

The Beauty in *the Portrait of a Lady*

Yan SUN

Northeast Dianli University, Jilin City, China

169 Changchun Road, Jilin City, China

Sonya1989612@163.com

Keywords: Isabel, beauty, Mencius's aesthetics.

Abstract: *The Portrait of a Lady* (*The Portrait* for short) is one of James Henry's best stories, and its heroine, Isabel, is quite a controversial character for centuries. With Mencius' aesthetics theory, this paper is going to study Isabel's beauty in the eyes of readers from East Asia. The paper is divided into three parts, while the first part deals with Isabel's beauty in appearance, the second concentrates on Isabel's beauty in heart, and the third centers on Isabel's beauty with maturity. By the guide of this eastern aesthetics theory, the paper is able to find out that it is the heroine, Isabel's sincerity and goodness that give the perpetual beauty to herself as well as the novel.

Introduction

The Portrait tells the growth story of Isabel. Isabel is a beautiful American girl and comes to England with her aunt after her parents' death. In England, by her beauty in appearance and in mind, Isabel attracts attentions from many both male and female. Later, she inherits a fortune by the help of her cousin, who loves her deeply and purely, and falls into a conspiracy of marriage. With the torture of her unhappy marriage, she gains more life experiences and more strength to be a good person.

Mencius believes that one's virtues are rooted in his mind, and give rise to his physical appearance. In *The portrait*, compared with her two sisters, Isabel is labeled as "the intelligent" by her fellow-villagers in America and is considered as a beauty when she comes to England and Rome. The following parts intend to discuss Isabel's beauty by the careful study about her experiences and reflection in the novel.

Isabel's Beauty in Appearance

When Isabel comes on the stage for the first time, one can observe her by her cousin, Ralph's eyes: "...was a tall girl in a black dress, who at first sight looked pretty. She was bareheaded, as if she were staying in *the* house..." Later when Ralph "looked at her a moment", he thought "she was unexpectedly pretty." This is the first impression Isabel gives people, which is not so deep for Isabel's simple dressing. But with more reading through down the novel, one can feel Isabel's beauty in appearance:

[...*she* was *looking* at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception...

...her head was *erect*, her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and all reflected in a clear, still smile.

...her hair, *which* was dark even to blackness, had been an object of envy to many women; her light grey eyes, a little too firm perhaps in her graver moments, had an enchanting range of concession. (James 40)

...and *our* rustling, quickly-moving, clear-voiced heroine was agreeable to sense as the sound of flowing water. (49)

She *turned* her head with a glance of her clear, fair eyes...] (137)

Mencius once said, "*The best way to observe a man is to look at the pupils of his eyes, which cannot conceal his evil intentions. If he is upright at heart, his pupils are bright. If he is not, his pupils are dull. Listen to his words and look at his pupils---how can a man conceal his real self?*" (Zhao 165)

With the typical descriptions about Isabel's appearance, readers are able to notify the heroine's beautiful *eyes* and figure, which convey Isabel's purity in heart and diligence in her mind.

Beautiful *appearance* is just the first step on the road of knowing Isabel, and it is a good heart that gives her grace and fragrance *which* is the original force for her beauty.

Isabel's Beauty in Heart

i Isabel has a beautiful heart to be sincere. In the novel's first few chapters, Isabel is as innocent as a child who is frank and brave to express her thought. There are several incidents giving readers the impression that she is an honest girl:

When Mrs. Touchett, Isabel's aunt, came to America and firstly introduced herself to Isabel, she said to her aunt slowly, "you must be our crazy Aunt Lydia!" for that she had been instilled "disrespectful view" of her aunt when she was a child. Therefore, at the first sight, we know that our heroine is brave enough not to conceal her real feeling toward people around her. Isabel's frankness can be illustrated by another small incident when she came to England. In the novel's chapter VII, Isabel enjoyed talking with Ralph, her cousin, and Lord Warburton in one night. When her aunt asked her to say goodnight to the gentlemen and go upstairs having rest, Isabel replied without a second thought that she would like to stay longer by half an hour.

If Isabel's frankness in her early age shows little evidence to the virtue sincerity, her genuineness through out of her life can undoubtedly prove her good heart. Once, Isabel told readers by her monologues that she had been holding a theory that "one should be one of the best, should be conscious of a fine organization, and should move in a realm of light, of natural wisdom, of happy impulse, of inspiration gracefully chronic." In addition, she often took much time to ponder over "beauty and bravery and magnanimity" and hoped infinitely that she could never do anything bad. While she witnessed women's indecent behaviors, she felt "indecent" not to "scorn them." And made her mind to be what she "appeared" and appear "what she was" Following her own theory, Isabel was indeed sincere when she made friends. (In western culture, people take their family members and relatives as friends in addition to their kinship, therefore, all the characters in *The Portrait* are Isabel's friends) She loved and admired everything that was beautiful and have little knowledge about money and the complicated society. Therefore, she admired people just for their good points and personalities, for their wit and elegant talks. Observing the way Isabel treat her friends is feeling the girl's sincere affection for her friends. And the example of Mrs. Touchett and Madame Merle can illustrate her very trait sufficiently.

After an hour's "uninterrupted talk" with her new-found aunt, Isabel started to take an interest in her aunt and feel that she was not grotesque and sinister at all. With the passage of time, she knew her aunt well enough to understand her peculiar character and respect her integrity.

For Madame Merle, who was in her 40s, Isabel gave the most sincere affection and respect. Isabel was "too sincere, too interested in [Madame Merle's] judicious companion" and secretly exclaimed, more than once, that she had learned a lesson from a high authority. And in return, she talked to Merle about things she had never said to any one before.

ii Isabel has a beautiful heart to be good. In depth of Isabel's heart, she invariably believed that she had a powerful self-assurance and an extraordinary faith in her own goodness. She often even wished for hardship, so that she could demonstrate her ability to overcome it without losing her moral essence. Throughout the novel, Isabel liked every wonderful person coming into her life and was kind and benevolent to everyone.

Her cousin Ralph's weak lungs made him indifferently upon everything including Isabel. He often "amused himself with calling Isabel's nickname and made fun of her by drawing ironic caricature of her. As conceited as Isabel was, she would go together with her cousin's tease if the teasing pleased him and gave him "plenty of occupation." And when she was not in good mood at being laughed at by Ralph, it was not because that she thought "herself ill-used," but because she was very sorry for her cousin's health condition. Since she knew that Ralph "was talking as a blind and had little heart in what he said."

On the day of Isabel's arrival to England, she knew that Lord Warburton was a nice gentleman, and after a period of talk with him, Isabel liked Warburton "extremely" and regarded him as "a hero of romance." But when the gentleman proposed to her sincerely, she refused him after a second thought. Her reason was that she could not take advantage of Lord Warburton's fortune and love, and that she could not enjoy herself just by another person's wealth.

Mencius aesthetics presents beauty with sincerity like this: "*What is worth our admiration is called 'good'. To have it inherent in oneself is called 'sincere'. To be imbued with it to the full is called 'beautiful'*" (Zhao 329)

By Mencius theory, Isabel is a beauty for that she was born with a good heart, for that she had a sincere nature, and most of all, for that she by her words and deeds has made a perfect illustration of a good heart.

Isabel's Beauty with Maturity

Finishing reading *The Portrait*, one can notice Isabel's great change from a beautiful girl to a graceful lady. And Isabel's grace with her unhappy marriage especially presents her beauty in depth, which is a beauty in maturity with charming quality and admirable capability.

When Isabel married to Gilbert Osmond, she met a disastrous calamity in her life. Her marriage was "the house of darkness, the house of suffocation" to her. But bravely enough, Isabel did not lay blame on others despite of the fact that her marriage was a trap made by her husband and his mistress. After recognizing her husband's bad nature, Isabel was wise enough to know that complaints was not the solution for her troubled life. Hence she said to herself: "Whatever happens to me let me not be unjust, let me bear my *burdens* myself and not shift them upon others!"

Besides, Isabel never lost her principles in the anguish of her marriage. For example, when her cousin Ralph came to Rome and wanted to see Isabel, her husband was very angry about it and showed his objection. For Isabel, she "was perfectly aware that the sight of her interest in her cousin stirred her husband's rage as if Osmond had locked her into her room---which she was sure was what he wanted to do" (James 409). However, she still decided to look after her cousin.

There is another good example. When Isabel's husband and Madame Merle had the urge to marry their daughter Pansy to Lord Warburton, they asked Isabel to persuade Lord Warburton to propose as soon as possible. At first, Isabel for a time wanted to satisfy her husband's demand to better their marital relationship. Later, when she found the fact that Pansy and Lord Warburton did not love each other, she respected their own wishes and fearlessly did her best to support Pansy.

Finally after Isabel's cousin Ralph's funeral ceremony, she chose to go back to Rome (the symbol of her unhappy marriage) even though Mr. Goodwood (her suitor all along) offered his help to Isabel getting away from her bad marriage. Facing the temptation as well as predicament, Isabel knew that escape was not a good way to solve her difficulty in the marriage. Therefore she chose to face it bravely and personally. Isabel's final decision at the end of *The Portrait* shows her beauty of courage, wisdom and maturity.

Mencius said, "*Benevolence is man's heart; righteousness is man's way...The pursuit of learning is just to recover this missing benevolent heart. This and nothing more.*" (Zhao 259)

Holding tightly to her life's rule, Isabel pursued knowledge and experienced life thoroughly. She gained a lot and suffered a lot at the same time, presenting people with her beautiful face and heart, giving people a real beautiful portrait of a lady.

Summary

Madame Merle once said that she was sure that life "can't spoil" Isabel, which "may pull the heroine about horribly," but would never break Isabel up. What's more, she even wished that she could be with Isabel's qualities---frankness, sincerity and goodness, with which she might have made "something better of her life". By the thought of the villain (Madame Merle) in the novel, people can know that Isabel's beauty in heart wins over people's admiration even those negative characters.

Henry James believes “the novelist had to be less the priest or philosopher than the detached and disinterested observer of things” (“The Art of Fiction” 4). Therefore, *The Portrait* is a general portrait of people’s conscience under the pressure from society in which different cultural values might mix together. While the story tells Isabel’s beauty in the sophisticated society, it brings readers to Mencius’s thought on aesthetics that beauty lives in a good heart, and that the sublime is the beauty coming from goodness.

References

- [1] James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*. New York: Charles Scribener’s Sons, 1962.
- [2] Lee, Brian. *The Novels of Henry James*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd. 1978.
- [3] Ousby, Ian. *A Reader’s Guide to Fifty American Literature*, Henan University Press, 1979.
- [4] Richmond, Marion. The Early Critical Reception of ‘The Portrait of a Lady’ (1881-1916). *Henry James Review* 7:2/3(1986: Winter/Spring) p.158.
- [5] Schriber, Mary S. Isabel Archer and Victorian Manners. *Studies in the Novel Winter*, 1976:441.
- [6] Sigi Antonia Jottkandt. *Sublime Beauty: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic*. Diss. State University of New York, 2002.
- [7] Spiller, Robert E. *The Cycle of American Literature---An Essay in Historical Criticism*. New York: A Division of Macmillam Publishing Company Inc, 1976.
- [8] Yaoxin, Chang. *The History of American Literature*. Nankai University, Tianjin,1990.
- [9] Zhentao Zhao,eds. *Mencius*. Trans. Hunan People’s Publishing Press, 1999.