Romance in Henry James' "The Portrait of a Lady": A Study of Duality

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ROMANCE IN HENRY JAMES'S THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY:

A STUDY OF DUALITY

A Thesis

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Maria Elizabeth Litzendorf

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of the romance on Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady. Section I establishes the working definition of romance. The various links between James and the romance help identify James’s interest in duality, and the central question which emerges in The Portrait of a Lady is how to resolve duality. Section II traces the dualities developed throughout the novel and within Isabel herself. Ultimately, America and Europe, good and evil, light and dark, and action and servitude will all be a part of Isabel’s experience. Section III explores Isabel’s transformation from a creature of light to one of darkness embodied in her husband Osmond. Lastly, section IV addresses Isabel’s final rejection of Caspar Goodwood and her return to Rome at the end of the novel.

The dualities that dominate Isabel’s development owe a debt to the romance, yet James refuses to resolve his plot in terms of one duality for the other. Instead, he forces a recognition of the complexity of humanity, and directs his reader forward to the future of Pansy.
ROMANCE IN HENRY JAMES’S THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY:

A STUDY OF DUALITY
Henry James and the romance have been linked by numerous critics. Indeed, James himself examines in various writings the romance and its usefulness for his purposes. However, because romance has been so often defined and qualified, the term's evolution and range must be considered in order to examine the relationship between the romance and James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. A useful definition of romance is made by comparison to the genre that historically follows-- the novel. Elsa Nettels explores the distinction between the romance and the novel, beginning with Clara Reeve's definition: “The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. --The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written. The Romance, in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen” (Reeve qtd. in Nettels 81). Nettels uses Reeve's definition as a basis to contrast James's own analysis of the romance. By drawing on James's “Art of Fiction” and Preface to *The American* Nettels shows how James transforms Reeve's definition of romance, thus blurring the distinction between the romance and the novel:

In “The Art of Fiction” James rejects the idea that “adventure” is necessarily a matter of duels and pirates and buried treasure. A
“psychological reason,” he asserts, can be as rich in pictorial value and dramatic interest as a kidnaping or a shipwreck. Elaboration of this point in the preface to The American leads James to his fullest definition of romance. Observing that many people have identified romance simply by the presence of caravans or ghosts or forgers or wicked women, he contends that “the idea of the facing of danger,” to which these elements are reducible, is not of itself romantic. “The panting pursuit of danger is the pursuit of life itself, in which danger awaits us possibly at every step and faces us at every turn.” (84)

Where romance was once “the remote, the strange, the marvellous, the improbable,” James adopts a view that makes romance possible in the daily life of an average person (Nettels 84). Romance is possible because it can go beyond unlikely or preternatural events to become an analysis of the fundamental dangers inherent in life. As such, romance for James becomes strikingly like the novel, “a picture of real life and manners.” James’s interest in a “psychological reason” for adventure produces a romance that does not rely solely on outward action. The narrative of Isabel Archer, in The Portrait of a Lady, with her primarily psychological battle against the forces of evil, namely Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, supports James’s revision of the romance and is, according to Nettels, “[James’s] most detailed portrait of a romantic personality” producing “the narrative which best exemplifies his power to transform the plot of romantic melodrama into a drama of inward action” (101). In doing so, James
uses romantic traditions, the struggle between light and dark, and good and evil, to illustrate his central tenent that good and evil do coexist and knowledge of both is essential.

Although it seems from the above discussion that James wishes to distance himself from the traditional romance, Elissa Greenwald discussing James’s biography of Hawthorne (1879) points out that “despite his overt critique of romance, James’s most powerful, almost unconscious responses are to aspects of Hawthorne’s work identified with romance” (28). Citing Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, Greenwald argues that “though James rejects Hawthorne’s use of the symbolic and supernatural in Hawthorne, these elements return in transformed guise in The Portrait of a Lady,” a novel James outlined in 1878, the same year according to Leon Edel, that he began his study of Hawthorne (Greenwald 28, Edel in Bamberg vii). In addition to Hawthorne’s use of symbolism and the supernatural, Greenwald addresses an additional aspect of Hawthorne’s romance: what she calls the picturesque, “a mode containing strong contrasts, to illustrate the simultaneous presence of good and evil in the past” (17). It is a mode relying on contrasts of light and shadow to illustrate not “moral oppositions” but rather the complexities of “moral issues” (Greenwald 17). In other words, it is by virtue of the simultaneous existence of light and shadow, representing good and evil respectively, that the picturesque of Hawthorne’s romance “exploits ambiguity and ambivalence to provide a complexity akin to that of Jamesian realism” (Price qtd. in Greenwald 17). Thus, James’s romance becomes heavily
invested in Hawthorne’s “picturesque,” and does not preclude depiction of “life itself.”

The contrasts between light and shadow and good and evil that define Hawthorne’s picturesque need to be evaluated in terms of the larger discussion of dualities. A non-Hawthomian perspective on the picturesque by Edwin Fussell maintains the importance of contrast: “[the picturesque] referred to anything that might be felt to possess unusual possibilities for such representation [in a sketchbook] and preservation, anything with a high degree of more or less enduring visual interest (complexity, variety, subtlety, typicality, rarity, novelty, importance, and so forth)” (29). Although Hawthorne’s juxtaposition of good and evil is absent in Fussell’s analysis, both Greenwald and Fussell acknowledge that complexity is associated with the picturesque. Indeed, it is precisely complexity that defines James’s heroine, Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Neither contrast nor duality is confined to definitions of the picturesque. In fact, Isabel’s complexity has not only been attributed to “the picturesque,” but has also been linked to the philosophies of Emerson and Blake. The contrasts are drawn by Emerson thus: “we have two things, --the circumstance, and the life. Once we thought positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half” (Emerson qtd. in Porte 3). The oppositions are clear, but rather than emphasizing the polarity of either, Porte asserts that “Isabel will learn the further Emersonian lesson of compensation-- that things go by halves indeed, and that nothing can be considered purely evil” (3). Again, as in Hawthorne’s analysis of the romance, the central duality
is good and evil. The question that emerges is how do good and evil function together, through the perceptions, actions, and transformation of Isabel Archer?

For James Gargano, Isabel is “so diverse that her contradictory qualities can be more easily experienced than reconciled” (124). However, Martha Banta in *Henry James and the Occult* introduces Theodora Bosanquet’s analysis “that James contracted two ‘marriages’ with Romance and Experience (translation: romanticism and realism)... that he tried to merge the marriages into a single union” (73). As *The Portrait of a Lady* unifies romance and realism, so does Isabel become a figure of reconciled contradictions. Through her quest for knowledge, James reveals the complexities of the human spirit that defy simple definition as good or evil.

In *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination* Daniel Fogel notes William Blake’s connection to James’s use of contrasts. Blake tackles the question of duality in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* stating “Without contraries is no progression” (xvi). Like Emerson, Blake acknowledges the existence of oppositions, or “contraries,” but Blake emphasizes movement beyond opposition towards progress. Not only do “positive and negative power” coexist, for Blake; together, they liberate. In Fogel’s discussion of the “spiral dialectic” as the “typically Romantic design,” he notes that Blake’s description of the spiral dialectic as a motion from ‘innocence’ through ‘experience’ to ‘organized innocence’ seems particularly useful for students of Henry James” (4). Again, the influence of the romance is cited for several characteristics of James’s work. Blake and the spiral dialectic establish the foundation
for both the juxtaposition of opposites and the movement towards reconciliation of "innocence" and "experience," or good and evil.

Thus, numerous philosophies on duality have been linked to James. Hawthorne, Emerson, and Blake each offer a perspective on how thesis and antithesis function. Indeed, the paradigm for developing a "portrait" of Isabel is established by Hawthorne's use of the "picturesque" as the contrasting natures of light and dark, and good and evil. James takes these dualities and expands them, incorporating additional "romantic symbols" used by Hawthorne. Greenwald describes the progression of Hawthorne's romance: "Hawthorne initially locates romance in a realm of ghostly reflections; by his last preface, however, romance finds a 'local habitation and a name' in Europe" (14). Similarly, James uses the ghost of Gardencourt to frame his narrative, while also identifying Europe, or the foreign, with the romantic as it is perceived by Isabel. Although James finds Hawthorne's use of symbolism and the picturesque problematic, he nonetheless adapts both, "[seeking] to capture the psychological effects of romance without some of its more fantastic mechanisms" (Greenwald 29). The result, as Greenwald states, is "that James 'realizes' Hawthorne's romance. But by adapting romance, James redefined the nature of novelistic representation and of the 'reality' the novel represents. Romance provides intensity and vividness through its symbolism and use of extremes. At the same time, it creates a sense of mystery and enchantment" (35).

James defines his own vision of the romance in his Preface to The American:
"The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals--experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, desencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it" (1064). His famous balloon metaphor follows:

The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated; we only swing apart from the globe--though remaining as exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well. The art of the romancer is, "for the fun of it," insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him. (1064)

James's description of romance coincides with Isabel's notions of the world "as a place of ... free expansion" (54). Isabel's sense of liberty is derived from this preliminary view of the world, and clearly marks her as a romantic figure. Not only does she fulfill James's above stated definition for the romantic, she also embodies Hawthorne's "picturesque" of the romantic: contrasts, oppositions, and complexity.

James describes his conception of Isabel in his preface: "It was naturally of the essence that the young woman should be herself complex; that was rudimentary—or was at any rate the light in which Isabel Archer had originally dawned. It went, however, but a certain way, and other lights, contending, conflicting lights, and of as many
different colours, if possible, as the rockets, the Roman candles and Catherine-wheels of a 'pyrotechnic display' would be employable to attest that she was” (12). Thus, The Portrait of a Lady examines the consequences of complexity as Isabel is forced to acknowledge several sets of dualities both within herself and the world at large, the central one being good and evil. As James merges the romance and the novel, he adapts the philosophies of Hawthorne, Emerson and Blake, ultimately resolving the oppositions within his heroine, Isabel Archer.
II

Isabel Archer has aptly been described as “contradictory” (Gargano 124). Indeed, Henry James’s portrait of Isabel inherently relies on contrasts, informed by Hawthorne’s use of the picturesque, that are played against each other throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel’s primary identity is as an American, yet that identity is itself contradictory. Tony Tanner notes that “James habitually described America as being, as it were, all light—bright, glaring, and unsubtle” (73). Indeed, the relationship of light to America is drawn early in the novel through Mr. Touchett’s concern for Ralph’s future: “it seemed to him equally simple that his lawful heir should after his death carry on the grey old bank in the white American light. He was at pains to intensify this light, however, by sending the boy home for his education” (43). It is therefore in keeping with her identity as an American that Isabel defines a life worth living as “[moving] in a realm of light, of natural wisdom, of happy impulse” (54). That “she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, or irresistible action” further secures Isabel’s American or “light” consciousness, as well as her regard for action and liberty (54).

Although Isabel’s first appearance in the novel, in Gardencourt, supports these associations, her original condition back in Albany shows her to be distinctly different.
While physically in America James’s American heroine is not drawn to light or action. Instead, she sits in a room of “mysterious melancholy,” “the most depressed room of the house” from which she “had never opened the bolted door nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its side-light; she had never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond” (33). Her bodily inaction is emphasized by James’s contrasting elaborate description of Isabel’s active mind: “she had spent much ingenuity in training [her mind] to a military step and teaching it to advance, to halt, to retreat, to perform even more complicated manoeuvres, at the word of command” (33-4). Action exists only in Isabel’s mind, where it will primarily exist throughout the novel. While Isabel’s mind is thus engaged, she sits, content to “never [open] the bolted door,” confined in a room that resonates darkness (33). Even after Mrs. Touchett’s visit and offer to Isabel to take her abroad, Isabel retreats to darkness, “[moving] about the room, and from one room to another, preferring the places where the vague lamplight expired” (39).

The desire for liberty is established early in Isabel’s life. Her experience at the “Dutch House,” a primary school, sets the tone for Isabel’s future ideas of liberty that she ultimately subverts:

having spent a single day in [the primary school], she had protested against its laws and had been allowed to stay at home, where, in the September days, when the windows of the Dutch House were open, she used to hear the hum of childish voices repeating the multiplication-
table-- an incident in which the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion were indistinguishably mingled. (33)

Even liberty exists as both “positive” and “negative,” being a source of both “elation” and “pain.” The groundwork for Isabel’s consciousness of extremes, or duality, is thus established.

The problem that emerges from this consciousness is one of choice. Not only does choice necessitate action, it also excludes one possibility in favor of the other. For Isabel, having a choice means having freedom. Conversely, as Donatello Izzo notes, the act of choosing “becomes a limitation of one’s infinite potential” (33). He describes yet another aspect of Isabel’s contradictory consciousness:

Paradoxically, it follows from Isabel’s idea of self and freedom that only passivity can ensure freedom, since every action is a choice and, therefore, a limitation of one’s self. Indeed, it is Isabel’s imagination that is described as “active” from the very beginning. We witness mainly her mental activity, while her concrete actions and her very choices tend to be mostly negative and to reinforce her passivity: Isabel chooses not to marry Warburton, not to marry Goodwood, and to marry Osmond so as not to make any more decisions concerning her actions.

(37)

Nevertheless, soon after her arrival at Gardencourt Isabel articulates her desire “to choose” when Mrs. Touchett responds to Isabel’s “taking what seems to [her] too
much liberty” (67). Because Isabel lacks knowledge of what is proper behavior in England, she wishes to stay up late with her cousin and Lord Warburton. Although she assents to her aunt’s prohibition, the exchange that follows reveals two central tenets of Isabel’s consciousness: her desire for knowledge along with her lack of it, and her desire for liberty. For Isabel, the complexities of choice are a result of her lack of knowledge of evil. Still, her limited choices together with choices made for her by Ralph, Madame Merle, and Osmond, will facilitate Isabel’s knowledge of evil.

Isabel’s inherent contradictions are thus established early in the novel. The peril lies both with the contradictions themselves, and Isabel’s naivete. James identifies Isabel’s “high spirit” to foreshadow the consequences of her contradictions: “Of course, the danger of a high spirit was the danger of inconsistency— the danger of keeping up the flag after the place has surrendered, a sort of behavior so crooked as to be almost a dishonour to the flag. But Isabel, who knew little of the sorts of artillery to which young women are exposed, flattered herself that such contradictions would never be noted in her own conduct” (54). However, contradictions are noted in Isabel’s conduct by Mr. Touchett who remarks to her, “I forget whether you’re on the side of the old or on the side of the new. I’ve heard you take such opposite views” (71). Indeed, she does. Though an American, who defines a life worth living as “[moving] in a realm of light, of natural wisdom, of happy impulse,” Isabel in America has seemingly rejected the very ideals she espouses upon her arrival in England (54). She exists purely within her notions of being an American, expressing a desire for light, action and
liberty, while ultimately revealing tendencies to the polar opposites of darkness, servitude and inaction.

Underlying the above tendencies is Isabel’s yearning for and association with the foreign. She is described by her brother-in-law as being “written in a foreign tongue” (38); she prefers knowledge that is “tinged with the unfamiliar” (53); she is perceived by the young men in Albany as “a goddess in an epic” (41). The very connection between Isabel, an American, to the foreign, or more specifically Europe, illustrates James’s belief that Europe provides a “greater...number of potential sources of knowledge” (Tanner 68). Although Isabel clearly lacks knowledge, her association with the foreign foreshadows her subsequent knowledge of evil. Indeed, by using Rome as the scene for Isabel’s discovery of evil, James borrows from Hawthorne’s ideas on the romance.

In his preface to *The Marble Faun*, where Italy is the symbolic source of evil, Hawthorne explains his choice of setting: “No author, without trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land” (3). Where America is “broad and simple daylight,” Italy is “shadow,” “antiquity,” “mystery,” and “picturesque and gloomy wrong.” Isabel, in Italy and in Osmond, will discover the very same characteristics Hawthorne imputes to Italy. Thus, Isabel’s romantic compulsions are in concert with Hawthorne’s view of the romance,
and take on more symbolic characteristics as Isabel discovers the ultimate knowledge, a knowledge of evil. Although Isabel yearns for the foreign, she does not specifically identify a yearning for evil. Rather, she couches the foreign in more “picturesque” ideas of the romantic. Nevertheless, Isabel’s American innocence is neatly juxtaposed with European evil.

Despite Isabel’s bodily inaction in Albany, her active mind and her desire to live a life of “happy impulse” together create a sense of action that is informed by her desire for the picturesque romantic. She responds to the Civil War with “passionate excitement, in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valour of either army” (41); she “[sometimes wishes] that she might find herself in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded” (54); discussing England with Mr. Touchett she exclaims, “Oh, I do hope they’ll have a revolution! ...I should delight in seeing a revolution.” She goes on to affirm her interest in the picturesque: “In a revolution--after it was well begun-- I think I should be a high, proud loyalist. One sympathizes with them, and they’ve a chance to behave so exquisitely. I mean so picturesquely” (71); anticipating Lord Warburton’s political reactions she states, “But if I were he I should wish to fight to the death: I mean for the heritage of the past. I should hold it tight” (75); Isabel’s thoughts on Caspar Goodwood are equally romantic: “It pleased Isabel to believe that he might have ridden, on a plunging steed, the whirlwind of a great war-- a war like the Civil strife that had overdarkened her conscious childhood
and his ripening youth” (106). The impetus for Isabel’s ideas of action, then, is early on confined within romantic ideals expunged of the realities of war or of “a difficult position.” After all, Isabel has yet to experience evil in the world, so her romantic notions are necessarily void of any evil.

Isabel’s notions of the romantic are evident upon her arrival at Gardencourt, where the search for knowledge becomes framed by a desire to see a ghost. The ghost is a signal of the romantic that Isabel associates with Gardencourt, telling Ralph “You ought to [see ghosts], in this romantic old house” (50). Although Isabel will not see a ghost until the end of the novel, the circumstances necessary for her to see the ghost drive the ensuing narrative. Ralph describes the requirements: “You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it” (52). Since Isabel herself recognizes in Albany “that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge,” her search for knowledge through the “unpleasant” is easily transformed into the more menacing search for some “miserable knowledge” (39). Thus the scene is staged for Isabel’s discovery, through her initial attraction to the romantic, of what constitutes the foreign. Superficially, of course, it is Europe. More substantive to Isabel’s quest, however, is Europe’s association with a romantic past, and the veiled, initially at least, threat of evil that is implied in the foreign.

James’s heroine, created from numerous contradictions, is throughout most of the novel stifled by them. Her relative inability to act, despite her intense desire to have
choices, signals both Isabel’s desire for liberty, and her marked lack of knowledge.
Isabel does make several choices, but they function to facilitate her ultimate goal:
knowledge of the foreign and by extension, knowledge of evil, or as Ralph describes it,
“miserable knowledge.” First, she accepts her aunt’s invitation to go abroad. Mrs.
Touchett’s invitation places Isabel squarely on foreign ground, physically giving her the
means to experience the more subtle components of the foreign. Isabel accepts the
invitation because it coincides with her attraction to the foreign and the romantic.
Second, she rejects Caspar Goodwood, as well as Warburton. Finally, Isabel chooses
Osmond, a choice which will propel Isabel to her discovery of evil.

Isabel’s rejection of Caspar Goodwood is a complex choice. Nevertheless, the
initial rejection can be dealt with in relatively simple terms. Goodwood, for several
reasons, does not fulfill Isabel’s interest in the foreign. On the most basic level,
Goodwood is an American, and is thus not foreign to Isabel who is also an American.
He is associated with American ideals of light, a direct opposition to Isabel’s attraction
for darkness. Goodwood first appears in the novel “standing near the lamp” in Isabel’s
house in Albany (42). As Isabel actively seeks darkness, it is not surprising that she
rejects Goodwood, who will ultimately blind her with his kiss of “white lightening” at
the end of the novel (489). Moreover, he is described in pointedly unromantic
language: “He was not romantically, he was much rather obscurely handsome” (42).

Warburton, although not an American, is also cast in terms of light: “he wore a
white hat, which looked too large for him; he held his two hands behind him, and in one
of them-- a large white, well-shaped fist-- was crumpled a pair of soiled dog-skin gloves” (19). For Warburton, the white of his hat and hands do not signal an American identity, but can be seen in terms of the romantic “white knight” symbol. He should, then, appeal to Isabel precisely because of his stature as a romantic hero. After all, when enquiring of Warburton she states “Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it’s just like a novel!” (27). However, Isabel rejects Warburton as well, suggesting that she has moved beyond both experiencing passively through books in Albany, and validating knowledge she has from books, to actually ensuring the possibility of experiencing as she states, “what most people know and suffer” (119).

Thus, the rejection of Warburton is threefold. First, Warburton is represented by white, and Isabel’s attraction is to darkness. Second, although he fulfills Isabel’s notions of the romantic, Isabel’s search for knowledge goes beyond the romantic towards “some miserable knowledge.” She rejects his offer of marriage because a life with him would preclude suffering, and hence preclude Isabel’s complete experience of the foreign which houses both the romantic and evil. Isabel identifies her fate with unhappiness, and explains her refusal of Warburton’s offer based on her inability to escape her “fate.” Thus her rejection of Warburton is in concert with her search for some “miserable knowledge.” Lastly, Warburton’s rejection affirms Isabel’s pointed American desire for liberty and action, despite her previously voiced acceptance of fate. For an alliance with Warburton would confine Isabel within a system, and would define her in the same terms as the Misses Molyneux, who although they are kind, are passive,
and thus in direct opposition to Isabel’s American ideals of impulse or action.

Although Isabel actively rejects Warburton she continues to exhibit more action mentally than she does outwardly. She will, throughout the remainder of the novel, be acted upon, have choices made for her, by Ralph, Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. She will relinquish her American desire for light, action and liberty for the darkness, inaction and servitude prescribed by her husband Osmond. The contradictions in Isabel that were so much a part of her character at the start of the novel seemingly disappear as Isabel becomes immersed in the realities of darkness, just as earlier she was immersed in the realities of light embodied within Gardencourt. Isabel “chooses” darkness, experiences it, and ultimately incorporates it into her own psyche, producing a balanced picture of humanity where good and evil coexist. Ultimately, Isabel’s desire for liberty can only be realized after she has knowledge of evil. Armed with this knowledge, Isabel becomes capable of making real choices, whereas before, without knowledge of both “light” and “dark” her choices are uninformed, and a moot testament of her character. It is precisely character that is examined at the close of the novel. There, Isabel makes a final choice, a choice to reject Caspar Goodwood yet again, and return to Rome, to Osmond and to Pansy.
II

Upon her arrival at Gardencourt Isabel is immersed in a reality that validates one side of several dualities: light (as opposed to the darkness of Albany), and action (as opposed to her inaction while in Albany). Gardencourt itself becomes one side of another duality that develops between houses, juxtaposing Gardencourt to Osmond’s house. Isabel rejects the very idea that she herself will illustrate to some degree: that one’s home is a reflection of one’s self. Isabel argues for an inherent identity, but Madame Merle introduces the idea of identity linked to possessions: “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” (175). Ironically, it is not Isabel’s possessions that mark her, but Osmond’s, as she is assimilated into his collection, and becomes not a “possessor of things” but “a thing possessed.” In this light, Madame Merle’s above statement is prophetic.

Ralph’s contemplation of Isabel as a house early in the novel establishes a pattern of comparison. We are told that “he surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. The door was fastened, and though he had keys in his pocket
he had a conviction that none of them would fit” (64). Where Ralph sees Isabel directly as a house, the comparison is developed more subtly by James until Isabel actually occupies Osmond’s house. There, Isabel is part of what physically makes up the house, becoming as James Gargano describes, “a drawing-room ornament whose manner, dress, and surroundings reflect her husband’s aestheticism” (127).

In Albany, Isabel simply reflects the rooms she chooses to occupy, rather than embodying the whole house. Consequently, her choice of the library, “the most depressed room of the house,” illustrates Isabel’s attraction to darkness and inaction. Where she had a choice of rooms in Albany, Osmond’s house offers no such choice, as each room is a reflection of Osmond. However, Gardencourt produces a different Isabel, one who is able to embrace the other side of those dualities: light and action. Gardencourt is, as Darshan Maini states, a stark contrast to the “sheltered house in Albany” and represents for Isabel a new Eden, and thus new possibilities (7). Before, while in Albany, Isabel’s innocence was still intact, but it was untested, and confined just as she confined herself to a world of books. At Gardencourt, Isabel’s innocent notions are given a means of expression. In fact, Isabel is described both by the narrator and by herself as a garden:

Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one’s spirit was
harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many places which were not gardens at all--only dusky pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery. (56)

Isabel seemingly anticipates her very fate. Just as she reflects the possibilities of Gardencourt, a garden that facilitates expression of light, liberty and action, she will be confined by the limitations of Osmond’s house, which corresponds to the narrator’s description of “dusky pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery.”

While Gardencourt allows Isabel’s ideals of light and action to emerge, her inherent contradictions are soon evident by her attraction to Madame Merle. Even as Isabel retains her liberty by refusing Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton (although the ultimate purpose of both rejections is fulfillment of “miserable knowledge” of the foreign), she fosters a relationship that will subvert not only her liberty, but also her American ideals of light and action. In effect, Isabel becomes the opposite of what she consciously sets out to make herself, succumbing instead to her deep-rooted desires for darkness. Thus, the underlying contradictions within Isabel direct her to Madame Merle and eventually to Osmond.

Where Warburton stood as a romantic figure for Isabel, the system to which he belonged was too easily defined by his status as a lord. Madame Merle, also a romantic figure, holds Isabel’s interest precisely because she cannot be defined. The heroine in
search of knowledge is naturally more intrigued by Madame Merle, who seems to exist outside any system. Initially mistaken by Isabel as a Frenchwoman, she discloses herself to be an American, but Isabel’s interest is only heightened by Madame Merle’s seeming complications: “rarer even than to be French seemed it to be American on such interesting terms” (152).

Madame Merle directs Isabel’s attention to Osmond, another American whose identity is obscured by foreign affect: “You would have been much at a loss to determine his original clime and country; he had none of the superficial signs that usually render the answer to this question an insipidly easy one. If he had English blood in his veins it had probably received some French or Italian commixture” (197). Not only is Osmond alluring to Isabel because of his foreign aspect, he is also described in romantic terms: “This beard, cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century and surmounted by a fair moustache, of which the ends had a romantic upward flourish, gave its wearer a foreign, traditionary look and suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style” (197). Even the “points” of his face speak to Isabel’s identity as contradictory, a reflection of her own contrasts or “points.” Moreover, Isabel’s attraction to Osmond is not based solely on his foreign pretensions, but also, as Joel Porte states, on darkness (48). Thus, although it is established that Isabel “has a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness,” her attraction to the romantic and the foreign directs her to darkness (54). The contradictions within Isabel, who is “light,” are fully developed when she succumbs to the “darkness” of Osmond.
As she succumbs to Osmond, Isabel relinquishes the ideals she held at Gardencourt, relecting not light, but darkness. She subsequently reflects Osmond’s house in Florence. The transformation is from animate to inanimate, light to dark, active to passive. The house is described thus: “-- this antique, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was a mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes” (195). Ralph’s perception of Isabel is in strikingly similar language: “He should see nothing, he should learn nothing; for him she would always wear a mask... if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said-- it was a representation, it was even an advertisement” (330).

Cast in the same language as Osmond’s house, Isabel is defined as a function of Osmond.

Osmond, himself a product of artifice, of “studied style,” reveals his commitment “not to strive nor struggle... to resign [himself],” early on to Isabel (197, 227). Clearly, resignation or inaction does not coincide with Isabel’s commitment to “happy impulse” and “irresistible action.” Rather than reconciliation of these opposite ideals, Isabel relinquishes light, action and liberty in favor of Osmond’s world of darkness and inaction. The “portrait” has in effect been framed inside Osmond’s house: “She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception-- she had more of the air of being able to wait. Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man [Ned Rosier] as the
picture of a gracious lady” (310). She has therefore adopted Osmond’s inaction, “being able to wait,” and become assembled into Osmond’s collection of art. Just as Pansy is formed and maneuvered by Osmond, so Isabel has been maneuvered into Osmond’s house, and “framed in the gilded doorway... a picture...,” she becomes Osmond’s work of art. Isabel, who is introduced in the novel with a preoccupation about constructing herself as a work of art, has now become one. The result: a certain lifelessness that bespeaks Osmond’s house, and the death of the only product of Isabel’s and Osmond’s union.
The impetus for Isabel’s transformation from the light embodied in Gardencourt to the darkness of Osmond lies within Isabel herself. The contradictions around which Isabel is created are acknowledged by James in his Preface to the New York Edition as “contending, conflicting lights” and are evident from a comparison of Isabel in Albany to Isabel in Gardencourt. Henrietta, who typifies the American ideal to the extreme, nevertheless accurately assesses the shift: “She’s not the bright American girl she was. She’s taking different views, a different colour, and turning away from her old ideals” (109). Isabel adopts Osmond’s views and Osmond’s colors, and accepts a one-sided approach to the dualities noted earlier in this essay. Consequently, light, action and liberty are relinquished in favor of darkness, inaction and servitude. However, the transformation does not end there. Isabel will ultimately incorporate the darkness of Osmond, her knowledge of evil, into her psyche. The result is a testament to Isabel’s complexity and cannot be reduced simply to any of the philosophies on duality discussed earlier. Even so, the fundamental analysis of both Emerson and Blake does apply: things do exist by halves, good and evil coexist, and oppositions, even as extreme as good and evil, are necessary for progress.

Still, Isabel’s final return to Rome has sustained much speculation and criticism.
Darshan Maini summarizes the various explanations:

1. the heroine's New England sensibility and puritanical background coupled with a sacramental view of marriage,
2. her promise to Pansy and the place of the plighted word in her value-system,
3. her spiritual pride and moral aggressiveness,
4. her concern for form and appearances,
5. her sexual frigidity and emotional aridity,
6. her bourgeois world-view and a flawed view of freedom,
7. her death-wish and streak of martyrdom,
8. her sense of inner and integral freedom and her moral maturity. (18)

It is clear that critics' attitudes are split concerning Isabel. Has she reconciled light and dark, good and evil, and progressed? Or has she remained essentially unchanged, still clinging to the familiar darkness of Osmond while rejecting the possibilities of Caspar Goodwood?

The final rejection of Caspar Goodwood, the American suitor who epitomizes action and energy, is somewhat difficult to resolve considering both the closure of Isabel's knowledge of evil (Ralph dies, Isabel sees his ghost, and the quest for "miserable knowledge" is seemingly complete), and a renewal of action (Isabel leaves against Osmond's wishes, and expresses her willingness to take Pansy along). Isabel has restored energy, an implied restoration of her American liberty, so why does she
again reject Goodwood?

First, Isabel’s attitude toward passion does not favor Goodwood’s intensity. She prefers, or rather is it implied through the narrator’s description of Warburton’s passion, that she prefers, “a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser parts of the emotion-- the heat, the violence, the unreason” (97). Goodwood’s last entreaty of Isabel consists of all three of the “baser parts” of passion. The threat of violence is established immediately: “She had had only time to rise when, with a motion that looked like violence, but felt like-- she knew not what, he grasped her by the wrist and made her sink again into her seat” (486). “Unreason” is clearly indicated in Isabel’s question to Goodwood: “She turned on him as if he had struck her. ‘Are you mad?’ she cried” (487). Finally, heat is both in the “white lightening” of Goodwood’s kiss, and more generally in his passion: “this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden” (489, 488). Consequently, it is not surprising that Isabel rejects a passion composed of what she defines as “baser parts.” In addition, Goodwood’s advances threaten Isabel’s newly restored liberty. He kisses her, she is restrained and almost paralyzed by “this one act of possession” (489). James Gargano accurately defines the kiss thus: “the kiss represents for James a loss of independence that Isabel has gained throughout the second part of the novel. As she frees herself from Goodwood and impulsive sexual temptation, she does not turn her back, as some critics contend, on a creative future” (130). The kiss is, as Gargano states, a threat to Isabel’s independence, and Isabel,
already having been possessed, chooses freedom: “But when darkness returned she was free” (489). The darkness here is the cessation of Goodwood’s kiss which was “white lightening,” and does not necessarily imply a conscious return to the life in darkness that she lived with Osmond. Isabel returns to Rome, but she returns with a newly acquired and more importantly, a tested liberty.

Joel Porte characterizes Isabel’s return to Rome in less flattering terms: “Isabel Archer— perversely as it would seem— turns away from the light (as she will do on the last page of the novel) and walks steadily into the dusk” (5). Oscar Cargill further reiterates this “perversity” in Isabel as “duty to Pansy, duty to her vows, duty to her ‘mistake’ are preferable to a life without obligations” (555). However, to dismiss Isabel Archer as returning to the safety of her duty is to deny the depth of emotion she clearly shows in trying to provide an escape from Osmond for Pansy. The following exchange illustrates Isabel’s commitment to Pansy, at the expense of her commitment to Osmond:

“You’re not happy, Mrs. Osmond,” said Pansy.

“Not very. But it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s what I say to myself. What does it matter? But I should like to come out [of the convent].”

“I wish indeed you might.”

“Don’t leave me here,” Pansy went on gently.

Isabel said nothing for a minute; her heart beat fast. “Will you
come away with me now?” she asked. (461)

Although Isabel’s attempt to remove Pansy from the convent without Osmond’s knowledge fails, her attempt to do so is a heartfelt response to Pansy’s plea and to Pansy’s pain.

The relationship between Isabel and Pansy goes beyond simply step-mother to step-daughter. Pansy is consistently developed as a foil for Isabel. Lord Warburton’s romantic interest in both Isabel and Pansy illustrates their interchangeableness. Isabel’s childhood affection for Edward Rosier, the object of Pansy’s affection, further establishes their similarities. Although Isabel’s marriage to Osmond makes her Pansy’s step-mother, they are described as sisters: “Then they held each other a moment in a silent embrace, like two sisters” (463). Interestingly, Pansy, whose name signifies a flower, replaces Lily, whose name is also a flower, the sister Isabel left behind in Albany. Because Pansy is so closely aligned to Isabel, saving her is a symbolic self-preservation. Thus, it is not the safety of her duty that explains her return to Rome. Isabel has already shown, by leaving for Gardencourt against her husband’s wishes, and by her willingness to take Pansy against her husband’s wishes (or knowledge), that duty to Osmond no longer governs her actions.

In order to fully examine Isabel’s actions after her knowledge of both Madame Merle’s and Osmond’s manipulation of her, it is also necessary to consider Isabel’s motivations from the start of the novel. Her attraction to the foreign and the romantic has been discussed, but Isabel does not just figure herself as the stereotypical romantic
passive female. She also takes the reverse position, the position of the active hero:

“Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a
difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion
demanded” (54). This role reversal, placing the female in the active position as savior,
is foreshadowed by Mr. Touchett’s comment to his son and Lord Warburton that “the
ladies will save us” (23). Significantly, Isabel is introduced almost immediately after
Mr. Touchett’s statement.

Isabel’s own desire to act as a savior is introduced and refined quickly.
Discussing the effects of Mrs. Touchett’s initial visit with her sister Lily, Isabel claims
that her feelings of grandeur “will be for a better reason” (39). Her theory on the
misery of the world provides “a better reason”: “She always returned to her theory that
a young woman whom after all everyone thought clever should begin by getting a
general impression of life. This impression was necessary to prevent mistakes, and
after it should be secured she might make the unfortunate condition of others a subject
of special attention” (56). Given Isabel’s feelings about the Catholic Church, and her
knowledge of Osmond’s malevolent influence, Pansy is the natural candidate for
Isabel’s “subject.”

Isabel, while visiting Pansy in the convent, realizes the significance of “a
woman with whom benevolence was a habit, and whose conception of duty was the
acceptance of every care. It fell with a leaden weight on Isabel’s ears; it seemed to
represent the surrender of a personality, the authority of the Church” (460). Pansy is
not only under the authority of the Church, being in the convent, but she is also under the authority of her father, Osmond, who expresses his admiration for and willingness to be Pope. The combination of Osmond and the Church clearly for Isabel marks Pansy as deserving of “special attention.”

Isabel’s motivations to do something grand, to be a hero, are established early on, and strengthen the argument that Isabel returns to Rome at the end of the novel to save Pansy from the two threats that Isabel perceives: Osmond and the Church. Moreover, Isabel’s return to Rome must be considered within the symbolic dialogue James has established. Isabel (along with Ralph) is closely aligned to Gardencourt, because she herself is likened to a garden. Madame Merle and Osmond introduce evil into the “Garden,” and Isabel is displaced, becoming progressively stifled and passive in a world of darkness. Isabel’s knowledge is intimate, and consequently when she arrives in London for her last visit with Ralph,

the dusky, smoky, livid light, the dense, dark, pushing crowd, filled her with a nervous fear and made her put her arm into her friend’s. She remembered that she had once liked these things; they seemed part of a mighty spectacle, in which there was something that touched her. She remembered how she walked away from Euston, in the winter dusk, in the crowded streets, five years before. She could not have done that to-day, and the incident
came before her as the deed of another person. (466)

However, Isabel’s movement at the very end of the novel is precisely through darkness: “There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time— for the distance was considerable— she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door” (490). Isabel’s ability to move through darkness signals new possibilities for her influence with Pansy. Pansy is immersed in a world of darkness constructed by Osmond. As her name indicates, Pansy, a flower, requires a garden. Isabel, her soul a garden, is able to leave Gardencourt to tend a different garden in Rome: Pansy. Because Isabel is unable to respond to a man sexually, her newly found liberty is directed elsewhere, to Pansy, where Isabel is now able to act even in darkness.

Ultimately, Isabel’s attraction to romance, along with her attraction to the foreign, yields more than just knowledge of evil. James relies on the established use of Europe as a source of evil, and consequently Isabel encounters evil while abroad. However, because both Madame Merle and Osmond are Americans, James transmutes the expected pattern, emphasizing the universality of evil that cannot simply be confined to the European past, or European objects, places and people. By doing so, James ascribes to the Emersonian philosophy “that things go by halves indeed, and nothing can be considered purely evil” (Porte 3). Similarly, nothing can be considered purely good. Thus, while Isabel’s American identity relies on the “good” values of light, action and liberty embodied in extremes by Caspar Goodwood and Henrietta
Stackpole, James balances the equation by creating Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, also Americans who represent evil.

Because evil is closely linked to the past, the past of Rome and the past that produced Pansy, the relationship that emerges aligns evil to the past, and good to the future. The ending of The Portrait of Lady deals directly with the issue of the past. James anticipates the response to the conclusion of the novel in his Notebooks: “The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished-- that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation-- that I have left her en l’air. --This is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity-- it groups together. It is complete in itself...” (15). Yet, by leaving his heroine “en l’air” James reinforces movement forward, with an acceptance of the past that justifies Isabel’s return to Rome for the future embodied in Pansy.

James uses contrasts as a foundation around which to develop conflicts in The Portrait of a Lady, and as a means to explore the realistic possibilities of duality within his heroine, Isabel Archer. Light and dark, reality and imagination, action and inaction, are all a part of Isabel’s consciousness. Each side of several dualities is given a forum for expression, either in Gardencourt, or after Isabel’s marriage to Osmond, in Florence and in Rome. Isabel’s journey is one of knowledge of the fundamental duality: good and evil. Her nostalgia for a past, for “places in which things have happened,” is realized through her knowledge of Madame Merle’s and Osmond’s past, and the evil
associated with it (35). However, by making Madame Merle and Osmond both American, and by figuring Pansy as a foil for Isabel, the dualities cannot, finally, be maintained. In effect, as James blurs the distinction between the romance and the novel, he blurs the extremes of good and evil, subscribing to the Emersonian philosophy “that nothing can be considered purely evil” (Porte 3). Furthermore, as Pansy, a product of an “evil” past, is certainly not evil herself, James affirms a belief in Hawthorne’s picturesque ideal of “the simultaneous presence of good and evil in the past” (Greenwald 17).

From the start, Isabel is upon a sliding scale: she begins with knowledge of the American experience and American values, but has an attraction to the other end of the scale where the foreign, darkness and evil cohabit. Ideas of the romance obscure for both Isabel and Henrietta the realities of the other extreme. Isabel systematically rejects the very embodiment of the romantic ideal, Lord Warburton, as her attraction to darkness directs her to Osmond. Experiencing the full range between good and evil gives Isabel the ability to function and be productive at any point on the sliding scale. Thus, she no longer needs Gardencourt to express her American ideals. Instead, she is able to use her positive, American values of action and liberty in Rome.

Coincidentally, Isabel’s choice to return to Rome addresses another aspect of the American condition— a lack of a past. Just as Hawthorne uses the picturesque in Rome as a symbol of good and evil in the past, James retains the symbol while offering a viable future in the form of Pansy. In essence, by adopting Pansy, Isabel adopts a past,
one that incorporates America and Europe and good and evil. Ultimately, the dualities identified with Isabel—light and dark, action and inaction, liberty and servitude, America and Europe—conflate and we are left with an implied shift of focus from the past to the future, and from Isabel to Pansy.
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