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Defining Henry James's Feminine Perceptions and Characterizations: Alice James as Model for Isabel Archer and Claire de Cintre

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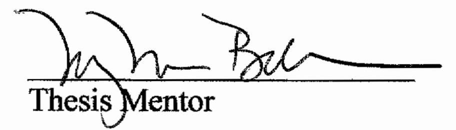
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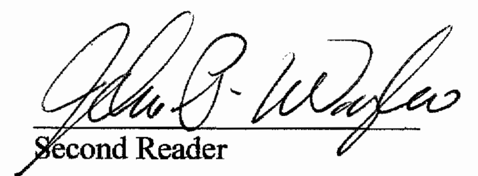
Second Reader

Abstract

This paper explores the manner in which Henry James's sister, Alice, served as both a literal and figurative model for the characters Isabel Archer in his *The Portrait of a Lady* and Claire de Cintre in his *The American.* The paper relates the way that historical evidence suggests that James often modeled his characters after real-life acquaintances, friends and family, in order to further emphasize his psychological realism, and the ways that he utilized women he knew as sources for the many females that populate his fiction. The paper will argue that these two specific characters seem to have a thematic and conditional connection to the way that Henry viewed the life of his sister. Moreover, it reveals the manner in which Henry understood the limitations of the life his sister led and the limited possibility for female independence and self-actualization in the 19th century.

The paper argues that the characters, as a reflection of his view of the life Alice led, or more specifically, the one imposed on her via the patriarchal system of the time are inhibited by the constraints of the social values, conventions, and constructs of the period. Family, institutions such as marriage and class, and national considerations create a social fabric that serves in the novels and in the reality of Alice's life as a means of imposing restrictions on the individual woman; James reveals this in a number of ways. The paper will also address the ways in which James's perception of Alice, as illustrated in his depictions of Isabel and Claire, differs from the way that she presents herself in her own writing.

The era in which Henry James lived and wrote, the overall iconic status of his family, the number of famous and influential figures with whom he had relationships and correspondences, and the prodigious amount of work that he produced over an extended period of time have led to extensive examinations of his personal history and the manner in which it is reflected in his novels and stories. James's three-volume autobiography, as well as the distinct variety of styles his works exhibited throughout his career, has also driven critics to try to identify the parallels between his private life and, more specifically, the events and characters of his works. For these reasons, the speculation about his character origins is quite copious; in fact, so much so that one could view it as a specific sub-genre within the overall criticism of James's work.

As a result of James's lifelong bachelorhood and critical speculations about his sexuality, the inspiration behind the numerous female characters that populate his work has drawn particular interest. His sister Alice, his cousin Mary Temple, writers Lucy Clifford, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Annie Fields, Edith Wharton, and Wharton's literary agent Mary Cadwalader Jones have all been examined in this regard as there was not a consistent female figure with whom he had any kind of intimate relationship. James's devotion to a realistic style of writing and the fact that his female characters are often revealed from a somewhat feminist perspective, recurrently offering commentary on the way that society restricts females' ability to self-actualize, strongly suggests that his female characters are grounded in these women. Certainly, both *The American* and *The Portrait of a Lady* are indicative of such a perspective, particularly in the way that Isabel Archer in the latter novel and Claire de Cintre in the former are portrayed. While each woman displays a strong sense of independence and a clear sense of self, each one becomes a victim, in her own way, to the social mores of the period. James may well have drawn connections between the figurative restrictions on these two women and the literal,

physical ones that were endured by his sister Alice James during her brief life. An examination of these texts, Alice James's diary, and Henry's letters show that the author's understanding of his sister and his need to feel sympathy for her as a result of the traumatic life she experienced served as a primary inspiration for these two characters.

Alice and the other women of James's life had a profound impact on the manner in which he developed many of the female characters in his works. Critics identify his cousin Mary Temple, known as Minny, as one of the foremost inspirations for many of his female characters. Leon Edel has suggested that Temple is the main source from which James created Isabel Archer, clearly demonstrating her impact on his writings as, according to his own testimony, she granted him knowledge of areas of human nature and experience that he had previously considered beyond his means of comprehension (Sandeen 1060). (Hendricks 36). In addition, most critics agree that the protagonist of *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale, is a direct and near literal fictionalization of Temple (LeClair 36-37). Despite the fact that she died relatively early in James's literary career, she was only 24 when she passed away, Temple's impact was lasting, as revealed in James's devoting an entire chapter to her in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, as well as the sense of loss he expressed in letters to both his brother and mother upon hearing of her death, since she was to come and meet him in Italy around the time she passed away (LeClair 37-38). The impact Temple had on James's life supports the supposition that she remained one of the primary sources for his literary creations, although it is impossible, with the notable exception of Milly Theale, to affirm how much of her is reflected in specific female figures. Still, it must be noted that as a result of James's perpetual use of Temple as an inspiration throughout the course of his career, it has been suggested by critic Robert C. LeClair in his article "Henry James and Minny Temple" that their relationship may have been romantic in

nature, although he notes that there is no evidence from historical accounts to support this (48). Because Temple affected James so profoundly--she would serve as a source of material for a character more than 30 years after her death--critics such as Edel and Alfred Habegger have determined that James's understanding of her serves as a primary source of inspiration for his female characters, even in so far that he felt the need to "rewrite" her letters in his *Notes of a Son and Brother* (Habegger).

Other critics, including but certainly not limited to Milicent Bell and Adeline R. Tintner, tend to focus on fellow literary figures who became friends of James's during his lifetime, and also serve as inspiration for his characters and themes. While women such as the poet Annie Fields and novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson were both friends and muses to the author, critics consider no other female literary figure to be as important to him during the final period of his life and career, both personally and professionally, as Edith Wharton. Having come to know Wharton during the last two decades of his life and during the height of her career, the two became not only friends but also characters in each other's work; many of Wharton's earlier works were seen by contemporary critics to be Jamesian in their style and themes (Bell 620). Subsequent scholars contend that in one of his later collections, *The Finer Grain*, each of the stories contains an incarnation of Wharton in at least one of its characters (Tintner, "Metamorphosis" 356). In addition, Wharton's story "The Hermit and the Wild Woman," her poem "Ogrin the Hermit," and James's "The Velvet Glove," provide readers with an understanding of the personal correspondences which passed between the two authors regarding the nature of art and the observer (Tintner, "Hermit" 41-42). All of this suggests both the profound way the women in James's life impacted his development of characters and themes but also the impression that Wharton specifically had on him in his later years.

Still, while these various critics suggest that the characters Isabel Archer and Clair de Cintre may have been drawn from an infinite number of sources, including the aforementioned women, it seems unlikely that this is the case. Wharton met James long after both novels were completed, and further, his understanding of her life offered in other pieces of his writing is far different from the perspective that he offers through the lives of Isabel and Claire. Unlike them, Wharton was able to escape the social and legal constraints of her own bad marriage through her relationship with Walter Berry (Tintner "Hermit" 33). What's more, James also seems to see in this liberation of Wharton's a kind of optimism for women's ability to gain a sense of identity and independence that is largely absent from his depictions of both Isabel and Claire. Due to James's age, in fact, his work probably had a greater impact on Wharton than hers did on him (Bell 619-620). The woman whose situation more closely resembles that of these two characters, Minny, also serves as an insufficient model. The age at which she died would seem to have spared her from coming to understand the way women were constricted by the cultural view of their gender and the lack of independence available to them; Minny did not live long enough to endure the impositions of a patriarchal society that result from the hardships of marriage and other restrictions, so she would not have felt imprisoned by social conventions in the way that would allow James to connect her reality to such a fictionalization. In essence, she could have served as a model for Isabel when the reader first encounters her in *Portrait*, but it is hard to believe James could have imagined her as the unhappy woman Isabel becomes or that Claire is throughout *The American*. Further, while it may be said that James could have anticipated the decline of his cousin should she have survived, there would certainly not have been a need for such projection as the ideal model for replication of society's victimization of females remained close at hand, namely Alice.

The life events and perspective of Alice James would have allowed her brother to see her plight in a way that is consistent with his depiction of the two characters as, according to biographer Jean Strouse, she and Henry shared a "deeper intellectual and spiritual kinship than either felt with any other member of the family... What bound Henry and Alice together was a different kind of exclusion and a profound mutual understanding" (Strouse 49). For, in both the story of her life and in the reading of her diary, according to Elizabeth Duquette, an "unfulfilled, repressed and ignored, Alice James becomes, in many readings, a martyr to patriarchal hegemony" (717). Likewise, Henry, as he had "withdrawn early from the competitive masculine fray to a safe inner world," takes on the role of the "docile, easy, 'good' James child" (Strouse 49). With this taken into consideration, in the life she led and in the way that she recounts that life in her diary, Alice becomes a figurative and literal symbol of the limitations of women's roles in the late 19th century and the limited possibility for self-actualization, although the reasons for her limitations vary slightly from the way that James imagines them in his novels. It must be noted that this in itself leads the reader to experience feelings of compassion for Alice similar to those invoked by the female protagonists of the two pieces, despite Alice's admonition that pity for her illness is not only unproductive but actually limits the way she is understood and related to by the observer (Boudreau 54). Further, the *Diary* becomes more than an effort to overcome the loneliness of her invalidism; it is an attempt instead to overcome the larger problem of escaping the theft of her subjectivity by both illness and by the social conventions and restrictions of her era (Boudreau 56). Finally, as with the aforementioned women, most scholars note James's use of Alice as a model in other stories, most notably for the governess in *Turn of the Screw*. The pattern that this character displays, although she sees ghosts, suggests Alice's hysteria and pathology, because it is never made clear whether the

ghosts in the story actually appear or whether they are simply projections of her troubled mind, similar to those which James's sister experienced (Cargill 240-241). In answer to the argument that the tale was written after his sister's death, while *Portrait* and *American* were written prior, James's qualms about "reproducing the thoughts of a dying woman" may be applied to not only Milly, as Habegger states in "Henry James's Rewriting of Minny Temple's Letters," but also to Alice; he argues that James would never have written a character whose psychological state so closely mirrored that of his sister while she was alive (162). Isabel and Claire are not afflicted with mental deficiencies, but they serve to demonstrate the cultural restrictions that women such as Alice faced, and further, make evident the fact that Henry understood these limitations as contributing to Alice's mental deterioration. While a character as mentally unhinged as the governess could only be written after Alice's death, the other characters, Isabel and Claire, may be used to reflect upon the restrictions imposed on Alice's condition metaphorically, while literally challenging the institutions that had no doubt created a climate averse to her spirit. These characters are patterned after Henry James's understanding of this plight and the restraint inherent in Alice's life and an examination of them can offer a better understanding of both how he viewed his sister's invalidism and how he translates this into an understanding of the restricted freedom afforded women during his lifetime. Further, an analysis of these characters reveals the way Alice felt she had transcended these restrictions through intellect, although, as suggested in the outcomes of his fictional accounts of her, James personally did not believe she could or did. For this reason, superficial readings of the two pieces demonstrate James's preservation of the respite and escape which may be gained through the conscious preservation of the mind and cannot be taken from a person, let alone altered without the person's consent. For Isabel and Claire, their quest for freedom in life must succumb to society and their own

vision of their identity as a woman and a lady. Nevertheless, their choices, too, it may seem, bring them to a point of determination to never relinquish their mental faculties to the sensuous or the mundane. Yet, because of the end which befalls the two characters, a more profound reading of the pieces allows the reader to understand James's belief that this, perhaps momentary, reprieve remains inadequate in its presentation of salvation.

In addition to the comprehension of James's view of his sister's idea of the mind as salvation, there are several other reasons why the characters of Isabel and Claire, and the novels they inhabit, are important to understanding both James's view of his sister and the plight of women during the Victorian era. In particular, both novels were written when Alice still lived at home and before her parents' deaths, which supports James's view of the limited recourse for women who choose neither marriage nor the convent and their consequent inability to live a life of independence and self-determination. This time period was also before Alice had begun to work on her diary, which means that knowledge was extremely restricted as concerned Alice's understanding of herself, her position, and the limitations that resulted from her health problems and social impositions; the correspondence between Alice and Henry at this time is mostly comprised of letters from him to her; thus, her authorial voice, which is representative of some personal understanding of her life at this time, is limited. The characters of Isabel and Claire seem to reflect a similar mode of being in that each seeks to assert her independence, yet each is constrained not only by social but also familial demands. This reflects something of Henry's perception of his sister during this time period, as his letters to her suggest that she is intensely interested in the life of travel and socializing with the European literary and cultural luminaries he was living with during this period. Finally, the limited ability of medicine at that time to diagnose any of Alice's maladies properly allows James to suggest the limited opportunities for

true independence as concerned women; as both protagonists become metaphorical invalids as his sister physically deteriorates, he is able to foresee the outcome of her life through these fictional accounts based on his perception of her.

For Alice James, as for most women of the time, life was a constant struggle to escape the constraints of family and society. Born in 1850, her early life was marked by travel and upheaval, as were the lives of the rest of her siblings, because the family moved extensively around both Europe and America during her childhood. Although this exposed Alice to a number of experiences and places, her formal education was limited because schools in America for girls were geared toward domestic skills, and while in Europe, like the majority of visiting adolescent females, she did not attend school. The instability of her childhood was further exacerbated by her own emotional disorders; she had her first nervous breakdown at the age of 19, and she never displayed any true emotional balance afterward (Strouse 98). Her second major breakdown occurred in 1878, around the time of her oldest brother William's engagement to Alice Howe Gibbens, and this began a long string of treatments and diagnoses for her condition, which manifested itself physically, psychologically, and emotionally throughout the rest of her life (Strouse 102). Representative of about ten percent of the Victorian female population during their reproductive years, Nancy Hedrick notes that Alice suffered from a vulnerability to musculoskeletal pain disorders as well co-occurring autoimmune disorders and endometriosis (1106-1107). For her part, despite never receiving a concrete diagnosis at the time, Alice remained convinced throughout her life that she was terminally ill, and when she was finally diagnosed with breast cancer, she reported that it gave her a sense of relief (Duquette 219). Even as concerned the idea of death as a result of this disease she wrote:

> ...the only drawback [to dying is]... that it will probably be in my sleep so that I shall not be one of its audience, dreadful fraud! A creature who has been denied all dramatic episodes might be allowed, I think, to assist at her extinction. I know I shall slump at the 11th hour, and it would complete it all so to watch the rags and tatters of one's Vanity in its insolent struggle with the Absolute, as the curtain rolls down on this jocose humbuggery called Life (135).

The emotional breakdown that underlies such entries in her diary seems to reflect the same neurological problems that were evident in the entire James family, as both Henry Sr. and Henry Jr. and even William suffered from lengthy depression and alcohol issues or other mental breakdowns, as Hendrick also notes.

Upon the death of her parents in 1882, Alice's mental and physical condition became increasingly unstable. In 1884, after undergoing several treatments for the various diagnoses she received, she and her companion Katherine Loring left for Europe, where she would spend the final years of her life (Boudreau 53). During this period, as in much of her earlier life, she was largely an invalid as a result of what was diagnosed as hysteria; she required Loring as a nursemaid, and, according to critical speculation, possibly as a lover, for the remainder of her life (Boudreau 53). It was also during this time that Henry became so intimately involved in her care alongside Loring that Alice wrote, "I crossed the water and suspended myself like an old woman of the sea round his neck where to all appearances I shall remain for all time" (A. James 104) and Edel notes that it was "as brother and nephew, rather than as writer for the *Nation*, that Henry James sailed for Europe in May 1872" with Alice and his Aunt Kate (63). It was then that Alice developed breast cancer, to which she would eventually succumb in 1892.

Still, rather than dwell on the various afflictions of her life, Alice saw maintaining an active mind as a means of overcoming her problems, which is what motivated her production of her *Diary* during the final years of her life. For example, she uses various illustrative techniques within the diary to offer herself and others a better understanding of her illnesses, which, in turn, allows for increased awareness regarding the nature of the treatment of the sick and invalid (Duquette 721-722). She writes:

> How well one has to be, to be ill! …The last prostration of mine was rather excessive and comic in its combination, consisting of one of my usual attacks of rheumatic out in that dissipated organ known in the family as 'Alice's tum,' in conjunction with an ulcerated tooth, and a very bad crick in my neck. By taking a very small dose of morphia, the first in three years, I was able to steady my nerves and *experience* the pain without distraction, for there is something very exhilarating in shivering whacks of crude pain which seem to life you out of the present and its sophistications… and ally you to long gone generations rent and torn (129).

She also, in opposition to her philosopher-brother William James's theories, uses this phase of her life to create an understanding of sympathy as a means of marginalizing the one who is pitied rather than viewing her as vital and useful, thereby perpetuating "her own perception of herself against the perception and definition imposed by her spectator" (Boudreau 54). In this way, she promotes the view that the body is merely housing for the activity of the mind, which is, for her, the essential component of human life and expression (Boudreau 56). At the early age of nine Alice realized the moment of her "intellectual initiation" writing,

> The stir of my whole being in response to the substance and exquisite, *original* form of this remark almost makes my heart beat now with the sisterly pride which was then awakened and it came to me in a flash, the higher nature of this appeal to the mind as compared to the rudimentary solicitations which usually produced my childish explosions of laughter (qtd. in Strouse 49).

As an adult, she called to mind the experience noting that she could "still feel 'distinctly the sense of self-satisfaction in that I could not only perceive, but appreciate this subtlety, as if I had acquired a new sense, a sense whereby to measure intellectual things, wit as distinguished from giggling for example'" (qtd. in Strouse 49). Consequently, she promotes a sense of identity through individualized thought in that she seeks to escape the impositions of the perceptions of others, which limit her both because of her gender and her physical and mental health; this notion becomes central to understanding the way that her brother utilized her as a model for both Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Claire in *The American.*

For Henry James understood the divide between men and women, their social status, and the attending mobility afforded because of this status all too well. In *The American*, this plays out in the perspective that the narrative employs, despite the fact it is that of Christopher Newman, a man. In a letter to William Dean Howells, James explains that the limited scope of women's roles in Victorian society, in his view, narrowed the way that Claire's story could be understood by the reader, stating, "I have written my story from Newman's side of the wall, and I understand so well how Mme de Cintre couldn't really scramble over from her side! If I had represented her doing so I should have made a prettier ending certainly; but I should have felt as though I were throwing a rather vulgar sop to readers who don't really know the world and who don't measure the merit of a novel by its correspondence to the same" (*Life* 83). Thus, James

understood that in order to maintain authorial authenticity, Claire's ability to self-actualize and to determine her own fate must be limited, Alice, on the other hand, sought to escape the perceptions of herself as a mere invalid through the expression of consciousness in her diary. In James's view, Claire would have been unable to escape the intentions and impositions of her family and society to find a place where she and Newman could have been together. In this way, she is emblematic of the limited sphere of possibility that James saw in the life not only of his sister but of all women of his time; thus, for James to allow her greater possibility for self-actualization by having her "scramble" over the convent wall would have been inauthentic and unrealistic (*Life* 83).

James views both Alice and Claire with a sense of compassion and pity as he feels their suffering allows them poignancy and beauty. When Claire is described to Newman, she is called "the loveliest person in the world. Neither more nor less. I don't say a very charming person or a very estimable woman or a very great beauty" (*American* 73-74). This suggests that her beauty lies in her character, which is revealed throughout the course of the narrative by her suffering; in a way, she becomes a kind of everywoman through these trials. While James would have held his sister's intelligence in higher regard, there is a sense of admiration for Claire's attending resolve concerning her plight that is similar to the way he seems to have viewed Alice. When he writes to his brother William, referring to Alice as "the most appealing and pitiful thing I ever saw" as she lay dying, it seems an apt description of how he wants the reader to feel about Claire (*Portable* 526). Both women, in James's estimation, are made more beautiful by the suffering and hardship they endure, whether as a result of their gender and their fragility. In fact, he seems to suffer from a distinct form of apprehension as concerns women who prove to be more resilient.

Such an authorial perspective no doubt stems from the limited possibility that James saw for his sister to be perceived as more than an object of pity. Hence, it is telling that the reader encounters Claire first through her being described to Newman by Mrs. Tristam, rather than her being revealed by the narrator or by her own actions or speech. In this way, she becomes an object, which is emphasized when Newman first calls upon her after their brief meeting at the Tristams, he must be admitted by her brothers, her keepers and handlers, further framing her as an object and suggesting the limited independence women had. Finally, the idea of Claire as an object is reiterated at the novel's conclusion as Claire remains voiceless and unseen behind the wall of the convent, unable to be accessed by Newman, as if she were a totem rather than a human being, a holy grail locked away in a medieval castle.

This episode also suggests the way the family served as a mechanism for control and a means of restricting the self-actualization of women. As with Alice, Claire spent much of her life under the supervision of others, and most specifically in the charge of her family While Claire has been married before, it was a marriage arranged by her brother and mother; upon her husband's death, she is driven back into the control of the family. As Mrs. Tristam reports, Claire's family is one of "fabulous antiquity" that has "kept such a tight reign on her she could do very little" (*American* 74). The term "fabulous antiquity" would have served as an accurate description of James's own family, and the way that Alice's family largely sheltered her would seem to be a similar, if less overtly oppressive, situation to that of Claire.

In a sense, Alice and Claire represent a divergent yet similar understanding of the role of family in the lives of 19th century women, particularly in an upper-middle class setting, and in the way that this social organization serves to maintain and limit the role of women within the larger culture and their ability to determine their own fate. Claire's actions are defined by and

for the good of her family. They seek to marry her off in order to improve their fortunes, and she, in turn, refuses to pursue her passion for Newman because they forbid it, finding him unsuitable for admission to their lineage. Alice also becomes an object to be employed by her family, although the implications of this were far less sinister for her, and James himself may not have been aware of what he was doing. She served him both as inspiration and as a direct source for many of his female characters and his insights about women throughout his career; perhaps even more profoundly, Alice served as a direct case study and source of theoretical insight for her brother William in his studies of the science of psychology and, early on, in his medical research on physiology, which was based on her deterioration. Early correspondences between the two explicitly discuss her progress as regards the illnesses she suffered from and the challenges of the space, both literal and figurative, that separated Alice and her eldest brother. "I am glad you think you are doing well and are managing to live comfortably. I little thought you would be able to do so without me and my pills," he half-jokingly wrote to her while she was being treated in New York in 1866 (qtd. in Strouse 99). Even in William's more lighthearted letters to Alice, the concept of sickness and the idea of his presence as a means of survival remain prominent.

This level of family control is enhanced by the systemic and institutional controls placed on women which the novel also explores. One of the primary conventions used to maintain this gendered order, as James seems to suggest again and again in his work, and particularly in *The American*, is marriage. For Claire, marriage at the institutional level and the needs of her brother and mother at the family level form a confluence that allows her limited recourse. It is understood that Claire is seen simply as a means to an end as she is forced to bring money into the family through matrimony so that her family may maintain their status. Their objectification

of her in this role is further emphasized by the fact that Claire is only permitted to refuse her claim to her late husband's money, because it has come through dubious means, if she will agree to deepen her obligation to this construct through her vow to obey her brother and mother for an additional ten years; thus, any claim to independence is subjected to a greater level of obligation and confinement for a woman. Ultimately, it is this fact, as well as the understanding that Newman cannot preserve the status of her family, that causes Claire to refuse his proposal. This ideology seems to mirror the perspective that Alice expresses throughout her diary in entries concerning the tradition. Alice saw clearly the way that the institution of marriage confined women and limited their opportunity for independence and self-actualization and, more than any other female figure in Henry's life, Alice's view on marriage is more clearly drawn and more overtly negative. Her depiction of "the Bachelers [who] have sunk to the most abject and grocer-like respectability since the absurd clericule unearthed them from their slum and danced them up the aisle of the Parish Church to mumble his dead, dry-as-dust incantation over them, thereby desecrating the sacred fidelity in which they had lived for twenty years," is evident in James's depiction of Claire (A. James 28).

James makes use of another character in the piece, Noemie, as a counterpoint that allows the reader to observe a woman who does seem to have greater independence and thus greater social mobility. James makes clear that Noemie's ability to manifest her own destiny stems not from some particularly transcendent quality that she possesses, however. For Claire's brother Valentin falls under her spell, despite his own assertion that, "I see her as she is, a vulgar little wretch, after all. But she is amusing as ever, and one *must* be amused" (*American* 291). The suggestion is that Noemie's ability to define herself, and to ambitiously pursue her desire to marry into wealth, stems from her more common origins, which James asserts throughout the

novel in ways both subtle and overt. This allows her a freedom not afforded to women of Claire's social class, and she is able to use this freedom to achieve her objectives. However, this ambition and social mobility do not improve the quality of Noemie's character; her questionable ethical code, in fact, seems to help her achieve her objectives just as Claire's moral fiber prevents her from subverting the familial and social impositions that restrict her. She is not hampered but rather helped by her lack of breeding and education. This seems to reflect Alice's own perception of the status of women in 19th century society since in her *Diary* she openly wonders "if I had an education I should have been more or less a fool than I am" (A. James 79). The perspectives of both James siblings seem to suggest that education and breeding may actually inhibit the ability of a woman to develop a true sense of self and, in turn, an independent identity. The manner in which Noemie flourishes even as the more refined and well-to-do Claire flounders seems to support this understanding and additionally highlight his belief and recognition of the fact that a true woman may never be able to attain independence of the same measure.

Still, as Claire's limited ability for self-actualization and freedom becomes confounding to Newman, James suggests that men are often unable to realize the ways they directly restrict women. When he contemplates Claire's decision to withdraw into convent life rather than defy the wishes of her brother and mother and marry him, he is dumbfounded both by the fact that "it struck him with a kind of awe, and the fact that he was powerless to understand it" (*American* 358). It may be noted that Newman's own humble background and his outsider status as an American are partial explanations for his inability to comprehend her actions. He, for example, cannot understand the notion of arranged marriages, thinking it some barbaric European custom; however, Mrs. Tristam reminds him that such marriages exist everywhere, including America.

However, on a larger scale, James seems to be arguing that women, and particularly women of a certain social status, are made to be objects of power, although the men who configure them as such are sometimes unaware of the implications and impositions forced upon the women subjected to this treatment. Still, while Newman does not understand the implications of gendered control of women, it must be noted that he intends to manipulate her with his expectations that she will defy her family and traditions in order to join him in America. Claire's brother the Marquise clearly understands it and employs it to his advantage.

This thematic strain of gendered control and manipulation not only continues, but is further extended in James's portrayal of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In this later piece, the reader is offered insight into the transformation of a woman who believes steadfastly in her sense of independence and identity into a woman willing to remain imprisoned in a marriage out of a sense of duty to the institution itself. In a sense, while Claire may express the condition of Alice's life as her brother understood it at the time he wrote *The American*, Isabel seems to embody the full arc of her life more directly; while Claire may be Alice as James saw her in 1877, Isabel is Alice as he remembered her, and the arc of *The Portrait of a Lady* becomes the metaphorical expression of the physical and mental problems she endured, as well as a commentary on the way that vibrancy and independence are destroyed in women.

For Isabel, the deterioration of her status is derived, in many ways, from her own sense of self; but this in turn begins to deteriorate as the various mechanisms of society are imposed upon her. When she is first introduced, one of the observations offered by the narrator is that "the young lady seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and others" (*Portrait* 70). Ultimately, it is this confidence that is her undoing, since it leads her to trust in both Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, who are far more socially adept than she is, and the two conspire to

imprison her in a hollow marriage and steal her fortune. For James, then, the novel becomes a way of exploring the means by which this sense of confidence and independence is eroded away in Isabel, and in this exploration, he offers readers an illustration of his understanding of the way that his own sister's status and sense of identity were eroded by both illness and social conventions and constructs and society's view of both women and invalids.

In the beginning of the novel, Isabel is clearly a creature of fierce independence, which the novel contends is an unconventional disposition for women during this time. Early in the novel her cousin Ralph reflects that "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" (*Portrait* 116). In this way, she reflects James's understanding of his sister's ambitions beyond the limitations imposed by her illness, perhaps as he remembered her in her youth. Even on her deathbed, he seemed to have a kind of reverence for her nobility and independence, remarking at the time that "she looks most beautiful and noble – with *all* of the august expression that you can imagine" (*Portable* 526). This passage reveals his sense that his sister's independence and struggle were the source of her true beauty, much as he seems to suggest that they are essential qualities of both Claire's and Isabel's allure as well; simply put, when Isabel cedes her independence to marry Osmond, she forsakes that which makes her beautiful and authentic.

In the same light, as with Claire, James emphasizes the notion of Isabel as an object to be possessed rather than as an individual being. This is made evident in the way that each of her suitors view her, but it is particularly true of Gilbert Osmond, who seems to regard her as he would a piece of art to be possessed. When, for example, Warburton finally leaves Italy and his pursuit of Isabel, Isabel increases in esteem in Osmond's mind, not because of her virtues, but

because she has rebuffed a British nobleman. This leads him to perceive "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" and leads to their eventual marriage (*Portrait* 354). While this characterization underscores Osmond's nature, it also reveals the way that women of character and class were perceived during the 19th century as, again, objects to be controlled and manipulated. It also suggests, in the way that it relates to James's understanding of his own sister, that women were limited by being understood merely as prospective wives and mothers, which was a role Alice neither undertook nor desired.

One of the ways that *Portrait* also creates a connection between the understanding James had of his sister and the characterization of Isabel is in the notion of their family life creating the sense of independence that they share. Isabel, tellingly, has had a childhood similar to that of Alice, one that "had no regular education and no permanent home" (*Portrait* 87). For Isabel, as with Alice, this has not been her perception, for she felt "her opportunities had been large" (*Portrait* 87). In this way, James makes the parallel between Alice and Isabel that much more apparent. This parallel is further solidified by James, who reveals that any of the suitors who came to court the Archer girls gravitated to her sister Edith, largely because they were intimidated by the intelligence and intensity Isabel displayed. This characterization is one that both James siblings would have applied to Alice as well.

In a certain sense, the narrative suggests that the intelligence Isabel displays also becomes a source of her downfall. Isabel's intelligence creates a feeling of self-confidence that allows her to be deceived by Osmond and Madame Merle; she believes her perceptions to be infallible, but instead she is naïve. Still, it may be said that in this case James's representation of the price which Alice paid for her mental acuity falls short. It led her to experience a variety of mental

and physical health issues, much as it did many other members of the James family. Both women then seem to possess great intelligence that is offset and undermined by psychological conditions that prove their undoing; while Alice suffers from a hysteria that limits her independence, Isabel's gullibility and sense of self limit hers by allowing her to become trapped in a marital invalidism.

This connection highlights the way the family structure limits the possibilities of self-actualization for women in this novel just as in *The American*, although the way this manifests with Isabel seems increasingly analogous to Alice in comparison to Claire. While the largely paternal indulgence that Isabel and Alice receive in their upbringing leads to developmental issues that restrict the very independence their childhoods fostered, Claire never experiences any independence. These women thus serve as counterpoints of the two extremes in terms of the roles that daughters are given within the family. Alice felt she had experienced both extremes, first in her discussions of her childhood and then in the limitations her illnesses imposed on her. Ultimately, however, all three women become prisoners in one way or another, with Alice as an invalid, Isabel in a disagreeable marriage, and Claire in a convent. James seems to suggest that, no matter the original circumstances, familial and social restrictions limit the ability to be independent for women, as with Claire, while too much independence can lead to either frailty of mind, as with Alice, or to a flaw in judgment that leads to a downfall, as with Isabel. This also emphasizes the notion of the family as a cultural device that prevents the healthy, balanced development of women into individual, independent beings during the 19th century.

It is here too that the notion of nationality enters into the discussion of family and upbringing. James seems to suggest that American women are afforded a greater level of mobility, at least in their childhood. He states, "like the mass of American girls, Isabel had been

encouraged to express herself" (*Portrait* 108). James undoubtedly saw the way his sister had been reared and then developed as a true example of this belief, and in fact, her own treatment may well have informed the way that he develops Isabel. For Claire, who represents the European model, this encouragement toward self-expression was summarily repressed, and, with the notable exception of her refusal to take the dirty inheritance of her late husband, she dutifully complies with the wishes of her mother and brother.

Despite these differences, Isabel, like Claire, becomes ensnared in the roles and impositions forced upon women during this era as a result of the fact that many of the same social institutions are at work. Isabel, despite her stated wariness, becomes part of the class struggle that dominates European society during his time. The necessary assimilation she experiences slowly wears away the independence and ability to self-actualize that Isabel possesses, something James seems to suggest in the way that he uses the ellipsis technique to pass over important events that erode Isabel's autonomy, such as her wedding.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Isabel understands her independence as something to be preserved. When she arrives in England, Isabel is keenly aware of the limitations of European society, particularly on women. She remarks to her uncle about the British that "I don't believe they're very nice to girls; they're not nice to them in the novels" (*Portrait* 110). This remains her understanding throughout the course of the novel and extends to the whole of European men, although the level of malevolence varies according to the nature of the male figure who is imposing himself upon her. While Osmond treats all women, including his own daughter, his wife, and his former lover, Madame Merle, with disdain, less despicable men also objectify women and try to use them for their own purposes, albeit unconsciously at times. Warburton, for example, does not pursue Pansy for any reason other than to be closer to

Isabel, although he does eventually abandon this pursuit. While this depiction contrasts with that of Osmond, it does reveal the way that women become objects within the larger class struggle rather than active participants. Even Ralph has unwittingly imposed himself on Isabel; by his petitioning of a fortune for her from his father, he draws Isabel into a higher social status, which in turn attracts Osmond to her and leads to her unhappy end.

As in *The American*, marriage becomes an institution designed to consolidate and maintain the relationship of power of men over women. While Isabel marries Osmond, she remains cynical of the institution, as revealed when she learns Henrietta is to marry Mr. Bantling, which leads her to think that "there was a want of originality in her marrying him – there was even a kind of stupidity" (*Portrait* 612). This expression not only closely reflects the way marriage is portrayed in *The American* but it also evokes Alice's remarks about marriage throughout the course of the *Diary*. While she seemed to hold at best ambivalence for men in general, she deemed the way that they imposed themselves on women through marriage to be intolerable, and Henry seems to have supported her understanding in the attitude that Isabel holds for the institution and the impact that marriage has on the course of her life. She becomes a reflection of Alice, and the fact that her decision to marry leads to her misery seems to affirm Alice's beliefs regarding the subject.

Again, as with Claire in *The American*, James provides Isabel with a foil or counterpoint in her friend, Henrietta. However, unlike Noemie, Henrietta provides the reader with a contrast based on her philosophical outlook rather than on the distinction of class. Further, Henrietta is depicted favorably as a figure of independence and self-actualization, whereas Noemie is seen largely as a villainous character as a consequence of her words and deeds. Although "Isabel always thought of her as a model" for her own behavior, in a larger sense Henrietta and Isabel

share the same views and beliefs at the beginning of the novel, but Isabel's perspective becomes tainted by the influence of European society (*Portrait* 105). While Henrietta perpetually advances American ideals to Isabel, symbolized by her recommendation of Caspar Goodwood, a fellow American, to Isabel for marriage, Isabel embraces the European sense of order, culminating in her marriage to Osmond, who tries to subdue her sense of independence and her expression of opinion. Thus, Noemie is able to self-actualize because of her lower class status and Henrietta is able to do the same because of her status as an authentic American, but Isabel as a result of her allowing European influences to infiltrate her perspective, must come to a comparatively unfortunate end.

This contrast supports the reading of Isabel as a woman patterned after Alice, because of their similar background and perspectives; however, Isabel has been corrupted by her interaction with European society in a way that Alice has not. Due to the various physical and mental problems she experienced, Alice was not able to travel in the same circles, either in America or abroad, that Isabel encounters during her development. In this way, Alice becomes a hybrid of Isabel and Claire; James seems to cull Alice's childhood experiences as source material for the development of Isabel, while the sense of confinement and limited opportunity to develop that her invalidism created, at least in his perception, seems to be the model for Claire.

Certain strains of the *Diary* entries support the agenda that James advances in the way Isabel and Claire are drawn. Alice's sense of desperation and the limitations of her ability to be actively involved in life seem to be mirrored in Claire's ability to determine the course of her own life. In one of the entries that seems to best mirror Claire's plight, Alice remarks sardonically that "a creature who has been denied all dramatic episodes might be allowed, I think, to assist at her extinction" (A. James 137). Just as Alice was often an observer of to life

rather than a participant, so too has Claire's experience been metaphorically comparable, and, in turning to the convent, she serves to assist in her own extinction, as the church represents the ultimate sacrifice of self. James's understanding of his sister's plight seems particularly acute here, and the reader's awareness of Claire as a representation of his translation of his Alice seems inevitable. Although to a slightly lesser degree, the same may be said about Isabel, as she is largely a victim of her circumstances rather than an active creator of her own destiny, until she decides on passive acceptance of her final fate as a wife in an unhappy marriage.

In accordance with this idea, the notion of intelligence and education as it relates to women and their social role must again be revisited since both siblings touch on the subject in their writing. The intelligence and self-confidence that Isabel displays actually serve to subjugate her, which in turn suggests that too much awareness actually can work to the detriment of women. At times, Alice seems to share this sentiment in her *Diary*. Were Isabel more than a character, Alice may have been speaking directly to her when stating that "everything seems to prove that blunted sensibilities is the refuge of over-strained humanity" (A. James 29). Isabel sees too much, thinks too much, feels too much, and, as a result, she suffers all the more in the marriage in which she becomes a prisoner. Likewise, awareness is part of Claire's downfall as well. Her awareness of her first and only husband's ill-gotten fortune causes her to reject it, which in turn leads to the placement of the control in the hands of her family, just as their financial desperation seems to reflect Alice's notion of "over-strained humanity."

However, while each of these characters is informed by James's understanding of his sister, there seems to be some deviance from his insight and her own assertions about herself. Both Claire and Isabel lose, in a certain sense, the ability to express themselves, but for Alice this would have been a fate worse than death. In fact, her *Diary* becomes a means of overcoming this

sense. Even as her ability to articulate herself to others was waning, she argued that "a written monologue by that most interesting being, myself, may have its yet to be discovered consolations… I shall at least have it all my own way and it may bring relief as an outlet to that geyser of emotions, sensations, speculations and reflections which ferments perpetually in my poor old carcass for its sins" (A. James 25). This passage serves both as a kind of invocation for her work and a means of understanding her perception of the primacy of the mind as a means of affirming one's sense of self. It also shows the importance of being removed from class concerns; Alice, because of her limited ability to interact socially, is unconcerned with propriety, while both Isabel and Claire become irrevocably absorbed by this consideration.

Alice also distinguishes herself in her refusal to be seen as an object rather than an entity. In her refusal to accept sympathy or pity from others for her condition, Alice allowed herself to maintain a sense of independence. She would not be defined by others, as both Isabel and Claire are, because it transforms a woman into an object to be possessed, traded, or discarded at the leisure of others, particularly men. Despite being an invalid for the majority of her life, Alice argued against such a restrictive understanding, asserting that "although I have no productive worth, I have a certain value as an indestructible quality" (A. James 113). In this statement, she distinguishes herself from mere figurative existence, because the "indestructible quality" is something independent of any value that can be culturally imposed on her, both as a person of status and as a woman; instead it is something she perceives in herself and that is revealed through the very act of creating her *Diary*. Through this act, she transcends objectification because the quality that gives her worth emanates from her own consciousness rather than from external evaluation. She becomes an entity that imbues itself with worth rather than passively accepting the value imposed by the culture of her time.

For Alice, it is the struggle against the impositions of society and gender expectations and definitions that affirms the value of her existence. She asserts "what is living in this deadness called life is the struggle of the creature in the grip of its inheritance and against the consequences of its acts" (A. James 34). Overcoming the way that society imposed itself upon her as both a woman and a person struggling with invalidism that was both literal and metaphorical, her "inheritance" is her very essence of living as it allows her to define both her sense of self and her sense of womanhood in a way that neither Isabel nor Claire is able to do. In a more literal sense, Alice's birthright also included the genetic problems that contributed to her lifelong physical and mental struggles. Still, her assertion of self refutes the fate that both of these characters accept. Isabel does not try to escape her marriage, which is the culmination of her acts, nor does Claire try to resist her family's refusal to allow her to marry Newman.

Finally, Alice also draws a distinction, similar to her understanding of pity, in the way she hopes her suffering will be understood. For her, the incapacitation of her illness is a "fight simply between my body and my will" which she perceived to be won by her will so long as she continued to express and reveal herself through her writing (A. James 149). In this way, she saw suffering as an inconsequential, if necessary, component of existence. This lies in distinct contrast to her brother's rendering of Isabel and Claire. Rather than face the discomfort of confronting her family in pursuit her own happiness or the equal misery that acceptance of another arranged marriage would bring her, Clare chooses to retreat to the antiseptic and safe life of the convent. For her part, Isabel asserts clearly, "I'm afraid of suffering….And I think that people suffer too easily" (*Portrait* 102). Despite this declaration, however, Isabel chooses to endure the suffering that her marriage to Gilbert Osmond produces, because for her it is less severe than suffering the social indignity of separation or the illegality of divorce. In this way,

she refuses to engage the suffering of her body through the assertion of her will, which in turn creates an enduring suffering of both her body and her will, a problem that Alice James overcomes by asserting the primacy of her will.

This, then, creates a conflict between the way that Alice understood herself and the way that she was perceived, as understood through the depiction of these characters, by her literary brother; in a sense, these differing perceptions become pedagogical counterpoints. James saw only the limitations of body, both from a health and a gender standpoint, which his sister endured, while she herself saw these situations as mere impediments to self-expression rather than permanent roadblocks. This seems to suggest that James's view of women in itself becomes a means of limiting the way women are understood, much as the men in his novels perpetually limit the scope of womanhood through conscious and unconscious actions. In this way, James reveals that he cannot write Claire's, or any other woman's, "side of the wall," not because the public could not understand it, but because he himself could not understand it well enough to accurately portray it. This also reveals that, despite his best efforts, he could not truly have understood the way that invalidism and illness defined the way he perceived his sister, despite her constant struggle against being so narrowly drawn. Carol Holly even notes that James makes use of these same ideas of invalidism and illness as a means of imposing "uncertainty" upon members of his family, including Alice (48).

Alice James, or at least as James perceived her, serves as a model for both Isabel Archer and Claire de Cintre, and allows for greater understanding of feminine identity and the female's ability to act and think autonomously in the late nineteenth century. These characters reveal the powerful interplay between social institutions and convention and the way these forces are used against the individual in James's work, and specifically against women. Perhaps both because of

and in spite of his own limited understanding of his sister, both in real life and in the way he rendered her through these and other characters, Henry found her diary to be "heroic in its individuality, its independence" upon reading it after her death (*Letters* 215). He wrote,

> As regards the life, the power, the temper, the humour and beauty and expressiveness of the Diary in itself – these things were partly 'discounted' to me in advance by so much of Alice's talk during her last years – my constant association with her – which led me often to reflect about her extraordinary way of taking life – and death – in very much the manner in which the book does. I find in its pages, for instance, many things I heard her say. Nonetheless I have been immensely impressed with the thing as a revelation of a moral and personal picture… But it also puts before me what I was tremendously conscious of in her lifetime – that the extraordinary intensity of her will and personality really would have made the equal, the reciprocal, life of a 'well' person – in the usual world, almost impossible to her, so that her disastrous, her tragic health, was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life (*Letters* 215).

Still, in ways that James could not comprehend, his sister was addressing, both in how she lived and how she understood her life, the very issues that characters such as Isabel and Claire were intended to illuminate. For this reason, James becomes susceptible to the very criticism he lobbied against, the patriarchal construct of 19th-century culture for its treatment of women, because he was ultimately unable to see his sister as she saw herself.

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