

Biblical Archetypes of Settings in *the Portrait of a Lady*

Ping Chen

Huaiyin Normal University
Huaian, China 223001

Abstract—The American writer Henry James (1843-1916), is generally considered the master of the psychological realistic novels during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *The Portrait of a Lady* is universally acknowledged as his masterpiece during his early writing career. It has aroused much attention and received criticism in literary circle ever since its publication in 1881. Many critics have adopted various methods of criticism to figure out their own profound interpretations of *The Portrait*. Yet few critics have employed the archetypal method to analyze it, especially its setting. This thesis just attempts to use Frye's archetypal criticism to probe into the Biblical archetypes in the light and dark settings in *The Portrait*. Therefore, archetypal analysis, especially the Biblical archetypes, might be quite a helpful method to discover the theme of the novel and to reveal Henry James' religious view and his unique Jamesian salvation.

Keywords—*The Portrait of a Lady*; Biblical archetypes; Jamesian salvation; rebirth

I. INTRODUCTION

The Portrait of a Lady is a great novel devoted by Henry James to the world literature. The protagonist, Isabel Archer, is generally considered one of the most brilliant females in the world literary gallery. James' subtle revelation of its heroine's consciousness and the device of psychological realism to unfold the journey toward her self-discovery won the novel great reputation. The British critic F. R. Leavis commented that this great novel is "an original masterpiece", which is "one of the great novels" in English (1955:126). Yet few critics have employed the archetypal method to analyze it, especially its setting. However, archetypal analysis, especially the Biblical archetypes, might be quite a helpful method to discover the motif of the novel and to reveal the Henry James' religious view and his unique Jamesian salvation.

II. THE ARCHETYPE OF SETTING

James first designs the certain circumstances where the prideful heroine full of free appears. Joel Porte said that the positive power was all, and that negative power, or circumstance, was half (1983:196). That is both sobering and consoling, for life is not simply swallowed up in circumstance but rather that it is qualified by it, reduced by half but not annihilated. (Porte 2007:3) The Gardencourt represents "positive power", while the hell Palazzo

Roccanera represents "negative power". Like Eve, Isabel chooses the dark place which is warned by all the relations.

A. Gardencourt: The Garden in Eden

Much like Genesis story, Henry James gives his characters a setting at the very beginning of the story in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Gardencourt is not in the bright and hopeful morning, on the contrary, James portrays a shadowy afternoon picture. The summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, and the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf (Henry James 1999:17). Then James sketches the shadows of an old man and two young men. On the perfect lawn, they are killing the time by enjoying this admirable setting and drinking the traditional English afternoon tea. Actually it is the still picture, the old man is dying, the two younger men, one is ill and will die before long, and the other man is a falling British aristocracy. They are shadows and backgrounds in *The Portrait*. That necessity is insisted upon in the first three words of the novel "Under certain circumstances" which acknowledge the reality of a world not created by the self but independent and sometimes governing. (Jonathan Freedman 1998:113) But this merging garden is a declining, drowsy Eden. The night will fall. Our heroine suddenly appears in such an unpleasant lifeless circumstance, she will show them what really life is, just like the old Touchett says: "the ladies will save us." (ibid: 23)

B. Palazzo Roccanera: The Hell

The setting where Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond first meet each other is in Osmond's house, which locates in the small super urban piazza, "where a clear shadow rested below and a pair of light-arched galleries, facing each other above caught the upper sunshine upon their slim columns and the flowering plants in which they were dressed. There was something grave and strong in the place; it looked somehow as if, once you were in, you would need an act of energy to get out" (ibid: 222). However, for Isabel, she never thought of getting out, but only of advancing. In the dark house, there is a pure innocent girl, Pansy, Osmond's daughter. "The small figure stood in the high, dark doorway, watching Isabel cross the clear, grey court and disappear into the brightness beyond the big portone, which gave a wider dazzle as it opened" (ibid:275). Such a pure mind desires the light in her life. But the place where she lives, also Isabel lives, is "a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon" to them. His "fastidious" father should be "immured in a kind

of domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence, which was mentioned in "Murray" and visited by tourists who looked, on a vague survey, disappointed and depressed, and which had frescoes by Caravaggio in the piano Nobile and a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche" (ibid:313). This is the very place where Isabel lives after marriage, the lifeless house without the light of sunshine. But the dark and massive structure dwelt in the very heart of Rome, where Isabel desires to know.

Being nourished by the Italian scene was of course central to James's imagination through his career. Though James does not attempt to speculate further about the significance of his Italian sojourn for the composition of *Portrait*, people at least may notice a curious echo, in his description of how Italy's "romantic and historic sites" draw the artist "away from his small question to their own greater ones," of a key scene late in the book: Isabel, in Chapter 49, takes a ride alone in "old Rome" and is compelled by city's ruins to consider the "smallness" of her own sadness in the "large Rome record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater." And undoubtedly, this sense will console her for a wretched marriage. James's belief in the capacity of Italy to nurture a sense of the dear old sacred terror of life is evident early and late in his work, and it is precisely this belief that informs Isabel Archer's deepening consciousness and her decision to return to Rome (ibid :12). Rome, then, is presented quintessentially as the scene of self-investigation, an incitement to examination of the secrets of the human heart, with its complex yearning for both love and death. (ibid:13) Her thought after knowing the truth: she finds her own strength occurs in this intensely Virgilian moment in Chapter 49 that marks culmination of her Roman experience. (ibid: 23)

III. JAMESIAN SALVATION

From the archetype of setting, two different settings are placed before Isabel, the light Edenic Gardencourt and the dark, negative Palazzo Roccanera. In the light and dark scene, there are two men with positive and negative powers who play the crucial role in Isabel's two major decisions. Based on the archetypal analysis of Isabel, she is doomed to choose the dark life with the cruel husband. Being called a psychological realist, Henry James is more concerned with exploring beneath the surface of social life to probe the complex motivations and unconscious desires that shape his characters' perceptions. The Jamesian salvation shines her inner heart; she realizes her final and ultimate quest of freedom.

A. *Light and Darkness*

The ray of light is God, with an inference of the light of Heaven. Isabel's rejection of light and embracing of darkness is just the manifestation of the writer's refusal of church and her despair on God in his certain period of life. Henry James' conflict Christian views shows clearly in her heroine who is far away from the Light but seeks the light in her own heart.

She believes that "if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely," but the image itself frightens her. Nevertheless she finds herself attracted to the equivocal "golden air" of Gilbert Osmond's early autumn. Though she retreated before him, her imagination goes forward to meet this obscure figure, yet, it hangs back, sensing that "there was a last vague space it couldn't cross — a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet." Isabel Archer turns away from the light and walks steadily into the dusk. (Porte 2007: 5)

The agreeable but shadowy Gardencourt in England, in Florence, the bright Palazzo Crescentini full of spring sunshine, rooms are filled with warmth and perfume. Ralph, though in awfully illness, appears in such bright settings. Because he was the person with love in his heart, so he brings the light. When Isabel tells him that she is going to marry Osmond, Ralph expresses that he loved her without hope, Isabel looks into "the sunny illness of the garden", and she says that he "lives on air" (300). Therefore, Ralph, is always in the light, and brings the light to his love. This is what Christ does to his people.

Isabel chooses and admires the house which is the hell without sunshine all the year, where her husband puts his wife in the dark part of heart, and sends his daughter Pansy back to the gloomy convent. Moreover he forbids her dear daughter to appear in the sunshine. All these indicate that Isabel's marriage life is in the morbid darkness.

B. *Falling into Darkness with Love, Patience and Dignity*

Based on the comparison of the light and the dark, there are two ways before Isabel, one is to return to the marriage but a very dark environment, and the other one is to stay at light Gardencourt, or go with Goodwood. At first sight, two ways are different, the way up and the way down. Actually, the way up and the way down are one and the same. All the signs indicate that she will definitely go back to her marriage, because she thinks staying here is not "right", and it is a kind of exception from life, which is against her original intention of seeing life in person. She chooses falling into darkness with dignity.

It is available to peep Isabel's inner mind and get the idea of her desire of being saved. "This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on." Though she has inherited such a large amount of money, she is still feeling unsafe; she still wants to find something to depend on. "The confusion, the noise of waters, and all the rest of it, were in her swimming head." According to the biblical archetype, the image of water as a symbol for rebirth is then quite apparent in the following descriptions. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink". (499) The water is just purifying her confused mind. "But when darkness returned she was free." Thus, readers will be disappointed by Isabel's final choice of falling into darkness again. However, unlike her first decision of marrying to Osmond, this decision to return to Osmond is made before seeing everything clear. Staying at

Gardencourt is not "right", eloping with Goodwood is the last thing she will do in her life, because she thinks she has a kind and sincere heart. The way up and the way down are both in the dark, no one knows its end, but Isabel knows her heart clearly now, choose the way up, her external world would be bright, but her inner world would be in the dark forever, while choose the way down, temporally, she would be in the dark, but she holds her theory of morality and she dares to face her conscious, therefore, she falls into darkness with dignity and love.

C. Looking for Spiritual Eden

The Garden of Eden seems to be an ideal place with simple and quiet life. There is no difficulties and confusing problems to disturb and hurt the mind of human beings. Life there is safe and tranquil only if you can resist seduce from the malicious and cunning snake. All good things are perfectly preserved in the Garden of Eden which is exempted from the polluting of the outside world where miserable things come into exist and hurt human beings all the time when the ancestors of mankind, Adams and Eve were excelled out of the golden place and driven to the wilderness after they disobeyed the LORD God's order, failing to resist the tempt from the snake and swallowed the fruits from the tree of wisdom. Simple and quiet life, plentiful fruit and clear water, simple task as leisure, all the good things have been blocked in the Garden of Eden which they were forced to leave and defended for their returning. To close up that so-called wisdom and let the heart and soul return to the Garden of Eden firstly.

IV. CONCLUSION

Henry James first creates the setting for his heroine to be and as a watcher and he watches her judgment and choices and feels her inner heart in a moderate distance. This way of writing is just like the God who creates his world for the man. He first creates the outside world and places man into a Garden of Eden to live. As a spectator, he watches how man chooses to create his choice. Man chooses to eat the fruit of tree of knowledge to be like God and Isabel also choose to see life herself to gain knowledge, violating from the Ralph's warning. God loves man and Jesus is sent to redeem man from suffering. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James creates a character Ralph, Isabel's cousin to support her, enlighten her, and redeem her. The story of Isabel Archer is the story of man's Fall to suffer and redeemed. Therefore, reading *The Portrait of a Lady* from a biblical archetype angle can find a satisfactory way to explain why Henry James makes her heroine to choose the "straight" path to go back to her marriage. However, most of comments concentrated on Isabel's pursuit of freedom and her tragic return to her miserable marriage with little concern about the final return which is, in fact, a real moral triumph in a young American woman "affronting her destiny." (Henry James 1999:8) With the biblical archetypal theory to study the text, it can be argued that Isabel's final choice demonstrates Jamesian moral salvation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Edel, Leon. Introduction to *The Portrait of a Lady* By Henry James. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.
- [2] Edel, Leon. *Henry James: the master: 1901-1916*. New York: Avon Books, 1978.
- [3] Fuller Margaret. *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- [4] Fogel, Daniel Mark. *A companion to Henry James Studies*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993.
- [5] Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. London, Melbourne & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, (1982): 149,175.
- [6] Frye, Northrop. "The Archetypes of Literature," in *20th Century literary Criticism*. Longman et. Singapore Publishers, Pte. Ltd. 19th impression, 1996, 429.
- [7] F. R. Leavis. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot · Henry James Joseph Conrad*, London: Chatto & Windus (1955):126.
- [8] James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *The Portable Henry James*. New York: The Viking Press, 1962.
- [9] James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. London: Penguin Books, 1978.
- [10] James, Henry. *Literary Criticism I: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*. Leon Edel Ed. New York: The Library of America, 1984.
- [11] Jonathan Freedman. *Henry James*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2005.
- [12] Jung. "Psychology and Literature," in *20th Century Literary Criticism*. Longman. Singapore Publishers. Pte. Ltd. 1996. 183-184.
- [13] Novick, Sheldon M. *Henry James: the young master*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- [14] Leon Edel Ed. New York: The Library of James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1973.
- [15] Liu Xiaolan. "An Analysis of Isabel Archer's Tragedy in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*" Thesis. Shanghai International Studies University. 2008.
- [16] Piore, Brunel. *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*. London and New York, 1992, 586.
- [17] Porte, Joel. Ed. *The Transcendentalist*. New York: Library of America, 1983.196.
- [18] Porte, Joel. *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*. Beijing: Beijing University Press. 2007. 1, 143.
- [19] Robert Weisbuch. "Henry James and the Idea of Evil." Ed. Jonathan Freedman. *Henry James*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2005. 102-119.
- [20] Rollo, May. *Freedom and Destiny*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981.52.
- [21] Santos, Maria. "Isabel's Freedom: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*". *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1987.
- [22] Weissb, Katherine. *Growing up in the James Family: Henry James Sr.*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985.