

Existential Interpretation of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract. Realism, with its true and objective reflection of the social reality, becomes nineteenth century American literary mainstream. Henry James is one of the three advocates of American realism in the nineteenth century. *The Portrait of a Lady* is representative of his novels, noted for unique narrative angle and psychological analysis, and attracts much attention of the critics home and abroad. By analyzing the protagonist from the perspective of existentialism, this thesis is aimed at helping readers learn more about Henry James and his life credo, interpret James and his works from existential angle, and then rethink about the meaning of life and the self-value.

Introduction

Henry James (1843—1916), like William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, is representative of American realistic writers in the 19th century. He is an American-born novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, and playwright, becoming a naturalized British citizen in 1915. Henry James is famous for his international theme: the meeting of European civilization (rich mixture of history and art, sophistication, and corruption) and American innocence. He also concerns man's life and consciousness. Published in the year of 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the greatest novels written by Henry James. *The Portrait of a Lady* illustrates this theme and concern to a large extent through Isabel Archer's experience and choice.

Generally speaking, foreign critics explored this novel from the aspects of psychoanalysis, international theme, characterization, style, narrative technique, cultural contrast, symbolism; domestic critics analyzed it mainly from the aspects of narrative strategies, feminism, deconstructionism, aestheticism and so on, which laid foundation for understanding and analyzing this masterpiece. This thesis attempts to interpret *The Portrait of a Lady* from existential point of view, probe into existential philosophy represented by Isabel the conflicts between ideal and reality, further understand the life credo advocated by Henry James, and then arouse readers to rethink about the meaning of life and the self-value.

Existential Freedom of Choice

"Existentialism is a current in European philosophy distinguished by its emphasis on lived human existence... Sartrean existentialism, as distinct from the Christian existentialism derived from Kierkegaard, is an atheist philosophy of human freedom conceived in terms of individual responsibility and authenticity." [1]

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer embodied the essential spirit of existentialism; at the same time, she represented Henry James' life philosophy. This novel was published before Sartre's birth, but James had illustrated existential ideas through his works, corresponding to Sartre's existentialism, so in my opinion, Henry James was a great thinker in this aspect.

Existentialism mainly is about human beings existence. Danish theologian Kierkegaard was the precursor of Christian existentialism in the 1840s, which denied material world's existence and Hegel's abstract spiritual existence, but the real existence was what existed in individual inner heart.

Martin Heidegger was one of the most famous German philosophers who advocated atheistic existentialism, and he put forward the term of existentialism for the first time and made existential theory systemized and explicit. He believed that human beings had the freedom of choice and self-control. It was anxiety and fear that revealed human's existence. But this thesis is developed on the basis of Sartrean existentialism, which put individual life, freedom, and existence on the first place. The essence of Sartrean existentialism was freedom of choice, that is, human beings are free to choose action. Its belief was that, in this world, everyone had his or her own freedom. Facing various situations, adopting what action, or how to act, human beings can make free choice.

In Sartre's words, human beings live in a godless world and make any decisions according to our own values and will, so we are absolutely free in this sense, which is freedom of choice, and then put it into action, finally, man must be responsible for himself and the world. In this process, man obtains meaning of life and defines himself, because there is no fixed external criterion to define human beings, and "man makes himself," which maybe is one explanation of "existence precedes essence".

Existentialism has three basic principles, first of which is "existence precedes essence." Man first exists, and then acts and creates meaning in the world according to his choice; in this process, man owns essence, that is to say, man's essence is created by one's choice and action rather than definite when man was born. The second principle of existentialism is that the world is absurd, and life is painful. In a society full of subjectivity, the relationship between people is inevitably conflict, struggle and cruelty, and all is absurd. Man is painful in this absurd and cruel world that gives man endless anguish, disappointment, pessimism, so life is painful. As to this principle, the author of this thesis believes that part of it is reasonable. The third principle of existentialism is the most important one, that is, the concept of the freedom of choice, which is also the essence of existentialism. This principle emphasizes man's freedom of will, freedom of action and responsibility or commitment. In the world, each man has his or her freedom. Facing various conditions, adopting what action, and how to act, man can make free choice to do or not to do. Man's freedom is embodied in choice and action. Only by the action based on choice, can man realize freedom, for the essence of man is determined by one's action based on choice.

Now that man is in a godless and helpless world, there are no other given elements to define man's essence except man's freedom, choice, and responsibility in the process of action. For man, the most significant thing is to realize the importance of choice, and then to act and shoulder responsibility based on one's own free choice. Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the embodiment of this principle.

Isabel's Choice in Marriage

The Portrait of a Lady is unfolded mainly around the heroine Isabel Archer's experience and other characters' involvement. Isabel's foremost principle was freedom, which in some degree corresponded to existential freedom of choice. Originally an innocent American girl, she embodied the nature of purity, and facing reality, based on freedom, she made her own choice about marriage and life. Finally, although she realized that she had been trapped into the plot made by her husband Gilbert Osmond and his mistress, Madam Merle, she still shouldered the responsibility of her choice and returned to Rome to live with her husband and stepdaughter.

Isabel Archer, an innocent American girl, valued freedom, mainly spiritual freedom, as the most important aspect in her life. After her mother's death, she was brought to the Gardencourt, the old English country-house, by her aunt Mrs. Touchett. Sartrean atheistic existentialism considered that man lived in a godless world, suffering anguish and despair in his loneliness, he may, nevertheless, become what he wished by the exercise of free will. Isabel's experience and story just proved and reflected Sartrean existential ideas. Parentless, brought up in the new world of United States, which meant she had no close kin to care about her from inner heart. She was lonely in her spirit, although she didn't live alone. Her uncle and aunt Mr. and Mrs. Touchett, her cousin Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, Madam Merle, Gilbert Osmond, all these people were more sophisticated than her and became threat to her ideal realization.

By exercising free will, she refused first two suitors, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, and accepted Gilbert Osmond's marriage proposal, but in fact the latter just coveted her inherited money with the plot of his mistress, Madam Merle, all which was unaware by Isabel because of her purity, but she finally accepted her fate and continued to shoulder her responsibility as a wife, stepmother and "the guard angle" of her stepdaughter, Pansy.

Both Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood loved Isabel, but both failed to marry Isabel. Isabel's cousin Ralph Touchett also deeply loved her, but because of his illness and poor health, he didn't express his love until his untimely death. Isabel went to Europe to know, to try, and to experience life based on her pursuit of freedom. Facing the condition, she chose to marry Gilbert Osmond who later considered her as his property. But at last, after she visited her dying cousin, she still returned to her husband to accept her responsibility for her choice, which corresponded to Sartrean existential idea about the freedom of choice and responsibility, and in this process, she created or gave her life meaning, defined herself, and endowed her existence with essence.

Lord Warburton was an English aristocrat who represented conventionality and tradition. His life followed a series of fixed form. Although he owned fine qualities—elegant, gentlemanlike, wealthy, etc, and also he loved Isabel, the latter did not accept his marriage proposal, because in Isabel's eyes, marrying Lord Warburton meant leading a comfortable and stable life in material aspect, but on the other hand, she must obey the English aristocratic conventionality and tradition, transforming herself into part of the conventionality, thus maybe losing her own independence and personal freedom, which were deviant from her original intention—spiritual possessions and freedom.

Facing Lord Warburton's proposal, she thought a lot. "What she felt was not a great responsibility, a great difficulty of choice; it appeared to her there had been no choice in the question. She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favor of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining." (James: 101) She considered that her marriage to Lord Warburton would not be beneficial to her free exploration of life and there was no choice but to refuse Lord Warburton on this matter.

Existentialism held that not choosing itself was a choice, that is to say, to choose no choice. It seemed apparently a paradox, but in reality for example, one choosing to do one thing is a choice, and one choosing not to do this thing is another choice. One has the freedom of choice in doing or not doing this thing. Actually, here Isabel chose not to accept Lord Warburton's proposal and not to marry him although she believed "Lord Warburton offered her a great opportunity" and "nineteen women out of twenty would have accommodated themselves to it without a pang" (James: 101)

Caspar Goodwood, a son of a proprietor of well-known cotton-mills in Massachusetts, wealthy, graduated from Harvard College, strongly recommended by Miss Stackpole, Isabel's friend, as the only man worthy of Isabel, ardently expressed his appeal to Isabel until the end of the novel. Caspar Goodwood had a strong build in physical aspect, and was so solid existence that he may leave no space for Isabel to develop her imagination and her free exploration of life if she married him. Isabel herself considered Caspar Goodwood as "He was the finest young man she had ever seen, was indeed quite a splendid young man; he inspired her with a sentiment of high, of rare respect." (James: 42) When Caspar Goodwood knew Isabel went to England, he also deliberately followed her just in order to win her heart and mind, but Isabel was very serious and interrogated "What good do you expect to get by insisting?" He answered, "The good of not losing you." "You've no right to talk of losing what's not yours. And even from your own point of view, you ought to know when to let one alone. You're strong for everything else; why shouldn't you be strong for that?" (James: 141—142) Her disapproval and refusal tone was directly expressed without any mask.

He was a diligent, rich and typical American man, which were Caspar Goodwood's advantages realized by Isabel but she directly rejected him every time he proposed. Why did she refuse him so strongly? His masculinity or manhood would smother her desire to experience the old Europe and its culture. His strong and aggressive love was like a fire that will burn everything around the people loved, a fetter to Isabel, which was in conflict with the heroine's ideal. When Caspar expressed his reason for marrying her, Isabel's answer was "If you were in the same place I should feel you were

watching me, and I don't like that—I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of, it's my personal independence." (James: 142)

She clearly expressed her own reason, but he refuted, "An unmarried woman—a girl of your age—isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step." (James: 143) This speech reflected Caspar's self-centeredness and he persuaded Isabel based on his own point of view and his belief as if without him, Isabel couldn't be independent, which aroused Isabel's wisdom to attack him. She declared that she could do what she chose, and belong to the independent class, besides, she tried to judge for herself, and to judge wrong was more honorable than not to judge at all, which expressed her and Henry James' existential idea of freedom of choice, i.e. choose to act or not.

Isabel refused to marry Lord Warburton or Caspar Good, for she felt they were "a collection of attributes and power" limited by personal circumstances and social position, which would hamper her independence and freedom. Besides, she had the freedom to refuse each of them. After refusing two suitors, Isabel had a feeling of happiness and sweetness, for she was satisfied with her practice of her freedom of choice. But she married Gilbert Osmond, who appeared to her to be pure personality, having no specific social position and material circumstances to define or fix him, and as last, she found herself "ground in the very mill of the conventional". After she visited her dying cousin Ralph, although she appeared to break up with her husband, Isabel still left England for Rome, her husband's house of darkness, accepting her responsibility of her own choice which reflected her existential idea.

Conclusion

Life with its meaning is an everlasting topic discussed by literary writers and philosophers who analyze this from different perspectives. Henry James and Paul Sartre are examples of these two kinds of greater writers. In his philosophical works, Sartre explicitly interpreted his existential beliefs, and he believed that man makes himself, and in other words, human beings make our own choices in terms of responsibility and freedom, and make what we are based on our own choice. Individuals freely construct and use (or choose not to use) their own value systems, forming their own sense of being and creating meaning in the process, and by exercising the power of choice human beings can give meaning to existence and the universe; but due to living in the godless and helpless world, life is a tragedy although man has the freedom of choice and action.

Acknowledgement

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