ralph makes fewer and fewer appearances in the novel, for he has provided Isabel with the means to live her life the way she wants and now steps back to observe her.<sup>31</sup> According to Philip Weinstein, Ralph "broods over Isabel's career as though he were sculpting it--in search of the ideal form within his unshaped materials."<sup>32</sup> Ralph comes to see, however, that his "ideal form" is cracked and that he is responsible. When the reader does encounter Ralph in the middle sections of the novel, it is only briefly--as a guide for Isabel in Florence, as the subject of other characters' conversations, and as the observer. As the reader is told about Isabel's impressions of Rome, for example, he is also told that "Ralph Touchett, when he appeared to be looking listlessly and awkwardly over her [Isabel's] head, was really dropping on her an intensity of observation" (p. 245). It is only natural that Ralph makes fewer appearances after he gives Isabel the money because he has set the stage for her and steps back to watch the

<sup>31</sup> Segal, The Lucid Reflector, pp. 40, 42: "As Isabel begins her European career at Gardencourt, Ralph serves not only as the amused and delighted witness of her day-to-day activities but also as her initiator"; "During the period of Isabel's initiation, Ralph functions as the center through whose consciousness she is projected. His subsequent withdrawal from this post reflects Isabel's emergence from the sheltered existence of Gardencourt and marks the beginning of her European career."

<sup>32</sup> Weinstein, Henry James and the Requirements of the Imagination, pp. 48-9.



performance and because, as Lyall Powers suggests, "he must interfere but little if her freedom is to have any real meaning."<sup>33</sup>

One of the most interesting and important scenes in which the reader sees Ralph in the middle sections of the novel is the Forum scene (Chapter Twenty Seven) because it presents some very significant imagery. Charles Anderson<sup>34</sup> notes the importance of light/dark imagery in this scene but does nothing with what might be called celestial/terrestrial imagery. Throughout most of the novel Isabel is associated with celestial imagery while Ralph is associated<sup>35</sup> with terrestrial imagery. These contrasting images are quite appropriate since Isabel is aspiring to great heights and Ralph is approaching death during the course of the novel. Although these images can be found in numerous

<sup>33</sup> Powers, "'The Eternal Mystery of Things,'" p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels, p. 103: "This is one of the very rare scenes in the novel that is set in bright light, at least to start with; but when Ralph went off with an archaeological guide and she [Isabel] remained behind, the hour and the place were exactly suited to her mood of the moment."

<sup>35</sup> See note thirteen for a consideration of Isabel and celestial imagery. Some examples of Ralph being associated with the earth include the following: "Ralph Touchett had been joined in his visit to the excavation by Miss Stackpole and her attendant, and these three now emerged from among the mounds of earth . . ." (p. 249); "He [Ralph] fixed his eyes on the ground" (p. 290); "Ralph must sink to his last rest in his own dear house" (p. 413, my italics); and "It was in the green burial-place of this edifice [the church] that Mrs. Touchett consigned her son to earth" (p. 480).

places, the most obvious and significant is the Forum scene:

A process of digging was on view in a remote corner of the Forum, and he [an archaeologist] presently remarked that if it should please the signori to go and watch it a little they might see something of interest. The proposal commended itself more to Ralph than to Isabel, weary with much wandering; so that she admonished her companion to satisfy his curiosity while she patiently awaited his return. The hour and place were much to her taste--she should enjoy being briefly alone. Ralph accordingly went off with the cicerone while Isabel sat down on a prostrate column near the foundations of the Capitol. She wanted a short solitude, but she was not long to enjoy it. Keen as was her interest in the rugged relics of the Roman past that lay scattered about her and in which the corrosion of centuries had still left so much of individual life, her thoughts, after resting a while on these things, had wandered, by a concatenation of stages it might require some subtlety to trace, to regions and objects charged with a more active appeal. From the Roman past to Isabel Archer's future was a long stride, but her imagination had taken it in a single flight and now hovered in slow circles over the nearer and richer field. (p. 246)

Ralph goes to see the diggings in the earth; Isabel remains on her seat to think of lofty things. After Isabel's marriage to Osmond, however, the celestial imagery is no longer associated with her and significantly so because she has been brought back to earth, because she has been hit, to quote Ralph, by a "'missile that never should have reached [her]'" (p. 291). Thus, during Isabel's midnight vigil the narrator comments about her marriage to Osmond,

She had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the

infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure. (p. 356)

The reader gets a foreshadowing of Ralph's eventual decline in Chapter Twenty Eight, the scene in the opera house. While descending the stairs, Ralph meets Lord Warburton, who is ascending to meet Isabel: "He [Lord Warburton] took his way to the upper regions and on the staircase met Ralph Touchett slowly descending, his hat at the inclination of ennui and his hands where they usually were" (p. 254).

One should note that Ralph always descends the stairs in the novel; this is quite appropriate since he is moving toward death during the course of the work. In addition to the opera scene, consider the following: "Ralph knew what to think of his father's impatience; but, making no rejoinder, he offered his mother his arm. This put it in his power, as they descended together, to stop her a moment on the middle landing of the staircase . . ." (p. 49, my italics); and ". . . he [Ralph] went down to the door of the hotel . . ." (p. 150, my italics).

Isabel, on the other hand, always ascends the stairs, except for a few places toward the end of the novel. Once

again, the image of Isabel ascending is appropriate, for she is aspiring throughout the novel until her marriage to Osmond brings her back to earth. Consider the following examples, my italics throughout: "She [Isabel] turned slowly away, and he [Ralph] watched her as she slowly ascended" (p. 52); "Above-stairs the ladies [Mrs. Touchett and Isabel] separated at Mrs. Touchett's door. Isabel had said nothing on her way up" (p. 67); "She [Isabel] had come in with her companions . . . and the party, having ascended the staircase, entered the first and finest of the rooms" (p. 257); "'Very well,' said Isabel; 'I shall never complain of my trouble to you [Ralph]!' And she moved up the staircase" (p. 294); "If Ralph had been kept alive by suspense it was with a good deal of the same emotion . . . that Isabel mounted to his apartment the day after Lord Warburton had notified her of his [Ralph's] arrival in Rome" (p. 333); "She [Madame Catherine] led Isabel out of the room, through several corridors, and up the long staircase" (p. 460); and "'Oh my dear, he [Ralph] doesn't chatter as he used to!' cried Mrs. Touchett as she preceded her niece up the staircase" (p. 472).

There are three places, however, at which Isabel does

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<sup>36</sup> See Powers, "'The Eternal Mystery of Things,'" p. 76. Powers notes the images of descent associated with Ralph but fails to develop any ideas related to these images.

not ascend the stairs, and the reasons are easily explained. At the Coliseum the narrator says of Isabel, "She had often ascended to those desolate ledges from which the Roman crowd used to bellow applause and where now the wild flowers . . . bloom in the deep crevices; and to-day she felt weary and disposed to sit in the despoiled arena" (p. 437). For one thing, Isabel has realized the truth about her marriage, which has brought her down to earth. More importantly, however, Ralph has become increasingly present in her mind since her revelations during her midnight vigil, and as the novel nears its close, the two are slowly moving together, not so much physically as spiritually. The perceptive reader will also note that Ralph is described with the same imagery as in the above quotation earlier in the novel: "His serenity was but the array of wild flowers niched in his ruin" (p. 46).<sup>37</sup>

Another scene in which Isabel does not ascend the stairs is the scene in which she says good-bye to Pansy: "Isabel descended, and when she reached the bottom the girl was standing above" (p. 463). Obviously Isabel is disappointed in leaving Pansy, but she is undoubtedly upset because she is leaving Osmond, too. The reader will remember that Isabel believes in the sanctity of marriage, no matter how disagreeable it may be. As the narrator says, "What he [Osmond] thought of her she knew, what he was capable of saying to

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of how James arrived at this description of Ralph, see F. O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944), p. 159.

her she had felt; yet they were married, for all that, and marriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar" (p. 449).

Finally, Isabel descends the staircase when Ralph dies: "She was not afraid; she was only sure. She quitted the place and in her certainty passed through dark corridors and down a flight of oaken steps that shone in the vague light of a hall window" (pp. 479-80). The reason for Isabel's descent here should be obvious: The "author of her freedom," the man who gave her the means to "fly," the person she comes to recognize as the true projection of what she has wanted all along is dead.

The image of Ralph descending the stairs at the opera is quite appropriate, for at this point Isabel is very fond of Gilbert Osmond, much to Ralph's chagrin. When Henrietta Stackpole and Ralph meet Isabel and Osmond in the cathedral, for example, the narrator says, "on perceiving the gentleman from Florence Ralph Touchett appeared to take the case as not committing him to joy" (p. 252). Ralph does not care for Osmond because Ralph can see through him; he perceives the real man, the man who later marries Isabel for her money. Isabel, on the other hand, is deluded by Osmond: "She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent" (p. 294). For his part, Osmond has as much antipathy for Ralph as Ralph has for him, and at one point Osmond calls Ralph "'a conceited ass'" (p. 408).

Perhaps what Osmond does not like about Ralph is his relationship with Isabel. Ralph represents freedom to Isabel; Osmond rebels against this freedom. As the narrator says, "He [Osmond] wished her [Isabel] to have no freedom of mind, and he knew perfectly well that Ralph was an apostle of freedom" (p. 386).

Many critics compare and contrast Ralph and Osmond and with good reason: <sup>38</sup> Both are artist-figures, both take an interest in Isabel and, in a sense, use her--albeit for different reasons, and both are rather witty and perceptive individuals. One of the most significant comparisons between Ralph and Osmond, however, is that both view Isabel as a work of art. In the beginning of the novel Ralph says of her, "'A character like that . . . a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It's finer than the finest work of art--than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian, than a Gothic cathedral" (p. 63).

<sup>38</sup> Of the critics who consider these two characters in relation to one another, the following are the most interesting: Gass, "The High Brutality of Good Intention," p. 69: "The differences between Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett are vast, but they are also thin"; Manfred Mackenzie, Communities of Honor and Love in Henry James (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 106: Ralph is Osmond's "good double"; Powers, "'The Eternal Mystery of Things,'" p. 75: "Isabel's career is defined quite strictly by the polarity set up in the novel between Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond; and we must be clearly aware of this polarity in order properly to appreciate the heroine's career"; and Weinstein, Henry James and the Requirements of the Imagination, p. 49: ". . . Osmond seeks to have her [Isabel] reflect himself alone, while Ralph, less selfishly, is interested in realizing the possibilities within the medium (Isabel) itself."

Osmond's views of Isabel are scattered throughout the novel but are quite consistent:

We know that he [Osmond] was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. (p. 258)<sup>39</sup>

He [Osmond] was immensely pleased with his young lady; Madame Merle had made him a present of incalculable value. . . . [And he] found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. (pp. 295-6)

And later in the novel the narrator says, "Osmond was in his element; at last he had material to work with" (p. 331).

Even though both Ralph and Osmond see Isabel as a work of art, their attitudes are quite different and reflect two general attitudes toward art. Ralph views Isabel as a portrait that he can observe and admire--adore. He is the true artist, the person who admires beauty for beauty's sake. (One should note how Ralph enjoys showing both Isabel and Henrietta Stackpole the paintings at Gardencourt.) Osmond, on the other hand, seems to be more interested in the value of art and thus the value of Isabel. She is a commodity for him, an artistic status symbol; she "represents" Gilbert Osmond (p. 331). Robert Emmet Long agrees that both "Ralph

<sup>39</sup> One should note that Ralph wants to observe what a woman who refuses Lord Warburton will do with herself; Osmond wants to have such a woman as part of his collection.



and Osmond are connoisseurs of art, but their attitudes toward art, and by extension toward life, are significantly different.<sup>40</sup> "Osmond wants to turn Isabel into a work of art . . . ," says Tony Tanner; "Ralph appreciates her living qualities artistically."<sup>41</sup>

With Isabel's engagement and subsequent marriage to Gilbert Osmond, Ralph's real decline begins, for, as Ora Segal states, "Since Ralph lives solely for the purpose of seeing Isabel fulfill the requirements of her imagination and draws all his strength from the prospect of 'watching the show,' it is not surprising that the beginning of his decline should coincide with her engagement to Osmond."<sup>42</sup> When Ralph returns from Corfu, for example, the narrator states that "he [Ralph] looked very ill to-day" (p. 285), which is only natural since Isabel is to be married to Osmond. The marriage, in essence, will leave Ralph alone, "like a rudderless vessel in a rocky stream . . ." (p. 286), because the life force--Isabel--is to be taken away from him. The only thing that keeps him alive after Isabel's marriage is "the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested: he was not yet satisfied" (p. 332).

<sup>40</sup> Long, Henry James: The Early Novels, p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> Tanner, "The Fearful Self," p. 156.

<sup>42</sup> Segal, The Lucid Reflector, p. 51.

Ralph does come to realize his mistake: "Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost" (p. 286). Ralph's calculations, of course, had been that Isabel would consistently do the right thing and that he would "amuse" himself with planning a "high destiny" for her. By the end of the novel, however, Ralph discovers that Isabel's "high destiny" is "'ground in the very mill of the conventional!'" (p. 478). What Ralph has done, according to Philip Weinstein, is to construct "a ~~60,000~~<sup>43</sup> bridge between her [Isabel's] limitless imagination of life and the actual facts of her future experience." Ralph's hopes have been dashed because of his idealized vision of Isabel. As he says,

"Well, that renders my sense of what has happened to you. You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue--to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly someone tosses up a faded rosebud--a missile that should never have reached you--and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me . . . , hurts me as if I had fallen myself!" (p. 291)

In effect, Ralph has fallen, both spiritually and physically, because he sees a part of himself in Isabel. The perceptive reader will remember that Isabel's arrival at Gardencourt had given Ralph's thoughts "wings and something to fly for" (p. 62); now, like Isabel, he too has "'drop[ped] to the

<sup>43</sup> Weinstein, Henry James and the Requirements of the Imagination, p. 49.

ground.'"

Ralph steadily declines after Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond, and, just as in the beginning of the novel before her appearance at Gardencourt, he reverts to a rather somber and melancholy mood. When Lord Warburton brings Ralph to Rome, for example, he says, "'He [Ralph] has been getting worse every year, and now he has no strength left'" (p. 322). With regard to Ralph's mood, the narrator says, "So dismal had been, during the year following his cousin's marriage, Ralph's prevision of the future; and if his meditations appear morbid we must remember he was not in the bloom of health" (p. 327). Ralph even says to Isabel, "'It was for you that I wanted--that I wanted to live. But I'm of no use to you'" (p. 419). The only thing left for Ralph, then, is death.

After receiving the news of Ralph's imminent death, Isabel journeys to Gardencourt to be with her cousin. One should not overlook the obvious symmetry of the beginning and the ending of the novel, both of which are set at Gardencourt. In the beginning Isabel comes to Gardencourt a young, naive, vibrant, and vital individual; she returns an older, more experienced, drained, and relatively lifeless person. "Gardencourt had been her starting point," says the narrator, "and to those muffled chambers it was at least a temporary solution to return. She had gone forth in her strength; she would come back in her weakness, and if the place had been a rest to her before, it would be a sanc-

tuary now" (p. 465). As she travels to England in a railway car, the narrator says that "[s]he sat in her corner, so motionless, so passive, simply with the sense of being carried . . ." (p. 465). It is interesting and significant that the word passive is now ascribed to Isabel.

Despite her obvious change, however, Isabel still represents life to Ralph because he rallies upon her arrival. Indeed, he can almost sense her presence: "On the day of Isabel's arrival Ralph gave no sign, as I have related, for many hours; but toward evening he raised himself and said he knew that she had come. How he knew was not apparent, inasmuch as for fear of exciting him no one had offered the information" (pp. 475-6). Moreover, "on the evening of the <sup>44</sup> third day" Ralph is "resurrected." Isabel, however, cannot sustain him because the life force that once imbued her has been drained, and Ralph rallies just long enough for both to penetrate the "private apartments" of each

<sup>44</sup> There is definitely something Christ-like about Ralph, especially in the death-bed scene in which Isabel kneels before him and, in essence, confesses. See William Veeder, Henry James--The Lessons of the Master: Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 105: "In confessing to Ralph her unhappiness, Isabel is acknowledging the prideful, naive attitude of mind which prevented her from recognizing his wisdom; she is also accepting the consequences of what her marriage has done to them all. Kneeling now is a spiritual, almost liturgical, experience because the gesture earns its significance as Isabel earns communion. Humble now instead of humbling, she can open herself more fully to Ralph's love, and love him more fully in return." One should also note Ralph's saying that Isabel has been "'like an angel beside his [Ralph's] bed'" (p. 477) and the narrator's comment, "she [Isabel] seemed for a moment to pray to him [Ralph]" (p. 477).

others' minds and to reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings.

In the death scene, the scene that Alwyn Berland calls<sup>45</sup> the "true climax of the novel" and that S. Gorley Putt<sup>46</sup> calls the most "affecting" he has seen, Isabel and Ralph finally come together, and both are able to speak frankly with one another:

"What is it you did for me?" she cried, her now extreme agitation half smothered by her attitude. She had lost all her shame, all wish to hide things. Now he must know; she wished him to know, for it brought them supremely together, and he was beyond the reach of pain. "You did something once--you know it. O Ralph, you've been everything! What have I done for you--what can I do to-day? I would die if you could live. But I don't wish you to live; I would die myself, not to lose you." Her voice was as broken as his own and full of tears and anguish.

"You won't lose me--you'll keep me. Keep me in your heart; I shall be nearer to you than I've ever been. Dear Isabel, life is better; for in life there's love. Death is good--but there's no love."<sup>47</sup>

"I never thanked you--I never spoke--I never was what I should be!" Isabel went on. She felt a passionate need to cry out and accuse herself, to let her sorrow possess her. All her troubles, for the moment, became single and melted together into this present pain. (p. 477)

The end of the novel seems to reverse the roles of Isabel

<sup>45</sup> Berland, Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James, pp. 130-31.

<sup>46</sup> Putt, Henry James: A Reader's Guide, p. 156.

<sup>47</sup> One cannot help hearing an echo of Andrew Marvell in Ralph's words: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace" ("To His Coy Mistress").

and Ralph because now he will live in her imagination just  
as she had lived in his. Isabel finally realizes what  
Ralph actually is and what he really means to her, and the  
words are spoken with passionate honesty, an honesty that  
takes the imminence of death to reveal. Richard Poirier  
sums up the situation quite well:

At last . . . two people speak to one another  
without a semblance of theatricality or shame  
or self-elevation.<sup>49</sup> This is possible because  
neither one of them really feels, nor do we,  
that there is any promise of beauty left past  
the boundaries of this moment. . . . Everything  
that matters to either of them has been done and  
done badly, but it is only now that Isabel can  
cry in front of Ralph and can tell herself as  
well as him: 'Oh, Ralph, you have been every-  
thing!' Here and only here, at the moment of  
undefensive anguish and the recognition of the  
futility and wastefulness of her life, Isabel  
finally achieves that absolute union of outward  
expression<sup>50</sup> and inward feeling for which she has  
labored.

<sup>48</sup> See Long, Henry James: The Early Novels, p. 126:  
"At the end [of the novel], the perspective shifts from  
Isabel as Ralph's 'life-preserver,' to Ralph as Isabel's";  
and Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James, p. 241: "The  
end of the novel reverses the relationship between Isabel  
and Ralph. It is now she who carries his image in her  
mind. . . ."

<sup>49</sup> A number of critics view the death-bed scene as  
sentimental and melodramatic. See Long, Henry James: The  
Early Novels, p. 116: "The scene is not crudely melo-  
dramatic, but [has] its sources in melodrama . . ."; and  
Samuels, The Ambiguity of Henry James, pp. 116-17: "This  
scene is the book's unique lapse into Dickensian sentimen-  
tality." These critics make some interesting observations,  
but what seems to save the scene from sentimentality and  
melodrama is the depth and sincerity of the characters'  
words and feelings.

<sup>50</sup> Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James, pp. 242-3.

In other words, by the end of the novel Isabel has attained the ability not only to see but also to feel.

Only at the end of the work, after she has suffered, can Isabel finally see the ghost she wanted to see upon her arrival at Gardencourt:

He [Ralph] had told her, the first evening she ever spent at Gardencourt, that if she should live to suffer enough she might some day see the ghost with which the old house was duly provided. She apparently had fulfilled the necessary condition; for the next morning [after her last talk with Ralph], in the cold, faint dawn, she knew that a spirit was standing by her bed. . . . at the time the darkness began vaguely to grow grey she started up from her pillow as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that he [my italics] was standing there--a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. (p. 479)

What Isabel sees, in essence, is the true image of what she herself wants to be--Ralph. As Tony Tanner says, "Having seen through the false aesthetic approach to life [i.e., Osmond's], she now appreciates the true artistic attitude: a vision based on love, on generosity, on respect for things in themselves, and a gift of unselfish appreciation."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Tanner, "The Fearful Self," p. 157. See also Martha Banta, Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 263-4, note five: Ralph "knows that the sign of her [Isabel's] salvation will be to see the ghost of Gardencourt for what it really is: in part himself, in part that knowledge gained by those who have come through suffering to knowledge and the ability to make choices according to that knowledge"; Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James, p. 59: Through suffering Isabel learns "that the aesthetic is not coextensive with the moral, and that the touchstone of taste is not the touchstone by which a good life can be lived"; and Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, p. 184: "Isabel's

So it is only natural that as Ralph slowly dies and makes fewer appearances in the novel, Isabel's thoughts become more and more about him, for she begins to realize that Ralph represents something that she really wants to be. Ralph's death, then, according to Ora Segal, "is the logical culmination of a long process of physical [and spiritual] decline and, as such, the expression of Ralph's ultimate despair, his inability to face the dreadfulness of Isabel's condition."<sup>52</sup>

As one can see, then, Ralph Touchett is much more than a mere spectator at the game of life. He is a man who recovers his vitality when Isabel first arrives at Garden-court because she becomes not only a curiosity but also his alter-ego. In Isabel, Ralph seems to see a part of himself, a part that has withered long ago, and by aiding her, he can actually live through her. With Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond, however, Ralph's rather idealized visions of her have been dashed, and his decline and death are inevitable: the life force, his inspiration, has been taken from him. Only at the end of the novel can Isabel and Ralph reveal their true feelings; only after Isabel has drunk of the cup of experience can she look at Ralph and

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link with humanity, if not through sin . . . is through her acceptance of suffering."

<sup>52</sup> Segal, The Lucid Reflector, p. 52.



say with sincerity and love that he has been everything, and, to agree with Quentin Anderson, "just as in the case of Milly Theale and Densher, Ralph's love will be her [Isabel's] real inheritance, not the seventy thousand pounds."<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Quentin Anderson, The American Henry James (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1957), p. 190.

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## Vita

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