CHAPTER III
FREEDOM OR ISOLATION?
A Study of The Portrait of a Lady

In terms of its social material The Portrait of a Lady (1881), has all the usual appurtenances of an engaging story of the moneyed international set. Its central action revolves round the fortunes of the young American girl Isabel Archer who falls a victim to certain scheming fellow Americans living abroad because of the great wealth that she inherits from a benevolent uncle. On this level, there is no doubt at all that Isabel Archer's story is in the pattern established earlier in Mme de Mauves (1874), and Washington Square (1880).

But the real theme, as James asserts in the Preface to the novel rests on "the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny," and by laying the "corner stone" of his story on this, James transcends the limits of the so-called international theme and directs his probe into regions where it is immaterial whether one is from America or Europe or for that matter, from the deep woods of nowhere. The setting merely provides him with the metaphors for his probe. Ultimately
therefore, the story of Isabel Archer is much more than the international opposition, it is one of moral actions and decisions that confront sensitive beings "from whatsoever proceeding." The focal point in The Portrait therefore is not merely the personal history of the heroine but of the other dimension of her existence - the inner life or consciousness which is of paramount interest. The external event or incident is no longer valid per se but only in the measure in which it evokes responses from the protagonists. Comparing The Portrait of a Lady with Daisy Miller, Christof Wegelin says, "In the earlier story the picture he gives is all manners, all in terms of Daisy's relations with society; in The Portrait it is largely of the heroine's relations with herself so that the story is a story of moral clarification."¹

The focus on Isabel's inner life thus affords James a new phase in his fiction where Europe seems to be of less import in the American imagination and the greater weight is given to the imagination of the heroine herself.

In the earlier studies, we see the heroines as

victims of forces outside of themselves more or less
but in Isabel's case the process is subtly reversed.
She is victimized ostensibly because of her inheritance
but this is made possible by her own vivid imagination
and a naive and smug sense of self-sufficiency.

Here is James's description of the essence of
Isabel's nature.

"Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories;
her imagination was remarkably active."\(^2\)

Because her theories are unsullied by the expe-
riences of the practical world Isabel surrounds herself
with an aura of make-believe superiority and exclusiveness.

...She had an unquenchable desire to
think well of herself, she had a theory that
it was only under this provision life was
worth living; that one should be one of the
best, should be conscious of a fine organi-
sation (she couldn't help knowing her orga-
nisation was fine), should move in a realm
of light, of natural wisdom, of happy impulse,
of inspiration gracefully chronic. It was
almost as unnecessary to cultivate doubt
of one's self as to cultivate doubt of one's
best friend: one should try to be one's own
best friend and to give one's self, in this
manner, distinguished company."(PL pp.50-51).

Although the above observations point to a super-
ego, there is no doubt that this personality also does

\(^2\)Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, first published
All other references hereafter are to this edition, cited
as PL.
possess a spontaneous vivacity and natural vitality. Her egotistic tendencies in the passage below are quite explicit.

Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions; she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant. (PL p. 52).

The sole aim of young Isabel's existence seemed to be striving after a perfection of her self, to cultivate a refined personality. "She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress." (PL p. 53).

Commenting on this particular aspect of her personality, Paul J. Eakin remarks,

Isabel's pre-occupation with the ideas of genius and self-reliance, following the characteristic movement of transcendentalist thought, leads her to the formulation of a program of self-culture.3

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When such a young, naive and inexperienced girl sets out to "affront her destiny" with an inflated ego and a set of unproven theories, the obvious result would be a personal tragedy which Eakin terms the "tragedy of self-culture." But Isabel's tragedy is not in the tradition of the classics, hers is a tragedy of the inner life where her natural vitality and innocence is first cleverly manipulated and then slowly strangulated by the cold and calculating Gilbert Osmond and his Kind. The offense is intangible and unprovable but the effect is all the same as debilitating and hurtful as a physical violence. Her tragedy lies in the fact that the fine theories that she formulates about herself and with which she hoped to "affront her destiny" fall pitiably short of her expectations. Not only that, these very theories expose her to the machinations of others and prove in the end, to her infinite dismay, her undoing.

One such theory was about her independence or self-sufficiency, "It was one of her theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of that state." (PL p.52).

Isabel's belief in her personal freedom is an assertion of her distinct individuality. It is this
sense that is to influence her thinking and decision-making all her life. In her ardent pursuit of her personal "development, perfection and progress" she believes that this freedom is a pre-requisite. To a certain degree, this belief is shared by Ralph Touchett too and he eventually persuades his father to leave her half of his inheritance because he wants her to be independent in the material sense also. She defends and treasures her freedom and individuality so jealously that when Ralph, on their first meeting hastily assumes that she has been adopted by his mother she retorts, "Oh no; she has not adopted me. I'm not a candidate for adoption." (PL p.21) The desire to preserve this freedom in order to attain the full measure of her personal expansion therefore establishes the tenor and pattern of Isabel's future.

In the limited span and circumstance of Isabel's American existence and even during her sojourn in Europe, the major decisions of her life concern the men who woo her and want to marry her. First there is the young American Gaspar Goodwood who has a considerable amount of wealth and is a "mover of men". He exudes a strong masculine virility which at once attracts and repels her.
In the entire novel the only physical scene occurs between them when he kisses her. She finds that his kiss was like "white lightning" and the intensity of this encounter is such that she feels overwhelmed just as if she has been shipwrecked. There is no doubt at all that she never really 'rejects' him as she does her other suitor Lord Warburton. Though the pull of Goodwood's masculine presence and persistent wooing does sway Isabel's mind momentarily, she turns him away because to accept him would mean the loss of her "personal liberty."

The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present, since she had just given a sort of personal accent to her independence by looking so straight at Lord Warburton's big bribe and yet turning away from it. Sometimes Caspar Goodwood had seemed to range himself on the side of her destiny, to be the stiffestest fact she knew; she said to herself at such moments that she might evade him for a time, but that she must make terms with him at last - terms which would be certain to be favourable to himself. (PL p.115)

In another instance, Isabel tells Goodwood, "I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of ... it's my personal independence.

(PL p.161)

Isabel considers that Goodwood, of all her suitors,
constitutes the real threat to her personal freedom. Therefore, after she has dismissed him almost summarily in the scene at Pratt's Hotel in London, Isabel is seen in an intensely agitated state of mind.

It was not for some ten minutes that she rose from her knees, and even when she came back to the sitting-room her tremor had not quite subsided. It had had, verily, two causes: part of it was to be accounted for by her long discussion with Mr. Goodwood, but it might be feared that the rest was simply the enjoyment she found in the exercise of her power. She sat down in the same chair again and took up her book, but without going through the form of opening the volume. She leaned back, with that low, soft, aspiring murmur with which she often uttered her response to accidents of which the brighter side was not superficially obvious and yielded to the satisfaction of having refused two ardent suitors in a fortnight. That love of liberty of which she had given Caspar Goodwood so bold a sketch was as yet almost exclusively theoritic; she had not been able to indulge it on a large scale. But it appeared to her she had done something; she had tasted of the delight, if not of battle, at least of victory; she had done what was truest to her plan. (PL p.164)

But the irony of it all is that, being an American and also being so ardently and sincerely in love with Isabel, he might have proved to be the most generous who would cherish her and assist her in the free expansion of her personality so that she would attain that level of perfection and achieve the zenith of her "self-culture".
He tells her exactly this in so many plain words.

Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent—doing whatever you like? It's to make you independent that I want to marry you. (PL p.161)

And he goes on to explain that an unmarried, young girl was not really independent and was "hampered at every step." Caspar Goodwood speaks from a very practical, realistic point of view whereas Isabel views the matter solely from the point of her theory of 'independence' as the precondition for a program of "self-culture." Though at this point in her career, Isabel delights in her power to reject Goodwood, he remains till the end a factor in her destiny so much so that in the end their final separation is not the result so much of her rejection of him but rather of her deliberate withdrawal from him.

In contrast, Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton's offer of marriage has the stilted formality of a stage-play. He does not seem too intensely in love with her. What he finds appealing in her is her naive vivacity and freshness. When she first appears at Gardencourt, his remark to Ralph Touchett sums up his real estimate of her.
"You wished a while ago to see my idea of an interesting woman. There it is!" (PL p.21)

Of her encounters with men, Isabel's relationship with Lord Warburton seems to be the most casual and formal. Unlike Goodwood, he cannot arouse any deep response in Isabel, either of attraction or repulsion. On the other hand, each time Goodwood visits her, she feels the impact of his presence deeply and these are the few instances when Isabel's emotional agitation is emphatically visible. When she rejects Lord Warburton she does it in unequivocal terms unlike the case with Goodwood. However, she fails to give a convincing reason for doing so, at least nothing tangible that the prosaic Englishman can grasp. But her reasoning is once again based on her considerations of personal freedom. Though she has enough common sense to realise that refusing him means denying herself a magnificent chance, she realizes that in spite of the "splendid security" offered by Lord Warburton, the situation might prove to be a "stupefying anodyne." She tries to explain this to Lord Warburton by saying that if she marries him she will be giving up real participation in life and thus will be trying "to escape her fate." (PL p. 131)
This vague and hypothetical argument is beyond Warburton's comprehension and as he tries to reason with her his statements turn comical, thus turning such a serious moment into a farce, almost.

The rejection of Lord Warburton establishes certain distinctions for Isabel. She has not been unduly impressed by the grandeur of his title and property though she does admit that his offer does her great honour. Later on she recalls this offer of marriage as a "big bribe" a bribe which would have seriously handicapped her program of "free exploration of life." On such considerations therefore it costs Isabel very little to reject Warburton's magnificent offer of marriage.

But with Gilbert Osmond, the man whom Isabel eventually marries the circumstances are drastically different and are tinged with the shade of certain important changes in her life. While both Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton are practical men of the world, commanding considerable influence in their respective circles of society, here is a man who belongs to no country in particular and by anybody's standards is a complete non-entity. That she should choose this man in preference to the other two is as much due to her
inherent romanticism as to her changed circumstances. The penniless orphan girl, who so boldly and even heroically rejects offers of marriage from such important and wealthy men, has now become herself the proud possessor of a formidable fortune - an inheritance of £70,000 left to her by her benevolent uncle Daniel Touchett. If before she feared her pecuniary destitution as a possible weak link in a relationship, she need no longer have any apprehension on that score. She can now be absolved of any mercenary motive should she choose to marry a man of affluence.

To a person who values her personal liberty so much, the fortune left to her by her uncle adds to her sense of being 'independent' in every sense of the term. This is the spirit out of which Ralph had persuaded his father to leave her half of his inheritance. When he discusses the subject with his father he tells him —

It's just to do away with anything of that sort that I make my suggestion. If she has an easy income she'll never have to marry for a support. That's what I want cannily to prevent. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free. (PL p.183)

Apart from being materially independent, Isabel views her fortune in yet another perspective, as her
ever-active imagination lends a new dimension to her new found status as a moneyed person.

...She lost herself in a maze of visions; the fine things to be done by a rich, independent, generous girl who took a large human view of occasions and obligations were sublime in the mass. Her fortune therefore became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty.

(PL p.224)

Isabel also decides that "to be rich was a virtue because it was to be able to do, and that it could only be sweet", and also looks at her wealth as an "acquisition of power." (PL p.210)

Though this latter view about her new-found wealth promises to be more practical and viable, Isabel's general outlook on life which is idealistic and is often conditioned not by what the facts are but by what she imagines them to be, eventually clouds her judgement about her money. Once again this too has a direct relevance to her concept of her personal liberty and freedom.

The vehemence and consistency with which Isabel tries to defend her personal liberty speak for her inherent fear of being dominated or possessed completely
by another personality. And hence this fear is seen as the essential co-relate of her concept of personal freedom. In her relationship with Caspar Goodwood, his virile masculinity and personal dynamism are formidable forces to reckon with. Then there is the fact of her poverty compared to his affluence. On all counts therefore Isabel reasons that she is at a great disadvantage and to enter into a permanent relationship with him would mean the surrender of all personal liberty. The same logic is operative vis-a-vis her relationship with Lord Warburton also, though on the physical level he seems to leave her simply cold.

Thus the picture that emerges of the young Isabel so far is that of an idealist who tries to live purely on the theoretic and imaginative sphere with no real correspondence to hard facts about the business of living. She rejects both Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton because they fail to appeal to her imagination - they are too solidly grounded in the tangible world. What exactly she hopes to find in her ideal man is hard to define but judging by her admiration of Osmond one can surmise that her ideal man should not be
"course-minded", nor should be too vulgarly engaged in the pursuit of material wealth or fame and should display a keen appreciation of everything artistic and beautiful.

Though her uncle's bequest makes her financially independent, intellectually Isabel is still impressionable and idealistic. She has a tendency for hero-worship which is evident in her attitude towards her two women friends. Henrietta Stackpole an American journalist is in Isabel's estimate "a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy." (PL p.53) Isabel's admiration rests on the fact that Henrietta is an independent woman who was "in the van of progress and had clearcut views on most subjects." Being a fellow American Isabel can appreciate the slightly naïve, pushing exuberance of Americans in general which stands out conspicuously in societies other than America. If in her admiration for Henrietta, one senses Isabel's spontaneous response to a kindred natural vitality, another aspect of her sensibility is revealed by her admiration for Mme Merle, an expatriate American widow who seems to have the most exquisite taste in almost everything and accessibility to the best circles and homes in society. Isabel
thinks of Mme Merle in superlative terms.

To be so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it - that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self. It was as if somehow she had all society under contribution, and all the arts and graces it practised - or was the effect rather than of charming uses found for her, even from a distance, subtle service rendered by her to a clamorous world whenever she might be?

(PL p.190)

In Mme Merle Isabel sees what she perceives to be, an ideal life lived exclusively for the sake of the sophistication and the beautiful aspect of it. When by the circumstance of Mr. Touchett's last illness these two ladies are thrown together quite often, Isabel discovers the older woman to be a perfect conversationalist, discoursing knowledgably on many subjects. It was during one of these discussions that a very important theme of the novel comes under scrutiny of these two women who represent two radically divergent views about "self" or "personal identity." Isabel has so far made a cult of her 'self' by way of planning out her expansion and development but which has so far remained purely theoretical and intellectual pursuits. Her concern moreover, is with what constitutes the
'inner life' of a person and has very little to do with the person's outward circumstances. Therefore Isabel's vision of the perfected self excludes all questions of wealth, rank or position in society. She rather thinks of the self as a 'free spirit', leading an 'aristocratic' life - free from all the gross and dross inevitabilities of actual living.

In complete disagreement with this view Mme Merle gives her definition of the 'self' as she understands it.

That's very crude of you, when you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us - and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things. One's self - for other people, is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps - these things are all expressive." (PL p.201)

Taken with a proportionate sense about the importance of what Mme Merle calls the 'shell' of a
person, one can see that this definition is solidly grounded on a worldly pragmatism. However, the one crucial drawback in this definition seems to be the fact that the emphasis is on the 'expression' rather than on what it is an expression of.

Isabel's reaction to such a view is predictable.

'I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should; (PL p.202)

The opposition between these two views of 'self' is in essence the real conflict in the novel. The unconcealed materialism of Mme Merle and her kind is in direct contrast to the naive, idealistic and unrealistic attitude of Isabel Archer. She has failed to appreciate the fact that tradition and sophistication is attainable only with a measure of material well-being and that the greater part of a tradition is its tangible forms and norms. While her keen sensibility has rightly ascertained that a mindless pursuit of outward forms can stunt a person's moral and intellectual growth,
this perception is not bolstered by an objective overview of tradition and its impact on a person. The concept of tradition in its extreme is a dehumanising factor and it is precisely this that Isabel seems to be fighting against. It is however not as though she rejects tradition altogether. But she seems to declare that if she accepts it, it will be on her own terms.

The tension between these views can be seen again in the way Isabel and Mme Merle judge what each seems to consider a fault in the other. Though the older woman admits that Isabel is "extremely good-looking and extremely clever and quite exceptional" these are quite not enough. She tells Isabel, "I wish you had a little money," (PL p. 203) thus implying that this important item is missing from her personality. Once again her concern is of the material world.

On the other hand when Isabel casts her critical eye on Mme Merle's otherwise polished personality, the one fault that she detects probes into the essence of her nature.

If for Isabel she had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious since from these vulgar vices
no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away, she had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness which we may assume to have belonged even to the most amiable persons in the ages before country-house life was the fashion. (PL pp.191-192)

While Mme Merle is concerned about the incompleteness in Isabel's 'shell', the latter's probe makes no reference to Mme Merle's outward circumstances, whether she has money or not, whether she dresses well or not, whether she has married well or not etc. By saying that Mme Merle is not 'natural' Isabel means that 'custom' or tradition or whatever the sophistry of genteel living can be called, has overwhelmed her nature and has deprived her of a certain spontaneous energy of being. It is as though the essence of her being has been exhausted in the creation of the shell and now there is very little of that natural self which can be termed original. This created self, the artificial self may be pretty, may even look "aristocratic" and grand, but having lost that naturalness, the
original vigour, this polished self is only a poor copy of the original and hence of comparatively less value. The "tonic wildness" which Isabel sees "overlaid by custom" in her companion is the spontaneous vitality and vivacity without which a person cannot be said to be an individual in his or her own right. The distinct 'self' or individual in Mme Merle has become merely a "social animal." The loss of this "tonic wildness" therefore, in Isabel's estimate amounts to the loss of a certain measure of humanity.

It is Isabel's "destiny" to combat such a world view as represented by Mme Merle and her kind and the only weapon at her disposal is her idealism but the tragic irony of her situation is that it is this very idealism which make her so susceptible to the cleverly disguised materialism of Gilbert Osmond and his kind.

It is in the context of such a mental make-up in Isabel that one can discern the reason why she chooses a man like Osmond to be her life companion.

The process of Isabel's victimisation starts from the moment Mme Merle insidiously brings his name into their conversations at Gardencourt. She seems to make light of this "most delightful person, exceedingly
clever, a man made to be distinguished" because he has "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything." (PL p.197) The reduction of the personality is total; it is brought down to the final zero - "no anything". But this estimate of Osmond is according to Mme Merle's materialistic yardstick and is therefore not bound to bear any correspondence to Isabel's view of the same personality. Moreover, by the time she comes to make the acquaintance of this delightful personage, certain events have taken place in her life which greatly add to her sense of independence and personal liberty. Coupled with her theories of her own independence her new found wealth lulls her into a false sense of security. She is now momentarily off-guard and when she comes into contact with the suave, worldly wise Gilbert Osmond, she is completely bowled over.

Her eagerly receptive mind is now ready for any new relationship and her emotional state having been properly primed by Mme Merle, Isabel finds herself in the company of a man whom she thinks of as a "specimen apart." And she thought that "this new relation would perhaps prove her very very distinguished." (PL p.261)
The impact of Osmond's personality on Isabel is altogether remarkable. She seems completely smitten with him.

She had never met a person of so fine a grain. The peculiarity was physical, to begin with, and it extended to impalpabilities. His dense, delicate hair, his overdrawn, retouched features, his clear complexion, ripe without being course, the very evenness of the growth of his beard, and that light, smooth slenderness of structure which made the movement of a single one of his fingers produce the effect of an expressive gesture - these personal points struck our sensitive young woman as signs of quality, of intensity, somehow as promises of interest. (PL pp.261-262)

Isabel's observations of Osmond's physicality dwell on the artefacts of his personality rather than on the actual physical features. For instance, she notes his hair, complexion, beard, fingers and also makes the intriguing remark "retouched features," as though Osmond has just had a face lift or altered some aspect of his physiognomy. One can observe a certain amount of superficiality in these remarks and yet Isabel thinks that they are an index to his "quality, intensity and promises of interest." She seems to be viewing him in the same way as one would view a completed picture and note the delicate finishing touches.
Though Isabel does not realize it, she seems to be admiring the artful polish of Osmond rather than looking deeper into other aspects of his inherent 'nature'.

This attitude is in direct contrast with the one she has taken regarding Goodwood's looks earlier.

She wished him no ounce less of his manhood, but she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently.

His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff; these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life. (PL p.116)

If one seeks for a logical opposition between a square jaw and the "rhythm of life" as Isabel puts it, there would be little to sustain her pronouncement on his features. However it is clear that she is aware of his inherent nature rather than of his outward accomplishments of personality. There is also the fact that her observations point to her awareness of him as a virile, very masculine personality. When she thinks of him as a "mover of men" she admits of his forceful personality and also grudgingly evinces a certain amount of admiration for his active and hectic participation in living. On the other hand she thinks that the keynote
of Osmond's existence is one of "connoisseurship" - a life-style which is passive, calculated and devoted to activities somewhat effeminate. What Isabel so tragically overlooks is the fact that connoisseurship is a matter of cultivation which, sooner or later overwhelms the natural. She had earlier found fault with Mme Merle because she had become a mere "social animal" but she seems to find the very same qualities in Osmond a mark of distinction.

In her previous relationships with Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton Isabel has been seen as on constant guard against any encroachment upon her personal liberty and freedom. Therefore she was always prepared to meet them with the awareness that she should not allow anything or anybody to overwhelm her. The affluence and virile personality of Caspar Goodwood therefore instead of being a point in his favour become a point of contest in which Isabel is determined to retain her personal freedom. With Lord Warburton also, she is not unduly impressed by the grandeur of his aristocratic background and wealth and she can dismiss his proposal of marriage to be able to call it a 'big bribe' to buy off her freedom.
In the context of her own impoverished circumstances their wealth and importance become minus points for these two gentlemen. In the author's own words "... her poverty had been a venial fault for two gallant gentlemen." (PL p. 203)

But by the time she makes the acquaintance of Gilbert Osmond, Isabel is getting used to the "new consciousness" of being rich and is just beginning to savour of the power that money can buy. Therefore the fact that Gilbert Osmond has "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" and yet that he is apparently so superior to any man she has met so far, disarms her completely. Osmond's very lack of material possessions lends an air of mystery and romance and fires her imagination which has always been active.

During a visit to his hill top villa he tells her about his life - making his poverty and social insignificance sound like a heroic renunciation of the vulgar. The account that he gives her of his life is apparently self-disparaging but yet tinged with an air of self-righteousness of the true connoisseur.
I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even; I took my measure early in life. I was simply the most fastidious young gentleman living. There were two or three people in the world I envied—the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey. There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome—for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn't be I didn't care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honours. (PL p. 265)

A dull, somewhat malcontented and non-descriptive kind of existence but Isabel does not see it for what it really is, but rather "her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting." (PL p. 266) In contrast to the other two men whom she rejects, Osmond seems to epitomise the genteel tradition where occupations of the mind, intellect and imagination govern the life-style rather than the mundane things like owning cottonmills in Massachusetts or "half of England." The lack of material concerns like these in Osmond's life is grist to the mill of Isabel's imagination and the list of his lackings, "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" is instead transformed into a sort of negative grandeur to surround his personality. Even Ralph Tonchet who is a cynic by circumstance and long practice voices a
similar attitude when he says that Osmond is "like a prince who had abdicated in a fit of fastidiousness and has been in a state of disgust ever since." (PL p.249) If such is the impression created upon a cynic like Ralph, it is little wonder that a naive girl like Isabel sees only the princely qualities - real or otherwise imagined - his suave manners, the air of disdain he implies for material things and his professed interest in the pursuit of art and beauty alone.

In her relationship with Osmond, Isabel seems to have abdicated her rights to her individuality and she is already defenceless in his presence. She tries hard to impress him and live up to the reputation which she believed Mme Merle had imputed to her.

She was very careful therefore as to what she said, as to what she noticed or failed to notice; more careful man she had ever been before. (PL p.263)

Her one apprehension was that she might be accused, not of ignorance but of "her possible grossness of perception." In other words she is acutely concerned about creating a favourable impression regardless of whether it corresponded to actual fact or not.

Already, Isabel is applying Osmond's touchstone to measure her own personality and action. It is from
this point onwards where she abandons her personal judgement and tries to emulate the standards of Gilbert Osmond and his like that her tragedy begins. The girl who was forever asserting her personal freedom and liberty succumbs to the impressions created by these "connoisseurs" of life for her benefit and with a view to entrap her free spirit. She seems to be in awe before Osmond's presence and is therefore at a seriously disadvantageous position in her relationship with him. With such a frame of mind in her dealings with Osmond, it is not surprising therefore that Osmond's reassurance and flattering remarks should create a lasting impression upon her and when he professes his love for her she succumbs to his proposal.

In the process of Isabel's capitulation to Osmond one sees once more her imagination playing the most vital role. Here it is in the context of her "new consciousness" of being rich. In the fact of her feeling inferior to Osmond's studied sophistication Isabel thinks of her wealth as the only armour - because she decides that being rich and "to be able to do" was equivalent to acquisition of power, and when one had this power, one could meet, anyone on equal grounds. But it is extremely ironical that the source of her "new consciousness", 
of her apparent acquisition of power is the very factor which makes her a victim of the machinations of Mme Merle and Gilbert Osmond.

Though Isabel's fortune is enough by itself as a motivating factor, there is some element in her nature that arouses Osmond's genuine interest. He is at first intrigued and then fascinated with the possibility of being able to woo and win a girl who has recently distinguished herself by refusing a very eligible handsome English peer. By succeeding where Lord Warburton has failed, Osmond thinks that he will be proven superior to him.

He had never forgiven his star for not appointing him to an English dukedom, and he could measure the unexpectedness of such conduct as Isabel. It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort. (PL p.304)

Besides this, Osmond is also enchanted with Isabel's personal qualities. He tells Mme Merle that "she's really very charming and graceful and capable of great devotion." Considering such an attitude it would be erroneous to dismiss Osmond merely as a fortune-hunter. Rather he is seen as a complex character who embodies conflicting qualities of mind and manners.
The decision to marry Osmond is the first conscious, independent step taken by the now slightly more experienced and mature Isabel. The inevitable reaction to this decision among her immediate circle of friends and relatives and her response to them once again bring out the essential qualities in her personality.

It is a curious fact that Isabel should feel obliged to write to Caspar Goodwood about her engagement and that he is one of the first two persons to be told about this. Her relationship with him remains an enigma till the end. This is one more index to the deep and complicated nature of this seemingly sweet and docile girl. She is in truth attracted to Goodwood in more ways than she cares to admit. He is the one man who is capable of arousing Isabel's emotions and of disturbing her composure. Though she has not given him any tacit commitment, enough of it is implied when she feels obliged to write to him of her engagement.

When Goodwood with his characteristic bluntness proceeds to probe into Osmond's antecedents and discovers his obvious lack of anything to warrant her consideration, Isabel concedes the point but not in any apologetic way and only to defend her choice.
'Who and what? Nobody and nothing but a very good and very honourable man. He's not in business,' said Isabel. He's not rich; he's not known for anything.

...That I should marry him? Nothing at all,' Isabel replied while her patience helped itself by turning a little to hardness. 'If he had done great things would you forgive me any better? Give me up, Mr. Goodwood; I'm marrying a perfect non-entity. Don't try to take an interest in him. You can't.' (PL p.329)

Goodwood of course understands what she means by her words.

"I can't appreciate him; that's what you mean. And you don't mean in the least that he's a perfect non-entity. You think his grand, you think he's great, though no one else thinks so.' (PL p.329).

Without being able to articulate it so fully, Goodwood is able to pin-point the essential nature of her admiration for Osmond - that in a vague undefinable way Isabel is smitten by Osmond's personality - an admiration which is quite beyond any outward or material considerations. In the context of Goodwood's very ostensible material success in life and virile presence she refuses to let Osmond's image diminish in importance.

Though so volubly defensive of her choice there is something in Goodwood's presence which disconcerts her and puts her on the defensive. She has been fully
prepared for an emotional outburst but instead she is met with a "remarkable self control." His self-composure irritates her and makes her feel angry and somewhat in the wrong. But she realises that such a situation is ridiculous and she "suddenly exclaimed, as if she were accusing him of having accused her: I've not deceived you! I was perfectly free!" (PL p.331) The only instance when Isabel ever voices any misgiving about her choice is when she tells, Goodwood, "No one can be more surprised than myself at my present intention." (PL p.331)

But it's a totally different Isabel when she announces her decision to marry Osmond to her aunt, Mrs. Touchett's displeasure is based on the obvious grounds that he has "no money, no name, no importance," but Isabel holds her own and virtually dismisses her objection by saying, "It was my duty to tell you Aunt Lydia, but I don't think it's my duty to explain to you." (PL p.334) Ralph's considerations against the marriage are however on quite another plane. He does not seem bothered about Osmond's lack of material possessions but is sincerely apprehensive about Isabel's future. He seems to sense that this idealistic, eagerly imaginative girl faces the repression of her free spirit. 'I think I've hardly got over my surprise,' he went on
at last. 'You were the last person I expected to see caught.' (PL p.341)

By this remark Ralph is able to envision the tragedy of the free spirit of Isabel at the hands of Osmond. He knows only too well of her lively imagination, her love of personal freedom, her eagerness to savour of life. "A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see life." (PL p.341) Because he had admired these qualities in her, he had made it possible for her to be rich - rich, by his interpretation, in being able "to meet the requirements of her imagination." He wanted to make her 'free' but with her engagement to Osmond he sees all his fond wishes for her future rendered null and void. He is dismayed to think of her life inseparably linked with a man of "no importance" whom he considers "small" and finally gives the crowning definition of Osmond's career by calling him a "sterile dilettante". (PL p.345)

In Isabel's discussion with Ralph on the subject of her impending marriage there is nothing of the stiff formality of her exchange with Goodwood nor the almost defiant posture with Mrs. Touchett. Instead there is more intimacy, more intensity of emotion in her defence of her choice. It is in the long passage quoted below
where Isabel is most articulate about her feelings for Osmond.

What sort of a person should you have liked me to marry? She asked suddenly. 'You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth. One has human feelings and needs, one has a heart in one's bosom, and one must marry a particular individual. Your mother has never forgiven me for not having come to an understanding with Lord Warburton, and she's horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of his great advantages - no property, no title, no honours, no houses, no lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant, belongings of any sort. Mr. Osmond's simply a very lonely a very cultivated and a very honest man - he's not a predigious proprietor.' (PL p.347)

It is very clear that in Isabel's mind, hers was "a choice of which she felt, only the nobleness and purity" needed to be justified. Being more sensitively attuned to Isabel's true nature, Ralph can also see that there is a deeply felt, genuine conviction about the rightness of her decision which no arguments to the contrary can shake. Through the pain of his disillusionment Ralph is aware of "the impression of her ardent good faith. She was wrong; but she believed; she was deluded but she was dismaly consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that having invented a fine theory about Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours." (PL p.348)
In order to understand the nature of the rift that occurs between Isabel and Osmond later, it is essential to understand the premises with which these two highly imaginative persons are entering into a life-long relationship. As for Isabel, her main sensation seems to be one of detachment. This is enhanced because of the discreet opposition offered her marriage by friends and relatives alike.

...she had now little free or unemployed emotion for minor deeds, and accepted as an incident, in fact quite as an ornament, of her lot the idea that to prefer Gilbert Osmond as she preferred him was perforce to break all other ties. She tasted of the sweets of this preference, and they made her conscious, almost with awe, of the invidious and remorseless tide of the charmed and possessed condition, great as was the traditional honour and imputed virtue of being in love. It was the tragic part of happiness; one's right was always made of the wrong of someone else. (PL pp.349-350)

The truism of the last statement despite Isabel's generalization is not universal; it applied peculiarly to her situation only. And in this perhaps Isabel is inadvertently alluding to her sense of certain loss as she stands poised on the threshold of a great experience, as she imagines her marriage is going to be.

Though Isabel does not see it as such, her marriage to Osmond is an act of surrender and renunciation of all
that she held essential for the full expansion of herself. She views her future with a metaphysical detachment and seems oblivious of all the practical considerations of marriage. Long ago she had thought that "if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely." (PL p.53) That light has dawned upon her sensibility in the person of Gilbert Osmond.

The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by her sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point. She had told Ralph she has 'seen life' in a year or two and that she was already tired, not of the act of living, but of that of observing. What had become of all her ardours, her aspiration, her theories, her high estimate of her independence and her incipient conviction that she should never marry? These things had been absorbed in a more primitive need—a need the answer to which brushed away numberless questions yet gratified infinite desires. It simplified the situation at a stroke, it came down from above like the light of the stars, and it needed no explanation. There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving. (PL p.352)

What constitutes an act of surrender for Isabel is definitely a gain for Osmond though he cleverly tempers his sense of success with an "ecstasy of self-control."

He thinks of Isabel in terms of "a present of incalculable
value" and a "gift" made by Mme Merle. In his "evaluation" of her he is calculating the various uses that he can derive from such a companion as Isabel.

...this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one a plate, that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel, he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring.
(PL p. 350)

For Osmond, Isabel is an acquisition, a thing for him to use and manipulate as he pleases. The sensation is pleasing because of his conviction that Isabel will be "malleable" to his whims. However, Isabel has merely a "decorative value" to his already accomplished life-style and whatever her intelligence can provide for him would be only a 'dessert' - and not the main course. But for Isabel marrying Osmond means breaking all past ties and renouncing her plans for self-expansion and one can see the immense difference in their respective attitudes with which they embark upon this new relationship.

Though Osmond envisages a bright future for them, the angle of vision is lopsidedly only his. He tells her, "You're remarkably fresh and I'm remarkably
well-seasoned. We've my poor child to amuse me; we'll try and make up some little life for her. It's all soft and mellow - it has the Italian colouring." (PL p.352) What Osmond seems to be doing here is look at the picture of their married life just as an artist would, at a canvas which he has just started by drawing two postures. Like the artist, he is hoping for the perfect symmetry of forms and for the correct blending of colours. And very curiously he is making his daughter the focal point of this picture as making a "little life for her" seems to matter more than making a life for themselves. Unconsciously however Osmond seems to be betraying the fact that they are coming together solely for this purpose. The oddest sentence in this passage is "We've my poor child to amuse me." (italics mine) While the "we've" denotes a collective responsibility the object 'me' shuts out Isabel from any further participation in the "little life" of Pansy Osmond.

In her role as Mrs. Osmond, Isabel is reduced to the position of someone dominated and used by beings seemingly superior to her. Gone is the highly imaginative girl who can withstand the powerful presence of a young American industrialist like Caspar Goodwood; can be
slightly disdainful of an English lord who owns "half of England", hold her own with an opinionated lady like - Mrs. Touchett and a sympathetic cynic Ralph Touchett. Instead we see her play the part of a meek and docile wife - being ornamental in her husband's equipage and in being instrumental in enhancing Pansy's chances of a brilliant marriage by providing her with a handsome 'dot'. Her milieu is now the society of a handful of expatriate Americans and their Latinated acquaintances whose sole pleasure seems to be derived from the acquisition of objects d'art, showing them off to each other and engaging in endless debates over the quality of porcelain or old lace. Surely a girl of Isabel's imagination had never thought of life in such sterile terms, never dreamed that one day she too would be forced to determine a person's 'worth' in terms of his material possessions, Life for her has become so stilted that she longs for some kind of "occupation" so that she may be saved. Ralph Touchett whose observation about Isabel have always been catalytic, sees the ennui of her life and tries to define the desultoriness.

The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph
asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good heavens, what a function!' he then woefully exclaimed. He was lost in wonder at the mystery of things.

(PL p.393)

The 'occupation' that Isabel can think of at the moment is to bring about the union of Pansy with Lord Warburton. Such an event, Isabel knows for a certainty, would please Osmond greatly. As the idea gets hold of her, she realizes that a new sensation takes possession of her - in a long while she feels enthusiastic about something and this brings her some happiness. "It was astonishing what happiness she could still find in the idea of procuring a pleasure for her husband."(PL p.415) This idea is then that of "assisting her husband to be pleased" - the obvious corollary being that she herself has failed to please him herself. Hence the project to 'procure' a pleasure for her husband in order to prove to herself that "she had done everything possible to content her husband".

Isabel is however aware that another expatriate, American Edward Rosier, enjoys Pansy's favour and might pose a problem for her scheme. The young man has no manifest occupation but keeps busy looking after his
collection of objects d'art adding to it whenever possible and generally moving in the society of like-minded people in Rome and elsewhere in the continent. Isabel, whose own life now revolves more or less in the same way thinks of Rosier as 'inferior' to Lord Warburton. Rosier, she thinks, is a 'light-weight' and a "useless fine gentleman when compared to the "English nobleman."

The note of worldliness in such observations speaks of the changes that have taken place in Isabel's attitude to life. A certain cynicism now marks her observations. Though she tries to tell herself that it is not Warburton's wealth and position which make him superior to Rosier she seems to assess people more or less according to the yardstick of Osmond and his kind. The man whom she rejected only a few years ago in favour of Osmond now becomes more attractive and even superior to a person like Rosier who is definitely not worse than Osmond in any way. Isabel does not seem unduly concerned about the human drama involved in the intricate relationships but is taken up with the idea of Pansy as "a perfect little pearl of a peeress." She dismisses Pansy's attachment to Rosier as "secondary obstacles."
In all these observations Isabel is trying "to take her husband's view" of things. But it is quite another matter when the moment of actual execution of her plans presents itself one evening while she and Pansy were at home. The moment of truth is the point when she is about to leave Pansy alone with Lord Warburton. But "something held her and made this impossible" (PL p.417) Although she tries to behave just as Osmond would have wanted her to, an unnamed element, "a vague doubt" prevails and she remains in the room all throughout the Englishman's visit.

The incident, on the surface is an innocuous one but in terms of Isabel's personal integrity and honesty, it is a decisive victory for her. It illustrates how close she comes to be overwhelmed by Osmond's influence in her life. But she pauses long enough to clear the "vague doubt", to establish the moral rightness of her action and is thus able to preserve her integrity. But Osmond in his avidity for procuring Lord Warburton as a son-in-law regards Isabel's hesitation as an open defiance of his wishes and precipitates the greatest moral crisis in Isabel's life. This is the moment which marks the distinct point of alienation from her husband.
"Think that over and remember how much I count on you" (PL p. 422). Osmond tells Isabel when he urges her to use her influence with Lord Warburton so that he would propose to Pansy. Mme Merle too thinks the same and tries to convince her that her action would be an act of kindness to Lord Warburton.

"But if you wouldn't marry Lord Warburton yourself, make him the reparation of helping him to marry someone else." (PL p. 414) A typically cunning and invidious way of winning over Isabel to her way of thinking and neutralizing any objection that Isabel might have against the proposition.

What these two are trying to do is ruthlessly exploit whatever fascination Warburton might still have for the penniless orphan who had rejected him, in order to bring about the marriage between Pansy and the English Lord. So long as their brilliant marriage comes off, they do not care if Pansy has to sacrifice true love and if Isabel, the wife of Osmond now, indulges in a bit of flirting with a rejected lover with this ulterior motive.

What seems so simply easy to these two worldly-wise sophisticates regarding the marriage is not so
simple or easy for Isabel. In her view there are very important moral questions involved, the most vital being her need to believe in the rightness of what she is going to do. This belief can be established by being convinced of the total sincerity of Warburton's feelings for Pansy. She senses a subtle hint in the word 'influence' implied by both Mme Merle and Osmond when they urge her to encourage Lord Warburton to marry Pansy. If by this it is meant some vestige of Warburton's old fascination for her then it would seem that he is partly motivated by the prospect of being near Isabel if he marries Pansy. On the other hand, if she manipulates in any way to accomplish this marriage it would mean violating Pansy's sensibilities and destroying her relationship with Rosier.

These are some of the considerations which disturb Isabel's conscience and arouse a moral rebellion in her soul against the people who wish to impose their views on her and dictate her action. The moral incompatibility between Osmond and Isabel is made crystal clear by their divergent attitudes to a possible marriage between Lord Warburton and Pansy. To Osmond it is extremely desirable on account of what it may do to enhance his social standing.
What means he employs to gain this end seems immaterial. He not only dismisses Pansy's affection for Rosier as of no account but is also totally insensitive about the indelicacy of urging his own wife to pander to any bit of lingering affection for her so that Warburton is induced to propose to Pansy.

On the contrary, for Isabel all these outward material gains should be eschewed if certain basic moral norms are violated. So when she discovers that she does have some 'influence' still with Lord Warburton, she refuses to cash in on it. When the 'vague doubts' are cleared in her mind, she tells Lord Warburton, "My dear Lord Warburton you may do, so far as I am concerned, whatever comes into your head." (PL p.446)

This decision taken in deference to a moral conviction releases a host of reactions in the psychological tug of war between Osmond's materialistic aspiration and Isabel's moral sincerity and forces open the hitherto intangible rift between them. It is remarkable that the most revealing psychological stocktaking occurs in her mind after Osmond speaks to her about using her 'influence' with Lord Warburton. This wish of his "puts the situation before her" - the situation about the real
state of her marriage. Her soul-searching vigil reveals to her the stark truth that in her marriage to Osmond she is living in "an opposition in which the vital principle of the one was a thing of contempt to the other". The chain of reactions which she had initiated, however inadvertently, by her refusal to marry Warburton causes the most violent upheavals in her marriage. It is in the context of Warburton's failure to propose to Pansy that the Osmonds have their first open rupture that reveals their deep-seated antagonism against each other. Osmond accuses Isabel of deliberately interfering in the affair so as to stop Warburton from proposing to Pansy and in this he sees only her attempt at inflicting an injury on him by dealing him a disappointment.

Osmond's disappointment is indeed great when he realises that Pansy will not become a "peeress". However, true to his imperturbable exterior, he displays a great feat of self-control and calculated civility during the night when Warburton comes to bid them goodbye. Isabel's consciousness monitors minutely her observations and mental reactions to Osmond's studied response to the situation.
On the other hand she had a perfect consciousness of Osmond's emotion. She felt almost sorry for him; he was condemned to the sharp pain of loss without the relief of cursing. He had had a great hope, and now as he saw it vanish into smoke, he was obliged to sit and smile and twirl his thumbs. Not that he troubled himself to smile very brightly; he treated their friend on the whole to as vacant a countenance as so clever a man could very well wear. It was indeed a part of Osmond's cleverness that he could look consummately uncompromised. (PL p.477)

Isabel is only too aware of the fact that Osmond "had been intent on the prize" of Warburton as a son-in-law but he also had the cleverness not to "allow his eagerness to irradiate his refined face." With a grudging admiration, Isabel can see that because of his seeming indifference regarding Warburton's attention to Pansy, he can now behave perfectly nonchalant, as if there was nothing at stake and therefore nothing has been lost. Inwardly Isabel is relishing her husband's cleverly concealed disappointment and is yet pitting Warburton against the imperturbability of Osmond. "Strangely very strangely, it was a satisfaction; she wished Lord Warburton to triumph before her husband, and at the same time she wished her husband to be very superior before Lord Warburton." (PL p.478)

A very complex response to the situation but a very clear indication of Isabel's identification with
Osmond. Her eagerly worshipful attitude of earlier days towards him has taken a lot of beating in the intervening years but still she is under the spell of his sophistication, as she will remain till the end. In this little scene she is fully aware of Osmond's terrible inward rage at the loss of Warburton - but she cannot help but admire his outward calm and sees only "the beauty of consistency" in his behaviour. She is charmed by "the advantage of acquired habit" that Osmond displays. The fact that at this moment Osmond is dissimulating does not strike her at all as an aberration - she is only conscious of the great act that he is putting up. Much more than anything else, she is now immensely taken in by the artistry of his behaviour.

Time and again we see Isabel come under this particular spell of Osmond's personality and how inadvertently she seems to abandon her individual conviction and incline to view matters from Osmond's angle of observation. This constitutes Isabel's weakest point - the fatal flaw in her psychological armour. The ascendency of the proper, of the conventional over natural responses which she now considers to be praiseworthy, dictates her decisions later. What she has failed to grasp at this moment is that if a distinction cannot be
drawn between the natural and that which is influenced by custom, admiration for the acquired habit can often cloud a person's judgment. It is then easy to mistake the fake for the genuine. There may be a certain amount of crudity in the natural, even vulgarity and unpleasantness but it has the advantage of being the essential truth about things, about feelings. Whereas in the pleasant exterior of the cultivated posture, and calculated behaviour there is definitely an air of insincerity and even of dishonesty because the spontaneous feelings are suppressed to create an impression. The artificiality super-imposed upon the natural passes off for the genuine and to that extent the moral value of the gesture is diminished.

The problem that Isabel has to tackle in order to give a psychological coherence to her disorganised and inconsistent psyche is in essence the problem of the much vaunted "international theme" of James's fiction. He uses Europe and America merely as the back drop against which he deals with extremely personal concerns with moral action in the lives of his heroes and heroines.

The tradition and culture of Europe certainly helped create the glittering, shimmering facade of its
society and nurtured its "beautiful people" with their suave manners and refined airs. What an alien to this society would see would be its glitter and charm - not realising that its basis rested on a form of materialism and artificiality. The artificiality lies in the attempt to gloss over the essential truths about things in the name of giving it refinement and polish. Hence the hint of duplicity and the air of insincerity that envelop such a society. Only when the outsider comes into closer contact the cracks in the apparently smooth exterior begin to show under scrutiny. This discovery becomes acutely agonising for the outsider because he had first come closer to this civilization because of a sense of admiration and adoration for its undeniable refinement, grace and culture. But the question remains as to how much of it is gained at the cost of the genuine. The thin edge between refinement and insincerity, between gracious behaviour and dishonest motives then poses the moral question.

A typical example of this society is Lord Warburton and therefore it is no wonder that the Warburton episode is to have long lasting effects in Isabel's life. When Warburton reappears in her life and eventually exits
without proposing to her step-daughter, it triggers off the first open rupture between her and Osmond thus dramatizing the complex moral questions relating to two opposing world views as symbolised by Isabel and Osmond. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that Isabel had rejected his offer of marriage and now he has turned up as an ostensible suitor for Pansy's hand. Though the focus of the tension generated by Warburton is on Isabel and Osmond, one cannot but be amazed with his behaviour too. He, like Osmond, does not see any indelicacy in appearing to be interested in the step-daughter of a woman who had rejected him and for whom he still harbours some affection. In the heightened drama of the Osmonds' disenchanted marriage, Warburton's motives and actions are almost relegated to the background and the point of emphasis on the Osmonds is complete. However one cannot but note that Warburton too belongs in the same world as Osmond's where form is more important than sincerity and honesty. As is made clear, he does not have too strong or deep feelings for Pansy but seems to be contemplating proposing to her if that will ensure his nearness to Isabel. He may then perhaps indulge in some subtle intrigue with her without violating any social norms; It is this seeming denseness as to the real import
of his actions that depicts Warburton as a sort of moral buffoon. He seems impervious to anything other than the superficial civilities of his breeding. He is an aristocrat by the accident of birth and too much custom and tradition seems to have stultified his nature into an ossified specimen of his tribe. His final departure from Isabel's life is affected without any fanfare; she hears from her aunt Touchett that he is to marry a "Lady Flora, Lady Felicia - something of that sort." (PL p.572) The implied obscurity and insignificance in this report truly sums up Warburton's effect on the overall drama. He seems to have been created for a specific purpose and retains interest as long as that purpose is viable, but after that, oblivion.

...Isabel felt as if she had heard of Lord Warburton's death. She had known him only as a suitor, and now that was all over. He was dead for poor Pansy; by Pansy he might have lived. (PL p.572)

Though Warburton fails to leave any indelible impressions on Isabel herself his reappearance precipitates the rupture between her and Osmond and it is during her wake (Ch.42) after an exchange with Osmond, that the high point in the drama of Isabel's consciousness is reached. In this chapter a complete analysis of her
marriage, her motives and actions is portrayed. In the flashback of events so far, she realizes that she had embarked upon her marriage with certain naive fallacies regarding her new-found wealth and her estimate of Gilbert Osmond. Though Isabel cannot be very articulate, she senses that Mme Merle has played a deep game and that the relationship between this lady and her husband was so suspiciously intriguing that the recurring vision of this long night was "that of her husband and Mme Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated."

Just as Isabel recognizes the unmistakable bond that exists between Osmond and Mme Merle, the importance of her analysis lies in the fact that here Isabel is seen as recognizing the underlying facts about the state of her marriage and the tenor of her life since she married Osmond. Though there is a hint of self-justification in the analysis, on the whole she displays, for the first time, a certain objectivity in her observations thus signifying her psychological maturity. If this chapter is a reflector of the past it is also a harbinger of the future trend of events. Isabel worries "what was coming - what was before them?" But the possibility of a separation does not provide the solution. "If to herself the idea was startling, if it presented itself at first as
a kind of infidelity, a capacity for pollution, what infinite effect might it not be expected to have had upon him?" (PL p.433)

But the saddest recognition during the vigil has been that they are living in an opposition in which "the vital principle of the one was a thing of contempt to the other." (PL p.424)

Nothing could be more basic, more fundamental than this gulf which existed between them. More important is the fact that both of them are aware of this incompatibility. Though there is no obvious attempt at deception each views the other with suspicion and with a great sense of being let down. Isabel's mortification is all the greater when she realizes that it was her own vivid imagination which supplied the "human element" to the drab existence of Osmond. And secondly she recognizes that she had married him with the notion of doing something noble with her money. In a very naive, subtle way she too had been guilty of trying to 'use' Osmond. When one undertakes any task on a theoretical premise, the implication is that the object or person involved is being 'used' for obtaining the proof of that theory. To this extent then Isabel is guilty of 'using' Osmond.
In her enthusiasm with her theory she failed to take into account the entire accumulation of events and experiences which went into the making of the personality of Osmond. She did not probe deep enough – she accepted and believed what was projected for her to see and absorb. Isabel merely took the envelope of his personality for the real person.

If on this account one is led into thinking that Osmond had 'put up' a front only for Isabel's benefit, a word of caution has to be struck. The suavity and sophistication of Osmond does look incongruous and deceptive in comparison to the narrowness of his mind but as a matter of consistent social behaviour no one can fault Osmond and say that he simulates these traits at any stage. His considerations for the proper manner of doing things and keeping up a decorous mode of behaviour is so great that it has become second nature with him. Osmond makes this point very clear to Isabel from the beginning of their acquaintance. During her sojourn in Rome before their marriage he tells her,

'Ah well, it's proper you should go with her, very proper. Do everything that's proper; I go in for that. Excuse my being so patronising. You say you don't know me, but when you do you'll discover what a worship I have for property.'
And again continues in the same vein -

No; I am not conventional. I'm convention itself. (PL p.312)

Even in her darkest hour of soul - searching, Isabel recognises and acknowledges this consistency in him.

His ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life, which she now saw that he deemed himself always, in essence at least, to have led. He had never lapsed from it for an hour; he would never have recovered from the same of doing so. (PL p.431)

On the eve of her journey to England to see her dying cousin, Osmond berates Isabel for proposing to defy tradition by undertaking the journey alone and against his express wishes.

I've an ideal of what my wife should do and should not do. She should not travel across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire, to sit at the bedside of other men. Your cousin's nothing to you; he's nothing to us. You smile most expressively when I talk about us, but I assure you that we, we, Mrs. Osmond, is all I know. I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and
I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our deliberate making, you don't like to be reminded of that, I know; but I'm perfectly willing, because—because—' And he paused a moment, looking as if he had something to say which would be very much to the point. 'Because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing!' (PL pp. 536-537)

This is the only occasion when one sees Osmond being visibly agitated about something and volubly expressive of his distaste for the prospect of Isabel's visit to Ralph which he calls "dishonourable, indelicate and indecent." For Isabel too this incident is clearly a landmark in her relationship with Osmond because during this interview she expresses her "worst thought to her husband" for the first time. She accuses him of being "unjust" and of putting up an opposition to her which is "calculated" and "malignant". For both of them then this incident is what the author designates as the "crisis-point" of their relationship.

Though Osmond's insistence on their oneness sounds ridiculous in the context of their acrimonious and suspicious attitude towards each other, one can all the same see that he is pleading for a certain decorum to be preserved in a married couple's public behaviour towards each other. He is claiming a social obligation
which she owes him as long as she stays married to him.

Isabel undoubtedly feels the force of his argument because he is taking a stand on behalf of convention, on behalf of tradition itself - concepts which have been the mainstay of a civilization that he has striven all his life to represent. "He spoke in the name of something sacred and precious - the observance of a magnificent form." (PL p.537) She is vulnerable to such an argument because she too ostensibly belongs to the tradition for which he seems to be pleading. It is not as an outsider but as a subscriber of that 'form' that she seems to be trying to deviate from it and to this extent her guilt and her apparent treachery to her own kind is emphasized by Osmond. It is precisely her recognition of this which makes Isabel concede that after all Osmond might have a point in his remonstrance.

It came over her that in his wish to preserve appearances he was after all sincere, and that this, as far as it went, was a merit. (PL p.537)

Isabel seems to be literally overwhelmed by the force of Osmond's argument. By his reference to propriety and her apparent lack of comprehension about the notion he puts her on the defensive with the insinuation that she "lacked tradition."
"He spoke gravelly and almost gently" as if trying to make a recalcitrant child understand the folly of its insistence on doing a particular thing.

What ensues is a very interesting psychological parrying between Isabel and Osmond presented mostly through her consciousness. She has a fairly detached view of her husband's game, but she seems unable to withstand the force of his sophistry when it comes to the moment of action. The passage which describes the subtle turning of the tables, contains certain terms with deep Biblical overtones. He spoke in the name of something "sacred and precious...." using words which "represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one's country." Isabel has a sense of her husband's blasphemous "sophistry" which can turn her resolve for action into "slow renunciation, transformed by the blight of Osmond's touch." In an earlier instance also Osmond had told Isabel that he has a great worship for propriety. (PL p.312) Isabel too at one time thought that to love and possess "the finest - the subtlest manly organism" named Osmond was an act of devotion. (PL p.428) (Italics mine).

In the use of the religious terminology, there are two distinct processes involved. As long as Isabel is merely observing the nature of Osmond's adherence to
form, the references to it are straightforward, untinted with any evaluative remarks. But when the analogy is brought to the context of their relationship, a negative tone predominates her observation. Terms like "blasphemous sophistry -" is a strange collocation where the sense of accomplishment embodied in the word 'sophistry' is made a mockery and a profanity because of the 'intent' in the ardour expended for it. The whole 'intent of his sophistry has been to bedevil Isabel to the point of coercing her into a "renunciation" which is "slow" because it is done unwillingly. In the "transformation" of her spontaneity of action and purity of intent, there is a retardation, a regression which is further reinforced by the phrase "the blight of Osmond's touch."

In such observations an objectivity is maintained and because of the clarity afforded by objectivity, Isabel is able to make a distinction in her situation. "If she must renounce, however, she would let him know she was a victim rather than a dupe." (PL p.537) It is as though she sees herself in a new light and is thus able to take stock of the overall situation. And in the context of this distinction that Isabel can now maintain about her individuality, one can begin to comprehend her
last irrevocable decision to return to Rome.

In "organising an ado" about Isabel Archer, her return to Rome is the cornerstone of the framework. If there is a denouement in the story in the traditional sense of the term, it is not in the revelation of countess Gemini to Isabel about Osmond's relationship with Mme Merle. Neither is it Mme Merle telling Isabel that it was actually Ralph who had made her a rich girl; nor the admission that she (Mme Merle) had "everything" to do with Osmond; nor is it Goodwood's reappearance at Gardencourt and his physical encounter with Isabel. It is not even the brief scene that Isabel observes unseen where Osmond is seated while Mme Merle is standing but in an attitude and proximity in glance and stance as only friends of long standing can acquire. The real denouement takes place without any fanfare or fuss and is merely a reported event. Isabel returns quietly to Rome, to her husband and all the obligations of her relationship with him. This is a surprising event because all the events prior to this pointed to the possibility of a final breach between her and Osmond. The denouement is in the debunking of all logical expectations about Isabel's action in the context.
Though this action does seem contradictory, it is to be remembered that at no point in her life does she contemplate leaving Osmond. She does go to England despite the strongest opposition put up by him but then the events immediately prior to this had greatly re-inforced her desire to see Ralph for the last time. After countess Gemini reveals everything about Osmond's past to her, her instinctive cry is for Ralph, rather than for herself.

'Ah, I must see Ralph!' Isabel wailed, not in resentment, not in the quick passion her companion had looked for; but in a tone of far-reaching sadness. (PL p.549).

Her concern is for Ralph but the 'infinite sadness' is for herself because deep in her heart she knows that inspite of everything there can be no drastic change in her life. There is an instance during the night of her vigil described in Ch. 42 when the idea of a separation from Osmond does enter her mind - but this too in an oblique manner as though she had gathered it from Osmond's attitude, as though it originated from his mind.

...he had had the revelation that she could after all dispense with him. If to her-self the idea was startling, if it presented itself at first as a kind of infidelity, a capacity for pollution, what infinite effect might it not be expected to have had upon him? (PL p.433).
Another instance when such an eventuality occurs to her is when she is taking a solitary walk soon after a visit from Mme Merle. She now realises why Osmond married her and how this lady was instrumental in bringing them together in the first place. And now that Osmond had her money, she ruminates, "would he take her money and let her go?" (PL p.520).

The only direct allusion to their separation is when she tells Osmond on the eve of her departure for England.

'I suppose that if I go you'll not expect me to come back." (PL p.538).

Osmond's response to it is characteristic of his attitude as it is genuine and unstudied at this instance. 'Are you out of your mind?' he enquired. Here too she seems to try to put the onus on Osmond if a separation did take place eventually.

On her arrival at London, referring to Osmond's great displeasure at her action, she replies to Henrietta's question. "He will though" Isabel answered gravely. 'It won't be the scene of a moment; it will be a scene of the rest of my life.' (PL p.565) (italics mine).
After having had those revelations during her vigil, after having come to realise the true nature of Osmond and even after learning of the relationship between him and Mme Merle, Isabel can have a vision of her future such as this. However, such an attitude is not new, she had earlier told Henrietta, "I cannot publish my mistake. I don't think that that's decent. I'd much rather die" (PL p.488).

If this sounds a bit hypocritical and vain, one is reminded of her mental stock taking in Ch. 42 of the reasons and inducements which culminated in her marriage to Osmond. She has enough moral integrity and honesty to acknowledge her responsibility for her marriage.

It might feed her sense of bitterness, but it would not loosen her bonds. It was impossible to pretend that she had not acted with her eyes open; if ever a girl was a free agent she had been. A girl in love was doubtless not a free agent; but the sole source of her mistake had been within herself. There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked and considered and chosen. When a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one way to repair it - just immensely (oh, with the highest grandeur!) to accept it. One folly was enough, especially when it was to last for ever; a second one would not much set it off. (PL p. 495) (italics mine).

It is noteworthy that this mental resolve takes
shape in her mind long before she learns of the facts of Osmond's past. But even so, the sense of betrayal she feels here is much greater and deeper than when eventually she learns of Osmond's relationship with Mme Merle. She feels let down and betrayed by Osmond on the emotional and spiritual level and these considerations count more with her than any ostensible, physically verifiable acts committed against her.

"She lost herself in infinite dismay when she thought of the magnitude of his deception." (PL p.428).

And because such deception cannot be countermanded by any retaliatory measure, nor is it in her grain to take such a step, Isabel's acceptance of her lot is made long before her trip to England. This trip merely brings forth all the suppressed antagonism and suspicion each has of the other but it can not lead to any open or final breach between them.

In a different way, Isabel too admires 'propriety' and the aristocratic way of life but what a difference there is between her ideal of it and Osmond's.

...but they attached such different ideas, such different associations and desires, to the same formulas, her notion of the
Aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude. He was fond of the old, the consecrated, the transmitted; so was she, but she pretended to do what she chose with it. He had an immense esteem for tradition; he had told her once that the best thing in the world was to have it, but that if one was so unfortunate as not to have it one must immediately proceed to make it. She knew that he meant by this that she hadn't it, but that he was better off; though from what source he had derived his traditions she never learned. (PL p.431)

The basic difference between them then lies in this that while he puts a greater premium on the outer circumstances and forms of life, she values the freedom of spirit and beauty of mind. His attitude to life is prosaic whereas she strives after pure poetry. That in reality such an ideal life cannot be had is made very clear. This recognition is one of the most vital discoveries that Isabel makes during her intense soul-searching. And her subsequent actions only prove her acceptance of this inalienable fact of life.

But this base ignoble world, it appeared, was after all what one was to live for; one was to keep it for ever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority. On the one hand it was despicable, but on the other it afforded a standard. (PL p.430)
Her return to Rome after Ralph's death is therefore the compromise she strikes with the 'ignoble' world of Osmond not by way of conforming with it but "to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority."

After her experiences Isabel has to redefine her concept of tradition but would no longer suffer by thinking that she lacked it. She too is concerned about having and upholding tradition and is, in her own way conventional to a degree. When she reaches Gardencourt and visits with Ralph he tells her that if there is a measure of disappointment in her life, if she has not been able "to look at life for herself," it's because she has been "ground in the very mill of the conventional." (p.577) She herself proves his point when she tells him that she'd stay at Gardencourt "as long as seems right" and asserts that one must think a great deal about that.

Given such a temperament and attitude to life, Isabel can never totally wean herself away from the influence of Osmond and though she recognises his faults and shortcomings, there are certain aspects of his personality which she cannot help admiring even at the
most intense moments of alienation from him. As an illustration of this there is the case of little Pansy's banishment to the convent after Lord Warburton leaves Rome without proposing to her. A typical Osmondian stroke, calculated to arrest Isabel's enthusiasm, to defy her if possible but at any rate to show her to what extent his devilish sophistication can lead him.

Pansy's departure for the convent has been arranged without the slightest hint to Isabel. It is only when the little girl comes to bid her step-mother good-bye, that Isabel realises what a masterful stroke this project has been and thinks to herself "that he had more traditions than she supposed." (PL p.531).

Osmond's speech to Isabel regarding the subject beginning with the blunt dismissal that she wouldn't at any rate, understand why he had decided to send Pansy to the convent again, aims to confine Isabel within a certain psychological isolation slot thus establishing the difference between their respective backgrounds. Her exclusion from the scheme of things is only too apparent and he takes a disgustingly patronising tone which not only slights her capacity for understanding but also dismisses her altogether from the completed
picture as it were. Isabel realizes however why Osmond has acted in this way.

...but she understood it better than he supposed or desired, in as much as she was convinced that the whole proceeding was an elaborate mystification addressed to herself and destined to act upon her imagination. He had wanted to do something unexpected and refined; to mark the difference between his sympathies and her own, and show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more and more careful about the finishing touches. If he wished to be effective he had succeeded; the incident struck a chill into Isabel's heart. (PL p.532)

Isabel's reaction arises from the recognition that it's not a father's possessive love or protective concern for Pansy out of which he has masterminded her return to the convent. He talks of her as though she is a rag doll become a bit 'dusty and dishevelled' for the rough handling it has been subjected to. She has therefore been sent to the convent so that she can be restructured according to his specifications. Osmond has thus reduced his daughter's human value and has turned her into a mere pawn in the subtly sinister psychological warfare that he is waging against Isabel. And hence the 'chill' in Isabel's heart.

In his long speech to Isabel, Osmond makes an intriguing remark about society. Unlike all previous
remarks and references, this one displays a potent contempt for what he calls 'this bustling, pushing rabble that calls itself society.' His attack here can be interpreted as an attempt to establish his superiority over the 'rabble' within society of which Isabel is obviously a member, according to him. Thus he is once again isolating Isabel from the exclusive circle within society where he thinks he belongs.

What an ironical fate for Isabel who had thought earlier -

She would have been willing, however to renounce all her curiosities and sympathies for the sake of a personal life, if the person concerned had only been able to make her believe it was a gain. This at best was her present conviction; and the thing certainly would have been easier than to care for society as Osmond cared for it. (PL p.430)

The 'personal life' that Isabel envisioned would be one within an enchanted circle where art, beauty and sophistication would merely enhance the sense of achievement and contentment. The bonds of personal relationships and commitments would be sacrosanct, shielded away from prying eyes and maneuvering minds. Each would surrender to the other with no expectations save those of reciprocity of feelings and the responsibility of
commitments. Indeed a truly poetic vision of life out of which the concerns of the 'base, ignoble world' have been banished totally. It is in pursuit of such an ideal life that Isabel is seen "affronting her destiny" trying at various stages in her career to break away from a predestined mould. But the supreme irony in her destiny has been that the one person whom she thought 'a person of so fine a grain,' turns out to be the exact opposite.

Isabel's tragedy lies in being what she is. Osmond, she believes, hates her for having a mind of her own - but it is this "remarkable mind" of hers which had induced her to admire and adore him in the first place. Her failure to grasp at the essence of his character can be compared to the costly mistake of a self-educated connoisseur of art who invests all his wealth on what he considers to be a genuine and valuable work of art - only to discover later that it is only a clever forgery. This seems to be an apt analogy because Isabel does seem bent on achieving a relationship best realised in the realms of poetry rather than in felt life. Juliet McMaster makes this remark, "What James has shown in Isabel and increasingly as the novel progresses, is life straining towards the condition of art.\(^2\) (p.63)

Isabel's return to Rome does show her as caring for society as Osmond does— for its outward norms and niceties, for the preservation of appearances. But the Isabel who goes back to Rome goes back armed with a certain knowledge, knowledge gained from her experience of being manipulated and maneuvered, of having been made use of in the most base and materialistic way. But, to quote her own words she is not a mere 'dupe' though a 'victim'. She is now aware of what has happened, is now conscious of the reality around her. This consciousness now is not one of merely 'knowing' what has happened but, more important, it is one of recognising and acknowledging her own part in her tragedy. This awareness is both of the outward circumstances as well as of her own self and motives. And if this new consciousness can be termed the 'new knowledge' then it is certainly the mark of a psychological maturity. Viewed from this angle, her return to Osmond is not merely for form's sake but can be seen as her acceptance of her own responsibility for her marriage.

In spite of her naive, imaginative and egotistical nature, the one consistent aspect of her personality is her moral conviction about the rightness of her decisions.
She marries Osmond out of such a belief, out of her 
"ardent good faith" in him and in the end she goes 
back to him because she believes that "certain obliga-
tions were involved in the very fact of marriage and 
were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment 
extracted from it." (PL p.581) Taken in isolation the 
statement does smack of a certain puritanism - but in 
Isabel's context, it only affirms her moral consistency.

Any attempt to rationalise Isabel's life and 
actions, however, must account for her being an American 
but as Dorothea Kroot warns, to take Isabel as merely 
representing the "weaker side of the American national 
character" with all her "sentimental nonsense about life 
and art and Europe and gracious living" would be to 
"drain the whole central relationship of the book of 
its tragic meaning, and a fortiori to diminish almost 
out of existence Isabel Archer's stature as a tragic 
heroine."5

In as much as Osmond is seen as the symbol of 
the magnetic charm of the old-world civilization, Isabel's 
career becomes the love-hate relationship of the newly 

awakened American consciousness with the old civilization. In her return to Osmond there is just a hint of the possible synthesis of the old civilization with the new energy and vitality of America as symbolized by Isabel. This is perhaps the possibility that Philip Rahv sees in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

In the Portrait James is still hesitating between the attitude of Mme Merle and that of Isabel, and his irony is provoked by the excessive claims advanced by both sides.6

However, Isabel's return to Rome must be seen not only as preserving the psychological coherence in her character but also as meeting the requirement of an artistic need, because this final act of hers heightens the sense of ambiguity of actions and intentions much more than anything else in the novel.

James's later heroines like Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl* might be able to articulate that synthesis of two equally energetic and scintillating world-views but as of the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady*, his heroine stands out in "splendid isolation" in her "humane consciousness," stranded between the realms of poetry and of ordinariness.

6Philip Rahv, *The Heiress of all the Ages*, (p.116).