

**THE DIVIDED SELF IN
HENRY JAMES'S
*THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY***

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SHORT STORY

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Henry James's literary career can be divided into three distinct periods. The novels of James's middle period (such as *What Masie Knew*, 1897) mainly concern English society. The novels of his early period (such as *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881) and his later periods (such as *The Golden Bowl*, 1904) mainly concern the relationship between the two different consciousness of America and Europe. In his writings neither culture is regarded as perfect. Symbolically, these societies represent, respectively, an innocent and natural way of life as compared to a ritualized, experienced, and artificial manner which was more present in Europe.

Regarding the characters in his novels, James's fiction is concerned with the unconsolidated man, the "divided self," a soul deeply split in its inclinations. The creation and handling of this divided self is a necessity of James's art – an inevitable structural implication of James's desire to dramatize the theme of freedom and encagement. The unconsolidated hero "is placed between two camps of hostile aggressors, such as 'Europe' and 'America' to dramatize the struggle of that spirit to preserve its freedom" (Jobe). One may think that the divided self required by James's art (the ambivalent self that art creates to dramatize, to sharpen contrast, to strengthen effects, etc.) is not much different from the divided self known to psychology and psychiatry – the schizoid personality. Of course this is not a well-accepted idea but, at least, we can say that in the development of his art James has made extensive use of his understanding of the divided self's anxieties which can be categorized as three motifs centering on the "fear of entrapment, seizure, and immobilization" (Armstrong 8). The first of these is a motif reflecting James's interest in the divided

self's inclination to retreat from a threatening world. The second is the motif of seizure by the eye, reflecting fear of deceiving appearances and acting. The third is the motif of quantification and focuses on a vicious tendency of human beings to treat others as if they were merely things, objects, tools, or "values."

Here, for instance, we will discuss the reflection of the anxieties of such a self in *The Portrait of a Lady*. It is the story of Isabel Archer, a young, beautiful American from New York who accepts her aunt's invitation to make her first trip abroad since she believes that being abroad will deepen her fundamental purpose in life – to live fully and independently. "I always wanted to know the things one shouldn't do ... so as to choose," Isabel acquires the knowledge she needs to make her ultimate choice. Before the novel ends four years later, she understands what her invalid cousin Ralph Touchett said in the beginning about her fund of worldly knowledge, "Yes, of happy knowledge – of pleasant knowledge. But you haven't suffered, and you're not made to suffer" (ch. Liii). But Isabel's experiences at Gardencourt cause her little suffering. Touchett enjoys her freshness and forthrightness. Lord Warburton, a liberal aristocrat, falls in love with her and successfully proposes marriage. Her cousin Ralph, who also loves her deeply but vainly, instructs her in the nuances of European custom. He persuades his dying father to leave Isabel a fortune of \$ 60000 to enable her to test her theories of Independence. Just at this point Isabel meets Mme. Merle, an American born cosmopolite who attacks and disarms Isabel by candidly confessing that she is a parasite.

After her unsuccessful marriage Isabel engages in a long internal monologue, sitting before the fire and reviewing the events of her past three years. Now, she is profoundly aware of disappointment and anguish in her own life with Osmond: "Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition ... it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure." She knows that Osmond desired her once as an addition to his art collection. Because she has displayed a mind of her own, Isabel realizes this complete egoist's hatred "has become the occupation and comfort of his life" (ch. Xxxiv). Isabel's determination to stay with her loathsome husband poses a difficult question. The range of theories here is great: Isabel has too much respect for the marital vow to abandon it; her sense of duty, especially to Pansy, is overpowering; her dread of an intense emotional involvement with Caspar makes even Osmond endurable; her moral values demand that she pay full retribution for her error. Whatever conclusion the reader reaches, he will find it difficult not to respect this young heiress whose integrity never falters even when her intelligence and imagination seem to waver.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* the unattached soul is nobody but Isabel Archer, the aggressor attached to the new or modern is Caspar Goodwood and, finally, the aggressors attached to the old are Warburton, Mme. Merle and Osmond. A soul like Isabel threatened by an aggressive suitor, wishes to "case" herself in "brown holland," like a piece of unused furniture (ch. Xvii), or craves "a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land" and is, at times, almost half in love with easeful death (ch. Liii). Hyacinth Roinson's suicide carries Isabel Archer's desire for utter peace to its logical

conclusion. Like any of the host of characters who manifest similar inclinations in James's fiction, she retreats to an "office" full of furniture.

One note we may touch upon in connection with this strategy of "shrinkage" is a deep sense of insecurity, a fear of being stripped of all that one has which may issue a compulsive desire to surround oneself with objects that mean security and safety to the threatened soul. James sees "collecting" everywhere, not only in the accumulation of objects d'art but also in the seizure and "fixing" of people. The aggressors in James regard people as things and their whole effort is to get hold of these things to possess them absolutely.

The second pattern or motif is the juxtaposition of reality and the world of appearance. In James's fiction eye is the organ that the aggressor uses as his chief weapon in the social wars. It is the eye that seizes and holds the aggressor's victim. It seems that consciousness is for the divided self a type of radar, a scanning mechanism. There is always a constant dread at being turned into someone else's thing and of being in someone else's power and control. James works very extensively with the conception of the eye. In *The Portrait* the title itself asks the eye to see, and the handling of the book is in terms of seeing. The informing and strengthening of the eye of the mind is the theme; the dramatization is deliberately "scenic," moving in a series of recognition scenes that are slight and low-keyed at first, then, toward the end, proceed in swift and vivid flashes. The action, moving through errors and illuminations of the inward eye, is set in a symbolic construct of things to be seen by the physical eye like paintings and sculptures. The context of particulars offered to physical sight

intensifies the meaning of “recognition” in those scenes where sight is insight, and provide a concrete embodiment of the amigities of “seeing.”

The “look” of things is a response of consciousness and varies with the observer; the “look” of things has thus the double duty of representing external stimuli, by indirection in their passage through consciousness, and of representing the observor himself. For instance, when Ralph takes Isabel through the picture gallery in the Touchett home, the “imperfect” but “genial” light of the bracketed lamps shows the pictures as “vague squares of rich color,” and the look of the pictures is Isabel’s state at the moment – her eager and innately gifted sensibility and her almost complete ignorance, her conscious orientations toward an unknown rich mode of being that is beautiful but indeterminate. The theme of “seeing” (the theme of the developing consciousness) is fertile with ironies and ambiguities that arise from the natural symbolism of the act of seeing, upon which so vastly many of human responses and decisions are dependant. The eye, as it registers surfaces, is an organ of aesthetic experience, in the mythological sense of the word “aesthetic,” which is a word deriving from a Greek verb meaning “to perceive” – to perceive through the senses (Van Ghent). James provides his world with innumerable fine surfaces for this kind of perception; it is a world endowed with the finest selective opportunities for the act of “seeing,” for aesthetic cultivation.

Going back to the divided self and the misuse of the act of “seeing,” we can see that the whole aim of the aggressors in James’s works is to immobilize their victims and strip them of all defenses

using their eyes. This pattern is mostly prominent in James's presentation of Caspar Goodwood. When Goodwood arrives in London, seeking to seize Isabel and put her into his American cage, he is "plated and steeled, armed essentially for aggression" (ch. Xvi). He has eyes "of remarkable fixedness" and, like Henrietta Stackpole, he invariably fixes people with these prehensive organs (ch. X). Thus we see him sitting "with his eyes fixed" on Isabel, eyes that "seemed to shine through the vizard of a helmet" (ch. X). He tells her, "I hate to lose sight of you!" and refers to his project of keeping her in sight. Isabel remonstrates: "It's ... being out of your sight – that I like;" and again: "I should feel you were watching me, and I don't like that – I like my liberty too much" (ch.x). Thus she wishes to flee from that paralyzing gaze. Her encounter with Goodwood in London ends in her symbolic flight into a dark apartment. It is perfect safety and invulnerability that she seeks, the quietude of a convent or a prison, or a return to the "office" of her childhood where the furniture was stored. She wants the "freedom" from exposure to Goodwood's aggression.

As James's fiction develops, the handling of the threat of the eye becomes more and more symbolic. He creates a world in which all men have, not a moral sense, but only a visual sense – an eye for things, for the bright surfaces, the waxed floors, the polished events, the radiant crystal, the glass and the mirrors that reflect light to appease the appetite for glitter. The aggressors live exclusively in the world of the eyes, of the vain appearance, and the worship of appearance implies one's surrender to the world, one's enslavement.

Seizing the world with one's eyes, one is, in turn seized by the world. And James plays with this motif throughout his career.

“Petrification and quantification” is another related anxiety that the divided self may feel in its confrontation of a threatening reality. We have seen that the great aim of James's villains is to use other people and thwart the free development of another's life. To prevent the free spirit from living his own life is, in a sense, to prevent him from living at all; it is to treat him as a mere product stamped out a cliché, a “type”. It is to petrify the free soul, convert it into an object. Most people, indeed, as James sees them, are nothing more than “coins” or “medals” stamped out by the great dies of society; most are “types.” Besides, the divided self is always afraid of being “depleted, exhausted, emptied, robbed, sucked dry” (Jobe 38). Very deep in him is the dread that he will be “turned, from a live person into a dead thing, into a stone, into a robot, an automaton, without personal autonomy of action, an ‘it’ without subjectivity” (Jobe 38).

The term “petrification” designates not only the dread of being turned into stone but also the act whereby one may attempt to turn someone else into stone, by “petrifying” him; and, by extension the act whereby one negates the other person's autonomy, ignores his feelings, regards him as a thing, kills the life in him. In this sense one may perhaps better say that one depersonalized him, or reliefs him. One treats him not as a person, as a free agent, but as an ‘it’. The technique is used as a means of dealing with a disturbing “other”. The people who use it both tend to feel themselves as more or less depersonalized and tend to depersonalize others; they are constantly afraid of being depersonalized by others. The act of turning the

divided self into a thing is, for him, actually petrifying. In the face of being treated as an 'it', his own subjectivity drains away from him like blood from the face. Basically he requires constant affirmation from others of his own existence as a person.

Moreover, the divided self cannot experience others as free agents because to do that is to open himself to the possibility of experiencing himself as an object of another's experience and thereby of feeling his own subjectivity drained away. He is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other without any life for himself, without any being for himself.

Now, the double aspects of "petrification" here analyzed may easily be identified as a prominent motif in James's fiction. The hero-victim is "got hold of" and treated like a thing: thus Isabel Archer, Clair de Cintré, Hyacinth Robinson, and a host of other divided selves are the targets, and it is interesting that the strategy of the victim becomes, in the later novels, a strategy of getting hold of others and forcing them to do the free spirits's bidding. Others are thus turned into things.

The idea of the divided self was, in fact, something innate for James. He also had the dream of freedom but it was only a dream. He wished the world to let people alone, to give them the chance to "live"; but he knew that he would never "live" in a thousand of the ways in which others lived. And the freedom which his divided self sought to maintain in the face of the enslaving world was perhaps no more than a sentence. Even his liberty to be an artist employing the freest and largest of forms, the novel, was his enslavement.

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