

The Portrait of a Lady



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY JAMES

Henry James was born in 1843 to a wealthy New York City family, with his father a clergyman and well-connected intellectual. James's older brother William became a highly regarded psychologist and philosopher, while his younger sister Alice was an accomplished diarist. The family traveled extensively during James's youth, residing in London, Paris, and Geneva. As an adult, James departed America to live in Europe for a twenty-year period, based in France and England. He drew on his Transatlantic experiences to write often on the topic of Americans living in Europe, and vice versa. At first creating straightforward and simplistic texts, James began to focus on writing dramas and short stories, before entering a new career phase in which he completed long and complex novels. He was a dedicated observer of human behaviors, himself a socially awkward individual who never married and formed few close friendships. Gaining British citizenship in 1915, he was awarded a British Order of Merit the following year for services to World War I. James died in 1916, likely the result of stroke three months earlier. Throughout his life he produced a prolific literary output of approximately twenty novels and numerous short stories and letters

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The influence of James's European experiences is central to his works, including *The Portrait of a Lady*, as he specialized in contrasting American "New World" progressiveness against European "Old World" sophistication. American audiences were greatly invested in Transatlantic tourism during James's lifetime; the United States experienced economic prosperity after the Civil War, and Americans began to increasingly travel or permanently move to Europe. James socialized with elite crowds while living in France and London for a twenty-year period. He particularly admired English aristocracy and opposed the social desire for democracy that was gaining widespread traction in Britain, and inserted both attitudes into *The Portrait*. His novel is also set against the background of Aestheticism, a literary and artistic movement that privileged the pursuit of "art for art's sake" without requiring social or moral purpose. Certain characters such as Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett embody aesthetic ideals because they pursue artistic objects for beauty alone.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bridging the literary periods of realism and modernism, Henry James wrote in a unique style of the time that was

noted—indeed largely criticized—by contemporary audiences for its lack of substantial plot. In this move toward modernist fiction, James was greatly influenced by Ivan Turgenev, a Russian author who focused on character development at the expense of action. As a work of psychological realism, *The Portrait of a Lady* is similar to intensely character-driven novels by renowned writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Edith Wharton (who was also mentored by James), Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Arthur Miller, and Patrick McGrath. Of particular note is Wharton's *The Reef* for its thematic similarities to *The Portrait* in featuring American characters experiencing complicated romantic entanglements in various European locations. Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner's respective *Mrs. Dalloway* and [The Sound and the Fury](#) are also acclaimed for their use of stream of consciousness in scenes that echo Isabel's motionless reflections on her marriage in *The Portrait*. Like *The Portrait*, James's novels [Daisy Miller](#), [Washington Square](#), and *The Bostonians* are all narratives about American women who confront challenges in identity and independence. More recently, John Banville has written a sequel to James's *The Portrait of a Lady* called *Mrs. Osmond*, which continues on from James's ambiguous ending regarding Isabel's decisions after Ralph's death.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Portrait of a Lady*
- **When Written:** 1879-1881
- **Where Written:** London, Paris, Florence, Rome, and Venice
- **When Published:** First published as a serial in America's *The Atlantic* and England's *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1880-1881. First published as a novel in 1881 and extensively revised in 1908.
- **Literary Period:** Realism and modernism
- **Genre:** Psychological realism
- **Setting:** England, Italy, France, and the United States
- **Climax:** Isabel, sitting in her room, reflects on her unhappy marriage and considers the events that led her here.
- **Antagonist:** Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Family Inspiration. Critics agree that James based the *The Portrait of a Lady*'s Isabel Archer on his beloved cousin, the energetic and charismatic Minny Temple, who tragically died at age twenty-four.

Brotherly Influence. Despite a keen rivalry throughout their lives, it seems that siblings Henry and William James influenced one another greatly. Henry James is much admired for the intense psychological modes performed in his works, while his brother was a psychologist often described as writing like a novelist, even publishing some of his own pieces in literary outlets.



PLOT SUMMARY

Isabel Archer, an independent and curious young woman from Albany, New York, arrives to the English countryside at the invitation of her maternal aunt Mrs. Touchett. Having never met their American relative, Isabel's uncle Mr. Touchett and her cousin Ralph greet her warmly at Gardencourt (the Touchett family estate). They are both immediately taken by Isabel's beauty and good nature after she appears like an apparition in their **doorway**. Mr. Touchett and Ralph are both unwell due to old age and consumption, respectively. Also present at this first introduction is the dashing Lord Warburton, the Touchett's neighbor, who is similarly enchanted upon meeting Isabel.

Spending four months at Gardencourt, Isabel is grateful for the Touchett's goodwill and charmed by their reclusive, yet beautiful, rural lifestyle. She spends time daily with her uncle and cousin, her fresh perspective and energy bringing them great joy despite their ill health. Isabel's aunt continues to favor her but spends most time isolated from the family in her rooms, as is her custom; Mr. and Mrs. Touchett have succeeded in a long marriage by spending the majority of their time apart, often living in different countries.

During her stay at Gardencourt, Isabel also spends time with Lord Warburton, who offers her a tour to inspect the **architecture** and grounds at Lockleigh, his neighboring castle property. He also introduces her to his two sisters. When Warburton proposes suddenly, Isabel is shocked. She rejects his offer as politely as she can, and is relieved by his good character in his continued visits to the Gardencourt in as friendly and gentlemanly a manner as ever.

Gardencourt is also transformed by the arrival of Henrietta Stackpole, an American journalist whom Isabel idolizes for her successful career and personal independence. Henrietta is reporting on European lifestyles for her newspaper column. Ralph accompanies Isabel and Henrietta to London to experience the capital's social scene. Despite Isabel's admiration for her friend, Henrietta's frank and even tactless personality ruffles a few feathers amongst the English elite.

While in London, Isabel rejects yet another request for her hand in marriage. The wealthy and charismatic American businessman Caspar Goodwood has followed her to England to pursue their burgeoning relationship. As with Warburton, Isabel is attracted to Goodwood—perhaps even more

strongly—but cannot see herself marrying him. She is concerned that marriage to either man will result in the sacrifice of her personal freedoms. Isabel's current desire is to experience exotic adventures throughout Europe without being tied to down to anyone else's influence. As with Warburton, she expresses to Goodwood her desire for total independence and explains that she would not make a good wife.

Madame Merle, an American ex-patriate and old friend of Mrs. Touchett's, visits Gardencourt and strikes up a firm friendship with Isabel. During this time, Mr. Touchett's health declines further. Ralph, who is fascinated by his cousin and wishes to fulfil her desire for a life of personal freedom, convinces his father to leave a significant portion of his will to Isabel. Upon Mr. Touchett's passing, Isabel is grief-stricken and also overwhelmed by the enormity of her surprising new financial assets. She comes to accept her uncle's generous gift, vowing to use her money to make meaningful change in the world. Despite Ralph's designs for new wealth to guarantee Isabel's independence, Henrietta and Mrs. Touchett warn Isabel of the responsibilities and risks of financial prosperity.

Isabel begins traveling Europe, visiting various locations in England, France, and Italy. In Florence, Madame Merle introduces Isabel to another American expatriate named Gilbert Osmond. Osmond is an older gentleman who fascinates Isabel due to his worldly experiences, artistic taste, and non-conforming personal life. The two spend time together, with Isabel unaware that Osmond and Madame Merle are collaborating for Osmond to take advantage of Isabel and her new wealth. After four months Osmond proposes to Isabel. Despite her family and friends' mistrust of Osmond, Isabel accepts his proposal of marriage, believing that their union will lead to her financing his artistic exploits as a worthy cause. Usually a perceptive individual, she is completely blind to his serious flaws in character.

Skipping forward two years in time, Isabel and Osmond are living in Rome in an unhappy marriage. Osmond treats Isabel as a mere addition to his art collection, and Isabel is unhappy with the lack of a true partnership. She has discovered that Osmond is a deceitful, selfish, and dominating individual. However, Isabel has come to adore Osmond's daughter, Pansy, an intelligent yet meek girl who obeys her father's every wish. Isabel's acquaintance from childhood, Edward Rosier, is a young art collector who falls in love with Pansy. Isabel approves wholeheartedly of the love match but Osmond opposes Rosier's courtship on the grounds that the young art collector has little wealth and career prospects. Osmond prefers Pansy to marry Lord Warburton instead, for the English aristocrat has shown interest in the young woman. Isabel is concerned that Warburton is only pursuing Pansy to be close to Isabel, as he may still be in love with her.

Isabel learns that Ralph's health has seriously declined, and he

is nearing death. She desperately wants to visit Gardencourt to be with him, but Osmond forbids it. Furthermore, Isabel learns that Pansy is the child of an affair between Osmond and Madame Merle, a secret that has been hidden throughout Pansy's life. Isabel comes to pity her previous friend, Merle, for her immoral and lonely existence. Before departing for England, Pansy begs Isabel to return to Rome, as the girl adores her stepmother. Isabel leaves without Osmond's permission.

At Gardencourt, Isabel reconnects with Ralph and comforts him until he passes. She is devastated by his loss. Goodwood visits her at Gardencourt, where he reiterates his commitment to her and passionately suggests that they run away together. Upon looking for her the next day, he discovers she has left the estate. Henrietta suggests that Isabel has returned to her husband in England.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isabel Archer – The novel's protagonist, Isabel is a young American woman who is characterized by her curiosity, kindness, beauty, and progressive values. Upon Mrs. Touchett's (Isabel's estranged aunt) invitation to visit the Touchett family **home** in England, Isabel's positive energy and thirst for knowledge enchant those she meets in Europe, including her uncle Mr. Touchett, cousin Ralph, their neighbor Lord Warburton and his sisters, and Mrs. Touchett's friend Madame Merle. As a progressive American woman who travels extensively to experience Europe, Isabel embodies the clash between New World evolution and Old World sophistication. Isabel demonstrates her unconventional New World attitudes when she rejects marriage proposals from Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood (an American businessman), both of which would make extremely advantageous matches for Isabel. After inheriting a significant inheritance from Mr. Touchett at Ralph's request, Isabel has the means to travel extensively through Europe as she has long desired. She is also excited by the opportunities to undertake meaningful action with her newfound wealth. However, Isabel's naïve hopes are dashed when Madame Merle and her mysterious acquaintance Gilbert Osmond dupe Isabel into a marriage with the domineering Osmond. As her husband, Osmond now controls Isabel's finances. He treats her as an object of beauty—a mere addition to his art collection—and stifles her active imagination and progressive ideas. Ultimately, Isabel's narrative depicts a young, bright, and independent woman who develops into a dissatisfied lady trapped in a miserable marriage. She is an extremely perceptive individual except for her weakness in failing to recognize the dangers of social predators such as Merle and Osmond. The end of the novel implies that Isabel chooses to remain with Osmond and his daughter, Pansy, instead of accepting Caspar Goodwood's tempting proposal

that they run away together—a choice that shows Isabel ultimately bending to social convention at the expense of her own happiness and personal freedom.

Ralph Touchett – Ralph Touchett is Isabel Archer's cousin and Mr. Touchett and Mrs. Touchett's son. He was born in America but since infancy has lived in England at the Touchett family **home**, Gardencourt. He embodies many European Old World qualities, for he is sophisticated, intelligent, and courteous; these are likely the reasons he has a firm friendship with the similarly disposed Lord Warburton who lives near Gardencourt. Differing from Warburton, though, Ralph acts as a moral compass throughout the novel; he is also humorous and self-deprecating in nature, likely a result of living with chronic consumption (tuberculosis). Isabel's arrival sparks in Ralph a zest and passion for life after many mundane yet comfortable years at Gardencourt. He is fascinated by her ideas and gains great pleasure in observing her reactions to various experiences. When Mr. Touchett's health seriously declines, Ralph is instrumental in persuading his father to leave Isabel a significant portion of the family's wealth. Ralph believes that this legacy will secure Isabel's future independence; she will not have to marry in order to rely on a man to provide for her livelihood. Ralph's actions demonstrate his generosity, for it means his own portion of his father's will is significantly reduced. It is also evidence of the great admiration and love he has for his cousin Isabel; the narrative suggests that this love extends beyond platonic feelings, although Isabel is unaware of this for most of the novel. However, Ralph's generous wish for Isabel to come into wealth is also due to his selfish desire to view her subsequent actions as a type of experiment—he is intrigued what course she will take without financial limitations and, like many men in the novel, views her as a work of art rather than a real person. Ralph's illness eventually claims his life near the novel's ending, with Isabel crushed by the loss of her dear friend.

Gilbert Osmond – Father of Pansy and a friend of Madame Merle's, antagonist Gilbert Osmond is an American expatriate living in Italy who eventually becomes Isabel Archer's husband. Despite being American, Osmond has lived in Europe for decades and represents Old World cunning and sophistication. He lacks career prospects and spends his time collecting art for his personal prized collection. Despite having no important social status or wealth, he is able to deceive Isabel into marrying him, thereby bringing Merle's designs for the marriage to fruition. Isabel is attracted to Osmond's charm and his seemingly exquisite taste and sophistication as an art collector. However, after the marriage is official he reveals himself to be a selfish and dominating character who has trapped Isabel in a loveless union. His apparently sophisticated aesthetic taste is also revealed to be a sham. Osmond treats women poorly, isolating his daughter at a convent, treating Isabel as an object, and having been unfaithful to his first wife

(now deceased). He furthermore craves admiration and obedience from those around him. Osmond is a villain and a direct foil to Isabel's innocence and kindness. Overall, his deception and consequent marriage to Isabel forces her to abandon her idealism and personal freedoms for the sake of morality and social propriety.

Madame Merle – Madam Merle, one of the novel's antagonists and Mrs. Touchett's friend, is similarly an American expatriate and an unconventional woman. She is a widow who lacks fortune, yet manages to spend her time traveling through Europe and the United States by using her social connections. Isabel Archer greatly admires Merle's charisma and accomplishments when they meet at Gardencourt, and the two form a strong friendship. However, Merle conspires to set up the newly wealthy Isabel with her friend Gilbert Osmond. She wants to see them married, despite their incompatibilities in values and desires. Madame Merle's strange intentions are later revealed as an attempt to secure Isabel's inheritance for Osmond and his daughter Pansy's benefit—it turns out that Pansy is the result of Osmond and Merle's longtime affair, but her parentage has remained a secret throughout her life. Merle wishes to ensure their future comforts at the expense of Isabel's happiness. She is therefore a highly ambitious character who understands the desires of others and manipulates them to her advantage. Her relationship with Pansy is ambiguous; Pansy is unaware of her parentage, and despite Merle's efforts to win favor with the girl as a family friend, Pansy seems to dislike her mother. Madame Merle lacks moral conviction, as demonstrated by her affair with Osmond and her encouraging the union between Isabel and Osmond despite knowing Osmond's cruelty. Merle is matched with Osmond as the narrative villains who bring down the protagonist. She is also a foil for Isabel, as although both are intent upon achieving personal freedom, Isabel shows the moral high road in that she will not sacrifice her morality and social duty in her pursuit for independence. Furthermore, Isabel pities Merle when she finds out the truth of Pansy's parentage and the callous scheming that Merle demonstrates.

Lord Warburton – A wealthy English nobleman and Mr. Touchett and Mrs. Touchett's neighbor, Lord Warburton is enchanted by Isabel Archer when she arrives at Gardencourt. He has a close friendship with Ralph Touchett and an almost fatherly relationship with his two meek sisters, the Misses Molyneux, whom he introduces to Isabel. Warburton quickly falls in love with Isabel and pursues her hand in marriage. Despite his wealth, status, and many admirable personal qualities, Isabel refuses his marriage proposal for fear that she will lose her independence. He appears to accept her decision in good spirits, but later tries to marry Isabel's stepdaughter Pansy Osmond, perhaps in order to stay close to Isabel. Despite his unusually liberal political values, Lord Warburton still embodies Old World convention as he cannot in reality accept

a world where he does not exist as a patriarchal, aristocratic, and authoritative figure.

Caspar Goodwood – A savvy American businessman in the cotton-mill industry, Caspar Goodwood pursues Isabel Archer to England to ask for her hand in marriage. Isabel is greatly attracted by his forceful charisma, but she rejects his marriage proposal for fear their union would quash her independence. Goodwood is friends with Henrietta Stackpole and shares many of her personal qualities, for he is also ambitious, forthright, and progressive. His blunt behaviors contrast another of Isabel's suitors, the typically English and aristocratic Lord Warburton. Goodwood remains committed to Isabel throughout her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, even scandalously suggesting that she abandon Osmond so that they can begin a new life overseas together.

Mrs. Touchett – Ralph's mother and Isabel Archer's aunt, Mrs. Touchett is an American expatriate who discovers Isabel in America and invites her to stay at Gardencourt (the Touchett family estate) in England. Mrs. Touchett is a very pragmatic individual and also somewhat unconventional, living in Italy separate from her husband Mr. Touchett and son Ralph for most of the year. Despite her blunt and unorthodox manner, she is very dear to Isabel, and they enjoy traveling through parts of Europe together. Mrs. Touchett detests English life, preferring to reside in Italy and travel regularly back to America.

Mr. Touchett – Ralph Touchett's father and Isabel Archer's uncle. Mr. Touchett is an American expatriate and wealthy banker who moved his family to England for his career prospects. Mr. Touchett has a strained relationship with Mrs. Touchett, who prefers to live abroad for most of the year. He is elderly and sickly, but greatly enjoys meeting Isabel and comes to treasure her regular presence in his life. Mr. Touchett is a kind and generous man who, at Ralph's encouragement, leaves Isabel a large fortune in his will so that she can enjoy a life of personal freedom.

Henrietta Stackpole – A patriotic American journalist and Isabel Archer's friend. Isabel greatly admires Henrietta because she is bold, ambitious, and self-sufficient. While writing about European life for a newspaper column, Henrietta visits Isabel at Gardencourt (the Touchett family estate), where she is unimpressed with the mundane lives of the English elite. They are equally unimpressed with her brash, even ignorant attitudes. Henrietta sometimes offers Isabel sound advice, especially in her warnings about Gilbert Osmond's untrustworthiness. But although Henrietta believes she has Isabel's best interests at heart, she interferes in Isabel's life by encouraging Caspar Goodwood's romantic pursuits. Isabel is eventually disillusioned by her friend's relinquishing her independence in marrying Mr. Bantling.

Edward Rosier – An American expatriate and art collector who

lives in Paris. Having known Isabel Archer as a child, they reconnect while Isabel is traveling Europe and remain good friends. Rosier is an unassuming and good-natured individual who falls in love with Pansy Osmond. She returns his feelings and Isabel approves of this love match. However, Pansy's father Gilbert Osmond does not, judging that Rosier is not wealthy or connected enough to be a favorable suitor for his daughter.

Pansy Osmond – Gilbert Osmond's only child, Pansy is fifteen years old when Isabel Archer first meets her. Educated in a Swiss convent, Pansy is an impressionable young woman who is mild-mannered and obedient to her father's every wish. She surprises Isabel with her intelligence, but remains unaware that Madame Merle is her mother. Pansy may be the central reason that Isabel returns to her marriage with Gilbert Osmond at the novel's end, for she does not want to abandon the sweet girl.

Countess Gemini – Gilbert Osmond's frivolous sister. She is widely regarded as disreputable due to her unfaithfulness to her husband. However, Countess Gemini demonstrates some moral fortitude when she objects to Madame Merle's designs for Gilbert Osmond to marry Isabel Archer, for the Countess believes that Isabel is too good for her unscrupulous brother. She is also the person who reveals to Isabel the truth of the relationship between Osmond, his longtime mistress Madame Merle, and their illegitimate daughter, Pansy.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lilian Ludlow – The eldest and most sensible of the three Archer children who lives with her husband, Edmund, and their children in New York City. Lilian is a conventional character who admires Isabel Archer, especially for her intelligence, and hopes that Isabel will soon find happiness in a traditional marriage.

Edmund Ludlow – A New York City lawyer who is married to Lilian Ludlow. He is a conventional character who is wary of Isabel Archer's progressive tendencies.

Edith Keyes – Isabel and Lilian's sister, mentioned only in passing as the most beautiful of the three Archer sisters. She is married to an engineer and lives in the American West.

Sister Catherine – A nun at the Swiss convent where Gilbert Osmond sends Pansy to be educated. Sister Catherine is particularly fond of the young girl.

Sister Justine – A nun at the Swiss convent where Gilbert Osmond sends to be educated.

Misses Molyneux / Lord Warburton's Sisters – Lord Warburton's two meek and unmarried sisters who live with him at Lockleigh. Isabel Archer befriends them both, and it becomes clear that they admire and adore her almost as much as they do their brother, desiring the two to marry.

Isabel's Father / Mr. Archer – Isabel Archer's father, recently deceased, who was at times inattentive but mostly ensured his

daughters were raised with every opportunity they desired. Like Isabel, Mr. Archer was an unconventional and well-intentioned character who was ultimately financially irresponsible.

Mr. Bantling – An old bachelor friend of Ralph Touchett's in London, Mr. Bantling begins a great friendship with Henrietta Stackpole. After traveling Europe together, this develops into a romantic relationship, and the two become married. Mr. Bantling is extraordinarily amiable and unconcerned by Henrietta's nonconformist attitudes.

Lady Pensil – Mr. Bantling's sister who is married to a baron and lives on a beautiful country **estate**. Bantling promises she will invite Henrietta Stackpole to her lavish home, where she regularly entertains persons of interest and importance, but despite Bantling's desire it takes many years before Henrietta receives an invitation.

Sir Matthew Hope – An acclaimed London doctor who makes house calls to check on Mr. Touchett and Ralph Touchett.



THEMES

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FEMALE INDEPENDENCE VS. MARRIAGE

Isabel Archer, the protagonist of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, is a fiercely independent young woman who departs from America to explore the enchanting world of Europe. Defying the social expectation that she be obedient and dependent on a man, Isabel is determined to forge a life in which she prioritizes personal freedom—she will not stand for others to impose their will on her. During Isabel's travels, her dynamic personality results in multiple offers of marriage, many of which come from men of towering social standing and wealth. But unlike the traditional Victorian marriage plot, James's novel does not culminate in happy matrimony for the protagonist. Despite Isabel's driving ambition to secure a life in which she is free to choose her own values and actions, she marries Gilbert Osmond, a man who reveals himself as a controlling and Machiavellian character who despises female independence. Isabel's entrapment in marriage reflects the novel's other undesirable ones, which suggest that female independence cannot exist within a Victorian marriage.

Throughout the novel, Isabel's actions are motivated by the need to prove her personal freedom to herself and to the world at large. This occurs most significantly when she shocks her peers with her rejections of Lord Warburton and Caspar

Goodwood's respective marriage proposals; either would have been an extremely advantageous social match for Isabel. Women of the time were expected to marry, and marriage for social gain was more common (and, perhaps, more respected) than for love. Rather than graciously accept one of the advantageous offers, Isabel rejects them both, seeing her unmarried status as an anchor of her independence in a culture dominated by masculine desire.

When Isabel finally marries, she does so believing that it was her personal choice to accept Gilbert Osmond's marriage proposal—rather than an arrangement someone thrust upon her or society pressured her into—given that Osmond doesn't boast of social currency or wealth. Rather than embodying her independent mind and spirit, however, Isabel's decision to marry actually results in the sacrifice of her personal liberties. Readers are likely stunned by Isabel's choice of husband, as are her peers. In fact, Isabel ignores her family and friends' warnings about Osmond's poor character. She believes he is a noble aesthete (an individual of cultivated tastes), and that it is her choice to socially limit herself by marrying a man with little wealth or career prospects. Due to her own newly inherited wealth from her late uncle, Isabel is certain that she is actually exercising her personal freedom in empowering Osmond to fulfil his seemingly noble aesthetic ideals. However, Osmond's aesthetic pursuits turn out to be a farce, for they are not ethically principled as Isabel believed. Osmond's mask drops after their marriage, and he quashes Isabel's ideas and desires—he will not stand for female independence, evidenced in his upbringing of his wholly obedient daughter, Pansy, whom he's confined to a Swiss convent. Isabel's noble intentions have resulted in a tethered existence where she bears the whims of her husband. Furthermore, the narrative reveals Isabel's decision to marry Osmond was actually orchestrated by Madame Merle—a friend of Isabel's aunt, Mrs. Touchett—and Osmond himself. Isabel's biggest life decision, which she believed was firmly rooted in independent thought, was carefully designed by others who did not have her best interests at heart. Isabel is appalled by her mistake in marriage, and Goodwood offers her an easy escape to run away with him. Instead of leaving Osmond, though, Isabel decides she must bear her marriage to honor her commitment to him. Isabel's character development has shifted from prioritizing a woman's choice to yielding to patriarchal and social authority. As she tells her cousin Ralph, she will do what is ethically right rather than choose independence from her wicked husband.

Beyond Isabel's nightmarish marriage, James peppers the novel with other failed and non-functional marriages, emphasizing that female independence cannot effectively exist within the confines of a Victorian marriage. Examples include the Countess Gemini's well-known infidelity, the revelation that Osmond was unfaithful to his first wife, and the Touchett's dysfunctional marriage that has only lasted a respectable

lifetime because Mr. Touchett and his wife reside in separate countries for most of the year. James's widespread depiction of matrimonial misery paints marriage as a cage that limits women due to their social duty to bend to their husbands' desires.

Although Isabel has been deceived into a terrible marriage, she is not a tragic figure. Isabel ends the novel by choosing to return to Rome to live with Osmond (or so readers are led to believe by Isabel's friend Henrietta Stackpole, her account the only explanation of Isabel's whereabouts that James includes at the narrative's conclusion). Isabel therefore exerts her own will to honor her moral commitment rather than her desired independent lifestyle. Paradoxically, her decision to return to the shackles of her dreadful marriage can perhaps be viewed as a retrospective freedom of choice as well as a certain future of dutiful matrimonial obedience. The costs of *The Portrait of a Lady's* multiple dismal marital unions, though, suggest that James—himself a rebel who defied his family's wishes by never marrying—did not have confidence in the righteousness of marriage.



THE EUROPEAN OLD WORLD VS. THE AMERICAN NEW WORLD

Henry James wrote a number of stories that contrasted American New World values of ingenuity, optimism, and new money against the European Old World values of sophistication, decadence, and a history steeped in hierarchy and tradition. James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* plays on this international contrast; James himself was an American who spent significant time living in Europe, and *The Portrait's* protagonist, Isabel Archer, is a young woman who similarly travels from America to Europe for worldly experiences. Although Isabel begins the novel a spirited individual who embodies the best elements of the New World, she is captivated by the allure of Old World values that then trap her into a dreadful marriage. Through this situation, James suggests that the Old World tradition of social duty is far more limiting and harmful than New World individualism.

Although James shows New World values in positive and negative lights, none of *The Portrait's* characters are significantly devastated by New World behaviors, such as individualism, independence, and forward-looking optimism. At the novel's opening, Isabel exhibits the best of New World values—she is spirited, curious, ambitious, and independent, all qualities that endear her to her peers. She never significantly harms any character except her own self through her choice in marriage. Caspar Goodwood, the successful American business who dislikes England but follows Isabel there to pursue her hand in marriage, is the epitome of a New World man due to his modern outlook and unflinching self-confidence. Despite his tendency to sometimes act in a thoughtless or ruthless manner (perhaps the underbelly of such spirited optimism), he does not disadvantage any of *The Portrait's* characters. Like Goodwood,

Isabel's friend Henrietta Stackpole, a journalist, is forcefully American in her blunt manner and career-driven lifestyle. Although she offends numerous people during her European travels, she never deals any major harm.

By contrast, James uses a much heavier hand in criticizing the more unsavory aspects of the Old World. Although feudal Old World traditions are often imbued with sophistication and morality, as seen through Lord Warburton and Ralph Touchett, the accompanying decadence and social duty that Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle embody prove disastrous for Isabel Archer. A number of *The Portrait's* main characters possess admirable Old World qualities. Lord Warburton is noble, gallant, and gracious, while Ralph is courteous, kind, and the novel's moral compass in terms of his astute reading of other characters. Both men fit almost perfectly into Old World social and moral codes. Like Ralph, Osmond and Madame Merle are American expatriates who identify much more readily with the European cultures they have lived in for so long. However, Osmond and Merle encapsulate an Old World decadence that ensnares the naïve Isabel. They have the appearance of sophistication and taste, but lack morality entirely. Osmond in particular favors the worst of Old World values to the point that he treats his daughter and new wife as possessions that add merit to his tasteful art collection. He and Madame Merle invisibly manipulate Isabel into an unfavorable marriage compared to Caspar Goodwood and Henrietta Stackpole's frank desire for Isabel to marry Goodwood.

Old World values ultimately trap Isabel in a lifestyle opposite to the New World individualism she has long desired, revealing James's underlying warning that the European Old World is stifling and even harmful in its commitment to propriety and social duty. Isabel is an ideal New World woman whose passion for Europe leads to sophisticated experiences and newfound wealth, but ultimately personal misfortune. After falling victim to Madame Merle and Osmond's scheme, she feels morally obliged to stay loyal to Osmond in their terrible marriage. Isabel ultimately demonstrates greater integrity than the Old World villains, refusing to follow in Osmond and Madame Merle's footsteps in ignoring social duty and moral conscience. However, by giving up the chance to escape her vile husband (Goodwood gives her the opportunity to run away with him and leave her husband), she has to relinquish her American-bred independence. In the clash between two worlds, Henry James uses Isabel's demise to represent entrenched European Old World values as more dangerous and powerful than starry-eyed New World ideas like optimism, innovation, and individualism.



ART AND MORALITY

In Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer is an independent young American woman who travels to Europe to experience cultures

steeped in history and tradition. James richly imbues Isabel's story with details of the art that she views while sightseeing and visiting private homesteads. Of particular note are the art collections belonging to Ralph Touchett (Isabel's cousin) and Gilbert Osmond (Isabel's future husband). In Europe, aesthetic taste demonstrates sophistication. As Isabel becomes more knowledgeable in European sensibilities, she comes to appreciate art in a more nuanced manner; however, she makes the mistake of equating aesthetic taste with ethical values, marrying the aesthetically refined yet morally corrupt Osmond. It is therefore Isabel's artistic as well as idealistic sensibilities that partially lead to her downfall.

The character Ralph Touchett demonstrates how artistic taste is a measure of individual sophistication in Europe, while Gilbert Osmond darkly illustrates how it can be feigned to gain social power. Ralph, arguably *The Portrait's* most morally upright character, has a small but tasteful art collection at his family **home**, Gardencourt. As Isabel grows in knowledge and experience, she comes to recognize how beautiful and valuable his collection really is and simultaneously adores her cousin even more for his exquisite artistic taste. This is one of the examples by which James suggests that art is a measure of refined taste and culture, which was true of late nineteenth-century Europe when *The Portrait* was written. Isabel is also enchanted by Osmond's aesthetic taste and art collection. She is so enamored by his artistic ideals that it is a key persuasion for her marrying him, allowing Isabel to help fund his apparently noble aesthetic taste. However, upon their marriage, she learns that there is no real system of value underpinning Osmond's artistic taste; it is a façade of fine taste that aligns with the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement of "art for art's sake." Osmond has feigned artistic taste and ethical behavior to gain wealth and social status from his union with Isabel.

Some characters' attitudes toward their art collections extend negatively to their human relationships, revealing that artistic sensitivity and taste is by no means a marker of morality. For example, Gilbert Osmond objectifies other people, perceiving them as art over which he can exercise ownership. He views his daughter, Pansy, and his new wife as property that he owns and can control, thereby molding them into objects of taste in his aesthetic collection and limiting their personal freedom. Even the virtuous Ralph Touchett is guilty of sometimes treating people as art. He is inspired by Isabel's individualism and beauty in much the same way that his art collection inspires him; he convinces his father to gift Isabel a small fortune so that Ralph can watch Isabel's progress experiencing the world on her terms as a flourishing work of art. Though Ralph's intentions are noble, he still objectifies Isabel in the process.

Art is a strong undercurrent in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, as artistic and aesthetic taste largely influence Isabel's character development and the way other people view her.

While Osmond forcefully exercises ownership over Isabel as an artwork, and Ralph views Isabel as an individual who requires “artistic completion” by experiencing all Europe has to offer, Henry James himself also conceives of Isabel through art. Through the novel itself, James owns and controls Isabel’s character as a work of art. This is reflected in the novel’s title, *The Portrait of a Lady*, with James painting many portraits of Isabel ranging from a naïve yet independent young woman to a sophisticated yet socially confined wife.



THE DANGERS OF WEALTH

Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* describes the formative years of Isabel Archer, a spirited and idealistic American woman who travels to Europe

from her home state of New York in order to experience the sophisticated culture of countries such as England, France, and Italy. Isabel is a young woman of no means who has so far happily partaken in life with a will to exercise her personal liberty in all regards, and she wants to continue enjoying this distinctively American brand of individualism during her European travels. However, her personal responsibilities are complicated when her cousin in England, Ralph Touchett, convinces his dying father, Mr. Touchett, to leave Isabel a large inheritance in his will. Ralph hopes that gifting his beloved cousin financial independence will allow her to always make own choices in life. Although wealth has afforded many of Isabel’s European peers favorable opportunities, it soon becomes apparent that Isabel’s social status as a relative nobody offered her more liberties than her newfound wealth does. Unforeseen wealth ultimately endangers Isabel’s independence by tying her to increased social responsibilities.

Wealth initially seems favorable, as it affords many of the *The Portrait*’s characters great opportunities in lifestyle and social status. For example, wealth has afforded Isabel’s suitors Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton power and charisma due to their privileged upbringings in industrialist and aristocratic families, respectively. Meanwhile, Mr. Touchett has been able to provide Mrs. Touchett and Ralph with luxurious lifestyles due to his success in banking. Ralph Touchett expects Isabel will benefit in the same way from her new windfall. Indeed, wealth initially enables Isabel to dream of diverse ways to use her money ethically. This is more than she had previously hoped for during her less exciting yet contented years in America, where she felt fulfilled through pursuits such as travel and reading despite her financial instability per Isabel’s father’s reckless use of family money.

However, unexpected wealth is dangerous because Isabel has not been educated to understand the social responsibilities and dangers associated with prosperity. Mrs. Touchett and her friend Harriet Stackpole warn their friend of the expectations attached to wealth, but Isabel is too overwhelmed by her new money to understand the duties and risks they speak of. She is

so staggered by her uncle’s generous inheritance that it takes her some time to process her changed circumstances; once she finally comes to terms with her new wealth, she is almost crippled by the expectation she places on herself to achieve meaningful enterprises with her monetary gift. Most significantly, Isabel fails to acknowledge her friends’ caution of the risks that come with wealth. She becomes subject to the schemes of cunning social predators: Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett’s friend, arranges for her lover, Gilbert Osmond, to court Isabel in order to marry her and gain possession of her fortune so that Merle, Osmond, and their illegitimate child Pansy can have access to it. Osmond successfully convinces Isabel to accept his proposal; upon their marriage, she realizes his true cruel personality. Despite Ralph Touchett’s best intentions to free Isabel by gifting her financial independence, his family money has contributed to her downfall. She is miserable in her marriage to Osmond, particularly when compared to her carefree attitudes when she lived in America. Her fortune led her into a tragic union, and she no longer has control over her finances, having relinquished her money to Osmond upon their contract of marriage.

The Portrait of a Lady therefore tells the story of an innocent young woman’s demise, with money at its core. Ralph Touchett believes that wealth will enable Isabel her much-desired freedom to live by her own choices and no one else’s, but Isabel’s ill-informed naivety makes her an easy target of malicious opportunists. Isabel’s earlier contentedness with her life of marginal means compared to her discontent at the decisions she makes concerning her newfound wealth illustrates the difference between money and happiness. Readers cannot, however, infer that Henry James is implying that wealth automatically brings ruin; after all, wealth provides endless comfort for the waning Ralph and his critically ill father. Instead, James demonstrates that unexpected prosperity can be perilous if its beneficiaries have not been thoroughly educated in wealth’s liabilities.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ARCHITECTURE

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James utilizes architecture beyond conventional world building to symbolize the influence of art and the way that art can both express characters’ internal thoughts and feelings as well as mask them. During Isabel Archer’s travels to various European locations, she is hosted by a number of grand households that include Gardencourt (the Touchett family estate), Lockleigh (Lord Warburton’s castle), and Gilbert Osmond’s two unnamed

homes (a Tuscan villa and a Roman castle). James's descriptions of these buildings, which are works of art in their own right, always resemble their principal inhabitants to some degree. Gardencourt is a harmonious and peaceful place of rest; Mr. Touchett and Ralph Touchett are similarly calm and kindly figures. Lockleigh is a castle with a defensive moat that symbolizes Warburton's fixed (or "locked") pride in his noble heritage. Osmond's Tuscan villa in Florence is dark and isolated, with great narrative attention devoted to the front of the building that mask the household behind it. Osmond is a similarly ominous character who deceives Isabel into marrying him. He also owns a Roman castle that is described as a grim fortress, which reflect Osmond's attitude toward his marriage with Isabel—he curbs her ideas and restricts her behaviors.

In the novel, architecture also represents what kind of life lies in store for Isabel during her time in each household. The narrator describes Isabel's family home in Albany, New York, as dull and dreary. This aesthetic shabbiness suggests that Isabel's life has been mundane compared to the glamor and opportunity that Europe will offer her. On her first visit to Gardencourt, Isabel fits seamlessly with the household's aesthetic as well as family, suggesting that Gardencourt will become a comfortable home for the protagonist. Lord Warburton's splendid Lockleigh offers stability and protection, just like its owner, but Isabel interprets this as mundane and easy. Art directly influences her behavior for she begins to avoid Lockleigh and rejects Warburton's marriage proposal. Finally, the ominous physical features of Osmond's Florence and Roman homes reflect his deceptive and menacing character. Subsequently, Isabel suffers greatly under the limitations Osmond imposes on her after marriage.



DOORWAYS

In Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, doorways are a significant **architectural** element that can cast characters as works of art framed within four edges. Besides reflecting the rendering of Isabel's character as a work of art, doorways also symbolize Isabel's various states of control throughout the novel. Isabel Archer's first narrative appearance occurs in a doorway at Gardencourt, where she observes Mr. Touchett and Ralph Touchett for some time. The rectangular frame serves as a threshold by which she can retreat inside or move outside. Once her cousin and uncle spy her in the doorway, they are overcome by her beauty and unfamiliarity—she is literally framed as an artwork they are viewing for the first time. After her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, James repeats Isabel's doorway scene. This time, Edward Rosier has come to find Isabel at the Roman house when he chances upon her standing in a gilded doorway. Significantly, the doorway scene at Gardencourt sees Isabel standing in the frame and looking outside, enjoying the chance to observe her relatives for the first time before they turn to

observe her as a seemingly beautiful portrait. However, in Osmond's Roman household, Isabel lacks agency: she is confined indoors and Rosier must come to her. Isabel's framing in the doorways contrast her personal freedoms at the novel's beginning compared to her marital entrapment at its end.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.

Related Characters: Lord Warburton, Ralph Touchett, Mr. Touchett

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's opening line, quietly formal in style and introducing the ritual of afternoon tea, suggests that this story will be a novel of manners. The sentence is even more significant for its purely English nature. The fact that James, an American author, sets up *The Portrait of a Lady* by detailing the delight of a traditional English pastime signals that his novel that will interrogate the cultural divide signalled by the Atlantic Ocean.

The afternoon tea ceremony is one of England's fondest traditions and suggests an aura of tranquillity, comfort, and easy companionship. James thereby sets the scene for the immediate introduction of readers to the setting and characters that accompany the act of taking afternoon tea together. Not surprisingly, the setting is an English country manor and the the characters are three courteous gentleman, including an English nobleman.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ “Oh no; she has not adopted me. I’m not a candidate for adoption.”

“I beg a thousand pardons,” Ralph murmured. “I meant—I meant—” he hardly knew what he meant.

“You meant she has taken me up. Yes; she likes to take people up. She has been very kind to me; but,” she added with a certain visible eagerness of desire to be explicit, “I’m very fond of my liberty.”

Related Characters: Ralph Touchett, Isabel Archer (speaker), Mrs. Touchett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

At a quiet English country estate, a young American woman—Isabel Archer—has burst onto the scene, her energy and charm drawing the admiration of the three gentlemen present. One of them is Isabel’s cousin, Ralph Touchett, and he is quite enchanted by Isabel to the point that the normally elegant gentleman is sometimes lost for words.

Isabel is meeting Ralph and his companions for the first time, as Mrs. Touchett—Ralph’s mother—has invited Isabel to England from her hometown of Albany, New York. Upon Ralph’s comment that Mrs. Touchett seems to have adopted Isabel, the young woman is very quick to clarify that she values her personal freedom and is in no way beholden to Mrs. Touchett. Isabel’s comments are not unkind; she seems to merely want to assert her independence. Her manner is very forthright as per American New World values of assertiveness. Ralph, meanwhile, with his “thousand pardons,” exhibits the European Old World values of courtesy and graciousness.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “I don’t see what you’ve against her except that she’s so original.”

“Well, I don’t like originals; I like translations,” Mr Ludlow had more than once replied. “Isabel’s written in a foreign tongue. I cant make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian or a Portugese.”

“That’s just what I’m afraid she’ll do!” cried Lillian, who thought Isabel capable of anything.

Related Characters: Lillian Ludlow, Edmund Ludlow (speaker), Isabel Archer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

Lillian and her husband Edmund, a conventional American couple, discuss Lillian’s younger sister Isabel. Isabel is an unusually headstrong and intelligent young woman who prioritizes vague ideals of personal liberty and expression above social conventions such as the expectation for her to marry.

Lillian, a very sensible woman, admires her “original” sister greatly and hopes that she will one day find happiness in marriage. Lillian wouldn’t be surprised if her curious and adventurous sister married a foreign national. Edmund, meanwhile, also cares for Isabel but is bewildered by her liberal attitudes. He prefers that people abide by social convention, which is why he is frustrated by Isabel’s nonconformist values; he wishes she were more a “translation” or copy of a good American woman such as Lillian than the “foreign tongue” she appears to be to him.

Later in the story, Lillian and Edmund’s prediction regarding Isabel’s marriage will to some extent come true—Isabel will marry an American expatriate named Gilbert Osmond who has lived some 30 years in Europe and exudes European sophistication and mystery.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active. It had been her fortune to possess a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast; to have a larger perception of surrounding facts and to care for knowledge that was tinged with the unfamiliar. [...] It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage. Meanwhile her errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his subject must shrink from specifying.

Related Characters: Isabel Archer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator shares background details on Isabel Archer as the novel's protagonist. Isabel has many admirable qualities, particularly in regard to her intelligence: she is quick-witted, well-educated, and has a keen imagination. However, her clever mind has resulted in her developing a number of flaws.

Isabel is self-confident to the point of arrogance. She naively believes that she always makes correct decisions in life and therefore regularly makes mistakes in action and judgment. Furthermore, she fails to interrogate her own character and development as closely as she should; as a result, she incorrectly believes in her superior nature compared to her peers. It is these flaws in character that set up Isabel up for an unhappy downfall later in the story. On the whole, though, James portrays Isabel as a likeable character who tries to act in a sincere and principled manner (even if it is often also a foolish manner).

Chapter 10 Quotes

“I like the great country stretching away beyond the rivers and across the prairies, blooming and smiling, and spreading till it stops at the green Pacific! A strong, sweet, fresh odour seems to rise from it, and Henrietta—pardon my simile—has something of that odour in her garments.”

[...]

“I'm not sure the Pacific's so green as that,” he said; “but you're a young woman of imagination. Henrietta, however, does smell of the Future—it almost knocks one down!”

Related Characters: Ralph Touchett, Isabel Archer (speaker), Caspar Goodwood, Henrietta Stackpole

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

One of Isabel's most ardently expressed desires throughout the novel is to experience European culture. However, at her heart she is a patriotic American and appreciates the sight and smell of American prairies and the Pacific Ocean more than Europe's landscapes. She adores and admires her friend Henrietta, who represents pure America in her bold and exuberant character.

For Ralph—who contrastingly aligns himself with European Old World values of history, tradition, and sophistication—Henrietta represents the forceful tide of

future change. This change threatens Old World order and tradition; it is no surprise that Ralph and Henrietta have a difficult relationship upon meeting each other. Ralph is not persuaded that Isabel and Henrietta's American ideals are the vibrant and worthy values they think them to be.

Notably, Caspar Goodwood seems the male equivalent of Henrietta in his American New World forcefulness and enterprise. This is perhaps the reason that Henrietta admires Goodwood so much and encourages Isabel to marry him.

Chapter 13 Quotes

“In so far as the indefinable had an influence upon Isabel's behaviour at this juncture, it was not the conception, even unformulated, of a union with Caspar Goodwood; for however she might have resisted conquest at her English suitor's large quiet hands she was at least as far removed from the disposition to let the young man from Boston take positive possession of her. [...] The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present.”

Related Characters: Mr. Touchett, Caspar Goodwood, Lord Warburton, Isabel Archer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 125-126

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel discusses Lord Warburton's surprising marriage proposal with Mr. Touchett (her uncle). Isabel is young, single woman with no close family or means, yet she has surprisingly rejected the charismatic, prestigious, and wealthy Warburton. Society expects a woman in Isabel's situation to seize on such an advantageous proposal, as in addition to the monetary and social advantages attached to the nobleman, Isabel is also attracted to his personality. However—as she has explained to Warburton—Isabel prioritizes her independence above all else in life and she knows that a marriage would restrict her personal freedom.

The narrator notes that it is not another suitor (the magnetic Caspar Goodwood) who stays Isabel from accepting Lord Warburton's affections. She genuinely believes that she will have more freedom as a single woman of no income than as a wealthy, married woman. The description of Goodwood's desire to take “positive possession” of Isabel demonstrates his forceful personality as well as the general Victorian belief that upon marriage, a woman becomes the property of her husband and must

abide by his wants and needs. Goodwood's forceful character is contrasted against the courteous Lord Warburton with his "large quiet hands," a comparison that highlights the cultural differences between America and Europe. As occurs throughout the story, Isabel affirms her desire to live by her own choices and no one else's.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ "If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of," she went on with a slight recurrence of grandeur, "it's my personal independence."

[...]

Isabel's words, if they meant to shock him, failed of the mark and only made him smile with the sense that here was common ground. "Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent—doing whatever you like? It's to make you independent that I want to marry you. [...] 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."

Related Characters: Caspar Goodwood, Isabel Archer (speaker), Lord Warburton

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel Archer is a woman who is eager to live a life of choices she makes independently of everyone else. She professes this desire frequently to her peers. Caspar Goodwood, on the other hand, is a man who wants to bind himself to Isabel in marriage. While she views marriage as an event that would restrict her personal liberty, Goodwood believes their union would enable her independence. He recognizes that Isabel lacks a financial income, with no immediate family, career, or investments to sustain her lifestyle. Isabel has refused to acknowledge this truth despite her family and friends' advising her to fix her financial and social vulnerability as soon as possible by undertaking an advantageous marriage. Isabel again wilfully ignores the truth of Goodwood's logic.

Goodwood is a beneficial romantic match for Isabel in many ways: he is wealthy, has excellent business prospects, and truly cares for Isabel's future wellbeing. Furthermore, Isabel feels strongly attracted to him physically and emotionally. Her rejection of his affections throughout the novel

indicates her naivety and lack of respect for Goodwood.

☝☝ "I'm not in my first youth—I can do whatever I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable to not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my own fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me."

Related Characters: Isabel Archer (speaker), Mrs. Touchett, Mr. Touchett, Caspar Goodwood

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel, a young American woman who desires to prioritize her personal freedom in life as well as to travel Europe to contend with new experiences, tells her ardent suitor Caspar Goodwood why she values her independence so highly. Isabel believes she is special and can shape a life that is richer with experience than most of her peers' will ever have. She will not get married for fear of cutting herself off from such unique opportunities.

She believes that her lack of immediate family, money, and frivolous desires enables her to participate in the independent lifestyle she dreams of. Isabel is unaware that her current wellbeing is financed by Mr. and Mrs. Touchett, as she has no idea about real-world practicalities such as money matters. Currently residing in the class-based England, she suggests that she belongs to an "independent class" in a move that echoes Mr. Touchett's comments that Americans can never belong in England.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ "Do you know where you're drifting?" Henrietta pursued, holding out her bonnet delicately.

"No, I haven't the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, on a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see—that's my idea of happiness."

[...]

"You're a creature of risks—you make me shudder!" cried Henrietta.

Related Characters: Isabel Archer, Henrietta Stackpole (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

When the exceedingly practical Henrietta questions Isabel on her purpose in life, Isabel admits that she is “drifting” without specific goals. She is happy to let external forces take her where they will, demonstrating her naivety as based on vaguely imagined ideals. Isabel’s dreams are also romantic—a young woman’s journey in “a swift carriage, on a dark night” could have been pulled directly from one of the many books that Isabel has read back home in America.

Henrietta is concerned by her friend’s naivety and increasing preference for European rather than American culture. She tries to help Isabel by setting her up with Caspar Goodwood, a man of clear focus and will, despite Isabel’s claims that she will not marry Goodwood nor anyone else. Henrietta views Isabel’s situation as an enormous “risk” that will likely backfire on her friend.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞ “Even the hardest iron pots have a little bruise, a little hole somewhere. I flatter myself that I’m rather stout, but I must if I must tell you the truth I’ve been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I’ve been cleverly mended.”

Related Characters: Madame Merle (speaker), Isabel Archer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199-200

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel and Madame Merle have struck up a fast friendship, and Isabel’s active imagination wonders about Merle’s mysterious background. Merle seems extremely sophisticated and talented, the type of woman Isabel would like to develop into. Isabel guesses that Merle has suffered in her past, lending her a worldly experience that Isabel also admires.

Madame Merle hints at her troubled past when she compares her identity to an iron pot that has been “chipped and cracked” throughout her lifetime. Alarm bells should

ring for Isabel when Merle admits she wears a façade after being “cleverly mended,” hiding elements of her identity, but the naïve Isabel misses the subtle warning. Merle is made from tough mettle and has proven her resilience in overcoming her previous suffering. Merle will prove to have survived because she is a savvy social predator who manipulates her peers for her own advantage; Isabel will come to resent Merle’s influence in her life, but will also pity the creature Merle has been forced to become through social circumstance.

☞ “You should live in your own land; whatever it may be you have your natural place there. If we’re not good Americans we’re certainly poor Europeans; we’ve no natural place here. We’re mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we haven’t our feet in the soil. At least one can know it and not have illusions. A woman perhaps can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl.”

Related Characters: Madame Merle (speaker), Isabel Archer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 202-203

Explanation and Analysis

Madame Merle is an American expatriate who has been living in American since childhood. Isabel immediately strikes up a firm friendship with her new acquaintance, admiring her sophistication and worldly experience.

Merle’s belief that Americans have to act as surface feeders in Europe with few rights—just as women must act in general, belonging nowhere and subject to the whims of men—is an apt description of her own behaviour. Europe has turned her into a social parasite who manipulates her peers in order to afford a lifestyle of comfort and travel. Her success in Europe as a seemingly sophisticated and talented woman likely arises from her recognition of how to play her cards correctly for favourable real-world outcomes. Isabel has not learned this lesson but admires Merle’s character. She is seduced by the deceitful Merle, who in turn was corrupted by European Old World decadence.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ “The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You’re not enough in contact with reality—with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You’re too fastidious; you’ve too many graceful illusions. Your newly-acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people who will be interested in keeping them up.”

Related Characters: Henrietta Stackpole (speaker), Isabel Archer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Henrietta, an American journalist traveling through Europe for a writing assignment, is a no-nonsense individual and practical go-getter. Her friend Isabel is contrastingly fixated on vague ideals that do not play out as hoped in the real world; Henrietta is concerned for Isabel’s wellbeing.

Henrietta’s worry for Isabel increases considerably when she learns that Isabel has recently come into a large inheritance. She believes that Isabel is too naïve to understand the responsibilities and risks that accompany wealth, and that money will also enable the headstrong Isabel to follow her vague ideals to her detriment. Henrietta advises Isabel that she needs to experience life’s harsh realities rather than narrow her social interactions to mixing with upper class Europeans who often practice out-of-touch principles.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure [...] [It’s] antique, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way—looked off behind, into splendid openness and the range of the afternoon light. [...] The windows of the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in.

Related Characters: Isabel Archer, Gilbert Osmond

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes Gilbert Osmond’s Florence villa as a “masked” building that hides secret within. The villa’s physical qualities reflect its owner’s character, with Osmond a man who wears a mask when courting Isabel to hide his agenda in targeting her wealth.

The villa is also “long,” “antique,” and “weather-worn,” characteristics that symbolize Osmond’s lean and angular figure as well as his mature age. Furthermore, the windows reflect Isabel’s view of Osmond as an individual of noble values and exquisite taste. These qualities are later revealed a farce, as suggested by the mask analogy. Osmond is a man who wholly lacks moral integrity and targets Isabel’s affections in order to gain access to her wealth. James’s double function in using architecture to comment on both setting and character is evident throughout the novel, with other notable buildings including the Touchett’s Gardencourt and Isabel and Osmond’s castle in Rome.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☞ We know that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. [...] It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort.

Related Characters: Lord Warburton, Isabel Archer, Gilbert Osmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

Gilbert Osmond has just learned that Isabel Archer has repeatedly turned down Lord Warburton’s affections. Osmond, interested in Isabel as a potential wife due to her considerable wealth, feels an increased attraction to her because of her unconventional behaviour in turning down a nobleman. Osmond admires Warburton’s English character and aristocratic status; Isabel’s value as a potential wife who will be an “original” object to add to his art collection

increases greatly due to the attention she receives from important men of society, which then reflects back on Osmond.

Osmond's thoughts reveal him to be an egotistical and greedy individual who delights in presenting a European Old World façade of sophistication and influence. The only reason he manages to trick the headstrong Isabel into marrying him is because he wears a mask to hide his true character from her. Isabel therefore falls in love with a false image; her downfall can also be attributed to her conviction to live a life founded on vague notions of personal freedom and meaningful action.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☝☝ “Is it a marriage your friends won’t like?” he demanded.

“I really haven’t an idea. As I say, I don’t marry for my friends.”

He went on, making no exclamation, no comment, only asking questions, doing it quite without delicacy. “Who and what then is Mr Gilbert Osmond?”

“Who and what? Nobody and nothing but a very good and very honourable man. He’s not in business,” said Isabel. “He’s not rich; he’s not known for anything in particular.”

Related Characters: Isabel Archer, Caspar Goodwood (speaker), Gilbert Osmond

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 327-328

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel must defend her decision to marry Gilbert Osmond to the outraged Caspar Goodwood. He is Isabel's long-time suitor and seems to have been led astray by her previous promise to him that she would not marry for a certain length of time. Goodwood is also jealous of Osmond and suspicious of his character.

Isabel seems a little surprised by Goodwood's calm questions, which contrast with his previous passionate outbursts. She takes great pride in informing Goodwood that her husband lacks money, social status, or career prospects. Instead of marrying for social advantage, Isabel is attracted by Osmond's apparently noble values in prioritizing his passion for painting alongside collecting tasteful works of art. She is thrilled to be able to help finance Osmond's art collection as a meaningful way to spend some of her inheritance. Due to her significantly greater social status compared to Osmond, Isabel may also

expect that she will still be able to exercise her personal freedoms in her upcoming marriage.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost. He drifted about the house like a rudderless vessel in a rocky stream, or sat in the garden of the palace on a great cane chair, his long legs extended, his head thrown back and his hat pulled over his eyes. He felt cold about the heart; he had never liked anything less. What could he do, what could he say? If the girl was irreclaimable could he pretend to like it? To attempt to reclaim her was permissible only if the attempt should succeed. To try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decently discreet only in the event of her being persuaded.

Related Characters: Gilbert Osmond, Isabel Archer, Ralph Touchett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 337-338

Explanation and Analysis

Ralph Touchett is devastated at the revelation Isabel is going to marry Gilbert Osmond. In love with Isabel himself, Ralph had incorrectly assumed that his cousin would never be attracted to a man like Osmond. Isabel's recent injection into Ralph's life had provided him with a new zest for living despite his terminal illness. Now, he feels the foundations of his world have been pulled out from under him. He adrift with shock and despondent at his loss of Isabel to another man.

Furthermore, Ralph does not trust Osmond to look after Isabel in their marriage, but he is unsure how to communicate this fear to Isabel in a manner she will accept. He knows that Isabel has a wilful personality and tends to wrongly believe in her own superior ability to judge situations better than her peers. He also believes that she has been seduced by Osmond's "deep art," referring to both Osmond's influence over Isabel and Isabel's particular attraction to Osmond's seemingly noble artistic passions. Ralph, however, believes Osmond is a fraud in both his artistic merits and his apparent love for Isabel. Osmond may merely be marrying Isabel for her money. Unfortunately, Ralph is right on all counts, including his belief that it is too late to change Isabel's mind about her marriage.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☝☝ “Pray, would you wish me to make a mercenary marriage—what they call a marriage of ambition? I’ve only one ambition—to be free to follow out a good feeling. I had others once, but they’ve passed away. Do you complain of Mr Osmond because he’s not rich? That’s just what I like him for. I’ve fortunately money enough; I’ve never felt so thankful for it as to-day. There have been moments when I should like to go and kneel down by your father’s grave: he did perhaps a better thing than he knew when he put it into my power to marry a poor man—a man who has born his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference. [...] Mr. Osmond makes no mistakes! He knows everything, he understands everything, he has the kindest, gentlest, highest spirit.”

Related Characters: Isabel Archer (speaker), Gilbert Osmond, Ralph Touchett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 345

Explanation and Analysis

Despite his knowledge that it is likely a hopeless cause, Ralph attempts to persuade Isabel that her decision to marry Osmond is a poor one. Isabel is quick to defend her fiancé, foolishly rebuking Ralph’s concerns about Osmond’s lack of money, status, career prospects, and genuine care for Isabel.

Isabel’s defence of Osmond’s integrity reveals the reasons she is marrying him. She is not interested in a “mercenary marriage” for her social benefit. In fact, she seems to relish the idea that she is acting against social expectation by marrying a man who offers her no obvious advantage in matrimony. This, to Isabel, proves that she is living life according to her desire to always act on her personal freedoms. She is attracted to Osmond not in spite of but *because* of his various poverties. Isabel seems wholly unable to recognize Osmond’s many flaws, even when her family and friends try to inform her of them directly. In her mind, Osmond is a uniquely faultless individual who can do no wrong—the sophisticated older man “makes no mistakes” and “knows everything.” Isabel adamantly believes that there is no better way for her to make meaningful change in the world that use her inheritance to finance Osmond’s apparently noble life passions.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝☝ The elation of success, which surely now flamed high in Osmond, emitted meanwhile very little smoke for so brilliant a blaze. [...] He was immensely pleased with his young lady; Madame Merle had made him a present of incalculable value. [...] What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one’s thought on a polished, elegant surface? [...] this lady’s intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one—a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert.

Related Characters: Madame Merle, Isabel Archer, Gilbert Osmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 349

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator relays Osmond’s inner thoughts upon securing Isabel’s hand in marriage. While Isabel remains unaware that Osmond is foremost attracted to her for money, readers know that he has played her during their courtship by wearing a mask of elegance and care that is not true of his actual character.

Osmond is thrilled by his success in winning over Isabel and her fortune but his “blazing” ego emits “little smoke”: he is able to continue hiding his true agenda from Isabel. Beyond Isabel’s money—which will enable him to buy more objects for his treasury of collected artwork—Osmond views Isabel herself as a valuable object for his personal art collection. He compares her to a “silver plate”—an object that holds financial value but that is also prized for its reflective qualities. Osmond believes that Isabel’s fine wit alongside the esteem that she draws from other influential men will reflect well on his social image. Osmond’s objectification of Isabel reveals his possessive attitude toward women and his selfish need to attract compliments from his peers. He is marrying for social benefit rather than for love.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☛☛ The object of Mr. Rosier's well-regulated affection dwelt in a high house in the very heart of Rome; a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny *piazza* in the neighbourhood of the Farnese Palace. In a palace, too, little Pansy lived—a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon to poor Rosier's apprehensive mind. It seemed to him of evil omen that the young lady he wished to marry, and whose fastidious father he doubted of his ability to conciliate, should be immured in a kind of domestic fortress [...] he could see that the proportions of the windows and even the details of the cornice had quite the grand air.

Related Characters: Isabel Archer, Gilbert Osmond, Pansy Osmond, Edward Rosier

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 363

Explanation and Analysis

James once more uses architecture as a mechanism that comments on characters as well as setting. Here, Edward Rosier considers the physical features and ambience of the Roman castle that Pansy Osmond, Gilbert Osmond, and Isabel Archer (now Mrs. Osmond) live in.

The castle is a direct representation of Gilbert Osmond and his attitude toward women. Osmond's "dark" and decadent personality is also foreboding, much like the oppressive looking castle. The building also reflects the "grand air" that Osmond has painted himself with—he believes that he is an individual of general importance and that Pansy and Isabel's status as desirable women (or objects for his art collection) enhance his social prestige. Rosier's description of the building as a "domestic fortress" symbolizes the prison-like restrictions that Isabel and Pansy live under. Social convention dictates they obey Osmond's will, yet he is a selfish and uncaring man. Pansy has grown up knowing no better treatment, while Isabel has been tricked into marriage with a man who desires only her money and her decorative qualities.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☛☛ He took his course to the adjoining room and met Mrs. Osmond coming out of the deep doorway. She was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, as he had said, and yet oh so radiantly gentle! [...] She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception—she had more the air of being able to wait. Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady.

Related Characters: Isabel Archer, Edward Rosier

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 366

Explanation and Analysis

Edward Rosier is looking for Pansy at the Osmond residence when he runs into Isabel. The now-married young American woman has changed greatly since Rosier last saw her in France some years ago; she appears more elegant, poised, and sophisticated. It seems that Isabel has evolved into the very portrait of a woman who embodies the European Old World qualities of worldly refinement. In doing so, though, she has lost the "original" edge she held at the novel's beginning through her transformation into Osmond's desired possession.

James plays on his title and the theme of artistic merit by framing Isabel in a doorway, as he has done earlier in the story. She therefore becomes the literal titular "portrait of a lady" as James simultaneously emphasizes her new status as an prized object in Gilbert Osmond's art collection. Isabel has come to realize that she was tricked into a marriage where her husband only cares for her wealth and her decorative qualities—not her ideas or wellbeing as an individual. The adjective "gilded" calls attention to the marital cage that Isabel finds herself trapped in, as social convention dictates she obey her husband's desires.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☛☛ "If she should marry Lord Warburton I should be very glad," Isabel went on frankly. "He's an excellent man. You say, however, that she only to sit perfectly still. Perhaps she won't sit perfectly still. If she loses Mr. Rosier she may jump up!"

Osmond appeared to give no heed to this; he sat gazing at the fire. "Pansy would like to be a great lady," he remarked in a moment with a certain tenderness of tone. "She wishes above all to please," he added.

Related Characters: Gilbert Osmond, Isabel Archer (speaker), Edward Rosier, Pansy Osmond

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 417

Explanation and Analysis

The prolonged tension between Isabel and her husband Osmond is heightened by Osmond's belief that Isabel has not encouraged the noble Lord Warburton's affection for Pansy Osmond as Gilbert Osmond desires. Here, Isabel tries to demonstrate her loyalty to her husband and also inform him of Pansy's true feelings—the young woman is in love with Edward Rosier and does not return Warburton's romantic interest. Osmond ignores Isabel's warning that Pansy may rebel against her father's wishes. This is typical of Osmond's treatment of Isabel—he offers her no attention unless it serves his own ego. She again finds herself trapped in a miserable, loveless marriage.

Osmond behaves oppressively by treating Isabel and Pansy as objects he wholly controls. This is most evident in his claim that “Pansy would like to be a great lady” who “wishes above all to please”; he always speaks for Pansy, never allowing her to voice her own opinions or desires. Isabel also suffers terribly under Osmond's cruel will, having lost the independence she used to value so greatly before her marriage.

Chapter 42 Quotes

☝☝ The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would take the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the best and gather an occasional nosegay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching.

Related Characters: Pansy Osmond, Gilbert Osmond, Isabel Archer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 427

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel has come to realize that her engagement to Osmond was based on a sham. He wore a kindly and sophisticated persona in order to trap her into a miserable marriage, desiring her wealth and her decorative qualities rather than her ideas and opinions. Now, Osmond resents Isabel

because she has not made her attitudes conform to his own. Osmond wants to control everything in his life, even his wife's thoughts.

Isabel references Osmond's marital ownership over her identity. Osmond treats his daughter Pansy in exactly the same manner he treats Isabel—as indicated by Pansy's name, she is a flower in his garden and he controls her growth pedantically. James thereby weaves a metaphor of gardening into Osmond's possessive treatment of women.

Chapter 50 Quotes

☝☝ “One's daughter should be fresh and fair; she should be innocent and gentle. With the manners of the present time she is liable to become so dusty and crumpled. Pansy's a little dusty, a little dishevelled; she has knocked about too much. This bustling, pushing rabble that calls itself society—one should take her out of it occasionally. Convents are very quiet, very convenient, very salutary. I like to think of her there, in the old garden, under the arcade, among those tranquil virtuous women. Many of them are gentlewomen born; several of them are noble. She will have her books and her drawing, she will have her piano. I've made the most liberal arrangements.”

Related Characters: Gilbert Osmond (speaker), Edward Rosier, Countess Gemini, Isabel Archer, Pansy Osmond

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 524

Explanation and Analysis

Osmond is trying to explain his decision to send his daughter, Pansy, back to the convent. He views her as a precious and pure object that he needs to protect from the “knocking about” of society's “rabble”—likely a reference to Osmond's disapproval of Edward Rosier's recent pursuit of Pansy's affections. Osmond does not endorse Rosier as a suitor for his daughter, therefore—despite Pansy's returned affections for Rosier—Osmond removes Pansy from the younger man's sphere of influence.

Osmond's descriptions of Pansy and the convent reveal his attitudes toward women and art. He feels wholly entitled to exert control over women, for example even arranging the hobbies that Pansy can participate in at the convent. He is also obsessed by art and treats women as artistic objects; Pansy is an object that has become too “dusty” and “dishevelled” in his collection, which he is trying to rectify by sending her away to the convent to be freshened up.

Osmond's decision to send Pansy away are significant

because he is splitting up two young lovers. Isabel will choose to refrain from confronting Osmond's cruelty for the sake of their marriage, while the Countess Gemini will have no qualms about interrogating her brother's callous behavior.

Chapter 52 Quotes

☛☛ Isabel saw it all as distinctly as if it had been reflected in a large clear glass. It might have been a great moment for her, for it might have been a moment of triumph. That Madame Merle has lost her pluck and saw before her the phantom of exposure—this in itself was a revenge, this in itself was almost the promise of a brighter day.

Related Characters: Pansy Osmond, Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle, Isabel Archer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 545

Explanation and Analysis

After learning the truth of Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle's previous adulterous relationship, Isabel runs into Merle at the convent. Both women are visiting Pansy. Merle quickly realizes that Isabel knows her darkest secret and is terrified by the power Isabel now wields: public knowledge of Merle and Osmond's scandalous affair would socially impoverish Merle and likely prevent her from building a relationship with her daughter Pansy. Isabel also resents, and pities, Merle for her devious orchestration of Isabel's unhappy marriage to Osmond.

Isabel has one of the clearest moments of judgment in her life, having previously been apt to make foolish and naïve decisions based on wilful blindness. Instead of bringing ruin onto Merle, she decides to stay silent and does not cause a scene. But Isabel does enjoy the sweet feeling of revenge she experiences when viewing Merle's terror at her secret exposed. She feels more positive about her future by looking at "the promise of a brighter day."

Chapter 54 Quotes

☛☛ "She made a convenience of me."

"Ah," cried Mrs. Touchett, "so she did of me! She does of every one."

Related Characters: Mrs. Touchett, Isabel Archer

(speaker), Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 564

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel and her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, bond over their shared dislike of Madame Merle. Both women used to consider Merle a dear friend, but have now realized that Merle is a master manipulator who plays her peers for social gain. Isabel and Mrs. Touchett are particularly upset by Merle's scheme to encourage Isabel to marry the cruel Gilbert Osmond in a bid for Merle and Osmond to gain access to Isabel's wealth.

Isabel is also particularly appalled by the revelation that the decision to marry Osmond was not really her own, but Merle's, thereby invalidating Isabel's pride and conviction in deciding to marry based on her own personal choice. Throughout her life, Isabel has tried to prioritize her independence; she now knows that her life's biggest decision was managed by another person without her knowledge. Isabel and Mrs. Touchett describe themselves as "conveniences" because of the easy way that Merle has used them to suit her own needs.

Chapter 55 Quotes

☛☛ "Why shouldn't we be happy—when it's here before us, when it's so easy? I'm yours for ever—for ever and ever. Here I stand; I'm as firm as a rock. What have you to care about? You've no children; that perhaps would be an obstacle. As it is you've nothing to consider. You must save what you can of your life; you mustn't lose it all simply because you've lost a part. It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We've nothing to do with all that; we're quite out of it; we look at things as they are. You took the great step in coming away; the next is nothing; it's the natural one."

Related Characters: Caspar Goodwood (speaker), Gilbert Osmond, Isabel Archer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 580

Explanation and Analysis

Caspar Goodwood has devoted himself to Isabel always. He now stands before her in an attempt to persuade her to leave her miserable marriage with the wicked Gilbert

Osmond. In his New World contempt for social convention, he believes that the right course of action is for Isabel to flee her marriage by running away with her.

Goodwood's reasoning is threefold. Firstly, he knows that Isabel is deeply unhappy and suffers needlessly in her marriage. Secondly, he is wholly committed to Isabel and promises to care for her wellbeing "for ever and ever." His continued dedication to Isabel throughout the tumultuous past years suggests his promise to be true. Finally, Goodwood feels that there is no obstacle that prevents Isabel from running away with him—she does not have any

children dependent on her and he believes that she also does not care about social convention. On this final point, Goodwood's beliefs are unfounded. Isabel has made a promise to her vulnerable stepdaughter, Pansy, that she will return to her (and by extension to Osmond). Isabel has also proven she has a strong code of ethics and has honored her commitment to marriage despite Osmond's oppressive treatment. It is for these reasons that Isabel will reject Goodwood's proposal to run away together, sacrificing her personal happiness to abide by her social responsibilities.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

Henry James offers context around his creation of *The Portrait of a Lady*. He began writing the novel in 1879 in Florence, Italy, and completed it in Venice the following year. It was released in serial form from 1880-1881 in American magazine *The Atlantic* and the British publication *Macmillan's Magazine*.

James reflects on how writing in the culturally rich settings of Florence and Venice provided many distractions from his work, slowing down his writing process. However, he is grateful for the vibrant European detail that his settings provided his narrative.

The central premise of *The Portrait* is pinned on the “conception of a young woman affronting her destiny,” and James thereby based the novel on “the sense of [this] single character.” James draws parallels between his work and that of Ivan Turgeneff, a Russian novelist who similarly prioritized character rather than plot. James supposes that if he exposes his central heroine to a number of different situations, the narrative would develop from there.

James admits confusion at how his strong sense of his protagonist arrived to him without any story attached. He compares her imagined character in “the back-shop of [his] mind” to a vintage object that is buried in an antiques store until a customer recognizes something special in the object and gives it new life.

As an American writing in Europe and publishing his novel simultaneously on both continents, James’s preface sets up the way that the novel will set American New World values against European Old World codes of behavior.



Throughout the preface James builds an argument about the merit of his novel, interrogating its characters and settings. One can read his musings as referring to both the artistic and financial value of his novel. In terms of setting, James acknowledges that his exotic European locations affected his writing in both positive and unfavorable ways.



*James explicitly outlines the manner in which *The Portrait of a Lady* is wholly reliant on Isabel Archer’s unusually independent character. It was rare for authors of the time to focus their work on female experiences. Compared to James’s contemporaries, he was significantly influenced by European writers’ literary styles more than the techniques of his fellow Americans.*



*The analogy comparing Isabel’s strong-willed and well-defined sense of character to a special object further reinforces James’s value of his novel as an artistic and monetary success—in fact, *The Portrait* was his most financially profitable work and also received critical acclaim. James also objectifies his protagonist through the analogy.*



He also details his uncertainty of Isabel Archer's merit as the protagonist of his novel. James overcomes this issue by reasoning that the narrative will hold value if he can ensure his protagonist's development is meaningful for other characters as well as her own. He also reasons that focusing the novel on her experiences and thoughts will be a unique element distinguishing his story from others with similar heroines. However, this will also be a great challenge, with James needing to build the narrative's structure and wider cast solely around Isabel.

Overall, when James considers his completed novel for revisions in 1901, he is largely satisfied with it. However, he does acknowledge that critics' levies that he mistreated the character of Henrietta Stackpole hold some weight; he perhaps exaggerated her personality, but his reasoning was to strongly contrast Stackpole's vigorous resolution with the introspective Isabel. Stackpole is a character whose purpose is to move the plot forward, while Isabel's many reflections on her situation are the body of the novel's thematic drive.

James defends Isabel Archer's value as his novel's protagonist by commenting on his unique focus on female consciousness and Isabel's significant influence over other key characters' narratives. James thereby adds ethical validation to his previous arguments regarding her artistic and financial values.



James makes few major changes during his edits, as he is likely thrilled at his novel's critical and financial success; The Portrait remains one of his most lucrative works. He addresses one of his novel's shortcomings in acknowledging Henrietta Stackpole's excessive character traits. In the story readers will come to see that James has painted Stackpole with total self-confidence to wholly associate her with American New World values of candor and enterprise.



CHAPTER 1

On the lawn of an old English country estate, three gentlemen are drinking tea together on a beautiful summer afternoon. A collie dog is also present. The ageing gentleman is Mr. Touchett, an American banker who has lived in England for three decades. Now an elderly invalid, he is very fond of his country home and stares at its **architecture** while reflecting on the home's history and its name of Gardencourt.

The two younger men interrupt Mr. Touchett's contemplation to engage him in conversation. One is Mr. Touchett's son, Ralph, who has a "witty, charming face" despite being sickly from long-term consumption. The other is a bearded nobleman named Lord Warburton, who is wearing riding clothes.

The first character that James describes in detail is Mr. Touchett, who is typical of The Portrait's cast in that he is an American expatriate living in Europe. The entire opening scene oozes English sophistication and wealth at the country estate. Touchett's reflections on his home and its architecture foreshadow the importance of architecture as a symbol throughout the novel. His memories also suggest that American self-made wealth can buy English social status and sophistication.



Again, witty conversation and characters' manners and dress suggest sophistication and financial prosperity. The presence of a nobleman is also indicative of the social hierarchy that is embedded in English tradition.



The three gentlemen discuss Lord Warburton's boredom with life, with the Touchett men encouraging him to marry a good woman. This would make life much more enjoyable and exciting. Lord Warburton imagines how an interesting wife might change his life. Mr. Touchett instructs Warburton to fall in love as soon as possible, as long as it is not with his American niece (later to be revealed as Isabel Archer) who is expected to arrive to visit Gardencourt soon. There is also banter about the differences in American and English cultures, with Ralph laughingly commenting on his father's inability to practice English courtesy despite his thirty years residing in England.

The very masculine scene turns to discuss women. The three gentlemen speak of the benefits of marriage, suggesting that a wife is a commodity that can enrich a man's life. Certainly, women of the day were expected to adhere to their husband's desires. Touchett's instructions for Lord Warburton to refrain from falling in love with Isabel foreshadow that very occurrence. In this scene a clear difference in American and English values is also highlighted, as Touchett has retained his American manner of forthright conversation.



The three gentlemen discuss the details surrounding Ralph's cousin Isabel's surprising visit. Mrs. Touchett, who has spent the winter living in the United States, discovered the girl in New York and took a liking to her, inviting her to visit England. Mrs. Touchett sent an abrupt and baffling telegram to announce their incoming guest; all that the Touchett men can understand clearly is that Mrs. Touchett's niece is an "independent" young woman. There is still confusion as to whether she is financially or personally independent, or both.

Isabel is not yet present in the scene but she already makes an impact, with her unconventional character (women are usually dependent on the men around them) drawing all three men's interest. Her expected arrival to Gardencourt signals the theme of Americans exploring Europe, a in keeping with concerns in James's time regarding America's increasing wealth.



Despite Lord Warburton's questioning Mr. Touchett further about his soon-to-visit niece, Mr. Touchett and Ralph can offer no further details about Isabel; they are as much in the dark as the nobleman. Having earlier bantered about getting married, Warburton muses aloud as to whether this niece might be worth "trying on" as a romantic partner; his interest is aroused by the mysterious circumstance of this independent young woman.

An aura of mystery adds suspense to Isabel's expected arrival. Warburton objectifies Isabel with the ease of a privileged male, wondering if she is a commodity worth testing out. In fact, he likens her to a piece of clothing he may "try on" to see if she is a good fit. Warburton's patriarchal attitudes are typical of Victorian English aristocracy and society at large, where women were treated as inferior to men.



CHAPTER 2

Ralph wanders away as Mr. Touchett and Lord Warburton talk further. He is unaware that a tall young woman in a black dress is standing in a **doorway**, observing him. He suddenly notices her because of his dog, who bounds over to her excitedly. Isabel handles the exuberant dog with great confidence and friendliness, and Ralph moves to greet her. She is the object of the men's conversation: Ralph's cousin, Isabel Archer, has arrived to Gardencourt.

Isabel intrudes on the masculine scene and immediately calls attention. She is a beautiful figure who is framed in a doorway, as though a portrait. The excited dog fawning over Isabel outwardly portrays Ralph's interior thrill at meeting his enchanting cousin. Isabel is the picture of composure in her new setting, assuredly assessing the other characters and meeting Ralph and the dog with great ease. Such confidence is typical of American New World values.



Isabel informs Ralph that his mother, Mrs. Touchett, has retired immediately to her rooms upon arrival, and would like Ralph to meet with her at 7 P.M. Isabel also explains why she has never met the Touchetts before, due a disagreement between Isabel's father and his sister-in-law, Ralph's mother. Ralph gallantly replies that he does not pay attention to his mother's quarrels; Isabel assures him that Mrs. Touchett has been very kind to her, taking her under her wing, although the young woman tells Ralph that she "is very fond of her liberty."

Isabel exclaims at the identity of the other two men on the lawn, Mr. Touchett and Lord Warburton, declaring that she hoped she would meet a lord in England. Upon meeting them, she is charmed by the kind Mr. Touchett, the impressive Lord Warburton, and furthermore by Gardencourt's delightful features and atmosphere. The three men are altogether thrilled to meet such an energetic and engaging young woman. So is Ralph's collie dog, which he jokingly offers to give to Isabel. The cousins laughingly agree to share custody.

Mr. Touchett then moves away with Isabel, leaving Lord Warburton to tell Ralph that Isabel is exactly the type of "interesting woman" that the nobleman has been waiting to meet. Indeed, all of the men have been enchanted by Isabel's charismatic appearance.

Upon meeting her cousin, Isabel drives conversation. Ralph has already learned of Isabel's independence through his mother's telegram, but Isabel asserts this independence herself. She acknowledges Mrs. Touchett's kindness in inviting her to England but does not feel beholden to her aunt because of it. Mrs. Touchett's decision to retreat to her rooms rather than greet her husband suggests a tense marriage.



Isabel's stereotypical opinions of England are confirmed by a nobleman's presence at Gardencourt. She is thrilled to experience traditional English culture and the three gentlemen are similarly thrilled to meet the lively young American woman. Ralph's gesture in offering shared ownership of his dog to Isabel foreshadows his later decision to share his financial inheritance with her.



Warburton's revelation that this is the type of woman he was just discussing with Ralph and Touchett suggests his romantic interest in Isabel, as the three men were speaking about marriage. Ralph's awkward generosity may also suggest romantic interest, or at least the beginnings of adoration, for his cousin.



CHAPTER 3

The novel flashes back to Mrs. Touchett and Isabel's meeting one another in America. Mrs. Touchett is a pragmatic and self-serving woman who has accomplished a "great deal of good," although "she never pleased." In a rather extraordinary arrangement, she resides in Italy while her Mr. Touchett lives in England; Mrs. Touchett realized early on in their marriage that she and her new husband wanted different things from life, but cited her dislike of English culture as the reason for her move. She also visits the United States each year to attend to her personal affairs, such as her investments. On this trip, she has returned to America with the express desire to meet her youngest niece, Isabel Archer, since Mrs. Touchett's brother-in-law, Isabel's father, has recently passed away, and her sister is long deceased.

Despite the focus so far on Isabel's character, James now describes Mrs. Touchett as an unusual and fascinating woman in her own right. She ignores convention by living independently from her husband and son as well as by attending to her own financial investments. She is another example of an American expatriate who now largely resides in Europe, and claims to prefer Italian life over English culture. It seems quite unusual for Mrs. Touchett to have taken Isabel under her wing; perhaps her niece's similarly headstrong character appeals to Mrs. Touchett.



Mrs. Touchett finds Isabel at the young woman's grandmother's house in Albany, New York. Isabel is reading a book in the library, a room that she romanticizes and has loved since her childhood. It is clear she has a great love of reading and a strong imagination. Isabel is comfortable in just her own company, and shocked at the intrusion of the older woman who she realizes must be her "crazy Aunt Lydia" that she has never met. Mrs. Touchett replies in a no-nonsense fashion that she has never had a single delusion.

Mrs. Touchett explains that she had a falling out with Isabel's father because of the unconventional manner in which he raised his daughters. She has some knowledge of Isabel and her two sisters, Lilian and Edith, and desires to know that their future is provided for now that they are parentless. She asks Isabel how much she will receive once Mr. Archer's home is sold for his daughters' benefit. Isabel replies that she has little idea about the property's worth. Mrs. Touchett finds her niece's financial unawareness to be exceptionally strange, although not unexpected, as Mr. Archer was known to be financially irresponsible.

Mrs. Touchett suggests that Mr. Archer's home is unimpressive and will be pulled down to create shopping space when it is sold. Isabel fervently hopes this will not be the case, as she adores her family house and the memories it holds.

Isabel and Mrs. Touchett talk for an hour longer, with Isabel mentioning that she would one day like to visit Florence with her aunt, although she could not promise to be obedient to her aunt's every wish. Isabel finds her to be Mrs. Touchett to be an unusual and fascinating figure, while Mrs. Touchett recognizes her niece as intelligent and bold character.

CHAPTER 4

Still in a flashback, the narrator states that Lilian is the eldest of the Archer sisters and known for being "the practical one," Edith is regarded as the prettiest of the three, and Isabel is known for being highly intelligent. When Isabel tells Lilian about Mrs. Touchett's unexpected visit, Lilian hopes that their aunt will invite Isabel to visit Europe. She tells her husband, a lawyer named Edmund, that this would give Isabel the chance to develop through new experiences. Lilian hopes that Isabel would also find a husband in Europe.

James further cements Mrs. Touchett as a strong-willed woman who speaks her opinions frankly and acts on them as she sees fit. He reveals Isabel as a curious individual who learns about life by reading. Isabel is also satisfied with her current circumstances, despite lacking significant wealth, and is furthermore free-spirited in opinion like her aunt. Both women embrace the radical New World values of forthrightness and liberty.



Mrs. Touchett is far more concerned with Isabel's prospects than Isabel herself is, demonstrating the young woman's naivety about real world practicalities. Marriage was the only course of action for a parentless Victorian woman with no inheritance or career prospects; Isabel has neither, yet is happily ignorant of her financial vulnerability.



Isabel again demonstrates her naïve and idealistic mindset, favoring nostalgic attachments over real-world predicaments. This naivety is a vulnerability that will later cause significant heartbreak during her travels through Europe.



Despite their contrasting attitudes toward money, James again highlights the similarities between Mrs. Touchett and Isabel as liberal and opinionated women who contradict Victorian social norms.



As per Victorian gender norms, the Archer women are stereotyped as one-dimensional characters by their peers. Isabel's bookish image reflects her curious and intelligent character, but James has already shown she has much more depth as an individual. Sensible Lilian is already married and wishes the same companionship and financial security for her youngest sister. She also recognizes that the clever Isabel would greatly benefit from the sophisticated experiences that Europe can offer.



Isabel reflects on her upbringing, noting she has already had a number of opportunities in life, including a largely self-directed education and an opportunity to travel abroad with her father. The narrator reveals that alongside Mr. Archer's financial recklessness, he largely left the care of his three daughters to their governesses. Many people are critical of him for his lack of family responsibility, although Isabel does not feel this way at all. She desires to live her life freely in much the same way that her father did.

A self-directed education means that Isabel is very intelligent. She has learned a great deal from books, although "hated to be thought bookish," preferring instead to learn from experience. She remembers that many of her sister Edith's suitors seemed intimidated to speak with her, likely because of her intimidating intelligence.

While thinking about the possibility of Mrs. Touchett inviting Isabel to England, Caspar Goodwood arrives at the house. He is a Boston cotton-mill businessman and has been pursuing Isabel's hand in marriage. She admires him greatly but does not wish to marry him. After half an hour, he leaves without having persuaded Isabel to accept his marriage proposal. However the narrator notes that he is a forceful personality and will not accept defeat easily.

Contrary to popular opinion, Isabel is grateful for the independence that she experienced through her unconventional upbringing. She doesn't seem to realize that her liberties are about to become greatly restricted due to her lack of any financial income. Her financial foolhardiness can be compared to her father's reckless attitude toward money and family.



Isabel is clearly intelligent and well-read—however, she lacks the wisdom of real-world experience. This naivety will later prove her downfall in happiness and prosperity.



Although Isabel is seemingly embarrassed at Edith's suitors' unwillingness to interact with her, she is not without romantic options: Goodwood, a wealthy man of influence, wants to marry her. Because Isabel values her personal liberty and hasn't recognized her financial vulnerability, she turns down his proposal in a move that her family and peers would consider unwise. Goodwood's resolve to continue courting Isabel demonstrates his American New World tenacity.



CHAPTER 5

Returning to the present, Ralph eagerly goes to meet his mother, Mrs. Touchett, at 7 P.M. as instructed. Mrs. Touchett is in many ways the more paternal of his parents in her distancing herself from family members, but she is nevertheless extremely fond of Ralph and insists they spend time with another. The usual arrangement is that Ralph spends three months a year with her in Florence.

Ralph tends to be motherly in nature and takes after Mr. Touchett in this temperament. Mr. Touchett arrived in England some thirty years ago to pursue a lucrative role in the banking industry. He aspired to become accepted as a local in England but to never become truly English, valuing his American identity over European culture.

Ralph adores and respects his mother, despite Mrs. Touchett's lack of conventionally maternal behaviors. Her liberal attitudes reflect the growing women's rights movement in America, one of many radical trends gaining traction in the nation.



Mr. Touchett is a self-made man who wants to command respect in England without assimilating to local behaviors. He and his wife are perhaps the only American expats in the novel not captivated by English Old World sophistication, although they do appreciate certain elements of it, such as European architecture.



Ralph is an amalgamation of his blended American and English upbringing. After earning a degree at Harvard University in the United States, he assimilated many British attitudes by then attending Oxford University in England. Ralph traveled and also worked in the banking industry for Mr. Touchett, but after falling ill with consumption, now lives a comfortable life between Gardencourt and European destinations such as Florence. Despite knowing of his certain early death, Ralph is convinced that he has a few more years ahead of him.

Ralph discusses his cousin Isabel with Mrs. Touchett, who admires her niece—particularly her independence—but also recognizes that Isabel is naïve to most workings of the world. For example, Isabel believes she has paid her own way to England without realizing that her aunt has covered a number of expenses. Mrs. Touchett tells Ralph that she wants Mr. Touchett to invite Isabel to stay at Gardencourt for a suitable period, before she takes her niece to visit Italy and France so that she can experience more of Europe. Mrs. Touchett is quite certain that Lord Warburton will not be able to handle her headstrong niece if the neighboring lord shows interest. At one point during their conversation, Ralph jokes that he speaks of his cousin Isabel as though she is a piece of “property.”

After a family dinner, Isabel asks Ralph to show her his art collection that he has personally curated at Gardencourt. He suggests that they wait until the morning, when the light suits the artworks better, but Isabel is keen to see them immediately. As Ralph shows her the collection, he is affected by Isabel’s curiosity and thirst for knowledge. He judges that she has good taste in art despite her lack of familiarity in this area.

Isabel then surprises Ralph by asking whether there are any ghosts at Gardencourt, due to the estate’s age. He tells her only those who have suffered see ghosts; she has so far experienced a wonderful life, and he hopes it remains this way so that Isabel will never see any ghosts. He tells Isabel that in the interests of her happiness he “shall be very happy to contribute to it.”

Isabel reveals to Ralph that she enjoyed meeting Mr. Touchett and Lord Warburton. She also likes Mrs. Touchett, particularly because her aunt does not expect anyone to like her somewhat prickly personality. Isabel also tells Ralph that she likes him, and that she recognizes he is in many ways the opposite to his mother, for he cares greatly what other people think of him. The two cousins agree that they should live life as happily as possible.

Despite his serious health issues, Ralph has led a charmed life of opportunity—he has experienced the best in terms of travel, education, and general luxury. His lifestyle is afforded by his father’s self-made wealth; Ralph has given up on pursuing similar money due to his approaching early death. Throughout these early chapters, it is clear that Ralph represents the Old World values of courtesy and morality as influenced by his adopted homeland, England.



Mrs. Touchett is a shrewd woman with a great judge of character; she admires Isabel’s many fine qualities but also recognizing her niece’s flaws. She believes that European experiences will broaden Isabel’s horizons. Mrs. Touchett’s wise judgment of character will similarly be proved right later in the story when she warns her niece about Gilbert Osmond’s untrustworthiness, although the headstrong Isabel will not take heed. In this scene Mrs. Touchett also foresees Lord Warburton’s lack of success in courting Isabel. Ralph seems quite devoted to Isabel, though this borders on objectification when he jokes about owning his cousin.



Ralph accepts Isabel’s desire to view his art collection without much argument, despite his knowledge that it would look better in the morning light. His obedience shows his growing adoration of Isabel. Ralph is an aesthete (an individual with fine taste in art) and judges some of Isabel’s character by her artistic taste, as was a social convention in Victorian Europe.



Isabel asks about ghosts during her first visit to Gardencourt and a ghost will indeed appear during her final visit to the estate. Ralph’s promise to contribute toward Isabel’s future wellbeing is significant because he engineers Isabel’s later financial windfall, a move that is meant to secure her independence but actually leads to her downfall in ruined happiness and liberty.



Isabel is again very forthright in announcing her own opinions, a quality that is not shared by the traditional English women she will later meet. A great friendship has started to form between the two cousins. Isabel remains unaware that Ralph also begins to care for her romantically, a fact that is only revealed near the novel’s end.



CHAPTER 6

The narrator goes into depth about Isabel's character. In possession of a keen intellect and an extraordinarily active imagination, Isabel also has some flaws in that she believes in her own superiority of mind and tends to assume that she is always right. These traits have led Isabel to value her own independence, which she prioritizes greatly. Her greatest fear in life is that she might hurt someone else and she also hopes "that she should never do anything wrong."

In keeping with the fact that Isabel values her personal liberties, she considers her friend Henrietta Stackpole, an American journalist, a role model. Henrietta is a liberal and tough-minded career woman who is clever enough to provide financial support for herself and her three poor nieces through her writing for newspapers. She is evidence of Isabel's desire to retain her independence alongside happiness.

Isabel forms an enjoyable friendship with her uncle, Mr. Touchett, spending time with him each day and asking him questions about England. He informs her of English society, particularly its customs and politics. Isabel muses aloud as to whether her uncle's descriptions match those about English culture as found in books; Mr. Touchett replies that he does not know, as he prefers to learn about such matters from experiences. After Isabel comments on European novels treating girls unfairly, her uncle relates a story about how a novelist had inaccurately portrayed Mr. Touchett in a book after staying at Gardencourt to observe family life.

Moving on to discuss English class structures, Mr. Touchett tells Isabel that it is helpful being an American in England, because Americans do not belong to any of the classes. Mr. Touchett has decided there are two main groups of people, those he trusts and those he does not. He states that Isabel falls into the former category. The conversation ends with Isabel remarking that she is surprised the English are so conventional; she prefers more "unexpectedness." She believes that her own spontaneous character will not bode well with Europeans she meets during her travels, but her uncle assures Isabel that Europeans are actually quite "inconsistent," and that she will have "great success" in her socializing and development.

Isabel's fear of hurting others demonstrates integrity and kindness, although her hope to refrain from doing "wrong" in life can likely be attributed to her arrogant desire to be superior to her peers. Isabel's self-importance can be characterized as an American New World attitude.



Henrietta is the epitome of the American New World woman—she is self-assured in her pursuit of a career and her personal freedoms, ignoring convention. Isabel desires a similar lifestyle, but has taken no steps to embark on a career of any sorts. This financial vulnerability is perhaps one of the reasons that Henrietta wants Isabel to marry Caspar Goodwood, as evidenced later in the story.



Isabel is eager to learn about European cultures. Her conversations with her uncle touch on female independence and on the inaccuracies of people's portrayal in novels.



Isabel believes English society will be boring. Mr. Touchett predicts that Isabel will actually find great success in England, and will be proven correct when she discovers friendship, romance, and wealth there. Once again, Isabel's comments are surprisingly candid for a young woman of the time, but Mr. Touchett is an American character who is similarly forthright and appears not to notice his niece's extraordinarily free-spoken thoughts.



CHAPTER 7

Isabel and Mr. Touchett continue to entertain themselves by discussing British attitudes and conventions. Isabel learns nothing from British people themselves, as Gardencourt is a quiet estate due to Mrs. Touchett's isolating tendencies, and Mr. Touchett and Ralph's ill health.

Isabel also spends more time with Ralph, finding her cousin to be very amusing and witty. Ralph adores Isabel, even if he is sometimes surprised at her bold manner. Before her arrival he had been focused on worrying about his father's ill health, but he now has a new zest for life due to his cousin's presence. He compares Isabel to the "finest work of art," but tells himself that he is not falling in love with her. He also wonders what the future will hold for such a fascinating and unique young woman.

The neighboring Lord Warburton is invited to stay at Gardencourt for two nights. Greatly enjoying his company, Isabel is shocked when Mrs. Touchett forbids her from sitting alone with Warburton and Ralph after dinner. Mrs. Touchett explains that it is not proper for a woman to behave so. Isabel does not understand the reasoning behind this practice, but is glad for her aunt to teach her about such customs. She wants to learn as much as possible about the ways of the world so that she can then make educated decisions as to her beliefs and actions.

CHAPTER 8

Lord Warburton has taken a liking to Isabel and requests that Mrs. Touchett bring her niece to visit his **castle**, called Lockleigh. Having spent more time with the nobleman, Isabel finds out that he is just as confused about American culture as she is about English ways of life. During their conversation, she concludes that he is a surprisingly liberal aristocrat. Isabel also realizes that he is a kind, clever, and altogether admirable individual.

Isabel later tells Ralph that she likes Lord Warburton, and Ralph agrees that he greatly likes him too. He also pities his friend, however, finding that Warburton is too modest, or even confused in his own values, and does not make use of his powerful influence as he could.

James continues to emphasize Isabel's appetite to learn about European customs. He acknowledges that Gardencourt is not typical of English culture, due to the Touchett family's reclusiveness in sickness and desired social isolation.



Ralph's description of Isabel as a work of art parallel's the novel's titular description of Isabel's character (the title, of course, being "The Portrait of a Lady"). Ralph furthermore views Isabel as an experiment and is desperate to see what such a unique woman will do with her life. He resists acting on his romantic love for Isabel; Ralph knows he cannot offer her the promise of a future together due to his terminal illness. His wisdom and compassion in this regard are evidence of his fine morality, although this is somewhat tempered by his viewing of Isabel as an object.



For the first time, Mrs. Touchett adheres strictly to social convention. Isabel is shocked by this irrational convention but happy to learn about it. The scene demonstrates the social freedoms that Victorian men could participate in compared to the social restrictions placed on Victorian women.



Lockleigh is a castle drenched in wealth, as are its inhabitants. Warburton would therefore be an attractive prospect for Isabel if she were interested in marriage. Despite Warburton's immense privilege, Isabel learns that he has some radical beliefs about the future of England. This is unusual for a nobleman who has been entrenched in the elitist traditions of owning property and social status since birth.



Like his mother, Ralph proves a perceptive judge of character. Where Isabel fails to recognize Warburton's complex character, Ralph is able to identify the nobleman's problematic ideals and reliance on wealth. Throughout the story, though, it seems that Ralph is blind to Isabel's character flaws.



Isabel is confused by Ralph's judgments of Lord Warburton, and therefore also speaks to Mr. Touchett. Isabel's uncle instructs her not to fall in love with the nobleman, to which Isabel replies she would not do so without her uncle's blessing.

It remains unclear why Touchett advises both Lord Warburton and then Isabel not to fall in love with each other. Perhaps it is his aversion to English culture that fuels Touchett's desire to keep Isabel away from the nobleman.



Mr. Touchett also tells Isabel that although Lord Warburton talks about his desire for revolutionary changes to occur in English society, the nobleman cannot imagine such changes if his own status and holdings were to also change. Isabel enthusiastically hopes that there will be a revolution, and that she would take the side of the loyalists in such an event. However, Mr. Touchett believes Lord Warburton and his fellow radicals would never follow through on actioning the changes they discuss. At Isabel's questioning, her uncle reveals that he agrees with Ralph in pitying Lord Warburton for his hollow ideals.

Isabel's key traits of curiosity and independence again emerge. She is far more interested in Warburton's political ideals than his possible romantic interest. As an American outsider, Mr. Touchett is able to recognize that the English aristocracy will never let go of its own privileges for greater common good.



CHAPTER 9

Lord Warburton's two youngest sisters, the Misses Molyneux, visit Isabel at Gardencourt. They are very timid women in their friendliness, but they do manage to extend Isabel an invitation to have lunch at Lockleigh.

Young English women seem meek and obedient when compared to Isabel, a headstrong and forthright American woman.



Isabel takes up their invitation and visits Lockleigh. She is bold in directly asking the Misses Molyneux if they consider their brother, Lord Warburton, to be a radical. The sisters agree that he is a radical, yet he is also very sensible in nature. They are confused by Isabel's pressing questions about whether Warburton would undertake radical action if it meant giving up his lands and title.

Again, James highlights the stark contrasts in personality between English and American women. Despite Isabel's prompting, the Misses Molyneux cannot even comprehend a world in which the English class system would disappear.



Later in the day, while Isabel and Lord Warburton walk together, he tells her that he hopes to see more of her in future, as she has charmed him. Isabel is concerned at hearing his interest, imagining that this is "the prelude to something grave." She tells him she will no longer be visiting Lockleigh, although there is nothing to prevent his visiting Gardencourt.

Isabel has ignored all previous signs of Lord Warburton's romantic interest and is therefore shocked when he admits his affections. She will not consider him as a suitor, verbally distancing herself from the nobleman. She even describes his romantic interest as a "grave" matter that implies a kind of death to her personal freedom were it allowed to continue.



Isabel has read that the English are "eccentric" and "romantic" individuals; she is concerned that she has offended Lord Warburton with her blunt rejection of his affection. However, after a slightly off-note moment in which the nobleman appears to be bitter at this turn of events, he transforms into being as gallant and good-natured as always.

Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton's affection is unexpected by the nobleman, even coming off as rude. Despite a man of his position likely never encountering denials to their desires, Warburton demonstrates English Old World courtesy in his chivalrous response to Isabel's unexpected actions.



As Isabel leaves, Lord Warburton promises that he will visit her at Gardencourt next week. She replies coolly “just as you please,” the narrator noting that her response comes from a place of fear.

Isabel’s dismissal of romantic liaisons seems to come from a fear of intimacy as well as a desire to maintain her personal liberty. Warburton’s response to Isabel’s rejection mirrors that of Caspar Goodwood, another suitor who is determined to pursue Isabel despite her rejection. James depicts these men as determined individuals who do not wholly respect Isabel’s feelings.



CHAPTER 10

Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel’s friend and an American journalist, has arrived in England to write on the European lifestyle. She writes to Isabel to ask if she can visit Gardencourt, seemingly wanting an introduction to upper-class society. Isabel extends an invitation, but notes that the Touchetts do not live the extraordinary European lifestyle that American readers wish to learn about. When Ralph asks Isabel what the journalist will think of him, she replies that Henrietta does not care at all what men think of her.

Henrietta’s newspaper assignment demonstrates America’s general interest in European cultures during James’s lifetime. Specifically, the American public is fascinated by England’s class system and wishes to learn about English aristocracy. It is likely that American individuals with new money were keen to emulate the luxuries of the European elite.



Henrietta makes her way to Gardencourt to see Isabel. Ralph and Henrietta develop a combative friendship; when the journalist first arrives, she brazenly asks if she should consider the Touchetts as Americans or English, and Ralph replies that he will please her by being an Englishman or even a Turk if necessary.

The straight-shooting Henrietta is frustrated by the playful Ralph, who evades the tactless questions that she asks about the Touchett family.



Henrietta writes about the Touchetts for her newspaper column, but when she shows her work to Isabel, her friend advises that the material is too private, and that Henrietta cannot publish it. Henrietta asks who she *can* write about for her newspaper column, with Isabel advising that Lord Warburton will likely be visiting Gardencourt in the near future.

In her time at Gardencourt Isabel has learned about English social convention and recognizes that the Touchett family would take great offense at Henrietta’s proposed stories on Gardencourt.



Henrietta challenges Ralph about his idle life at Gardencourt, believing that he should be investing himself in a career. She furthermore asserts that he has abandoned his American identity, to which Ralph responds that one can no more “give up” one’s country than they can their grandmother. When Henrietta then questions whether he has a heart, Ralph cryptically replies that “I had one a few days ago, but I’ve lost it since.” Henrietta is frustrated by his lack of serious response, furthermore attesting that he thinks himself too good to get married despite it being his duty to do so. Ralph is unimpressed by what he believes is her attempt to suggest that she would make him a good wife.

James paints Ralph as a European Old World gentleman who is gallant and sophisticated despite his inaction and illness. Henrietta, meanwhile, is the epitome of the self-made American New World individual who is bold and single-minded in her pursuit of financial success. They each make hasty (and inaccurate) judgments about the other.



Isabel tells Ralph that Henrietta believes that the English treat women poorly. Isabel also attributes many of Henrietta's forceful opinions to her strong sense of duty. Ralph suggests he should treat the journalist with less familiarity than the slightly hostile banter they have fallen into. He agrees with his cousin's belief that Henrietta is a fresh and exciting individual, stating that "Henrietta, however, does smell of the Future—it almost knocks one down!"

Isabel demonstrates personal development as she tries to explain Henrietta's character to Ralph, mirroring Ralph's previous explanations of Lord Warburton's character to Isabel. Ralph's description of Henrietta as a forceful indication of the "Future" honors the incoming American New World values of ingenuity and courage that are beginning to make headway in Europe.



CHAPTER 11

Ralph resolves to get along better with Henrietta, but she tends to treat even his compliments with hostility. Mrs. Touchett also suspects that the journalist dislikes her. Certainly, Mrs. Touchett holds no liking for Henrietta, viewing her as unsophisticated, tedious, and brash. The two women clash over the topic of English feudalism, and Henrietta cannot believe that Mrs. Touchett favors upper class-behaviors of tenancy and servants. Henrietta finds the Touchett family have been Europeanized and believes that Isabel is beginning to go down the same track.

Henrietta is not afraid to speak her mind, and her immersion in Gardencourt has brought to life the clash between European Old World and American New World values. She views English upper-class life as extravagantly privileged and benefitting from the lower class servitude, while the Touchett's view her as crass and uncultured.



Later, when the two are alone, Henrietta reveals to Isabel that Caspar Goodwood has traveled to England to connect with Isabel; in fact, they were on the same Transatlantic ship together. Isabel is dismayed to hear that Henrietta initiated conversation about Isabel with Goodwood. Henrietta charges her friend with losing her American values and failing to give the admirable Goodwood the attention he deserves. Isabel is further put out to learn that Henrietta expects Goodwood will visit Gardencourt to pursue Isabel. Isabel is internally alarmed by this news, although does not reveal her panic to Henrietta.

Henrietta has an ulterior motive for visiting Gardencourt: to convince Isabel to accept Caspar Goodwood's romantic pursuit. It is surprising that the bold journalist has waited this long to tell Isabel of Goodwood's movements. Again, Isabel responds to news of a suitor with internal panic.



Isabel spends the next few days in an anxious state of waiting to hear from Goodwood. One day, she is in the garden with Ralph's dog when a servant interrupts to hand her a letter. It is from Goodwood; the American businessman reveals he has traveled to England to pursue her and requests that she receive him at Gardencourt in half an hour. As Isabel is reading Goodwood's letter, Lord Warburton appears in the garden.

Isabel is suddenly accosted by unwanted suitors appearing from every direction. Goodwood's letter is straightforward in his intentions, while Lord Warburton's appearance is surprising and unexplained.



CHAPTER 12

Lord Warburton's sudden appearance shocks Isabel in the moment, but she has been expecting his arrival for some time, as he had alluded to a visit during their last meeting at Lockleigh. Isabel worries that he has come to Gardencourt with an intention of sorts regarding her. She fears this intention but is also curious to know exactly what he wants.

This scene again evidences Isabel's fear of declarations of love—and of what she perceives as the accompanying personal intimacy and restrictions on personal freedom.



Lord Warburton seems almost embarrassed in manner as he walks alongside Isabel in the garden. He then declares that he has fallen in love with Isabel and wants to marry her, stating “I care only for you,” as he reveals he has loved her since the first hour that they met. He gives a short, impassioned speech and takes Isabel’s hand; she withdraws it lightly, responding “Ah, Lord Warburton, how little you know me!” Despite her being immensely attracted to Warburton’s personality and honored by his gracious declaration, she suggests that she cannot marry him.

Isabel tries to explain why she feels that she cannot accept Lord Warburton’s proposal. She rejects his suggestions that she wants to marry an American, or that Mr. Touchett objects to him, or that she cannot live permanently in the English countryside. Instead, she tells him that she is not sure that she desires to marry anyone at all. She also privately considers the unimaginative and routine lifestyle that the security a marriage with Warburton would afford her.

Isabel suggests to Lord Warburton that he could find a much better woman to marry, but he is adamant he loves Isabel, and so she puts him off by promising to consider his proposal and write to him soon. The nobleman accepts this compromise, nervously twitching his hunting crop and remarking that he is “afraid” of Isabel’s “remarkable mind.” He assures Isabel that they can change anything about Lockleigh that she does not like, before he kisses her hand and departs Gardencourt, visibly upset.

Isabel remains in the garden, considering her conversation with Lord Warburton. She knows that a union with the nobleman would have many advantages despite some encroachment on her personal liberties. She is unsure why she feels she cannot marry Lord Warburton when “nineteen out of twenty women” would jump at the opportunity, on top of the fact that she genuinely likes him—a lot. As she retreats back into the house, she wonders if she is “not a cold, hard, priggish person” and is “really frightened at herself.”

CHAPTER 13

It is Isabel’s concern at her own personal fears and not her desire for advice that leads her to discuss Lord Warburton’s marriage proposal with her uncle. Upon hearing of these recent events, Mr. Touchett confirms that he knew Isabel would be a success in Europe. Furthermore, Lord Warburton had communicated his intentions to Mr. Touchett three days ago by letter.

Lord Warburton’s proposal is quite shocking for the time; Victorian nobility were usually reserved rather than passionate in manner, and it was quite scandalous for an English nobleman to propose marriage to an American woman with no social status or fortune.



Lord Warburton is flummoxed by Isabel’s rejection and tries to understand her behavior. Ultimately he cannot comprehend her unconventional preference for personal independence over social and financial stability.



This is the first instance in the novel in which the reader sees that Lord Warburton is visibly upset through his countenance, conversation, and nervous mannerisms. As a nobleman, he is used to getting his way and is shocked by Isabel’s refusal of his affection.



Isabel acknowledges Lord Warburton’s appeal as a suitor but does not seem to understand the enormity of his status as a fine match for her in both love and social gain. The scene demonstrates Isabel’s flighty personality—she is first afraid of marriage’s constraints but now fearful of her cold rejection of Warburton.



Lord Warburton stands by chivalrous values and has informed Mr. Touchett of his romantic intentions regarding Isabel as per the English tradition of asking a woman’s closest male relative for his blessing. Touchett’s previous prophecy regarding Isabel’s social success in Europe is already being fulfilled.



Isabel describes her feelings to Mr. Touchett, including her desire to refrain from marriage at this point in her life. She feels better after explaining herself, justifying her dismissal of Lord Warburton's proposal as reasonable. Mr. Touchett hopes his niece will not have to sacrifice too much in her pursuit of retaining her independence.

Isabel's thoughts change direction, considering Caspar Goodwood's romantic intentions. She is no more inclined to marry Goodwood than she is to accept Lord Warburton as a husband, and she decides that she will refuse to let the dynamic American businessman take "positive possession" of her. As with the authoritative Warburton, she is concerned that marriage to the assertive Goodwood would "deprive her of the sense of freedom." She also acknowledges that Goodwood emits even more of an alluring energy than Warburton. However, Isabel feels empowered by her rejection of Lord Warburton's handsome offer of marriage and commits to rejecting Goodwood also.

Caspar Goodwood is a wealthy Boston gentleman who is son of a Massachusetts cotton-mill industry magnate. He attended Harvard University, where he was at first well-known for his sports prowess before he developed a sharp intellect. Goodwood currently manages the cotton-mill works and has invented and patented a technology that improves the cotton spinning process, although Isabel is uninterested in this achievement. She is impressed by his charisma, dependability, and dynamic leadership style, but not enough to tie herself romantically to him. She also considers that he is a serious and unsophisticated character who is not blessed with good looks and fails to vary his modern daily outfits.

Despite Caspar Goodwood's many attractive qualities, Isabel will not marry him. She notes that Lord Warburton is in many ways the opposite to the American businessman, for he is charming in an incredibly "delightful" rather than forceful manner. However, Isabel has resolved not to marry the nobleman either. She writes him a letter in which she confirms she has considered his proposal, but cannot accept it. She decides not to write Goodwood a letter at all.

Mr. Touchett's comments on sacrifice echo Ralph's earlier statements to Isabel about his hope that she will never have to sacrifice her dreams and hopes—namely, to maintain her much-loved independence.



Despite Lord Warburton's earlier claim, Isabel is no more inclined to marry a prosperous American than she is a wealthy Englishman. She is triumphant in her refusal of a powerful man and vows to reject Goodwood's likely marriage proposal too, even though she feels more strongly attracted to the intensely masculine Goodwood than she does to Warburton. James continues the theme of men objectifying Isabel through Goodwood's desire to possess her as his wife.



Caspar Goodwood's background paints him as an entrepreneurial New World man. As with Lord Warburton, Isabel fails to realize the significant social and financial advantages that Goodwood offers her in marriage. Isabel's repeated attentions to Goodwood's unattractive looks demonstrate her vanity.



Isabel highlights Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood's opposing personalities in their respective Old World chivalry and New World magnetism. Despite Isabel's repeated assertions of Goodwood's plain physical features and dress, he certainly comes off as the most alluring man that she meets throughout the novel.



While Isabel is occupied with the letter to Lord Warburton, Henrietta Stackpole gets Ralph to walk in the garden with her. She charges him with inviting Goodwood to visit Gardencourt, suggesting that although Isabel has changed since arriving to England, Henrietta is quite certain that Caspar Goodwood is still the right man for her. Ralph is hesitant to get involved in the matter, particularly because he has never met Goodwood or heard Isabel speak of him. However, he agrees to extend an invitation after Henrietta accuses him of being in love with Isabel.

Two days after writing an invitation to Caspar Goodwood, Ralph receives a response in which Goodwood thanks him but regrettably replies he cannot make a visit Gardencourt. When Ralph shows the letter to Henrietta, she is confused by its contents and determines that she will write to Goodwood to discover what is going on. Goodwood does not respond to Henrietta's letter, further puzzling her.

Henrietta suggests that she and Isabel should travel to London together, with the journalist secretly wanting Isabel and Caspar Goodwood to connect there. Isabel is keen to experience more of England, agreeing to visit London, and Ralph decides that he will join the two women on their trip. Isabel has also received a letter from Lord Warburton stating that he will visit Gardencourt tomorrow, which she wants to honor before traveling to London.

CHAPTER 14

Isabel successfully puts off off the London visit until Lord Warburton comes to visit at Gardencourt. He brings one of his sisters to lunch and refrains from speaking or looking at Isabel during the meal, although he is as good-humored as ever in his conversation with the rest of the group.

Henrietta, seated beside Lord Warburton for the meal, informs him that she does not appreciate him, as she doesn't "approve of lords as an institution." She believes "the world has got beyond them—far beyond." Warburton is not offended, indeed agreeing that he doesn't approve of himself or noblemen either. He jokingly replies to her many questions and jabs that aristocrats are no longer "splendid" as Henrietta had hoped but are mostly "very ugly men." At Henrietta's challenge that he should "give it up," he is at first surprised but then agrees that he will mark the occasion with a ceremonial "supper and a dance." He then feeds Henrietta false information about English dress customs as a lark, for her questions and comments are inconsiderate to the point of rudeness.

Henrietta is a force to be reckoned with, and Ralph is uncomfortable at her appeal for him to invite the mysterious Goodwood to Gardencourt; such an invitation contradicts English protocol of rational and tactful behavior. Ralph only agrees to her request in order to divert suspicion that he is romantically interested in Isabel.



Henrietta shows no remorse or embarrassment over her social blunder in believing Goodwood would eagerly accept an invitation to Gardencourt. Her indiscreet manners are typical of American New World lack of refinement.



Again, Henrietta is unrelenting and unashamed in her desire to connect Isabel with Goodwood. However, her forthright scheming never causes any injury to others more serious than awkwardness or embarrassment. Ironically, Henrietta lacks the ability to feel either of these qualities.



Unlike Caspar Goodwood's undeterred pursuit of Isabel despite her rejection, Lord Warburton is embarrassed by her refusal and hides behind the safety of his sister's company.



Henrietta's comments indicate the change occurring in America and Europe in a bid for liberal reform. Readers can both approve of Henrietta's modern outlook and condemn her tactlessness, while appreciating Lord Warburton's self-deprecation, although he perhaps goes too far in ridiculing Henrietta.



After lunch, Lord Warburton invites Isabel to Gardencourt's gallery to look at the art. She knows this is a pretext, as he has seen them already many times. Lord Warburton is confused that Isabel has written that she likes his good character, yet will not marry him. She denies his following questions as to whether she prefers another man, or if his political beliefs are the issue. Isabel admits that marrying the lord would offer many opportunities, but she does not one to "give up" her personal freedoms in experiencing the full range of emotions and experiences that life can offer her. Warburton tries to argue she can still have those opportunities with him, but Isabel is not convinced.

Ralph, Henrietta, and Miss Molyneux enter the gallery. Henrietta accuses Miss Molyneux of being too meek and obedient in temperament, prioritizing Lord Warburton's needs rather than her own; Miss Molyneux is quite taken aback at this accusation, engaging Ralph in polite conversation in the hopes that Henrietta will not speak to her again.

Henrietta then wrongly accuses Lord Warburton of having been on his guard throughout lunch because Isabel has warned him of Henrietta's desire to write about the English upper class. The aristocrat is quite bewildered. Henrietta goes further in suggesting that the nobleman, his sister, and Ralph are all terrible subjects to write about in her newspaper column due to their "dismal" personalities. Lord Warburton and Miss Molyneux take their leave of the group after Warburton learns that Isabel is going to travel to London and will then be visiting Paris with Mrs. Touchett.

Isabel withdraws to her rooms, where her aunt stops by before dinner. Mrs. Touchett reveals that her husband has told her about Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton's marriage proposal. She believes Isabel to be quite satisfied with herself, having refused the nobleman with the intention of marrying even more highly than Warburton. Isabel smiles at her aunt's inaccuracy.

CHAPTER 15

Mrs. Touchett comes to agree that her niece was correct in refusing Lord Warburton's marriage proposal if Isabel does not love him. Isabel departs Gardencourt for London with Henrietta and Ralph. The women stay at a comfortable inn while Ralph prefers his father's house in Winchester Square, despite there being no cook. At his lodgings, Ralph finds himself thinking of Isabel fondly. He knows that she is an "idle pursuit" without hope for a future together, but he is continually enchanted by his cousin—as she experiences London, she is full of "premises, conclusions, emotions" and "brave theories."

Once again, Lord Warburton tries to make sense of Isabel's puzzling behavior in rejecting his marriage proposal. She makes it very clear that she values her independence over the security that marriage would offer.



The brash Henrietta offends another of her English hosts. While Isabel has previously gently probed at the Molyneux sister's obedience to their brother, Henrietta openly criticizes the intensely patriarchal relationship between Miss Molyneux and her brother.



Henrietta makes further tactless and inaccurate accusations about her English acquaintances. She gives them no artistic merit as subjects for her newspaper column, which reveals her lack of sophistication and taste.



Mrs. Touchett, usually a great judge of character, has not realized that Isabel prioritized personal freedom over Lord Warburton's marriage proposal. This is because Isabel's attitude is so unconventional—society expects her to jump at the chance for such an advantageous marriage.



Mrs. Touchett does not necessarily understand her niece's motivations in refusing Lord Warburton, but can accept that it was not a love match. Meanwhile, Ralph's adoration for—even obsession with—Isabel is growing. He is largely blind to her character flaws. Isabel will remain similarly unaware of Gilbert Osmond's flaws when she begins to fall in love with his invented persona.



Isabel, meanwhile, is feeling guilty and pained at her interactions with Lord Warburton before she left for London. She reproaches herself for behaving in a “graceless” manner, but consoles herself with the fact that it had to be done, and that she now feels “a feeling of freedom which in itself was sweet.”

During their time in London, Henrietta desires to see “some of the leading minds of the present.” Ralph therefore invites his old bachelor friend, Mr. Bantling, to dine with them at Winchester Square. Forty years old, Bantling is a good-natured and social personality who enjoys the company of all, particularly Henrietta, and he enjoys her rant as he walks with her after dinner. Upon hearing that Gardencourt has been very dull for the journalist, he insists that she must visit his sister, Lady Pensil, who entertains individuals of interest and can showcase some “genuine English sport” for Henrietta. Mr. Bantling promises to prioritize his securing an invitation for Henrietta to meet Lady Pensil.

Henrietta also greatly enjoys Mr. Bantling’s obliging company and is keen to visit Lady Pensil. However, she takes her leave of the gentleman as she has made arrangements to meet with two American friends for dinner. Mr. Bantling offers to accompany her to her destination to ensure her safety on the road.

Ralph and Isabel are left sitting together at Winchester House. Ralph thinks that Henrietta and Mr. Bantling get on very well and speculates that they could have a romantic future, while Isabel is certain that they will not be a good couple because they do not understand another. Ralph wryly responds that a “mutual misunderstanding” is the foundation of many marriages. Furthermore, he views Mr. Bantling as a “simple organism,” while Isabel believes “Henrietta’s a simpler one still.” Logically, the match might work.

Ralph suggests he dine with his cousin, but Isabel wants to return to the inn on her own to eat a simple dinner. She instructs Ralph that he should dine at his club. Ralph asks why they cannot eat together; Isabel replies simply that she doesn’t care for it, but Ralph suggests she is actually expecting another visitor this evening. He suspects she will meet with Caspar Goodwood, although Isabel is unaware that he knows of her American suitor. Isabel in fact is merely tired and wants a simple evening alone.

Isabel is extremely contrary in nature. She felt firmly righteous in rejecting Lord Warburton’s advances, but now questions her behavior in the matter, before quickly convincing herself that she acted in the only manner possible. She is again elated at exerting and affirming her independence by rejecting a powerful man’s marriage proposal.



Henrietta is again aligned with the radical “Future” as she wants to meet “leading minds” in London. Mr. Bantling represents European Old World values in all ways except for his enjoyment of Henrietta’s heavy-handed personality. Throughout the novel Lady Pensil will remain a stock character who represents the idle pursuits of English nobility, for she thrives on social entertainment.



A great friendship has been formed between Henrietta and Mr. Bantling. Despite their opposite personalities, the two will continue to get on very well and move beyond platonic attachment.



Again, Ralph demonstrates a good judge of character as he correctly predicts that Henrietta and Mr. Bantling will become romantically involved. Ralph’s view of marriage as a “mutual misunderstanding” could very well echo that of James himself, who never married and seems to criticize the institution throughout his work; The Portrait fails to showcase even one harmonious marriage.



Ralph’s suspicions about Isabel’s movements suggest that he is jealous of her potential interactions with a suitor. By now readers are quite certain that Ralph is in love with Isabel, although she has no idea.



Ralph hesitantly tells his cousin that he knows about Lord Warburton's marriage proposal, asking why Isabel rejected it. He is surprised by Isabel's rejection because he views Warburton as an extremely advantageous match in fortune, status, and personality. Isabel thinks that Ralph wants her to marry the nobleman, but he replies that he simply has a great interest in observing and understanding her actions. He is now quite thrilled to see "what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton." Isabel states that she is similar to Henrietta in that she does not want to marry until she has "seen Europe."

When Isabel deems it time to return to the inn, Ralph offers to find her a cab and to accompany her to the inn. She allows the former, but refuses his escort, stating that he is tired and must get some rest. He reveals that he is often inconvenienced when people forget that he is unwell, but it is even worse when they remember it, as Isabel has demonstrated just now.

CHAPTER 16

Despite wanting to spend the evening in solitude, Isabel is surprised to receive a servant's notice that Caspar Goodwood is waiting to see her at the inn. She instructs the waiter to let him up to her rooms.

Upon their meeting, Isabel asks how Goodwood knew where to find he in London. He replies that Henrietta informed him of their whereabouts. Isabel is frustrated by her friend's betrayal and by Goodwood's unexpected visit.

Isabel asks Goodwood why he is here, and he replies that he is intent upon their union, for he does not want to lose Isabel, although she tartly responds that he has "no right to lose what's not yours." She thinks about the reason for her lack of delight at seeing him, identifying Goodwood as a man who is "naturally plated and steeled, armed essentially for aggression."

Goodwood reiterates that he is "infernally in love" with Isabel. He strength of character means that he loves Isabel even more "strongly" than an ordinary man. Isabel feels the force of his declarations, but insists that Goodwood leave her alone. When he asks how long he must stay away, she states that it needs to be two years. She becomes quite sharp with Goodwood, and he finally flushes in embarrassment. Isabel notes that she does not want to treat him in such a way, but he forces her to do so; she does not like to cause others pain.

The besotted Ralph is also unhappy that Isabel has not confided in him about Lord Warburton's marriage proposal. However, he is thrilled that she turned the nobleman down and now views Isabel as a kind of experiment about to be set free in Europe. Isabel has used her future European travels as another reason she cannot give up her personal freedom to marry Warburton or Goodwood.



Isabel again turns down Ralph's offers to escort her to her hotel, further raising his suspicions about a likely meeting with Goodwood. In a rare moment, Ralph voices his resentment toward his terminal illness.



Ralph's suspicions about Goodwood meeting Isabel are correct, although Isabel had no prior knowledge of the meeting. Once again, she is subject to a man intruding on her life in an unwanted manner.



Isabel has not realized the extent of Henrietta's designs to match Isabel up with the ideal American businessman.



Isabel verbally rejects Goodwood's suggested claim of ownership over her. James describes Goodwood as a man who wears armor in preparation for battle, indicating his forceful and commanding personality.



Despite Goodwood's almost aggressive pursuit of Isabel's affections, Isabel rises to the occasion and just as forcefully denies him. For the first time in the novel, Goodwood is embarrassed by his actions, indicating the blunt certainty with which Isabel rejects him. Isabel once again justifies her behavior in rejecting an appealing marital offer by viewing it as the only path that preserves her independence.



Isabel also reveals that she has rejected a “dazzling” marriage proposal last week from an English nobleman, trying to demonstrate that she is not being fickle in her treatment of Goodwood. She values her personal freedoms greatly and is going to travel Europe. Goodwood states that he has no wish to restrict her liberties.

Isabel is also shocked when Goodwood reveals that, at Henrietta’s urging, Ralph previously invited him to visit Gardencourt. Isabel is appalled when she considers the awkward possibility that Goodwood and Lord Warburton could have crossed paths there.

Caspar Goodwood takes his leave, refusing to give in to despair by convincingly affirming that he will seek Isabel out in two year’s time. He believes that she will be truly fed up with her independence by then. Isabel reminds him that she has promised him nothing. They have an intimate moment of clasping hands, where Isabel feels great respect and admiration for him, although she does not return his depth of feeling. Upon Goodwood’s exit from her rooms, Isabel stands for a moment, before dropping to her knees and buries her face in her arms.

CHAPTER 17

After dropping to her knees upon Goodwood’s exit from her rooms, Isabel is “not praying; she was trembling—trembling all over.” She is intensely relieved that Goodwood has gone, describing the event as getting rid of a “payment,” and she feels a great “throbbing in her heart.” It takes Isabel ten minutes to rise to her feet and she is still trembling when she takes a seat in the living room. She wonders if her intense reaction is due to “the exercise of her power” as well as the extended conversation with Goodwood. Isabel is also immensely satisfied at having proved how much she values independence by rejecting two favorable marriage proposals in the space of a fortnight.

The door opens, and Isabel rises with alarm, believing that Goodwood has returned. However, it is simply Henrietta returning from her dinner with American friends.

Like Lord Warburton, Goodwood claims Isabel’s marriage will not limit her personal freedom. As with Warburton, Isabel does not agree with the logic; she recognizes that marriage will reduce her opportunities to develop and celebrate her identity, for she would be subject to her husband’s desires before her own.



Ralph joins the list of people who have schemed to manage Isabel’s love life. It is unclear why Isabel is so terrified at the possibility of her two suitors, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, meeting one another. Perhaps she recognizes that their opposing values would cause social discomfort, while their romantic competition might overwhelm Isabel.



Goodwood shows remarkable resilience in his dedication to pursuing Isabel’s affections. Isabel’s collapse upon Goodwood’s exit is even more remarkable, as it contrasts her previously calm manner. The reader learns that Isabel is far more affected by Goodwood’s presence than she showed, perhaps due to feelings of desire for the magnetic businessman. However, she has once again prioritized her ideals over her needs.



James reveals that Isabel’s collapse is intensely physical. Her trembling body and racing heart may be attributed to exerting dominance over a powerful man, her sexual desire for Goodwood, or both. Interestingly, Isabel reverses the usual objectifying relationship by which a man declares ownership over her and instead commodifies Goodwood as a financial transaction that is now paid. Ironically, though, Isabel is still fiercely vulnerable to financial instability; she currently relies on her aunt and uncle for living means.



Isabel’s panic at the door opening signals her volatile state of mind after her intense interactions with Goodwood.



Henrietta can see that her Isabel is in an unusual state, and quickly asks if Goodwood has visited. Isabel is frustrated by her friend's numerous invasions of privacy regarding Caspar Goodwood. She tells Henrietta that she can no longer trust her, but Henrietta exclaims that Isabel doesn't know what's good for her—Goodwood is perfect for her, and she cannot entertain the thought of marrying a European. Henrietta is quite certain that during Isabel's future travels in Europe, she will receive multiple proposals, as one of Henrietta's dinnertime companions recounted three European marriage proposals, and Isabel is far more irresistible than she. Isabel is unimpressed by Henrietta's concerns, believing them to hold no merit. Henrietta attests that she loves her friend and believes that Isabel is "drifting to some great mistake." Isabel requests that Henrietta leave her love life alone.

Henrietta decides that she will not return to Gardencourt despite Mr. Touchett's renewed invitation, preferring to wait on Lady Pensil's letter of invitation that Mr. Bantling promises her will arrive to London any day. Isabel asks Henrietta if she knows where she is "drifting," and Henrietta replies she is to be the "Queen of American Journalism." She takes her leave of Isabel to go shopping with her friends.

Shortly after, Ralph visits Isabel with some unhappy news. Mrs. Touchett has sent a telegram that states Mr. Touchett's health has taken a turn for the worse. She is extremely worried and begs Ralph to return to Gardencourt. Ralph has decided to seek a well-known doctor in London, Sir Matthew Hope, to employ him to call on Mr. Touchett at Gardencourt. Ralph will stay in London only to secure Sir Hope's services before traveling back early to Gardencourt. Isabel decides she will also return to Gardencourt earlier than expected in order to comfort Mr. Touchett; her cousin greatly appreciates the care and affection Isabel shows for his father.

Ralph returns to see Isabel later the same day. He has successfully met with Sir Matthew Hope and is ready to depart London for Gardencourt. Isabel is still getting ready for departure, and Ralph finds Henrietta in the sitting-room. She pays her respects to his father, wishing Mr. Touchett better health. She also recounts her pleasure at Mr. Bantling's friendship and connections, as well as informing Ralph that Caspar Goodwood visited Isabel the previous evening.

Henrietta has the audacity to tell Isabel she knows what is best for her, ignoring Isabel's firm choices regarding her love life. The journalist's bold actions arise from good intentions, as Henrietta is greatly concerned that Isabel is losing her American identity and that further European travels will result in Isabel marrying an undeserving European man. Isabel is "drifting" on vague hopes and ideals without any firm understanding of life's realities. Unfortunately, all of Henrietta's predictions will come true later in the story. Isabel and Henrietta's friendship is unusually frank compared to the novel's other friendships.



Isabel turns Henrietta's accusation of "drifting" back on the journalist, enquiring about Henrietta's next movements and simultaneously suggesting Henrietta is totally off course in her European newspaper assignment. Henrietta's flippant reply demonstrates the journalist's frustration with Isabel's behavior.



Mrs. Touchett never sends a telegram without some weighty news and this time it is the tragic revelation of Mr. Touchett's decline. Ralph's decision to employ one of the best doctors in London to attend to Mr. Touchett demonstrates the opportunities that Isabel wholly lacks due to her lack of financial support. If she became sick, she would have to rely on her family and friends' goodwill for medical care.



Henrietta continues to provoke her peers by revealing Goodwood's visiting Isabel to Ralph. Throughout the novel, Henrietta's liberating character acts to move the plot forward, starkly contrasting Isabel's many introspective scenes.



Ralph blushes at the revelation of Isabel's visitor, but chides himself, feeling that he has no right to be concerned about his cousin's romantic life. He also tries to persuade himself that he has no right to feel upset that she lied to him about her plans for the evening. However, Ralph is relieved when Henrietta explains that Isabel had no prior knowledge of Goodwood's visit, as Henrietta herself had devised the plan with Goodwood. Ralph is also delighted that Isabel sent Goodwood away with no promise of her romantic affection, although outwardly Ralph can only exclaim "Poor Mr. Goodwood!" at Henrietta's story.

Henrietta tells Ralph that she has no intention of letting Goodwood "give up" on Isabel, as she believes her friend really does like Goodwood and would benefit greatly from their union.

Ralph is similar in nature to his cousin; like Isabel, he outwardly presents a calm façade in the face of alarming news despite experiencing great internal turmoil. Once again, Ralph tries to dissuade himself from feeling romantic interest for Isabel because he knows he cannot offer her a lengthy future together.



Henrietta remains staunch in her opinions and desires, paralleling Goodwood in this regard. In fact, as a pair Henrietta and Goodwood embody the key values of the American New World woman and man.



CHAPTER 18

Isabel and Ralph have arrived at Gardencourt to be with the ailing Mr. Touchett. Isabel finds an unknown woman playing a piano in the house. The newcomer appears French, but upon introducing herself is revealed to be an American expatriate and friend of Mrs. Touchett's named Madame Merle. About forty years old, Merle lives in Florence and appears to Isabel a sophisticated and intelligent woman. Isabel immediately admires her very much.

Isabel goes to ask her cousin about Madame Merle, with Ralph revealing that he was at one time in love with the older woman, although her husband was still alive at that time. He still thinks that she is "the cleverest woman [he] knows," and knows that his mother also thinks unusually highly of Merle. Ralph states that "the husband of Madame Merle would be likely to pass away" and that Merle "fortunately" has no children. Isabel brands him as "odious."

Ralph's attention shifts back to his father's poor condition. Despite the local doctor and Sir Matthew Hope's attentions, Mr. Touchett has grown increasingly feeble and spends most of his time sleeping.

Despite her American heritage, Madame Merle exhibits the sophistication and elegance that is symbolic of European Old World culture. In fact, these characteristics lead Isabel to immediately assume that Merle is French.



Isabel's curiosity about Gardencourt's new visitor takes her straight to Ralph, who has now replaced Mr. Touchett as her moral touchstone at Gardencourt. Ralph tells Isabel that he and his mother consider Madame Merle highly intelligent, but he then suggests that Merle is a self-determined widow who would not make a good mother. Isabel considers his behavior as merely playful, but Madame Merle's questionable character is a topic that will rise again for Ralph and Isabel.



Mr. Touchett's poor health is a key narrative plot point in the novel and Ralph is likely already making plans to convince his father to award Isabel an inheritance upon his death.



The following day, Mr. Touchett wakes for a while, and it is Ralph who is on watch beside him. Mr. Touchett knows his time is near and tells Ralph that he is proud of his son's bright personality. He advises that Ralph must look after his mother once Mr. Touchett passes away and also find a worthy life interest. He also assures that his son and wife will be well-off after his death.

Ralph alludes to a previous conversation the two men have held about Ralph needing very little money for the rest of his short and infirm life, imploring Mr. Touchett to leave a decent proportion of his wealth to "some good use." Mr. Touchett has still left Ralph more money than he wants—in fact, "there will be enough for two"—as the elderly father desires Ralph to marry.

Mr. Touchett carries on, asking Ralph what he thinks of Isabel. After jerking in surprise, Ralph laughs at Mr. Touchett's hint that he should marry his cousin. He then admits that he adores Isabel; Mr. Touchett reveals Isabel likes Ralph too. Ralph will not approach Isabel regarding marriage because of his illness.

Ralph would, however, like to support Isabel in her life desires. Mr. Touchett, who has also admitted his great fondness for his niece, states that he has left Isabel 5,000 pounds in his will. Ralph is pleased by his father's intentions, but requests that more of his own inheritance is awarded to Isabel so that she will never need to marry for financial security and can always protect her personal freedom. He believes that securing her financial freedom is a worthy cause in allowing such a noble individual to carry out her desires. Ralph has also realized that his cousin is very naïve regarding finances; she does not understand how little money she has.

Mr. Touchett recognizes that a legacy of some 60,000 pounds would tie Isabel to the risk of social predators targeting her money. Ralph believes this potential danger is a small price to pay for his cousin's secured independence.

Mr. Touchett is unable to compliment Ralph on anything other than his fine personality, as Ralph has done little with his life due to terminal illness. Mr. Touchett charges Ralph with looking after his mother, although Mrs. Touchett has proved herself very capable of looking out for herself—even before family—throughout her lifetime. Unlike Mr. Archer, Isabel's father, Mr. Touchett's primary concern is that his family will be financially supported after his death.



Ralph's desire for the Touchett family money to go to "some good use" will later be echoed by Isabel, who vaguely hopes to put her new inheritance toward some good endeavor.



Ralph is shocked by his father's recognition of Ralph's love for Isabel. Ralph's hesitation to approach the topic with Isabel also may be linked to her rejections of Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood; he knows that she prizes her personal freedom above all else.



Despite his noble intentions to award his cousin a lifetime of financial security, Ralph's actions here are the starting point for Isabel's unhappy downfall. His financing of Isabel as an experiment set free in Europe without restraint is flawed from the beginning, due to Isabel's headstrong nature and naivete.



Mr. Touchett acknowledges the risk of awarding Isabel a large inheritance, as, unlike Ralph, she has not grown up with an education in wealth and its accompanying responsibilities. Ralph does not heed his father's advice; a smaller sum or no financial inheritance at all would have saved Isabel from much unhappiness.



CHAPTER 19

During the period of Mr. Touchett's declining health, Isabel and Madame Merle are thrown together by circumstance and form a great friendship. Indeed, "Isabel had never encountered a more agreeable and interesting figure than Madame Merle." The young woman confides more in her older friend than she has with any other. Madame Merle also greatly enjoys their new friendship and is keen to see what Isabel makes of life.

Isabel spends some time theorizing about Madame Merle's character, deciding that Merle was once a passionate individual who is now not so "original" but but instead gains admiration as a sophisticated and charming woman who lives through her relationships with others.

Throughout this period, a bout of bad weather confines the sickly Ralph to his rooms. One day he watches Isabel and Madame Merle walk through the rain together, feeling both regret and reproach toward them.

Isabel continues her sincere conversations with Madame Merle. When Isabel theorizes to Merle that the older woman must have once been hurt by a person or event, Merle responds that indeed she has not always been so happy as her current self. She likens herself to a pot that has been "shockingly chipped and cracked" before being "cleverly mended." She promises that she will one day recount her story to Isabel, but for now she wants to focus on discussing the exciting prospects that lie ahead of Isabel. Isabel is delighted by Madame Merle's attentions and praise.

Madame Merle feels that Americans are treated unjustly in European society and cannot live naturally. She offers Ralph as an example, suggesting that he is simply "idle," although not as idle as her friend Gilbert Osmond. Osmond is an American in Italy who is devoted to his only daughter (Pansy) but spends all of his time painting.

After her fraught parting with Henrietta, Isabel has found a much more suitable companion to learn from and share experiences with. However, Madame Merle represents the power of European Old World charm to influence and even corrupt naïve individuals such as Isabel, for Merle will later be revealed as a treacherous woman.



Isabel is quite self-satisfied in her belief that she is more "original" or interesting than the older Madame Merle. This is one of the novel's examples that showcase Isabel's flawed character. Considering her new friendship, Isabel is able to see that Madame Merle thrives on connection with other people, but James later reveals Merle is a social parasite who manipulates her peers for personal benefit.



Ralph's feelings likely stem from his jealousy of Isabel's close new friendship with Madame Merle, as well as from his frustration at his illness preventing him from spending time with Isabel. Despite his efforts, Ralph is still infatuated with his cousin.



Madame Merle likens herself to a pot that has been mended after severe damage, causing one to wonder what hides beneath the fixed façade. Isabel does not wonder too much at Merle's mystery because she is charmed and flattered by Merle's interest in Isabel's identity and dreams for the future. Merle symbolizes a mother figure that Isabel has lacked from a young age due to Mrs. Archer's early death.



Like many other characters, Madame Merle calls attention to the pronounced differences between American and European cultures. She introduces the name of her good friend, Gilbert Osmond (later revealed to be Merle's secret lover). Osmond will also be the cause of years of unhappiness for Isabel.



Merle also reveals that she feels uncomfortable staying at Gardencourt when Mr. Touchett is so unwell. She finds it hard to offer comfort to Ralph in particular, for she believes Ralph doesn't like her and feels injured by his disfavor. Isabel fails to question Madame Merle further about this revelation, justifying her lack of actions by regarding the matter as being either too important for her to respectfully inquire further, or too insignificant for her curiosity to bother with.

During another conversation, Isabel is surprised by Madame Merle's bitter admission that she would give a great deal to be Isabel's age again, for "the best part [of her life] is gone, and gone for nothing." Isabel exclaims that it is not so, for she regards Merle as a model of success. But Merle is adamant that she has failed in her desires and has no real use for the acquired talents Isabel admires so highly.

Their conversation moves on to the topic of marriage. Madame Merle does not agree with Isabel's declaration that she does not care for her future husband's financial means, advising that Isabel should consider marriage seriously and that a man's prospects are an important consideration in the matter. Madame Merle has a great respect for the opportunities a good income provides.

The narrator interjects that Isabel has kept the identity of her two ardent suitors a secret from Madame Merle, although the older woman is aware that Isabel has rejected at least one advantageous marriage proposal. At this time, Lord Warburton is no longer in the neighborhood, having left for Scotland with his two sisters. Merle has never met the nobleman on her previous visits and therefore has no reason to suspect his identity as one of Isabel's suitors.

Madame Merle takes her leave from Gardencourt, citing promises to visit other friends in Europe. She tells Isabel that she is about to visit six various locations in succession, but she is sure to find no one she likes so much as her new friend Isabel.

Isabel finds herself quite lonely after Madame Merle's departure from Gardencourt, seeing Mrs. Touchett and Ralph only at meals. Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel that the timing of her invitation to her niece to England is unfortunate. Upon Isabel's reassurance that she is very happy to have been able to get to know Mr. Touchett, Mrs. Touchett responds that allowing Isabel the opportunity to meet her uncle was not the reason that Mrs. Touchett brought the girl to Europe.

Madame Merle has accurately picked up on Ralph's covert aversion to her character. He likely disproves of her decadent past behaviors. Once again, Isabel's lack of sophistication is pronounced; she has not realized the reality of Ralph's dislike for Merle and does not believe it even when suggested out loud.



Again, Isabel naively dismisses wise advice from her elders. Readers later learn that Madame Merle's unusually pessimistic confession regarding her life's failures stems from the fact she behaved unethically throughout her marriage and now holds few ties with her illegitimate daughter (Pansy), a relationship kept secret from Pansy and society at large.



As per all of Isabel's family and peers, Madame Merle advises Isabel to become conscious of and act on her vulnerable situation without a husband to provide her with financial security.



For an unknown reason—perhaps social courtesy—Isabel wishes to hide the identity of her two suitors who have recently proposed marriage. Madame Merle would likely be even more impressed with her new young friend if she became aware of the powerful men who pursue Isabel's affection.



Madame Merle cements her friendship with Isabel by once again flattering the young woman. The headstrong Isabel has failed to recognize any warning signs in Merle's conversation and behavior.



Mrs. Touchett displays her fierce eccentricity when she implies that she invited Isabel to Europe to partake in cultural experiences rather than meet and form bonds with her dying uncle. As usual, the headstrong aunt and niece engage in a combative yet respectful conversation, for they both genuinely care for each other very much.



During her now lonely existence at Gardencourt, Isabel takes a great interest in Henrietta Stackpole's life in Europe, which she learns of via letters from her friend. The journalist's newspaper column is not going as well as hoped, and for some strange reason an invitation to visit Lady Pensil has never arrived. However, Harriet is quite pleased by the attentions Mr. Bantling pays her. The pair have decided that Henrietta will visit Paris shortly, and she encourages Isabel to meet her there.

Her recent isolation means that Isabel is now quite happy to renew her friendship with Henrietta despite the journalist's intense meddling in Isabel's love life. Again, Henrietta is an agent of action and persuades Isabel to travel to France as soon as possible.



Less than a week after Madame Merle's departure from Gardencourt, Isabel sits reading distractedly in the library when Ralph enters the room and informs her that Mr. Touchett has died. She exclaims in anguish and holds out her hands to him.

Alongside Isabel's fierce independence, James represents her as an extremely kind and caring young woman. She is devastated by her uncle's death and offers comfort to the heartbroken Ralph.



CHAPTER 20

Some weeks later, Madame Merle arrives at the Touchetts' London house in Winchester Square. She sees a notice that the house is for sale. Mrs. Touchett greets her matter-of-factly despite the recent loss of Mr. Touchett. She tells her friend that she believes her husband regarded her as a good wife, and he has left her a generous legacy; Madame Merle thinks privately that Mrs. Touchett has been a selfish wife, putting her needs before those of her family.

Mrs. Touchett's reaction to her husband's death seems frigid and unfeeling compared to Ralph and Isabel's anguish. Mrs. Touchett is immediately preoccupied by sorting the financial transactions that must take place now that Mr. Touchett has passed away.



Mrs. Touchett also reveals that Ralph has been left a generous inheritance, although not as much as she expected. In an extraordinary move, Mr. Touchett has gifted their niece, Isabel, a large fortune—roughly 70,000 pounds. Madame Merle is astonished by this news, raising her clasped hands and exclaiming, "Ah [...] the clever creature!" Mrs. Touchett is unimpressed with Merle's insinuation that Isabel has intentionally secured her uncle's money. Madame Merle backs down but still regards Isabel's inheritance as an achievement.

Mrs. Merle accidentally reveals some of her true character to Mrs. Touchett. Merle is a social predator who enjoys a luxurious lifestyle due to cleverly playing her peers for personal advantage. She is thrilled to recognize what she believes to be Isabel's similar approach to surviving and enjoying life.



When Madame Merle enquires about Ralph's reaction to Isabel's newfound fortune, Mrs. Touchett explains that her poorly son left England for warmer climates before the will was even read. However, she thinks he will be pleased, as he had always urged his father to use his money to help people in America.

Mrs. Touchett is aware that Ralph is very fond of Isabel and will be thrilled to learn of her new inheritance that will enable her to pursue her dream lifestyle. Mrs. Touchett is unaware that Ralph himself engineered the legacy.



Madame Merle requests to see Isabel, and notes the young woman's "pale and grave" appearance. Isabel is heartbroken by the loss of Mr. Touchett and overwhelmed by her surprising inheritance. However, after some time, she comes to realize that wealth is a great blessing that will allow her "to be able to do." Mrs. Touchett advises that Isabel must now learn how to take care of her wealth.

Mrs. Touchett intends to follow her original plans to spend some of winter in Paris. She and Isabel leave for France, where Isabel is struck by the absurdity of American expatriates' flaunted wealth. Isabel says so when she visits her aunt's friend Mrs. Luce, an elderly woman who often hosts gatherings for fellow American expatriates. At one such gathering, Isabel meets Edward Rosier, an art collector whom she knew as a child. Rosier is similarly delighted to see Isabel, reminiscing on their childhoods. He remembers an incident where his maid banned the children from approaching the edge of the lake, yet Isabel would continue to do so. He recognizes this same headstrong independence in Isabel as an adult.

In Paris, Isabel also reconnects with Henrietta Stackpole. The two spend so much time together that Mrs. Touchett suspects Henrietta's opinions and attitudes are rubbing off too much on Isabel.

As usual, Henrietta has strong judgments about everything around her. She finds Edward Rosier to be even more Europeanized than the unfortunate Ralph Touchett and lectures Rosier "on the duties of the American citizen."

Henrietta is also unsettled by the great wealth that Isabel has inherited, hoping that her new money won't "ruin" Isabel but certain that it will encourage her "dangerous tendencies." She believes wealth will encourage her friend's imagination without learning about life's realities and hardships.

Henrietta had spent her first four weeks in Paris with Mr. Bantling, benefitting from his knowledgeable insights about Parisian life. In fact, the two had "breakfasted together, dined together, gone to the theatre together, supped together, really in a manner quite lived together." They have made plans to meet again in Italy in spring.

After being overwhelmed at her uncle's death combined with an unexpected inheritance, Isabel begins to comprehend the enormity of her new wealth. It will allow her to pursue the personal development she has always dreamed of; furthermore, she can enable other people's good ideas, a power she had never even entertained before.



Clearly, Isabel's fierce independence has developed since she was a small child as per Rosier's lakeside memory. Her outrage at Mrs. Luce's extravagant parties is ironic considering that in years to come, Isabel will host similar parties herself.



In the same way that Henrietta worries Isabel is too influenced by European culture, Mrs. Touchett worries that her niece is too influenced by Henrietta's extreme American opinions.



Henrietta's patriotic behavior is quite startling in its intensity. As with Isabel, she tries to talk Rosier round to performing his American heritage.



Henrietta's concerns about Isabel's new money echo Mr. Touchett's worries in conversation with Ralph: Isabel is not ready for a sudden elevation of wealth.



Isabel's naivete is demonstrated in her false reading of Henrietta and Mr. Bantling's compatibility. Isabel informed Ralph that the two would never be more than friends, as their personalities are worlds apart, but it is quite clear that Henrietta and Mr. Bantling are indeed romantically involved, for they "quite lived together" in Paris.



CHAPTER 21

Mrs. Touchett had pre-organized her exact dates in Paris. She advises Isabel that her niece is now a wealthy woman and as such is under no obligation to accompany her aunt to her next stop, Italy. However, she suggests that Isabel continue to stay with her as family. Isabel agrees with her aunt's logic and joins her in Florence. On the way, they visit Ralph in San Remo.

When Isabel asks Ralph if he encouraged his father to leave Isabel an inheritance for his own entertainment, he replies seriously that he believes the money will allow Isabel to live with the freedom she so desires. He advises her not to worry about the ethics of the gift, instead making use of her fortune to develop her character through travel and life's other opportunities that may arise.

Isabel accepts Ralph's advice and begins to look more favorably on her fortune, admitting that it does allow her to enjoy more independence than before. Spending some time with the Touchetts, she reflects on her life, her existence, and the promise of the future. She begins to cultivate ambitious dreams, losing herself in "a maze of visions" and imagining that her wealth gives her increased status and even a kind of increased beauty.

At times, though, Isabel finds herself thinking back to her two suitors, Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton. She flatters and comforts herself of their true admiration for her character. She also acknowledges that when Goodwood visits her in a year and a half as he has promised, she may find herself attracted to his qualities that currently deter her from marrying him. If so, "she might herself know the humiliation of change" by entering a peaceful union with the American businessman.

CHAPTER 22

The narrative jumps to a villa in Florence, six months after Mr. Touchett's death. The **architecture** of the building is of special interest, with the villa set upon a hill and fronted by a deceptive façade that masks that real house behind it. The windows are also peculiar in that they are tasteful in proportion, yet "defy the world to look in."

Isabel's European travels are now well underway. Despite her newfound liberty experienced through her inheritance, Isabel makes an unexpectedly wise decision to continue traveling with her respectable aunt rather than explore Europe solo or with friends. For now, Isabel's money is safe from exploitation.



Isabel learns that it was Ralph who engineered her new wealth in order to ensure Isabel could always retain her independence through financial freedom.



Isabel demonstrates her lack of maturity and education in regard to managing wealth. Instead of considering real world priorities, she loses herself in vain and self-important daydreams.



Isabel demonstrates another about-turn in character by suddenly opening herself up to the possibility of marriage with one of her two previously rejected suitors. The "humiliation of change" refers to the possibility of Isabel having to concede to someone else, rather than always acting on her desires as has so far occurred in the novel.



The Florence villa's architecture symbolizes its owner, Gilbert Osmond, who is similarly deceptive and private in nature. The foreboding house also foreshadows the deception that Isabel will experience when she meets Osmond and he courts her for her money.



Inside the Florence house are two nuns, a gentleman (later revealed as Osmond) and a young girl (later revealed as Pansy). Luxurious artworks, books, and furnishings litter the villa's interior. The young girl stands silently before an easel that holds a painting of her own likeness, while forced conversation takes place between the adults.

The narrator pays great attention to the gentleman's physical features. Forty years of age, he has a lean figure with a fine and angular face that is emphasized by his pointed beard. His foreign look is completed with a flourished moustache and intelligent eyes. He is like a "a fine gold coin" that is not found "in the general circulation."

With a perfect Italian accent, the gentleman asks the girl what she thinks of the painting. She tells the gentleman, who is her father, that she loves it. She has just returned home with the two nuns from a convent, where she has been educated for some time.

The sisters elaborate on the child's education—now fifteen, the girl has received a well-rounded education ranging from the Romance languages, to gymnastics, to painting. One of the nuns remarks that she thinks the child has stopped growing; the gentleman replies that this suits him, stating "I prefer women like books—very good and not too long." When he asks one of the sisters what she makes of his daughter, the nun replies that she is "A charming young lady—a real little woman—a daughter in whom you will have nothing but contentment." Both sisters appear to genuinely care for the girl and will greatly miss her presence at the convent.

As the nuns say their goodbyes to the girl, the gentleman opens a door to let them exit the villa. He is surprised to see one of his servants admitting a lady in "shabby" clothing. He allows her through to the next room, where the girl identifies the new visitor as Madame Merle. Merle names the young girl as her friend, Pansy, whom she had regularly visited at the convent.

The villa is draped in rich furnishings that speak to a sophisticated European style. This is further enhanced by the books and paintings that decorate the room. Meanwhile the atmosphere between the people in the room is one of forced politeness.



Gilbert Osmond is the narrator's subject of attention. Osmond is an American expatriate (as previously revealed by Merle to Isabel) who appears European in his dark, sophisticated physical features. Osmond is therefore represented as an individual who has embraced European culture over that of his home country, just like Madame Merle. His comparison to a rare "gold coin" suggests that he is a unique man of great value. Readers later learn that this representation is a sham, for Osmond is financially and morally bereft.



Osmond seems very self-centered, asking his daughter to comment on his artistic talent rather than asking her about her life now that she has returned home. It also seems strange that Pansy has been educated at a convent, a very different upbringing from that of independent women such as Isabel.



Again, Osmond privileges his own desires above his daughter's, treating Pansy as though she is an object in his book collection.



Osmond's surprise at his new guest's appearance shows that Madame Merle's visit is unexpected. Her "shabby" dress suggests that she is not enjoying the wealthy lifestyle which readers know from previous chapters that she aspires to.



The nuns leave the villa, and Pansy is obedient but disappointed to the point of tears when Madame Merle instructs her to wait with her while Pansy's father shows the sisters out. Madame Merle asks Pansy if she will miss Madame Catherine, who is clearly the girl's favorite sister. When Pansy replies that she will, Merle suggests that one day Pansy might have a new mother.

Pansy's father, Gilbert Osmond, returns to the room. Osmond and Merle talk to one another about Pansy and her education, their aggressive undertones hidden by layers of charm and civility in the presence of Pansy.

Osmond sends Pansy outside to pick flowers for Madame Merle, which the young girl happily agrees to. Osmond then addresses Merle's unheralded visit, while she labels him as being idle and uncaring. Osmond simply agrees with her descriptions.

Madame Merle reveals that she has come to Florence not only to see Pansy, but to present an opportunity to Osmond. She wants him to meet Isabel, who is also currently in Florence. He does not want to meet a stranger, but Merle explains that Isabel is a great catch, and that she thinks he should marry her. Osmond is confused by her plan, but begins to be interested in the young woman whom Merle describes as "beautiful, accomplished, generous [...] very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune."

Osmond tells Madame Merle that she looks well, recognizing this is likely the result of her "idea" of matchmaking Osmond with Isabel. He is frustrated by her meddling in his life, trying to match him with Isabel, and he is even more disgruntled when Merle states that she doesn't value his paintings after he points out his most recent work. Osmond contrastingly believes that his artworks are a great deal better than many other painters'. Merle states that she wishes he had carried out other ambitions than his painting—something she has told him numerous times.

Pansy is closer in temperament to the meek Misses Molyneux than the headstrong Isabel and Henrietta. Merle's suggestion that Pansy might one day have a new mother is weighty for two reasons: firstly, it hints at her own identity as Pansy's mother, and secondly, it foreshadows the close bond that will grow between Pansy and her future step-mother, Isabel.



James now reveals that Pansy's father is Gilbert Osmond, the friend that Madame Merle mentioned to Isabel at Gardencourt. Clearly there is tension between the two adults that they want to hide from Pansy, putting on a façade of courteous friendship.



Pansy again demonstrates her obedient nature. Osmond reveals himself to be a surprising character who makes no argument against Madame Merle's assertions that he is an unproductive person. Indeed, he seems the very definition of an aesthete (an individual appreciates tasteful art and nothing more).



Madame Merle has to work hard to pique Osmond's interest in her proposal, but once he learns that Isabel meets all of his criteria for an ideal woman, he begins to pay attention to Merle's plan. Clearly, he is a social predator like Merle and is primarily interested in Isabel's wealth.



Osmond keeps up with Merle's wit and although he is intrigued by her proposition, he is also vexed by her failure to recognize his talent as an artist. Once again, James highlights Osmond's need for artistic validation. Madame Merle is forthright in her opinion that Osmond should have done something more with his life than pursuing his passion for painting.



Osmond checks again with Madame Merle whether Isabel is wealthy. He then agrees to meet Isabel, as long as Ralph Touchett won't bother him, for Osmond considers Ralph "a good deal of a donkey." Merle tells Osmond that Ralph dislikes her, and follows this up by calling attention to Pansy's failure to appear with flowers for the woman, making Merle think that Pansy dislikes her too.

The unconventional Madame Merle reveals one of her few vulnerabilities: despising others' dislike of her character. She has mentioned it before regarding Ralph Touchett, and she is even more concerned that Pansy—her illegitimate daughter—does not like her. Certainly, Pansy has no knowledge of her true parentage and regards Merle as a family friend rather than family.



CHAPTER 23

Mrs. Touchett invites Madame Merle to stay in Florence. Merle makes sure to tell Isabel she has spoken about her to Gilbert Osmond, although gives no indication of her secret hope that she desires to one day see the two married. Isabel's curiosity is piqued regarding the history between Merle and Osmond, but Merle speaks of nothing but a long friendship with the American gentleman.

Madame Merle's deception is aided by European Old World charm and sophistication; Isabel does not think to question Merle's story or motives.



Gilbert Osmond visits at Mrs. Touchett's Florence home. Isabel barely takes part in group conversation. She does not want to play into Madame Merle's expectation Isabel will amuse and charm Osmond, but she inadvertently fascinates him with her silence. Before he leaves, Osmond invited her to visit his villa with Madame Merle and suggests he would like Isabel to meet his daughter, Pansy.

Isabel accidentally plays into Madame Merle's desires when the young woman attracts Osmond's interest by largely removing herself from the social conversation. This is not the first time that Isabel's fiercely independent spirit will steer her toward disaster, in this case marriage to the wicked Osmond.



When Madame Merle congratulates Isabel on her captivating behavior, Isabel replies coolly, "that's more than I intended," feeling irritated with her friend Merle for the first time. Merle blushes with embarrassment at Isabel's unexpected displeasure, but says she thought that Isabel liked Osmond.

Isabel once again asserts her independence over her peers despite their higher social status. The sophisticated and older Madame Merle feels put in her place by her younger friend.



Isabel asks Ralph what he knows about Gilbert Osmond. Ralph can only say that he is a mysterious American who has lived in Italy for the past thirty years, and that he believes Osmond dreads "vulgar" tastes. However, Ralph advises Isabel that she must make judgments for herself without relying on other people's opinions.

In a growing pattern, Isabel is curious about Gilbert Osmond and asks Ralph for his opinion on the man. Ralph doesn't know much except that Osmond prefers a lifestyle of fine tastes as per European cultural traditions.



Ralph goes on to throw barbed insults about Madame Merle, and Isabel charges him with either speaking plainly or holding his tongue. All he will say is that Merle is too ambitious and that her merits are exaggerated; overall, he feels pity for Merle's failures to achieve her life desires.

Again, Ralph makes mysterious attacks on Madame Merle's character. Similar to his attitude toward Lord Warburton, Ralph pities Merle for her flaws. The unconventional Isabel bosses around her cousin, rashly commanding Ralph to reveal his issues with Merle or be silent on the matter.



Ralph imagines that the friendship between Isabel and Madame Merle will not be long-lasting. He does not believe it necessary to take any action regarding their friendship, as he assumes Isabel will discover Merle's true nature in time. Until then, it is unlikely that Isabel will be hurt.

Ralph makes a surprisingly poor character judgment in this moment, wrongly believing that Isabel will discover the truth of the devious Madame Merle before any harm befalls his cousin.



CHAPTER 24

Isabel accompanies Madame Merle to Gilbert Osmond's house. Osmond, Pansy, and the Countess Gemini, Osmond's sister, are all present. Isabel finds Pansy is innocent and sweet in nature, and judges the Countess to be a superficial character. The Countess Gemini announces that she has called in at the villa to meet Isabel rather than to spend time with her family.

The Countess seems in some ways similar to Mrs. Touchett, prioritizing her individual needs above family conventions.



While Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini walk through the garden, Osmond draws Isabel into conversation with Pansy nearby. He asks her what she thinks of the Countess, stating that she is the subject of an unhappy marriage but deals with this through humor.

Madame Merle and Osmond are very cunning in furthering their plan for Osmond to court Isabel, managing to leave the two alone with only Pansy playing nearby. Osmond engages Isabel by confiding private family matters with her.



Osmond and Isabel also discuss the topic of art, with Isabel impressed by Osmond's cultured aesthetic tastes. In fact, she is quite spellbound by his character in general, for she has never met someone so sophisticated and "original." She tries her best to avoid sounding ignorant when they speak on topics she feels unconfident in. She also tries to never disagree with Osmond's learned opinions. Isabel discovers that it is hard work to try to live up to the description that she thinks Madame Merle has given to Osmond of her.

Isabel is duped by Osmond's appearance of Old World knowledge and sophistication. She is certain that Madame Merle has told Osmond that Isabel is a unique and knowledgeable woman but is worried that she will not meet this description, especially on the topic of art in which Osmond seems so well-versed.



Osmond asks Isabel if she will visit him at the villa again. She agrees to do so, but reflects on whether this will affect her plans to travel extensively. Osmond admits to Isabel that his life's plan is to live a "quiet" life, and that he has no specific prospects before him. Osmond also makes the curious comment that "A woman's natural mission is to be where she's most appreciated."

Osmond secures another social engagement with Isabel. His comment that a woman has a "natural" or innate purpose to please those around her is evidence of the patriarchal expectations he holds women accountable to, a view that is especially displayed in his regular treatment of Pansy as an object that exists to reflect well on him.



Osmond and Isabel wander outside to join Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini. Osmond reveals that his daughter, Pansy, is his greatest happiness in life. Overall, Isabel finds Osmond to be mysterious; he is a self-described private individual who has secluded himself away from society, yet he seems to happily share personal truths with Isabel having only just met her. Isabel compares Osmond to Ralph, noting their similar personal qualities, but decides that Osmond is more at ease in his environment.

Osmond's claim that Pansy is his greatest joy is clearly a lie, as his previous actions have shown him to be a narcissistic individual. However, his lies attract Isabel's interest as she finds herself drawn to learn more about the mysterious and unconventional Osmond. He likely appeals to Isabel because he does not fit into a conventional stereotype as previous suitors such as Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood did.



CHAPTER 25

Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini converse in the garden while Osmond and Isabel talk inside. The Countess has guessed at Merle's designs for Osmond and Isabel to marry. She is not angry at Merle's scheming manipulation, but disagrees with the union. Although Merle tries to refute any such plan, the Countess states that she will actively oppose Osmond's pursuit of Isabel's hand in marriage. She does not believe that Isabel deserves to wed her cruel and selfish brother. Merle warns that Isabel will not believe the Countess, growing to mistrust her instead of Osmond.

Pansy is earnest in her desire to please her father, Osmond, by making tea for the group, which Madame Merle considers and agrees to. The Countess Gemini asks Pansy what she thinks of Isabel; Pansy replies that their visitor is "charming" and "polite" to everyone around her, including Pansy.

When Pansy leaves to offer Osmond and Isabel some tea, the Countess Gemini asks Madame Merle if she is planning on finding a husband for Pansy sometime soon, as she is almost sixteen years of age. Merle acknowledges that she will certainly be involved in helping to find Pansy a suitor. She suggests that the Countess's large social network will also be valuable for the project.

The Countess Gemini is more hotheaded than Madame Merle and is often frustrated by Merle's scheming. Madame Merle reveals that Isabel has recently received an inheritance of 70,000 pounds; the Countess Gemini feels sorry that Merle wants to offer the enchanting Isabel up for a dismal marriage to her devious brother. She knows that Osmond is a difficult man to please, and she "trembles for [Isabel's] happiness!"

CHAPTER 26

Gilbert Osmond has visited Mrs. Touchett's Florence home five times in just two weeks, which is a great many times more than his usual annual visit. Ralph discerns that Isabel is the reason.

The Countess Gemini and Madame Merle are both strong-willed and clever women who do not back down in their pursuits. The Countess, however, shows a compassion for Isabel's wellbeing that Merle totally lacks.



Pansy seems to be a young woman without opinions—she simply communicates whatever statement she knows her audience desires from her. In this manner, she fits her father's preference for a docile daughter.



Despite the secret of Pansy's parentage, Madame Merle involves herself in Pansy's life in whatever manner she can. Clearly Merle wants Pansy to marry for social gain rather than for love, a desire that will be thwarted by Pansy later in the novel.



Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini are shown to be tenuous allies despite their differences in character. Merle trusts her enough to reveal the truth of her plan to gain control of Isabel's wealth through Osmond.



Osmond has been acting on his desire to marry Isabel for her wealth; Ralph recognizes that Osmond is clearly courting Isabel.



Mrs. Touchett also recognizes Osmond's interest in Isabel. She wonders if his attentions would remain once he had spent her fortune. Ralph assures his mother that Isabel is not foolish enough to marry Osmond, for she is intent on retaining her personal freedoms to travel the world. Mrs. Touchett is not so convinced as her son is of Isabel's immunity to Osmond's attentions. She explains her concerns to Madame Merle, who stops Mrs. Touchett from warning Isabel of Osmond's intentions. Merle promises to help Mrs. Touchett find out the truth of the matter from Osmond.

The Countess Gemini also visits Isabel at Mrs. Touchett's home. Mrs. Touchett is annoyed by her appearance, as there are rumors that the Countess has behaved unfaithfully in her marriage. Mrs. Touchett does not want to associate with such an individual, although Madame Merle defends the Countess's character.

Henrietta Stackpole also visits Isabel again. She is currently traveling to Rome from Venice; Ralph suggests that he and Isabel join Henrietta and Mr. Bantling in their trip to Rome.

Before Isabel leaves Florence for Rome, Osmond tells Isabel he would have liked to travel with her. She suggests he go to Rome also, bringing Pansy with him, but he declines traveling in a group.

Osmond lets Madame Merle know that her plans for his marriage to Isabel are moving along nicely. Merle states that she is "frightened" of the situation she has put Isabel in by introducing her to the dastardly Osmond. However, Osmond is unconcerned by her fear and says that it is too late to stop the plan now. He is quite taken with Isabel, despite her flaw in having too many ideas. Merle encourages Osmond to travel to Rome to spend time with Isabel, but he cannot be bothered with the effort of it all. When Madame Merle makes to leave the villa, Osmond accompanies her outside, where she rebukes him for being too reckless in his behaviors.

Mrs. Touchett is similarly aware of Osmond's desire to court Isabel and that her niece's wealth is the likely attraction. Unlike Isabel, Mrs. Touchett and Ralph are experienced in the workings of society. They do not realize the extent of the danger that Isabel will soon find herself in, for her naivety is a huge vulnerability.



The eccentric Mrs. Touchett clearly adheres to some social conventions, wanting no interaction with the scandalous Countess Gemini. Little does Mrs. Touchett know that her good friend Madame Merle is the more scandalous threat.



Henrietta appears once again to act as a mechanism who moves the plot forward. Surprisingly, the American journalist is still traveling in the European continent that she detests, and with a man steeped in English tradition no less.



Isabel's attachment to Osmond grows; her kindness is also evident in her extending the invitation to Rome to Pansy as well as Osmond. Her care for Pansy foreshadows her considerate relationship with Pansy later in the novel as the girl's stepmother.



The confident Madame Merle reveals a sudden fear for Isabel's wellbeing. Osmond surprisingly finds himself attracted to Isabel's personality as well as her fortune. However, despite Merle's prompting it seems he is too lazy to make the effort to meet Isabel in Rome. Merle's later critique of Osmond's familiarity in her presence demonstrates the two's disreputable history that they hide from their peers.



CHAPTER 27

Isabel, Ralph, Henrietta, and Mr. Bantling are in Rome. Isabel eagerly takes in the city's history and culture, but is more reserved than usual. As she sits alone in the Roman Forum, Lord Warburton appears before her. Isabel is shocked, and he is similarly surprised at their meeting. The nobleman has been traveling in Asia and Europe, and is now in Rome for two weeks.

Isabel and Lord Warburton sit together. He states that he has written to her several times. When she exclaims that she has not received any of his correspondence, he admits that he burned each of the letters instead of sending them. Isabel realizes that Warburton's character has not changed, and that he is still in love with her. She still refuses to marry him, desiring his friendship but trying not to encourage his romantic pursuits.

On Sunday, Isabel is touring St. Peter's Basilica with Lord Warburton when they happen upon Gilbert Osmond, who has been watching the young woman for some time. When Isabel tells him that the rest of their party is inside, he states that he has not come to Rome to see them. Isabel introduces her two suitors to one another.

Ralph, Henrietta, and Mr. Bantling join the three of them. When Henrietta first met Gilbert Osmond, she had asked Isabel why all of her friends in Europe are so unlikeable. Henrietta had then exclaimed that Caspar Goodwood is so much better than the men in Europe.

Ralph and Lord Warburton move away from the group, with the aristocrat curious as to whether Isabel will accept a marriage proposal from Gilbert Osmond. Ralph encourages his friend to ensure that she will not be wooing her himself. When Ralph comments that unfortunately Isabel wants nothing from Lord Warburton or Ralph, the nobleman comments "Ah well, if she wont have you - !"

Europe seems strangely insular in the way that Isabel keeps running into old acquaintances such as Edward Rosier and now Lord Warburton. It is clear that Warburton has not planned to surprise Isabel; indeed he has likely been traveling in order to try to keep away from Isabel and the memory of her denying his proposal of marriage.



Isabel is such an enigmatic and desirable character that Lord Warburton has fallen into the same trap as Caspar Goodwood; he is still in love with Isabel despite her emphatic rejections of his affection.



Gilbert Osmond is in command of the situation, first observing Isabel and Lord Warburton at his leisure, before making it clear he has come to Rome to see Isabel.



Henrietta dislikes Gilbert Osmond upon meeting him, although the novel does not explain why. As usual, she is quick to share her opinion frankly with Isabel. Henrietta's loathing for Osmond will only increase as the story progresses and Osmond begins to treat Isabel poorly.



Warburton's final comment to Ralph can be interpreted twofold: if Isabel does not desire her beloved cousin Ralph, then Warburton believes he has no chance, or, if Isabel will not be courted by Ralph, then Warburton should continue to try his luck without offending his friend.



CHAPTER 28

The next day, Lord Warburton attends the opera because the hotel has informed him that Isabel, Ralph, Henrietta, Mr. Bantling, and Osmond will be there. At Ralph's request, Warburton joins Isabel and Osmond in a viewing box, but becomes despondent and angry after observing the two together.

Later, Osmond asks Isabel about Lord Warburton. After Isabel relates something of his background, Osmond suggests that he would like to be the nobleman.

The following day at the Capitol in front of the statue of the *Dying Gladiator*, Lord Warburton lets Isabel know that he is leaving Rome. Isabel tells him goodbye, to which Warburton responds miserably that she is keen to see him leave. She refuses his comment, sharing that she hates goodbyes. She also points out that he is not keeping his promise to refrain from pursuing her romantically. Warburton blushes, before admitting that this is the reason he is leaving. They shake hands and he departs.

Isabel sits by herself, immersed in the history of the sculptures and **architecture** around her. After half an hour of solitude, Osmond appears. He is surprised to find her without Lord Warburton. Osmond is in a good mood because he finds Isabel's rejection of a fine nobleman's passions qualifies her "to figure in his collection of choice objects." He is intent in his resolve to marry Isabel.

Lord Warburton makes a choice to continue pursuing Isabel. His subsequent anger arises from his realization that Isabel cares more for Osmond, a man of little means, than she does for the impressive Warburton.



Osmond is attracted by the privilege, power, and wealth that Warburton has grown up with.



The setting is important, with Lord Warburton's actions metaphorically mimicking the statue by giving up the fight for Isabel's affections. In his pursuit of Isabel, Lord Warburton has somewhat belittled himself into a petty man who does not keep his word.



Isabel's status as a rare middle class woman who would turn down a nobleman's affections impresses Osmond. If a man of status like Lord Warburton admires her, she appeals to Osmond even more. As with Caspar Goodwood and Ralph Touchett before him, Osmond objectifies Isabel as commodity that will enhance his personal collection of art.



CHAPTER 29

Osmond makes for good company in Rome. Despite his apprehensions, even Ralph acknowledges that Gilbert Osmond is an entertaining and sociable companion to the group.

Osmond likes Isabel very much, noting that only a few small faults keep her from being perfect. He is surprised to find that he feels some happiness in life at the present time, even taking pleasure in composing Isabel a sonnet. Osmond has come to believe that Isabel is a good influence, and that she can help him and his exquisite tastes to influence the world around them.

Osmond manages to ingratiate himself to Isabel and her friends in his pursuit of her hand in marriage.



Osmond's desire for Isabel goes beyond her attractive fortune, as he finds himself benefitting from her moral propriety. Mostly, though, Osmond is thrilled at the prospect of Isabel's wealth financing his increased influence on the art world.



Mrs. Touchett writes to Isabel to suggest that they travel to Bellagio in Lombardy. Before Isabel departs, Osmond comments that she is probably intending to experience the world through travel. He has no inclination to travel, instructing her to reconnect with him once she has achieved all the travel that she needs. Isabel criticizes Osmond for thinking that travel is a wasteful passion, but he responds that this is not the case, and that he believes in ensuring one lives life as though it is a work of art. He advises Isabel that she must follow her desires.

Osmond then shocks Isabel by revealing that he loves her. He doesn't have anything to offer her but his feelings. Isabel stands, panicked, but becomes caught in Osmond's stare. They lock eyes for some time. Osmond then reaffirms his love for Isabel despite her pleas not to. He furthermore states that he will always love Isabel, for she is "the most important woman in the world" to him.

Isabel reacts coolly, stating that she is concerned but unoffended by Osmond's revelations. Osmond requests that she grant him a favor when she returns to Florence, asking her to visit Pansy, which Isabel agrees to.

Osmond respectfully takes his quick leave from Isabel. Left alone, she sits down slowly and remains in place until the rest of her party return. Isabel realizes that she has imagined Osmond's declaration of feeling to her, but in the moment has been rendered entirely in shock. The narrator suggests that Isabel's odd reaction can be explained by her active imagination's refusal to enter "treacherous" territory.

CHAPTER 30

Returning to Florence with Ralph, Isabel tells Madame Merle of her intention to visit Pansy as per Osmond's request. Merle warns that she should not visit a bachelor's house alone, even if he is away, as such behavior is inappropriate. But Merle then advises Isabel to do so anyway.

When visiting Pansy at Osmond's Florence villa, Isabel admires the innocent beauty of her young friend. She is tempted to talk to the girl about Osmond. However, she decides this would not be ethical behavior in taking advantage of a young girl's innocence.

Isabel plans to travel further in Europe with her aunt. Osmond cleverly aligns himself with her values, not trying to tie her down through marriage but instead encouraging Isabel to follow her passions. If Osmond instead directly proposed marriage, as did Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton in their attempts to secure Isabel, it is likely she would immediately reject him as a suitor.



Osmond makes an unexpected declaration of love for Isabel, but again he refrains from directly proposing marriage. Osmond's claim that Isabel will always be "the most important woman in the world" to him calls into question his ethics, for his daughter Pansy should take priority.



Isabel is panicked by Osmond's declaration, but does not reject him outright as she had Goodwood and Lord Warburton. Osmond cleverly entreats Isabel to visit Pansy in Florence, likely hoping that his daughter's sweet nature will encourage Isabel to consider marrying him.



Again, Osmond acts cunningly by leaving Isabel alone to consider his words. His actions oppose the forceful Goodwood and Lord Warburton, who pressured Isabel in their desires to the point that she needed to order them away from her. Isabel has been happy to indulge in her imagination regarding Osmond and fails to see what is present before her very eyes.



Isabel again misses the warning sign that Madame Merle does not have her best interests at heart, for the older woman advises Isabel to act against social propriety.



Isabel keeps her promise to Osmond and visits Pansy; she has taken an enormous liking to the girl. Her consideration of Pansy's involvement in her relationship with Osmond is characteristic of the kindness that Isabel will show Pansy as her future stepmother.



Pansy shares a personal concern with Isabel, thinking that Osmond has brought her home from the convent to save money for the young girl's dowry—this is what happened to another friend of Pansy's at the convent. As Isabel leaves Osmond's Florence villa, Pansy wants to know when she will return for her next visit. Isabel thinks it will not be "for a long time."

Pansy reveals her affection for Isabel by opening up about a personal fear. Until this moment Pansy has been a one-dimensional character who only responds to the desires of those around her. Pansy's motherless vulnerability perhaps encourages Isabel to consider Gilbert Osmond as a potential husband.



CHAPTER 31

The narrative skips forward by a year. Isabel has returned to Florence, having been away for several months. She has been traveling Europe with her eldest sister, Lilian; the two have visited exotic locations such as Greece and Egypt, soaking in new cultures.

Isabel has been able to indulge in her desire for personal development through European and even African travels. Lilian is shown to be another American woman who is keen to partake in the trend to cross the Atlantic to soak up exotic cultures.



Although Isabel is currently sitting beside a window at Mrs. Touchett's house, waiting for someone, the narrator flashes back to some of the events of Isabel's recent travels. Isabel had also invited Madame Merle to travel with her and Lilian. After spending three months with her friend, Isabel feels that she has even closer bonds with Madame Merle despite their previously strong friendship. Merle has even related some of her history with her deceased husband to Isabel, revealing that he was a selfish and manipulative character who took advantage of her youth.

Isabel is thrilled to have bonded even more closely with Madame Merle, a woman who Isabel believes embodies the best of European sophistication and elegance. Isabel likely aspires to grow into a figure like Merle, despite Merle's earlier assertions that her life is superficial.



During their time together, Isabel does realize that she and Madame Merle have different ethical codes. Isabel presumes that her own is superior, describing Merle's as "values gone wrong." The narrator also observes that Isabel's imagination is just as active as ever.

Isabel's presumption again demonstrates that arrogance accompanies her independent spirit. She admires Merle and defends Merle's sometimes questionable moral qualities as good principles that have simply "gone wrong."



Upon her return to Italy, Isabel goes to Rome to stay with Madame Merle. There Gilbert Osmond calls upon her each day over a three-week period. In April, Isabel goes back to Mrs. Touchett's house in Florence. She hopes to meet Ralph there upon his expected return from Corfu.

Osmond demonstrates his commitment to Isabel and she allows his daily visits with the knowledge of his feelings for her.



CHAPTER 32

While waiting in the house for the visitor, Isabel reflects on how much she has changed from the “frivolous young woman she was in Albany and Gardencourt.” Her visitor then arrives: it is Caspar Goodwood. He is upset and talks with forceful determination, explaining that he came to her as quickly as possible after receiving her letter informing her that she has accepted a marriage proposal from Gilbert Osmond. Isabel tells him that she wishes he hadn’t come at all.

The two have a heated discussion, both angry at one another—Goodwood upset at her betrayal, Isabel frustrated at his assumed possession of her and his response to her news.

Isabel then changes tack and asks Goodwood if he has recently been in contact with Henrietta Stackpole. He states he has, although he has not passed on the news of Isabel’s engagement to her. Isabel admits that Henrietta dislikes Osmond. She admits to marrying a “nobody,” but declares that she is not marrying for the favor of her friends.

Goodwood asks Isabel for some details about Osmond and their upcoming wedding. Isabel is almost aggrieved by the control he now demonstrates over his intense feelings, perhaps expecting him to show more passion for her. However, she is also upset at the pain she can see him trying to hide.

Goodwood states that he came to Florence to demand Isabel’s rationale for getting married, when she had once promised him that she likely never would. He admits he would prefer her to marry no one if she will not marry him. Goodwood takes his leave without bidding Isabel goodbye, intending to depart from Florence the next day. Although Isabel responds that she is “delighted” to hear that Goodwood is leaving, she breaks down in tears shortly after he leaves.

The news that Isabel is to be married to Gilbert Osmond is as much of a surprise to readers as it is to Goodwood. The story has skipped the scenes detailing Isabel and Osmond’s continued courtship and agreement to marriage, leaving readers with the aftermath of Isabel’s foolish choice. Isabel may consider herself greatly developed compared to her time at Gardencourt, but this is another example of her imagination leading her into danger; namely, the risk of Osmond marrying Isabel for her money.



Goodwood and Isabel’s interactions are always heated, perhaps another sign that Isabel finds herself greatly attracted to him.



Isabel is wary of her friends’ responses to news of her engagement, as she recognizes that it is a seemingly disadvantageous match for her to marry the inauspicious Osmond. However, Isabel states she is content in the knowledge that she is marrying for herself and no one else.



Isabel again demonstrates her fickle character—she does not want Goodwood to romantically care for her, yet she desires his passionate attentions. She is also upset at causing him pain, having previously stated that one of her greatest fears is hurting others.



As per his American New World candor, Goodwood is shockingly honest in his preference for Isabel to refrain from marrying at all if she will not marry him. Isabel’s “delighted” response at his departure from Florence is revealed as false bravado. In an echo of their previous encounter in London, she breaks down in emotional turmoil after Goodwood leaves her. This time, Goodwood chooses to leave Isabel rather than Isabel turning him away.



CHAPTER 33

An hour later, Isabel has ceased her weeping. She means to share the news of her engagement to Gilbert Osmond with Mrs. Touchett, although she expects that there will be a scene when she does. Isabel had waited to tell her family until after she spoke with Goodwood, feeling obliged to hear his objections before informing everyone else of her impending marriage.

Isabel is surprised to find out that Mrs. Touchett already has some inkling of the engagement. In fact, Mrs. Touchett has realized that Madame Merle played her friend for a fool, convincing her that she would dissuade Osmond's interest in Isabel when really Merle was encouraging it. Mrs. Touchett refers to Isabel's fiancé as "Madame Merle's friend" because she has done him a great favor in intentionally setting him up with Isabel. Isabel does not believe her aunt's accusation that Merle was involved in Osmond and Isabel's courtship.

Mrs. Touchett cannot understand why Isabel wants to marry Gilbert Osmond when he has no conventional marital advantages: no name, status, or wealth. She wonders if Isabel is marrying the man out of charity. Indeed, Isabel suggests that she wants to give her husband-to-be some of her money immediately. At Mrs. Touchett's continued objections to the man, Isabel asserts that she need not explain her decision to her aunt.

Two days later, Ralph arrives to Florence. He does not mention his cousin's engagement, despite Isabel knowing that he has heard of it. In fact, his mother had shared the shocking news with him immediately. Ralph is "humiliated" by his poor judgment in having previously concluded that Isabel would never seriously consider Osmond's courtship. He is devastated that she is now lost to him forever.

Isabel grows impatient at Ralph's lack of a response to her engagement to Osmond. She knows that he is likely to be disappointed at her choice of husband. However, she is also respectful of his poor health, for he has arrived to Florence looking extremely sickly.

Isabel occupies her time with meeting Osmond in different places around the city each day. With their engagement now common news, they are free to meet in public.

Isabel's decision to tell Goodwood about her engagement before her family demonstrates the high regard that Isabel holds for the businessman. She now commits herself to telling the Touchetts that she is engaged, but dreads their reactions.



Mrs. Touchett has been betrayed on two counts: firstly, her niece has decided on a poor choice of marriage despite her aunt's disapproval, and secondly, it is Mrs. Touchett's own friend Madame Merle who helped to engineer the match.



Isabel is unable to clearly explain her reasons for marrying Osmond to her aunt. Mrs. Touchett suspects Osmond is marrying Isabel for her wealth, a suspicion that is heightened when she learns that Isabel wants to give him money now. In Victorian times, a man should provide for his family, but in this case, Osmond lives an idle life focused on producing art of little value.



Ralph's usually good sense of character has failed him, for he has judged the situation with Isabel and Osmond completely wrong. The fact that he is "humiliated" by his error likely stems from his additional strong romantic feelings for Isabel.



Isabel's close friendship with Ralph means that she hopes to have his blessing for her marriage to Osmond, although she is not expecting Ralph's easy endorsement.



One of the reasons Isabel is attracted to Osmond is his European sophistication, as the engaged pair meet in romantic places throughout Florence.



CHAPTER 34

One day, after returning from a meeting with Osmond, Isabel chances upon Ralph in the garden of his mother's home. He appears to be sleeping; Isabel finds the scene to be a visual delight. However, her growing frustrations at Ralph's lack of refusal to discuss her engagement stirs her anger. She keeps reminding herself of his frail physical health.

As Isabel approaches Ralph in the garden, he stirs and comments that was just thinking of her at that moment. To Isabel's great relief, they finally discuss her engagement. Ralph states that he cannot share his feelings about her engagement to Osmond unless she breaks it off; otherwise he will be speaking rudely of her husband, which is socially unacceptable. This comment alone irritates Isabel.

Ralph does go on to speak his true feelings on the engagement. He trusts Isabel but he does not trust Osmond. Ralph believes that Osmond is a "small" man who has trapped Isabel into an unfavorable marriage, which Ralph likens to a "cage." Isabel responds that there is no danger if she likes the cage. She thinks that her cousin's criticism of Osmond as "small" is unfounded.

Ralph also reveals that he thought that Isabel would "marry a man of more importance." All that Osmond has going for him is his taste; on the whole, he is an idle man with no prospects. He describes Isabel as having been a beautiful creature of flight who has now "fallen" to the ground. Isabel is confused by his impression of her.

Finally, Ralph accidentally admits that he has secretly always loved Isabel. Isabel is shocked and angry at this revelation. Realizing his error, Ralph tells Isabel that he knows there is no hope for them; because of his illness, he has always refused any thoughts of pursuing her.

Isabel defends her relationship with Osmond, finding herself wholly attracted to her fiancé and his values. She finds Osmond's lack of importance attractive. She is also fascinated by her husband's apparent worldliness and sophistication.

Isabel finds it difficult to check her headstrong opinions around Ralph, for she is used to frank conversations with her cousin.



Isabel and Ralph finally re-connect in meaningful conversation in the garden, which reminds readers of Gardencourt, the Touchett family estate where both cousins feel comfortable and at peace. Ralph's courteous English mannerisms at first prevent him from speaking poorly of Isabel's fiancé.



Ralph does go on to voice his low opinion of Osmond, with his description of Isabel's fiancé as "small" suggesting he believes Osmond is an unimportant individual who will make an inadequate husband. In fact, he believes that Osmond has trapped Isabel in a relationship.



Ralph reiterates Osmond's inadequacy, particularly criticizing the man's lack of productive activity (perhaps a bit rich, coming from the idle Ralph, although he is dealing with a terminal illness). Having likened Isabel to a "caged" animal, he now compares her to a "fallen" creature of flight; her unique spirit has been brought down to an unexceptional level.



Isabel is upset at the admission that her beloved cousin is now another man on a list of suitors she did not want.



Isabel is more persuasive in her conviction to marry Osmond compared to when she previously tried to justify her actions to Mrs. Touchett. Unfortunately, she will come to learn that Osmond's supposedly admirable principles are a farce; he lives for himself and his art only and has married Isabel for her wealth.



Ralph realizes that he cannot change Isabel's mind. He believes that she has wrongly invested her time and emotion in Osmond because the man wears "his very poverties dressed out as honors." Ralph is sickened by his sudden understanding that he has facilitated Isabel's mistake by convincing his father to leave her a great fortune, thereby attracting the attention of a social predator such as Osmond.

Isabel is firm in her conviction to marry Osmond. Ralph feels terrible for her situation but knows he is too late to do anything about it. Isabel says that she no longer trusts her cousin and that she will never come to him in future if she is in fact in real trouble.

CHAPTER 35

Osmond and Isabel take another walk together. Isabel feels somewhat isolated in her family and friends' disapproval of her engagement. For example, she believes that her sisters, Lilian and Edith, have only written to her out of a sense of duty, wondering why their sister has not picked a more traditionally suitable husband. Isabel also tells herself that she does not care about Mrs. Touchett and Ralph's strong objections to her engagement. In fact, she decides that she is even more adamant in her decision to marry Osmond, again reminding herself that she marries for her own desire and not the satisfaction of others.

Meanwhile, Osmond is experiencing an elated sense of achievement at having successfully charmed Isabel into marrying him. He knows that he will profit greatly from his marriage to the young woman: in fortune, and in the way that appreciates Isabel's original spirit. He compares her to a "silver plate" that reflects his own ideas back at him in an even better form. Despite his good spirits, he never forgets himself by stepping out of the character he has built up for her. Osmond is aware of others' objections to their engagement, although Isabel never mentions them to him. He tries to allay any concerns by reminding Isabel that he has never cared for money and will not start doing so now. Of course, his scheming with Madame Merle to win Isabel's hand in marriage proves otherwise, but his future wife remains unaware of his true character.

Isabel and Osmond plan for the future, deciding to reside in Italy together. Isabel is buoyed by the thought that she is giving back to the world by marrying Osmond and enabling his noble ideas to come to fruition.

Ralph realizes the enormity of his actions in enacting Isabel's downfall. He rightly guesses that Isabel has accepted Osmond's hand in marriage because she believes she will have power in their relationship to enact her will and to fund Osmond's seemingly noble yet largely moneyless lifestyle.



A huge rift develops between the cousins, with Isabel devastated by Ralph's refusal to endorse her engagement, while Ralph is furious at Isabel's resolute intent to undertake a disadvantageous marriage.



Isabel's unyielding personality results in her hardened resolve to see through a marriage that her family and friends disapprove of. She is blind to the truth of Osmond's nature, ignoring her family members' warnings that he is dangerous. Although she tries to deflect her family's disapproval, it is clear that it makes her unhappy.



Osmond is first and foremost marrying Isabel for her fortune. However, he has also come to care for her personality, specifically appreciating the way that her fine qualities reflect well on Osmond himself. His overpowering ego compares her to a valuable object for him to collect; his comparison of Isabel to a "silver plate" echoes her ability to reflect Osmond's image in a good light. In order to secure their marriage, Osmond blatantly lies to Isabel that he does not want her inheritance. His narcissistic and immoral actions reflect the worst of European Old World decadent behaviors.



Isabel again comforts herself with her imagined ideas of all of the good she can do in financing Osmond's seemingly principled values and artistic taste.



Osmond brings Pansy to see Isabel; he still treats her as a small child, despite her now being sixteen years old. Pansy is delighted at the news of her father's engagement to Isabel. She believes that they suit each other wonderfully, both being "quiet and so serious." Isabel promises that she will always be a kind stepmother to Pansy.

The Countess Gemini reacts quite differently to the news of her brother Osmond's engagement. She tells Isabel directly that she is pleased for herself that Isabel will marry Osmond, as it means she will be closer to Isabel, whom she admires greatly. However, the Countess thinks that Isabel is far too brilliant to marry into their "fallen" family. She also thinks of marriage as an oppressive institution in general, not even caring that Pansy can hear her when she describes marriage as an "awful steel trap" full of "horrors."

Strangely, the Countess Gemini suggests that Isabel will shortly see the truth of Osmond, and that if Isabel is strong enough, then the Countess will one day tell her all about her brother. When the Countess Gemini seems intent on telling Isabel of her brother's ills at once, instructing Pansy to leave the room, Isabel begs the girl to stay so that she cannot hear the apparently awful tales that the Countess has to share about Osmond.

CHAPTER 36

Skipping forward some time, it is now the autumn of 1876. Edward Rosier, the art collector who is also Isabel's childhood friend, arrives to visit Madame Merle in Rome. Over the summer he met Pansy and fell in love with her immediately. He views her as a "consummate piece" and hopes that Merle will advocate on his behalf with Gilbert Osmond for Pansy's hand in marriage, knowing that Merle has influence over Osmond as a family friend.

Madame Merle questions Rosier about his financial means and prospects. At times she ridicules his naïve grasp on financial matters. He earns 40,000 francs a year, which Merle doesn't seem to think he could live on comfortably with a wife. She suggests that although Isabel has wealth, she may keep it for her own children rather than sharing it with Pansy. Merle reveals that Isabel had a son with Osmond two years ago, but the child died at the young age of six months. She also hints at trouble in Osmond and Isabel's relationship, suggesting that they disagree on everything.

Pansy is likely an additional reason that Isabel has agreed to marry the cunning Osmond, as Isabel recognizes the (apparently) motherless girl's vulnerability.



The Countess echoes Ralph's claims that Isabel will "fall" if she marries Osmond. The Countess has previously revealed to Madame Merle that Osmond is far too wicked an individual to marry the kindly Isabel; she is wary of her brother's true narcissistic nature. Furthermore, the Countess builds on Ralph's description of Isabel's upcoming marriage as a trap that will limit her personal liberty, for the Countess has experienced terrible restrictions in her own unhappy marriage.



Isabel wilfully prevents the Countess from describing Osmond's dangerous faults; Isabel vainly seems to be unable to consider the possibility that she is truly marrying a terrible man who desires her money more than her love.



Edward Rosier falls into the novel's pattern of men treating women as desirable objects for their collections. Like Osmond and Ralph, Rosier is an art collector himself, which gives the analogy more weight. He thinks of Pansy as the "consummate" or perfect piece that he must add to his collection. His opinion of Pansy as the perfect woman and art piece echoes Osmond's previous descriptions of Pansy as the perfect daughter.



Madame Merle gives some detail as to Isabel's current state; readers are not surprised to learn that there is tension with her husband, Osmond. Merle's protectiveness over her daughter Pansy (the relationship still a secret to Pansy and society at large) sees her ascertain Rosier's value as a potential husband able to provide for his family. She finds his financial status lacking, but nevertheless seems to encourage Rosier's interest in Pansy.



Next, Rosier goes to visit the Osmonds at their house in Rome. Mrs. Osmond (Isabel) regularly hosts Thursday night social gatherings, which create an opportunity for Rosier to mingle with Pansy. He is fairly certain that Isabel will be more sympathetic than Madame Merle to his cause in pursuing Pansy's hand in marriage.

Rosier describes the Osmonds' house in Rome. It is "a dark and massive structure" whose **architecture** reminds him of "a kind of domestic fortress." Rosier supposes that this doesn't bode well for his beloved Pansy to be living there. He knows that Osmond and Isabel purchased the house because of its "local character," and that Mr. Osmond has been able to add greatly to his art collection since his marriage to Isabel. Rosier ends his musings by entering the house, eagerly looking for Pansy.

CHAPTER 37

Rosier bumps into Osmond before he finds Pansy. Showing a lack of social wiles, Rosier asks Osmond if he would be willing to sell some of his collection when he learns that Osmond has lost interest in ornaments. However, Osmond tells Rosier that he is "not thinking of parting with anything at all."

Rosier takes his leave of Osmond, coming across Isabel in the adjoining room. She is dressed in a beautiful black velvet dress and framed in a gilded and "deep" **doorway**, creating a splendid image. Rosier also notices that she has developed a patience and sophistication during her marriage.

Isabel helps Rosier to unobtrusively meet with Pansy at the party. Pansy has developed into a pretty nineteen-year-old young lady. Rosier asks if Pansy can show him a particular room, where he tells her that he has come to the party with the specific goal of meeting with her. He also manages to get Pansy to admit that she likes Rosier too, although she is concerned that her father, Osmond, might know.

Rosier believes that Isabel's kindness and their long-time friendship will help him win Pansy's affections. Interestingly, Isabel has started to host regular parties reminiscent of Mrs. Luce's social events in Paris; Isabel previously scorned the ridiculous wealth of such parties. That was before she inherited a small fortune, which has clearly influenced her personal values.



Isabel and Osmond live in a new house in Rome. Like Osmond's previous villa in Florence, the building's architecture reflects its owners—it is "dark" and overbearing like Osmond, and seems to Rosier a "domestic fortress," a term that could be used to describe Isabel's entrapment in an unhappy marriage. Osmond's increased art collection suggests that he has used Isabel's money to finance his own passions.



As per the previous chapter, this one prioritizes Rosier's point of view. In a conversation rife with innuendo, Osmond tells Rosier he will not sell him any of his art collection while more importantly suggesting that he will not allow Rosier to pursue Pansy's affections.



The image of Isabel, dressed in black and framed like a portrait in a doorway, echoes Isabel's first scene in the novel where she makes an impact framed in a Gardencourt doorway. The changes in situation are subtle; Isabel's dress is now described as velvet, a luxurious material that signals her increased wealth. Here, also, the doorway is "gilded" which suggests a birdcage that has trapped Isabel, matching up with Ralph's previous comparisons of Isabel to a trapped and fallen creature of flight in her relationship with Osmond.



Isabel's aiding Rosier to connect with Pansy suggests that she approves of the match between the two young adults. Unlike Madame Merle, it is clear that Isabel values marriage for love rather than social gain.



Madame Merle arrives to the party and speaks with Osmond. He reveals he was intentionally rude to Rosier, because the young art collector is not the right match for Pansy. Merle suggests that they keep Rosier around in case he is useful, appeasing Osmond's objections by revealing that Rosier promised Merle he would not yet reveal his feelings to Pansy.

Osmond feels similarly to Madame Merle in that Pansy should marry a man who holds significant social status and wealth. Clearly, Osmond and Merle are also still in collusion as they scheme for increased advantage for their secret family.



Pansy enters the room, trailed by Rosier. Madame Merle is immediately proved wrong—it is clear that Rosier has announced his feelings to Pansy. Osmond is angry and tells Merle scathingly that she should be “horsewhipped.”

Osmond's treating Madame Merle as an animal to be punished indicates his view of women as objects to cater to men's desires. This contradicts the growing movement in America toward female equality, as represented most strongly by the career-driven Henrietta Stackpole.



Madame Merle approaches Rosier to communicate her disappointment that he has broken her promise. Rosier then speaks to Isabel, worried that he is not good enough—specifically, that he is not wealthy enough—to gain Pansy's hand in marriage. Isabel confirms that Gilbert Osmond desires Pansy to marry a wealthy man, and that she wants to help Rosier and Pansy get engaged, but that she simply “can't.”

Isabel likely feels that she “can't” do more to help Rosier and Pansy marry one another because she is morally obliged to support her husband's values; it is clear that Osmond does not approve of Rosier.



CHAPTER 38

Edward Rosier visits Madame Merle the next day and is surprised that she forgives him so easily for breaking his promise to her. She advises Rosier that he must be patient and his chance could arise to marry Pansy. She also suggests that the young man refrains from visiting her house regularly.

Again, Rosier's point of view is offered rather than Isabel's own. It is unclear why Madame Merle encourages Rosier's pursuit of Pansy when she disapproves of Rosier as a suitor due to his lack of wealth. Merle is also conscious of her image and does not want her peers to suggest that there is a scandalous relationship occurring between Merle and Rosier, thereby warning him to stop visiting her so regularly.



After skipping one of Isabel's Thursday evening events, Rosier attends the next one. He talks with Osmond again, who advises that his daughter, Pansy, does not love or even care for Rosier in the slightest.

Osmond continues to treat Pansy as a voiceless possession, speaking on her behalf and misrepresenting his desires as her will.



Rosier seeks out Isabel once more to discuss his predicament. She secretly assures him that Pansy still returns his romantic feelings. During their conversation, Lord Warburton arrives to speak to Isabel. The nobleman tells her that Ralph has accompanied him to Rome, but is too tired to leave their hotel rooms. In fact, Ralph's health has declined again. Isabel vows to see Ralph the next morning.

Isabel's secretive behavior implies that she does not want her husband to know she is encouraging Rosier and Pansy's relationship. Notably, this is the first time readers see Lord Warburton since Isabel became engaged to Osmond.



Having not seen Lord Warburton since she has been married—in fact it has been four years since their last encounter—Isabel is impressed that he seems to bear no ill will against her. Warburton enquires after her happiness, with Isabel not giving an honest answer. He says that he may himself still marry at some point in his life. Warburton then points out the “charming face” of a young lady nearby. Isabel tells him that it is her stepdaughter, Pansy, and that she will introduce them.

Meanwhile, Edward Rosier asks Pansy if her feelings toward him have changed. She answers truthfully that they have not, but Osmond has forbidden her from speaking to Rosier. She plans to ask the fearless Isabel to help her change her father’s mind and asks Rosier to be patient. Isabel interrupts the conversation, bringing over Lord Warburton to introduce him to Pansy.

CHAPTER 39

The narrator shifts to the topic of Ralph and Isabel’s relationship, explaining that Ralph never spoke to Isabel about his objections to Gilbert Osmond again. He suspects that his voiced objections to Isabel about her husband means that the cousins can never be friends again. Consequently, Ralph has barely seen Isabel since she got married. He reflects on her wedding, a quiet and simple affair at a small American chapel with Ralph, his mother, Pansy, and the Countess Gemini in attendance. Madame Merle sent her apologies, unable to leave Rome, and Isabel’s friend Henrietta Stackpole was not invited. In fact, Henrietta wrote forcefully to Isabel stating that if invited, she would have attended to witness the marriage and to criticize it.

Upon meeting Isabel again after Lord Warburton’s entry to her Thursday evening party, Ralph realizes he should not have given up on Isabel’s friendship so easily. He “had played the wrong card” and “lost the game,” and Isabel now “always wears a mask” around him. Ralph is also keenly aware of Isabel’s change in disposition; she is no longer a curious, spirited, and carefree young woman, but instead an indifferent married lady who has a “fixed and mechanical” serenity permanently painted on her face. The relationship between the cousins is now stilted and formal. Ralph concludes that Isabel no longer represents freedom—she represents her husband. He also concludes that Osmond is a man who has pretended to live by admirable values, but this was always a façade. Instead Osmond lives for admiration from others and his resulting feelings of superiority.

Isabel, who always used to speak her mind, finds herself lying about her happiness in marriage. This may be to save face despite the obvious reality that she has made a poor choice in husband, or because she does not want to invite her previous suitor, Lord Warburton, to take too much of an interest in her wellbeing.



This is the first time in the novel that Pansy shows any real individuality and spirit, proving she is no longer obedient to her father’s every wish as when she was a girl.



Isabel’s state of mind is still denied from the reader, with Ralph now relating his version of events throughout this chapter. Ralph has largely removed himself from Isabel’s life since her marriage to Osmond, believing that his dislike of Osmond means Isabel will not want to see her cousin regularly if at all. Henrietta has also voiced her displeasure at Isabel’s choice of husband.



Ralph is shocked by the change that marriage has brought about for Isabel. In his foolish treatment of Isabel as an experiment to be set free on Europe with newfound wealth, Ralph has made a huge mistake. Isabel now resembles Osmond more than her old free-spirited self; indeed, she wears a mask as her husband did when courting her. Ralph laments the loss of the natural and carefree Isabel into this careful lady who is “mechanical” in her behaviors, likely calculating how she can best hide her unhappiness from the world while abiding by her new marriage’s responsibilities. Osmond, meanwhile, has dropped his mask since marriage and is revealed as wicked man that the Countess Gemini had previously alluded to.



Osmond has never considered Ralph as a threat. However, once when Ralph overstayed his welcome in Rome, Isabel's husband protested. Ralph left so he wouldn't cause further trouble between the couple. This time, Ralph decides to stay in Rome instead of moving on to visit Sicily as intended. He suggests he may have to defend his cousin from her husband's arguments.

Later, Ralph asks Lord Warburton how his relationship with Pansy is developing. Ralph wonders if the nobleman is interested in getting close to Pansy merely so that he is also nearer to Isabel. Warburton is angry at Ralph's assumption. But the nobleman does wonder what Isabel will think of his interest in Pansy.

CHAPTER 40

During her three years of marriage, Isabel has had ample time to consider her family and friends' previous warnings about getting involved with Osmond. She has particularly reflected on Mrs. Touchett's accusation that Madame Merle orchestrated the union between Osmond and Isabel. Isabel thinks that even if Merle persuaded Osmond to pursue Isabel, she certainly wasn't able to influence Isabel into accepting Osmond's marriage proposal, that being Isabel's choice alone.

Interestingly, ever since their marriage, Madame Merle has separated herself from Osmond and Isabel. Isabel remembers that Merle once told her she did not want to seem overly familiar with Isabel's husband. Isabel decided long ago that she no longer admired Merle as a role model.

The narrator notes that Isabel and Pansy are rarely apart. One day, one month after Ralph and Lord Warburton have returned to Rome, Isabel and Pansy return to their home from a walk together. When Pansy retires upstairs, Isabel is surprised to see that Madame Merle is visiting the Osmond residence in Rome. She is greatly shocked that Merle is standing in the drawing room while Osmond remains seated, a breakdown in social convention that demonstrates the pair's over-familiarity—the host should always remain standing until his guest is seated. Isabel also notices that there is too familiar a silence between the two. Osmond leaps to his feet when he realizes Isabel is present.

Ralph is so affected by Isabel's changed persona that he resolves to stay in Rome to defend Isabel's happiness, becoming an obstacle that Osmond will have to negotiate.



It is difficult to know whether Lord Warburton is truly attracted to Pansy, or if he merely wants to use her to get closer to the married Isabel.



Isabel has reconciled herself to the fact that her family's previous advice was correct and her decision to marry Osmond was a poor one. However, she is unwilling to believe Madame Merle's involvement in orchestrating the marriage because of her self-important certainty that she made the decision to marry of her own volition.



Isabel is not aware of the extent of Madame Merle's betrayal in setting her up for an unhappy marriage, but she has recognized that Merle is not an admirable role model. Marriage has certainly opened Isabel up to the realities of her situation and some of the truths in the world around her.



Finally, Isabel becomes aware that there is something more than friendship between Osmond and Madame Merle. Osmond realizes his social indiscretion immediately, hastily jumping away from his over-familiar position with Merle. A man sitting in the presence of a woman who is not his wife may not seem unusual in modern times, but in Victorian Europe this was a highly improper breach of etiquette.



Madame Merle explains that she is visiting for the sole purpose of discussing Edward Rosier's pursuit of Pansy's hand in marriage. She reveals that Rosier often visits her to request her help in facilitating the union. Merle asks if Isabel can speak to Pansy to see if she has real feelings for Rosier.

Madame Merle also states that Rosier is concerned at Lord Warburton's interest in Pansy. Merle favors the potential marriage for Pansy with Warburton as an advantageous one, which Isabel vaguely agrees with.

Madame Merle believes that Isabel holds significant influence over Lord Warburton and can encourage him to propose to Pansy; Isabel is surprised to learn that Madame Merle is aware of Warburton's prior marriage proposal to Isabel. Merle suggests that Isabel owes it to Lord Warburton to ensure he finds happiness in a marriage to Pansy, suggesting "reparations" are in order. Isabel is again vague in her answer, but Madame Merle is enthused by Isabel's response and "embraced her more tenderly than might be expected" before exiting the house.

CHAPTER 41

In truth, Isabel has to work hard to reconcile the thought of Pansy and Lord Warburton getting married. But she decides that she would be acting as a good parental figure if she promotes this more advantageous match, and therefore seems to experience a change in heart regarding the love match between Pansy and Edward Rosier, instead preferring Pansy to marry Lord Warburton as Madame Merle has suggested.

Isabel ignores her disbelief that Lord Warburton is truly interested in Pansy when the girl is such a different character from his previous love, Isabel herself. Isabel also hopes that Pansy's feelings for Rosier lack depth and that she can be persuaded to move on easily enough, although she knows deep down that this is likely not the case.

Madame Merle tries to explain her visit as one of concern for Pansy's welfare. In requesting Isabel to speak to Pansy to discern her true feelings for Rosier, Merle recognizes that Isabel holds the closest relationship with Pansy. There is perhaps some jealousy from Merle in this regard, although Isabel is of course unaware that Merle is Pansy's mother.



Madame Merle prefers Lord Warburton as a suitor for Pansy because he is wealthier and possesses greater social importance than Rosier.



Madame Merle has no qualms about using Lord Warburton's previous passionate feelings for Isabel to influence his courtship of Pansy. Isabel likely feels torn in duty, as by using her leverage over Lord Warburton to encourage his feelings for a woman who loves another man she steers Pansy away from a love match but toward a socially advantageous match.



Isabel remains torn about what role she should take as Pansy's stepmother, ultimately deciding that she should look out for Pansy's financial wellbeing more than her happiness.



Isabel shows that naivety is still a key character trait; she ignores the warning signs that Lord Warburton is interested in Pansy merely to be closer to Isabel.



Lord Warburton visits the Osmonds' house for one of Isabel's Thursday night parties. Isabel finds herself with the opportunity to leave Warburton and Pansy talking together alone, but cannot convince herself to carry out the act. Warburton ends up leaving the event without having been able to speak with Pansy alone.

After the party, Isabel sits alone in front of the fireplace. Osmond interrupts her quiet reflections to discuss Pansy's marriage options. Osmond is clear in his desire for Pansy to marry Lord Warburton, stating that she will always want to please her father and that she wants to be a great lady. He ignores Isabel's warning that Pansy had a great depth of feeling for Rosier.

Although Isabel expects a harsh rebuke from Osmond concerning her involvement (or lack of it) in shaping Pansy's future marriage, Osmond merely requests that Isabel help facilitate the match between Pansy and Lord Warburton. Osmond believes that Isabel still has the power to persuade Warburton to do whatever she pleases, offending Isabel when he alludes to the nobleman's previous passion for her.

CHAPTER 42

Isabel refrains from answering Osmond's rude request for her to influence Lord Warburton into marrying Pansy. After he leaves the room, she sits back into her chair and closes her eyes, "given up to her meditation."

A servant enters the room to stoke up the fire, with Isabel asking him to also bring candles. She then sits alone into the deep of the night, reflecting on her situation and the many choices that have led her here. She questions whether Lord Warburton still desires her and admires her beyond all other women; if so, is it possible that he would marry Pansy to please Isabel? Isabel admits to herself that she is sickened by the idea of Pansy marrying Warburton. She resolves to wait on action by seeing whether Warburton is truly invested in Pansy. She reasons that he cannot realistically be in love with two women at one time.

Isabel may not have followed through on her conviction to encourage Lord Warburton and Pansy's relationship because she knows that Pansy is in love with Rosier. Or, just as likely, Isabel wants Lord Warburton's attentions remain fixed on herself, not Pansy, even though Isabel would never act on such desires as a married woman.



Osmond is controlling and possessive. He is confident in his own opinion, ignoring Isabel's. Isabel was previously used to men such as Mr. Touchett, Ralph, Lord Warburton, and Caspar Goodwood paying high regard to her opinion and it must cause her much unhappiness for Osmond to treat her as a person of no importance.



It is unclear why Osmond asks rather than commands Isabel to keep encouraging Lord Warburton's affections for Pansy. Perhaps he knows that Isabel is lately questioning her resolve to remain loyal to her husband's desires.



Isabel refrains from open conflict with Osmond, perhaps trying to abide by her marital promise to obey him as his wife. Osmond's exit now sets the scene for the climax of the novel, surprisingly consisting of Isabel's "meditation" rather than action.



Isabel's inner thoughts are complex and crowded. Firstly, she experiences another about-face in her opinion on how to support Pansy in finding a husband, deciding that she cannot encourage Lord Warburton as Pansy's potential husband after all. Her decision seems to rest on her accepting the realization that Warburton is still in love with Isabel, a problem that she seems to somewhat enjoy.



Still seated before the fire, Isabel's thoughts turn to Osmond and Madame Merle's strange familiarity earlier that day. She had never known that the two kept in touch, for Madame Merle rarely visited the Osmonds. Isabel considers the way that her husband spoils everything around him; she was blind to his vices during their courtship, and tried to ignore his weaknesses during their first year of marriage, but now she sees "the whole man."

Isabel comes to realize that Mr. Touchett's gift of a significant fortune has been a burden that has ruined her life. Her naïve idealism led her to marry Osmond so that she could fund the apparently noble pursuits of "the man with the best taste in the world." However, Osmond's apparent taste and moral values were a mask. Isabel wishes she had realized her folly in marrying Osmond when he chastised her during their courtship as having too many foolish ideas.

Isabel thinks that living with Osmond is like living in "a house of darkness [and] [...] suffocation." His selfishness and arrogance crush her independence. He dislikes most of society, but relies on society to build up his self image. He is also petty of spirit; for example, he hasn't spoken to his wife for a week, likely because he is angry that Isabel has been visiting Ralph regularly.

Isabel remembers fondly her recent visit to Ralph. Her cousin has become a pillar for her again, as she relies on his friendship greatly, feeling as though he is like a brother to her. However, she never reveals her deep unhappiness in her marriage to him.

Isabel's intense internal reflections have reached a climactic frenzy; she stews quietly in front of the fire until four in the morning, when she finally retires to bed. Her last thoughts are of the strange interactions between Osmond and Madame Merle earlier that day.

Isabel also acknowledges her own deep faults in marrying Osmond despite the obvious signs they were not a good match. She is resigned to the truth of his "small" character now that she can clearly see the flaws that were previously hidden under a façade of European sophistication and elegance.



Even more significantly, Isabel admits to herself that her inheritance has been her downfall. Her grand idea to finance Osmond's noble artistic pursuits was in fact a selfish desire to ensure her money was used to enable great ideas in the world. In a way, Isabel did marry for financial reasons; however, this was not to improve her own wealth, but to ensure her new money was used for an admirable purpose.



Isabel feels that Osmond has trapped her and now smothers the identity and life out of her. James reveals Osmond is a man who embodies the worst of European Old World values: he fakes sophistication while harboring meaningless traditions and tastes. He has furthermore tricked Isabel into an unhappy marriage in pursuit of money to finance his worthless lifestyle.



Despite their repaired relationship, Isabel refrains from telling Ralph of her unhappiness in marriage because she believes it to be a kindness in sparing his anguish for her. It is evident that Isabel holds herself to a strict code of ethics, despite her husband's total lack of moral integrity.



Isabel's rich inner discourse occurs for hours as she sits quietly; this was a very unusual literary technique for James to use and heralds the incoming modernist literary movement that similarly favored expressing ideas in new forms and styles.



CHAPTER 43

Three nights later, Isabel takes Pansy to a party. She has been holding Pansy's flowers for some time while her stepdaughter dances, when Edward Rosier approaches her. Pansy has denied him a dance, and, realizing that Isabel is holding Pansy's bouquet, he asks if he may hold the flowers or take one. However, Pansy is on her way back to Isabel's side and Isabel tells Rosier to leave. Pansy counts her flowers when Isabel hands the bouquet back.

Pansy returns to dancing and Lord Warburton comes to talk with Isabel. He asks after Pansy and then requests a dance with Isabel. She replies that she prefers he dance with Pansy, her concern growing that he still shows some interest in Isabel. Warburton states that he will talk with Isabel even though he'd prefer to dance with her.

Pansy returns to Isabel, and Lord Warburton engages the young woman in conversation. Isabel notices that he presents "a smile of chastened devotion" to her stepdaughter.

Pansy returns to dancing, having promised Lord Warburton a dance later. Isabel reminds Lord Warburton that he had previously indicated he would like to marry Pansy. He has not been in communication with Gilbert Osmond as promised on this count. Warburton admits that he wrote a letter to Osmond this morning, but has not yet sent it.

As Isabel and Lord Warburton walk together at the party, they pass a wholly dejected Edward Rosier who is watching Pansy from a doorway. Warburton comments on the other man's miserable demeanor, with Isabel revealing that Rosier is deeply in love with Pansy. In fact, Isabel suggests that Pansy would marry Rosier if not for Osmond's preference of Warburton as her suitor. Isabel is suspicious of her companion's lack of jealousy toward Rosier as his rival; he seems to pity the man. When she calls out Warburton on his unconvincing feelings for Pansy, the nobleman claims that he has strong reasons to be in love with Isabel's stepdaughter and wonders at her doubt.

Isabel and Lord Warburton exchange a short but intense look, which contains many enigmatic feelings. Isabel is concerned by the kernel of desire for her own self that she sees in Warburton's eyes. Isabel takes her leave from Lord Warburton after their strange moment of studying one another. She finds Rosier still staged miserably in the doorway. She gives him hope for a union with Pansy.

Pansy's eye for her flowers shows her care for Rosier, despite having denied him a dance (likely because she knows that her father would disapprove of their dancing together).



Isabel's theory that Lord Warburton shows interest in Pansy only to get closer to Isabel is born out in Warburton's desire to dance with Isabel. If he truly cares for Pansy and is no longer in love with Isabel, Warburton's sole focus should be on spending time with Pansy (as Rosier is).



Isabel is confused by Lord Warburton's sudden attentiveness to Pansy despite his previous concentrated attentions on Isabel.



Isabel acts on her vague promises to Osmond and Madame Merle to encourage Warburton to marry Pansy. In this regard she betrays her principles, as she is almost certain that Pansy does not care for Warburton romantically and that he is still in love with Isabel.



Isabel seems to engage Lord Warburton in a game of wits to catch him out and thereby ascertain his false interest in Pansy once and for all. Warburton's suggestion of the "strong reasons" behind his attraction to Pansy could very well allude to his desire to be closer to Isabel as Pansy's stepmother. If true, Warburton has truly fallen in moral integrity compared to the man Isabel knew at Gardencourt. His desires would also contradict the English aristocracy's strict codes of ethics and social conduct.



Isabel's intense shared eye contact with Lord Warburton is reminiscent of the moment shared by Isabel and Osmond after Osmond first revealed his feelings for her. James is increasingly matching Lord Warburton with Osmond in desires and behavior.



Half an hour later, Isabel is leaving the party with Pansy. Lord Warburton assists them both to their carriage, where Isabel reminds him to send his letter to Osmond.

Isabel once more tries to undertake what she believes is her parental duty to support Pansy by encouraging Lord Warburton to focus his attentions on the young woman.



CHAPTER 44

The Countess Gemini wishes to live in Rome, as her own home in Florence is unexciting, and accepts her brother Osmond's invitation to stay with his family for a period. The Countess Gemini is convinced that Isabel leads a more exciting life than her own, but she is not envious of her sister-in-law. Isabel, meanwhile, is slightly intimidated by the Countess but enjoys her company.

The Countess Gemini is not envious of Isabel, despite Isabel's exciting lifestyle, because the Countess knows that Osmond is a cruel man. She tried to warn Isabel before she was married, but Isabel did not want to hear about Osmond's flaws.



Before the Countess Gemini leaves for Rome, Henrietta Stackpole visits her in Florence for help. The Countess has helped the journalist once before regarding a newspaper article. Henrietta claims that Osmond has tried to break up her friendship with Isabel. The Countess Gemini is not surprised to hear this and encourages Henrietta not to allow Osmond to have his way.

Henrietta hopes to repair her friendship with Isabel, despite Henrietta's objections to Osmond and Osmond's subsequent obstruction of the women's friendship. It is likely that Osmond resents Henrietta's aversion to him and her efforts to free Isabel from the marriage. Henrietta's dogged pursuit of a relationship with Isabel is typical of her American New World fortitude.



Henrietta plans to visit Isabel in Rome to see if she can repair their friendship. The journalist is worried about Isabel because the tone of her letters has changed. The Countess Gemini, known as a great gossip, informs Henrietta that Lord Warburton is trying to get close to Isabel again. The Countess offers an idea for working out whether Isabel is truly unhappy in her marriage to Osmond, which Henrietta rejects as too complex. The Countess is impressed by Isabel's strength of friendships.

In her straightforward manner, Henrietta decides that the best way to check whether Isabel is alright is to simply visit Isabel in Rome.



While returning to her hotel in Florence, Henrietta leaves a note for Caspar Goodwood, who is also currently in the city. She asks that he visit her this evening. However, she accidentally bumps into him earlier than expected while looking at the "Correggio of the Tribune" (*The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child*) at the Uffizi, a painting that depicts the Madonna kneeling adoringly over the delighted Baby Christ. Goodwood is polite but disinterested in engaging with Henrietta. The journalist insists that he honor his friendship to Isabel by going to Rome to help her in her unhappy marriage. After some persuasion, Goodwood agrees, even if only from a sense of duty that if Henrietta is insistent on traveling to Rome, he must accompany her.

Despite Caspar Goodwood's reluctance at becoming involved in Isabel's life again, Henrietta is still certain that he is the right man for Isabel. Her powers of persuasion are quite remarkable. Henrietta and Goodwood's accidental meeting in front of the painting symbolic of Henrietta and Goodwood's relationships with Isabel—they adore Isabel in a similar manner to the scene played out in the painting. The artwork can also represent Isabel's relationship to Pansy, as the stepmother has come to adore her charge.



CHAPTER 45

Meanwhile, Isabel has continued to visit her unwell cousin, Ralph, at his hotel in Rome, despite Osmond's displeasure in her actions. Isabel is concerned that Osmond will go so far as to soon ban Isabel from visiting Ralph at all. Ralph is unable to leave Rome due to poor weather.

Isabel contemplates the extreme but plausible actions of breaking her marriage to Osmond, but realizes this option as being "odious and monstrous." Isabel asks Ralph if he believes that Lord Warburton is truly in love with Pansy. Ralph confirms that the nobleman is in love, but with Isabel rather than Pansy, even though the nobleman denies it to himself.

In her despair, Isabel emotionally cries out "Ah, Ralph, you give me no help!" Her cousin is both shocked and relieved by her acknowledgement that she needs his help. He feels that they have finally repaired their friendship and states "How unhappy you must be!" As soon as he speaks, though, Isabel retracts her emotion and claims that Lord Warburton should let Pansy and Edward Rosier pursue their love match. Ralph defends Warburton's good character, admitting that he would treat Pansy very well, although Ralph dislikes the thought of the two getting married.

Ralph is concerned that if he and Isabel could convince Lord Warburton to stop pursuing Pansy's hand in marriage, Osmond would retaliate by punishing Isabel for failing to persuade Warburton to marry Pansy.

As they continue their discussion, Ralph is disappointed that Isabel's mask has dropped back firmly into place. He offends Isabel in his desire to prove Osmond's ill character, and she leaves him to speak with Pansy.

Isabel seeks out Pansy and asks her stepdaughter how she feels about Lord Warburton. Isabel suggests that a father's advice is more important than one's own desires, but the usually obedient Pansy surprises Isabel by claiming that she would prefer Isabel's advice, for a lady can offer a girl better advice than a man can.

Isabel is bound by Victorian social duty to obey her husband's commands, which is why she fears he will ban her from seeing Ralph.



Although it would ensure her happiness, Isabel's consideration of leaving Osmond is an extreme and scandalous action by Victorian standards. Her unhappy marriage is further complicated by Ralph's confirmation that Lord Warburton is still in love with Isabel.



Isabel's fickle character is on show yet again, as she flips between entreating Ralph for help and closing him out. Ralph defends his friend Lord Warburton; in fact, Ralph has proven himself a stalwart friend to Isabel and Warburton—despite their turbulent history—throughout the story. This is another reason why he can be viewed as the novel's moral compass.



Ralph's love for Isabel means that he is constantly concerned for her wellbeing. His concern is intensified with the knowledge that Osmond is a wicked character and has the great power of a husband over Isabel.



Isabel is constantly misinterpreting her family and friends' concern; her self-conceit means that she often interprets their advice as criticisms.



For the second time in the story, Pansy shows surprising individuality and stands up for herself. Her reasoning is also sound and suggests Pansy has a sharp intellect.



Pansy then reveals to Isabel that her greatest desire in life is to marry Edward Rosier, for she loves him. Osmond's disapproval is the only thing that stops her. Isabel tries to be loyal to her husband and again encourages Pansy to obey her father's wishes; Pansy acknowledges that she can live without marrying Rosier but she will always love him.

Pansy demonstrates a strong will and a desire to follow her heart. Isabel, who privileged personal freedom so heavily before her marriage, disappoints readers by trying to encourage Pansy to obey her father's wishes.



Pansy seeks Isabel's advice on what to do if a man different to Rosier proposed to her. The young woman is crushed when Isabel hears herself advise the girl to accept such a proposal. Isabel speaks directly to Pansy about Lord Warburton's affection for her, outlining that he would propose immediately to Pansy if he knew she was interested in him. It is Osmond's great wish that Pansy encourages Warburton's affections.

Isabel once more shows her loyalty to Osmond and marriage's social responsibilities by advising Pansy to accept the marriage proposal. Pansy is devastated by this advice because it goes against her desires yet is coming from her role model.



Pansy surprises Isabel with her astute take on the situation: Lord Warburton has some affection for Pansy (although he does not love her), but knows from her behavior that she has no interest in him. Therefore, although Osmond desires the match, Warburton will never pursue it any further. Isabel encourages Pansy to share these revelations with her father, but Pansy is afraid to do so. Furthermore, Pansy knows that she benefits from Lord Warburton's pretending to humor her father's desire, because it means that Osmond is not trying to find other eligible suitors for Pansy.

Surprisingly, Pansy takes charge and explains the truth of the situation to Isabel. Pansy reveals she is an extremely intelligent, and even somewhat manipulative, character, for she uses Lord Warburton's feigned affections to her own advantage.



Isabel feels quite relieved after her talk with Pansy that clarifies the situation with Lord Warburton and Rosier. Isabel's final piece of advice for her stepdaughter is that Osmond expects her to marry a nobleman; Pansy, standing in an open doorway and drawing a curtain aside for Isabel to pass through, comments seriously that Edward Rosier looks like a nobleman.

Isabel's relief stems from the realization that her stepdaughter is intelligent enough to look after herself to a certain degree. Pansy, the apparently meek and mundane woman, has even shows a flash of humor when she compares Rosier to a nobleman.



CHAPTER 46

For the next four days, Lord Warburton does not visit the Osmond family home. Osmond notices his absence and asks Isabel about it. She reveals that Warburton promised to write to Osmond about his intentions regarding Pansy. Osmond still has not received any letters from the nobleman. He insults Isabel for the previous letters between Isabel and Lord Warburton during her time at Gardencourt. They argue, albeit politely, and Isabel informs her husband that he will have to write to Lord Warburton if he wants to, for she will not write for him. Osmond accuses Isabel of being disloyal to her husband.

Isabel and Osmond's marriage further deteriorates, with Osmond growing suspicious of Isabel's obedience to his wishes. Ironically, she has been very loyal to Osmond's desires. A little of the "old" Isabel shows when she instructs Osmond that he will have to write to Lord Warburton himself. She is beginning to rebel against the social convention that a woman must obey her husband's will.



Suddenly, Lord Warburton enters the room. He informs the Osmonds that he is departing for England, although he is sorry to have to leave Ralph. Osmond leaves the room, while Pansy enters to bid the nobleman goodbye. Lord Warburton advises her to be happy, for she has “a guardian angel” looking out for her well-being. Warburton leaves the house in a gentlemanly manner, at which Pansy tells Isabel that she considers Isabel to be her “guardian angel.”

When Osmond is alone with Isabel later that day, he accuses her again of being disloyal to him. Isabel is no longer hurt at his insults and bids him to lay out his complaint clearly to her. Osmond contends that she has intentionally foiled Pansy’s union with Lord Warburton. Although Isabel denies this and highlights the fact that Pansy never had any feelings for Warburton, Osmond is convinced at her betrayal. Isabel exclaims “Poor little Pansy!” before she walks away from Osmond.

CHAPTER 47

Three days pass. Henrietta Stackpole informs Isabel that Caspar Goodwood is currently in Rome. This brings up a lot of emotions for Isabel, who believes that Goodwood is the only person in the world that she has ever harmed unfairly. She realizes that she never treated Goodwood’s commitment to her with the fairness that he deserved. She is also hesitant to meet with Goodwood because she feels that she needs to sort out her own affairs before they meet.

Henrietta asks Isabel why she doesn’t leave Osmond due to their intensely unhappy marriage. Isabel says that she must live with her foolish decision to marry a cruel man who wanted her money more than her companionship; Henrietta cannot move her friend’s mind on the matter. However, Isabel realizes that the journalist is a true friend who has gone out of her way to check in on her due to genuine concern for Isabel.

After first checking with Isabel, Caspar Goodwood visits the Osmond family home. Isabel hopes that he is long over his passion for her. As per social duty, Isabel introduces Goodwood to Osmond. The two men surprise Isabel by getting on well together. When Osmond learns that the American businessman once eagerly pursued Isabel’s hand in marriage, he is surprised that Isabel did not accept. Goodwood becomes a regular guest at Isabel’s Thursday night parties.

Lord Warburton’s appearance and announcement are very abrupt. Clearly, Warburton still loves Isabel as he thinks of her with the highest regard.



Isabel has reached the point where she is no longer painfully upset at Osmond’s attacks on her character, because she no longer respects him. She pities Pansy for Osmond’s conviction that his daughter must marry Lord Warburton, and for Osmond’s cruel behavior in general.



Henrietta, the agent of action, has encouraged Caspar Goodwood to come to Rome and now informs Isabel of his presence. Isabel is greatly affected by this news because she has come to realize that she never treated Goodwood respectfully during his courtship.



Isabel finds it easier to admit her foolish decisions in marriage to Henrietta. She begins to realize how lucky she is to have friends like Ralph and Henrietta who, unlike her husband, genuinely care for her. Isabel reiterates her belief that she must abide by her decision to marry Osmond and honor the accompanying social responsibilities.



Osmond has now met both of Isabel’s previous suitors, Lord Warburton and Goodwood, and has not found issue with either man. In fact, as per the rest of Isabel’s peers, he is amazed that she did not agree to marry one of them because they are such fine characters with great wealth attached.



Isabel asks Goodwood to visit Ralph at his hotel. The American businessman obliges her request, finding that Henrietta is also there when he calls on Ralph. She has been visiting Ralph each day and the two have built up a solid, if combative, friendship.

Isabel is pleased and rather proud that Goodwood now also regularly visits Ralph, believing she has been “clever” in making Goodwood an unassuming caretaker for Ralph who can likely accompany her cousin northward when Ralph is ready to travel. One of Isabel’s greatest fears is that Ralph will die in Rome, knowing that he should instead rest easy in the comforts of his beloved Gardencourt. Like Ralph, Isabel has come to realize that Gardencourt is a precious place to her.

During this time of Henrietta and Goodwood visiting Rome, Isabel is frequented by strange nighttime dreams of Osmond and Madame Merle together. She is not sure what her imagination is trying to communicate to her. Osmond and Madame Merle are certainly not physically in one another’s company, for Merle is not currently in Rome.

CHAPTER 48

Near the end of February, Ralph decides it is time for him to return to England. He knows that his death is near, and he wants to pass away at his beloved home, Gardencourt. Henrietta offers to accompany him and care for him, as does Goodwood per his previous promise to Isabel. The businessman also believes he bores Isabel in Rome; he is also tired of seeing Isabel pretend to be happy in her marriage to Osmond.

Before leaving, Henrietta visits the Countess Gemini once more. The journalist tells the Countess that she was wrong in her belief that Isabel and Lord Warburton were enjoying an affair, with Warburton actually courting Pansy for a period of time. The Countess highlights that fact that no proposal from Warburton to Pansy eventuated.

Henrietta urges Isabel to leave Osmond before their relationship grows yet more dire. Isabel insists that she is confident in her own strength of identity and in weathering the ills of her husband.

Isabel attends to Ralph, who remains too unwell to travel. Goodwood’s agreement to visit Ralph shows his continued commitment to pleasing Isabel; it is likely he still loves her. Meanwhile, Ralph and Henrietta—individuals with values and attitudes that are worlds apart—have surprisingly built a solid friendship.



Despite her claims not to want to harm those around her, Isabel keeps Goodwood in Rome and influences him to take care of Ralph. She acts in good faith, trying to make the dying Ralph’s final days as comfortable and happy as possible. Isabel looks back on her time at Gardencourt with nostalgia.



Isabel has a pattern by which she refuses to consider the horrible realities of the world around her. Her conscience seems to be trying to communicate the truth of Osmond and Madame Merle’s strange relationship to Isabel through dreams.



Isabel has arranged for Goodwood to care for Ralph because she knows that Osmond will not allow her to travel to Gardencourt do so. At this stage, Isabel is still unwilling to disobey her husband.



Henrietta displays her honest nature by admitting her error to the Countess in her usual forthright manner. The Countess wisely notes that it is still likely that Lord Warburton does, in fact, love Isabel.



Isabel again refuses to leave Osmond due to the breach in social duty this would cause. She made a poor decision, but she believes that she made it free of her own will and will therefore bear the results stoically.



When Isabel visits Ralph before his departure for England, she admits that she is sometimes afraid of herself, but never afraid of Osmond. Her admission of unhappiness is accompanied by the confession that Ralph is her best friend and that she adores him. He responds that Isabel has given him life for far longer than he dared to hope.

Isabel instructs Ralph to send for her if he desires her company at Gardencourt. Ralph is concerned that Osmond will not allow such travel, but she promises she will come in spite of Osmond's likely objections.

Goodwood visits Isabel at her home, where Osmond talks to him about the increased harmony that Goodwood's presence has afforded his marriage. Osmond is exceedingly more personal in his conversation than usual, although Goodwood does not directly recognize it. Osmond exaggerates his and Isabel's solidarity and claims that he and Isabel can now view their future more clearly together. Osmond's comments confuse and anger Goodwood, but he reminds himself that Isabel's relationship with her husband is none of his business.

Osmond also paints Goodwood as the true version of a modern man, and suggests that he find purpose in life by finding a wife—"You ought to marry, then you'd have plenty to do!"

Having waited some time to see Isabel privately, Goodwood is able to tell her that he does not want to leave her in Rome. He is concerned about Osmond's oppressive character, despite Osmond having treated him elegantly while Goodwood has been in Rome. The narrator suggests that Goodwood goes so far as to wish Osmond dead, although Goodwood does not voice this desire aloud. Goodwood also asks Isabel if she is genuinely happy, for she conceals her true feelings from all of her family and friends. Overall, the man is frustrated by his inability to know the truth of Isabel's situation, declaring "I can't understand, I can't penetrate you!" He is sure that she is hiding something from him.

The cousins know that this is perhaps their final parting and wish one another well. Isabel and Ralph are frank in their adoration for each other; they have moved beyond the tension caused by Ralph's admission that he loves Isabel romantically.



For once, Isabel makes a promise in which she prioritizes her own family above Osmond's needs.



Osmond blatantly lies to Goodwood in order to steer Goodwood away from pursuing Isabel by pretending that their marriage is wonderful. This is Osmond's signature move: putting on a façade in order to manipulate those around him for personal benefit.



Osmond acknowledges Goodwood's American New World enterprise and then cruelly insults Goodwood by suggesting he must find himself a wife, despite knowing Goodwood has only ever wanted to marry Isabel.



Goodwood now shares Ralph's concern that Osmond might hurt her. He reveals his continued love for Isabel through his care for her wellbeing, and is greatly upset that he cannot help her in her current situation, despite knowing something is wrong. As suggested earlier in the story, Goodwood is a knight-like character who wants to aid Isabel in her distress. The pun on "penetrate" alludes to the strong chemistry between Isabel and Goodwood that Isabel has repeatedly denied.



Goodwood is quite honest when he also reveals that he still loves Isabel. What's more, he asks her leave to pity her. He thinks that at least by pitying Isabel, he is still dedicating his life to her. Isabel hides almost her entire face behind her fan, telling Goodwood that he has behaved so well in her company, but is now almost spoiling it. She suggests that Goodwood cannot dedicate his life to pitying her, but that he might think of Isabel from time to time. Isabel then returns to the company of the Countess Gemini.

Once more, Isabel is unable to cut off her unwanted suitors' attentions entirely, for she enjoys elements of their courtship. She therefore invites Goodwood to keep her in his thoughts, untoward behavior for a married woman.



CHAPTER 49

Isabel and Madame Merle have not seen each other for some time, with Merle failing to appear yet again at Isabel's regular Thursday evening party. The narrative then flashes back in time.

Madame Merle has not been in Rome, but she has been a regular presence in Isabel's thoughts. The story seems to be setting up the two strong-willed women for a showdown.



During Madame Merle's last visit to the Osmonds' house in Rome, which was immediately after Lord Warburton's abrupt departure for England, Merle enquired about Lord Warburton and suggested that she was looking forward to congratulating Pansy on the couple's engagement. Isabel felt that Merle was suggesting that Isabel had failed in her duty to persuade the nobleman to marry Pansy. Isabel requests that Merle doesn't talk further of Warburton, as the family has dwelled enough on his person lately. Madame Merle ignores her request and presses her line of inquiry further. She asks if it is too late to save the desired union between Pansy and Lord Warburton, to which Isabel responds that she must ask the question of Pansy herself.

Madame Merle plays numerous social agendas, trying to criticize Isabel while still scheming to set up Pansy with Lord Warburton. Isabel will not put up with Merle's games and firmly directs her to speak to Pansy about Warburton. Her interest is piqued by Merle's excessive interest in Pansy's marriage prospects.



Isabel realizes what a false friend Madame Merle has been. She has begun to mistrust her ever since she found Osmond sitting too familiarly beside Merle at the Osmond home. Isabel finally feels that is acceptable to criticize the seemingly accomplished woman. She feels she is waking "from a long pernicious dream" and begins to question how much unidentified influence Merle has wielded over Isabel ever since the two women met many years ago at Gardencourt.

Finally, Isabel begins to suspect Madame Merle of deceitful behavior. Isabel's talk of having been caught up in a harmful "dream" is an apt description for the way she has acted on naïve ideals throughout her life and thus finds herself out of touch with the world and in an unhappy situation.



Madame Merle tells Isabel that Osmond visited her yesterday, confiding in her instead of his wife. She also asserts that Osmond directly insulted Isabel, judging her "severely" in Merle's company. Isabel is upset by the revelation that Osmond has spoken ill of her aloud, not merely in his thoughts as she suspected. Isabel offers to let Merle know how she judges Osmond, but Merle doesn't care to hear it, claiming it too "painful" for her to know. For the first time in her life, Isabel finds Madame Merle to be "disagreeable."

Isabel is appalled by Osmond's behavior because he has betrayed her trust as her husband by speaking to others about his discontent with Isabel. By contrast, Isabel has gone to great lengths to never speak ill of Osmond despite her marital unhappiness. Isabel is also finding herself becoming increasingly enlightened as to Merle's true character—Merle is a selfish and manipulative woman, matching Osmond in his Old World decadence.



Desiring the awkward conversation to end, Isabel advises that Madame Merle should not despair over Pansy's marriage prospects, reminding her of Pansy's attractiveness.

Isabel's attempt to shut down conversation with Merle rests on the social convention that beauty is a highly desirable trait to a man searching for a wife.



Madame Merle doesn't take the hint, continuing to harass Isabel with questions about Lord Warburton. The one truth she desires to learn: did the nobleman change his mind about marrying Pansy of his own accord, or did Isabel intentionally lead him away? If the latter, Merle and Osmond need to know. Isabel grows "pale" at Merle's charges, suddenly realizing that the familiarity between her husband and Merle is something to be fearful of. She dazedly asks Madame Merle about her intentions; "What have you to do with my husband? [...] What have you to do with me?" Merle replies dramatically, "Everything!" Covering her face, Isabel finally realizes that Mrs. Touchett was right in guessing that Madame Merle had wholly orchestrated Isabel's marriage to Osmond.

Due to Merle's extreme interest in Isabel's movements and Pansy's marriage prospects, coupled with Merle's familiarity with Osmond, it finally dawns on Isabel that Merle has masterminded Isabel's marriage to Osmond. Merle's admission that she has had "everything" to do with Osmond and Isabel's relationship forces Isabel to confront the reality of Merle's strange intimacy with Osmond and Isabel's false freedoms in choosing a husband.



That afternoon, Isabel takes a solitary drive alone, wishing to be far away from her home. She wonders if she can apply the descriptor of "wicked" to Madame Merle, and speculates as to Merle's intentions for bringing Osmond and Isabel together in marriage. Isabel cannot pinpoint what Merle would gain from their union, but supposes that it must have something to do with her fortune. Isabel considers whether Osmond would let her leave him if she gave him all of her wealth. Isabel ends up feeling pity for her false friend Merle, as she doesn't believe Merle has achieved what she wanted from Isabel and Osmond's marriage.

Isabel chooses to escape from Madame Merle and work through her thoughts, rather than confront Merle about her disgraceful behavior. Calling Merle "wicked" is Isabel's way of expressing her disgust at the morally corrupt widow. Although she is furious at Merle and Osmond, Isabel demonstrates a new kind of wisdom when she ultimately decides that she pities Merle. In this way, she has grown more in the likeness of Mr. Touchett and Ralph, who also pitied those less fortunate than themselves.



Meanwhile, Madame Merle is talking to Osmond at Merle's home. She accuses Osmond being ungrateful for her help in securing his advantageous marriage to Isabel. Merle additionally blames Osmond for shaping her into a person as wicked as himself, stating that she is so corrupted that she no longer has the ability to cry. She also alleges that Isabel is scared of him, which Osmond denies. He is "indifferent" to her accusations, believing that she reads too much into matters. As he leaves, Madame Merle cries loudly, "Have I been so vile all for nothing?"

Madame Merle, meanwhile, finds no sympathy from Osmond. She finds herself without family or wealth to enjoy life. Merle's parting comment to Osmond demonstrates her self-loathing at the immoral and lonely creature she has shaped herself into.



CHAPTER 50

Isabel visits the Coliseum with Pansy and the Countess Gemini. Isabel sees Edward Rosier watching them from afar, and when she finds herself alone, Rosier approaches her. He has sold the decorative ornaments from his art collection and is now 50,000 dollars richer. It was torment to part with his beloved ornaments, but he hopes that Gilbert Osmond will now consider him wealthy enough to court Pansy. Isabel advises that she hopes Osmond will accept Rosier's intentions to court his daughter, but thinks her husband will view Rosier's hasty sale of his ornaments as an unwise decision.

Pansy and the Countess Gemini rejoin Isabel. Rosier wants to talk to the Countess, so Isabel and Pansy return to their carriage. The Countess instructs that they leave without her, for she will catch a cab home.

One week later, Pansy tells Isabel that Osmond is sending her back to be educated at the convent again. Isabel is totally unaware of this development, but promises to visit Pansy.

After Pansy leaves Rome, Isabel shares a meal with Osmond and the Countess Gemini. Isabel tells Osmond that she will miss his daughter greatly, but decides not to question his strange decision to send her away. Osmond states that the convent is an excellent educational institution and that "it corresponds to an essential need in the family." Pansy is "dusty" from experiencing the world too much and that time at the convent will render her "fresh and fair" again. (The narrator advises that Osmond cannot reason his decision, but is simply trying to test some phrases to see if they fit.)

The Countess Gemini asks Osmond why he won't admit to the obvious truth, accusing her brother of sending Pansy away because of Edward Rosier's desire to marry her. She believes that Osmond knows that she approves of Rosier and is a bad influence on Pansy. Osmond states that if this were the case, he considers it more convenient to simply banish the Countess herself from Rome.

Rosier demonstrates his commitment to Pansy (as well as his general tendency to make hasty and foolish decisions) when he sells part of his beloved art collection. Judging by his previous descriptions of Pansy, he is making room in his collection for the "consummate piece."



Rosier is clearly still trying to form relationships with anyone he believes can sway Osmond to consider him a suitor for Pansy; first Rosier approached Madame Merle, then Isabel, and now the Countess Gemini. The problem is that Osmond does not respect the advice of any of these women.



Osmond's decision to return Pansy to the convent's confines signals his attempt to exercise control over Pansy and the volatile issue of her future marriage.



Osmond cannot persuasively argue his rationale for returning Pansy to the convent because it lacks reason; he has acted purely on a whim according to his own interests, rather than considering Pansy's wellbeing. In another act of loyalty to Osmond, Isabel decides not to cause a scene and accepts Osmond's decision despite its unfairness to Pansy.



The Countess Gemini does not share Isabel's loyalty to Osmond, calling out his false explanation for sending Pansy away. Osmond is used to dealing with the Countess's accusations and reacts with a subtle threat.



CHAPTER 51

Although Osmond does not banish the Countess Gemini from his house, she feels that her hospitality in Rome is vulnerable. A week after this episode, Mrs. Touchett sends Isabel a telegram to let her know that Ralph is nearing his death and would like to see his cousin if possible. Isabel tells Osmond that she needs to travel immediately to Gardencourt, but he does not allow her to. He thinks she is visiting Ralph just to spite him. If she disobeys his wishes, he informs her that he will view it as a “calculated opposition” to her husband. Isabel suggests that it is Osmond who is “calculating” in his opposition of Isabel.

Osmond claims that Isabel cares greatly for her cousin because Ralph does not give weight to her marriage with Osmond. Osmond contends that he, on the other hand, takes their marriage very seriously and values honor above all else. Isabel exits the room, infuriated.

Isabel talks to the Countess Gemini about her predicament. The Countess comforts Isabel somewhat. She also thinks of the consequence of Isabel mourning Ralph without having wished him a proper goodbye.

The Countess Gemini then encourages Isabel to defy Osmond’s instructions by traveling to Gardencourt. She also decides to reveal an enormous truth to Isabel about Osmond and Madame Merle’s past: Pansy is their child and the result of a long-time affair. Pansy was in fact born to Madame Merle after Osmond’s first wife died, but the parents have kept the truth a secret because of the public scandal it would cause. Pansy has no idea that Merle is her mother, and Monsieur Merle was similarly unaware of his wife’s deceit due to his long absences from home.

Shocked, Isabel asks why the Countess Gemini is revealing this secret to her now. The Countess merely claims that she is tired of Isabel not knowing. Isabel weeps openly and feels increased pity for Madame Merle. The Countess Gemini is surprised by Isabel’s compassionate reaction. Isabel also wonders if Osmond has been faithful to Isabel during their marriage, with the Countess Gemini indicating that he and Madame Merle were no longer lovers by the time he met Isabel.

Isabel’s fears of Osmond denying her travel to Gardencourt are realized. Despite their air of civility, Osmond and Isabel’s interactions are becoming more spiteful. Considering their history, it is clear that Osmond is the more “calculating” of the pair, having schemed his way into marrying Isabel for her money.



Isabel is unable to deal with the enormity of Osmond’s hypocrisy in claiming to honor their marriage. As with Madame Merle, Isabel chooses to take leave of Osmond rather than confront him.



Originally a suspicious character of questionable morals, the Countess is now one of the few people to whom Isabel can talk regarding her precarious marriage.



The Countess’s revelation is the final element that completes Isabel’s understanding of the realities of her marriage. Osmond and Merle’s illicit affair is so scandalous that it would ruin both of them—and Pansy—if the secret were made public. Isabel has an important choice ahead of her regarding her marriage to Osmond and her handling of this powerful information.



Isabel again pities Madame Merle, for the secrecy she lives with and the tragedy of Pansy not knowing her parentage. Isabel seems to have gained everything Merle wanted—marriage, wealth, and a daughter. Isabel’s questioning the Countess about Osmond’s potential current adultery is unsurprising considering his betrayal of his first wife and his lack of loyalty to Isabel in confiding in Merle about their marriage.



When Isabel questions why Osmond and Madame Merle never married, the Countess Gemini explains that Merle had no wealth to interest Osmond, and that she fell out of love with him quickly and desired to one day marry a “great man.”

Osmond’s selfish greed resulted in the collapse of his romantic relationship with Merle. Osmond is certainly not the “great man” Merle wanted to marry, having been identified from the outset by Ralph as a very “small man.”



Before Isabel takes her leave of the Countess Gemini, the Countess asks if Isabel still plans to visit Ralph against Osmond’s will. With an air of “infinite sadness” Isabel reveals that she must. She appears physically ill at the revelation of Osmond and Madame Merle’s treachery, having become quite pale and dizzy.

The foundations of Isabel’s world—her marriage and her previous identity in prioritizing her independence—have been rocked to their core. Her extreme sorrow may arise from the knowledge that she is bonded to a man as despicable as Osmond, or because her beloved cousin is dying.



CHAPTER 52

With the help of her maid, Isabel arranges to leave Rome for England to see her cousin Ralph on his deathbed. But before she departs for Gardencourt, she visits Pansy at the convent.

Isabel’s visit to Pansy mirrors her visit to the girl after Osmond told Isabel he loved her. Now, though, Pansy is not such a vulnerable young girl; she is intelligent and can assert her own will.



Isabel is shocked to find that Madame Merle is also at the convent. Merle tries to justify her visit to Pansy, acknowledging that she should have asked for permission from Osmond and Isabel, but she soon realizes that Isabel knows the truth of Merle’s relationship to Osmond and Pansy. Despite a quavering voice, she talks in the usual fashion about Pansy’s experiences at the convent.

Madame Merle slips into her usual mode of fabrication to explain her interest in Pansy. Even when she realizes that Isabel now knows the truth of Pansy’s parentage, Merle relies on Isabel conforming to social propriety in continuing to talk on expected topics.



Isabel knows that she could lord her newfound knowledge over Madame Merle in “a great moment [...] of triumph.” But she chooses to say nothing to Madame Merle, except that she is shortly to depart alone for England. Her near silence seems punishment enough for Madame Merle, who is helpless in her dishonor. Isabel announces her intention to wish Pansy goodbye, leaving Merle sitting in the convent parlor.

Isabel’s new knowledge gives her control of the situation. Isabel’s noble response to Madame Merle’s treachery renders Merle a pathetic figure—quite the opposite of the sophisticated and talented Merle that Isabel originally admired so much.



Madame Catherine takes Isabel to see Pansy, calling the young woman a “precious charge” who will be pleased to see Isabel. As soon as the nun leaves them together, Pansy buries her face in Isabel’s dress with happiness at seeing her. Isabel soothes her stepdaughter and admires her room, before revealing that she is leaving for England. Pansy hides her reaction to this news, but then begs Isabel not to leave her in the convent, suggesting she can go with her to England. Despite Isabel’s heartfelt desire to allow Pansy’s wishes, Pansy decides to obey Osmond’s orders and remain faithfully in the convent.

With her return to the convent, Pansy also seems to have returned to her former meek childhood character. Despite her opposing desires, Pansy decides to dutifully act in accordance with her father’s will.



Pansy admits to Isabel that she sometimes fears both Osmond and Madame Merle. Isabel gently rebukes her for saying so. She must say goodbye to Pansy, but promises that she will return. Pansy repeats her dislike of Madame Merle, with Isabel again insisting that she must not say such things. Pansy tells her stepmother that it is much easier to bear her father and Madame Merle's expectations when Isabel is also around.

Isabel is leaving the convent when Madame Merle requests to speak with her again. After checking whether Isabel is fond of her cousin Ralph, Merle suggests that Isabel has Ralph to thank for her wealth and subsequent marriage. Madame Merle is momentarily delighted at surprising Isabel so, but Isabel retorts that it is Madame Merle she has to thank. The older woman states that although Isabel is unhappy, Merle is unhappy to an even higher degree. Isabel believes Madame Merle, and tells her that she never wants to see her again. As Isabel exits the convent, Madame Merle states quietly that she will move to America.

CHAPTER 53

On a train to London, Isabel's mind has "given up to vagueness." She experiences confusing visions and is unable to imagine her future. With time, though, she uses her recent conversations with Osmond, the Countess Gemini, Madame Merle, and Pansy to begin making some connections between previous events.

Isabel considers that her time in Rome has been a total waste. However, she now believes that she could perhaps achieve happiness in her future and that life does not entail only suffering and pain.

Isabel is met in London by Henrietta Stackpole, with whom Isabel has corresponded with about her travel plans. Isabel is surprised to see that Mr. Bantling is also with Henrietta; the pair tell Isabel that they are engaged to be married, with plans to live together in London.

Isabel is further surprised by the news of Henrietta's engagement to Mr. Bantling and disappointed by her friend's falling into convention. However, she acknowledges that Henrietta is simply showing her "human susceptibilities."

Isabel's departing promise may come back to haunt her in future, for she is ethically beholden to Pansy but not Osmond.



Madame Merle cannot help her nature in wanting to exercise power over Isabel, insulting Ralph and simultaneously trying to shift the blame of Isabel's unhappy marriage away from Merle herself. Isabel again acts nobly, taking the high road while being very clear that she will not stand for Merle's manipulative behaviors any longer. Merle's promise that she will move to America effectively removes Merle from the complex relationship between Osmond and Isabel.



James again focuses on Isabel's interiority rather than moving the plot forward by action in response to Isabel's weighty new knowledge.



Despite her immense suffering, Isabel retains some of the earnest hopefulness that she demonstrated before her marriage to Osmond.



Ralph's prediction that the unlikely romantic pairing of the Old World Mr. Bantling and New World Henrietta have come true. With James's depictions of unhappy marriages throughout the story, though, there is doubt as to whether Bantling and Henrietta's marriage will be successful.



Isabel would never have imagined that her independent and career-minded friend would agree to a conventional marriage. She forgets, however, how similarly shocked her peers were at news of the headstrong Isabel's engagement.



CHAPTER 54

Isabel arrives at Gardencourt, where the servants instruct her to wait for Mrs. Touchett in the gallery. She spends her time in the gallery considering whether she would have married Caspar Greenwood if her aunt had never discovered her at her grandmother's house in Albany, thus never inviting her to England.

Mrs. Touchett greets Isabel in the gallery. Isabel's aunt has visibly aged but is as sharp as ever. She explains that she has been sitting at Ralph's bedside, or she would have come to Isabel earlier. Ralph's condition is dire. Mrs. Touchett laments that her son has experienced an unsuccessful life, but Isabel contends it has been a "beautiful" one.

Mrs. Touchett also informs Isabel that Lord Warburton is back at Lockleigh, and furthermore engaged to be married to a noblewoman. The older woman seems dismayed at Isabel's genuine pleasure for her friend. Mrs. Touchett asks Isabel if she now wishes she had married the nobleman, an idea that Isabel rejects. Mrs. Touchett also asks Isabel how she feels about Madame Merle; Isabel replies that she does not like her as much she previously did, but it is of no matter, for Merle is returning to live in America. Isabel tells her aunt that she now recognizes Merle treated Isabel as a "convenience."

Isabel visits Ralph in his room, where he lies for three days without speaking. On the third day, he feels better, telling Isabel that she has been like an "angel" at his bedside. He is concerned that Isabel has defied Osmond to visit him. However, Isabel tells Ralph that he has "been everything" to her. She wishes that she could sacrifice herself for him to live. Ralph convinces her that she will never lose him, for he'll always remain with her. He also advises that "in life there's love."

Isabel tentatively asks Ralph if it is true that he is the reason she became a wealthy woman. Ralph admits it is so and that his actions "ruined" her. Isabel confirms that Osmond was originally quite in love with her, but that he only married her because she was rich. The cousins agree that in Isabel's desire to live a life of extraordinary freedoms, she has been dearly penalized by being "ground in the very mill of the conventional." Ralph states that she must stay on at Gardencourt, with Isabel reassuring him that she will be there as long as it seems suitable.

Isabel still tends to overly rely on her imagination, dreaming of scenarios that are no longer possible. Her arrival back to Gardencourt brings the story full circle, as this is where James first introduced Isabel.



Isabel, still a naïve idealist, views Ralph's life as "beautiful" because he has lived it with integrity. Mrs. Touchett, however, is extremely practical and believes her son has not achieved any successes in wealth or marriage.



Mrs. Touchett ignores social convention as usual, directly questioning her niece on some very personal matters. Isabel's description of herself as Merle's "convenience" represents the easy way in which Merle has manipulated Isabel for her own desires.



Isabel is once more likened to an angelic figure, having previously been viewed as a guardian angel by Lord Warburton and Pansy. However, she finds it difficult to see those she cares for in pain and even offers to take Ralph's place if she could. Ralph is gallant and kind as ever despite his approaching death, comforting Isabel with his love and advice.



Isabel and Ralph finally talk openly about her unhappy marriage to Osmond. Isabel's existence in the soul-destroying "mill" of mediocrity is the opposite of she and Ralph's hopes for her life to be founded on extraordinary experiences and unfettered liberties.



Ralph reminds Isabel that if she has experienced hatred in her life so far, she has also been greatly loved and adored. Isabel, in tears, addresses Ralph as her brother.

Ralph demonstrates his Old World wisdom and kindness in also focusing on the joys that Isabel has also experienced in life.



CHAPTER 55

The next morning, Isabel senses a ghostly spirit beside her bed. The incident reminds her of Ralph's assertion upon their meeting that only those individuals who have suffered greatly can see ghosts at historic estates such as Gardencourt.

James insinuates that the ghost is that of Ralph, whom readers are soon to learn has recently passed away. The ghost's presence represents Isabel's current situation in being haunted by her past mistakes and missed opportunities.



Isabel goes to visit Ralph in his room, pausing significantly before she opens his door. She finds Mrs. Touchett at his bedside alongside a doctor and two nurses; everyone is very grave, and there is a stillness on the air. Ralph has just died.

Ralph's death is particularly significant because he was the family member whom Isabel adored most. She likely feels adrift without his comfortable presence in her life.



Three days later, mourners gather at a small church to pay their respects to Ralph. The funeral party includes Mrs. Touchett, Isabel, Henrietta Stackpole, Mr. Bantling, and Caspar Goodwood, with Isabel feeling distracted by the latter's forceful presence.

Even in utter grief, Caspar Goodwood's presence affects Isabel's emotions greatly. She is clearly still attracted to the charismatic businessman.



Isabel remains at Gardencourt for a few days. She is greatly distracted and cannot focus on the daily events of life, for she is torn by her desire to remain there permanently and her obligation to return to Osmond and Pansy in Rome. During this time, Mrs. Touchett informs Isabel that Ralph has left her nothing in his will. The older woman is, however, quite confused by Ralph's decision to leave his library to Henrietta Stackpole.

Isabel's thoughts are consumed by the significant choice before her: to pursue personal happiness by leaving Osmond, or to return to her marital cage.



One afternoon, Isabel notices Lord Warburton is sitting in Gardencourt's library. She presumes he is there to visit Mrs. Touchett and escapes his company by walking in the garden. However, Mrs. Touchett later leads him out to see Isabel in the garden. Isabel imagines she can feel her aunt's reproach directed at Isabel for having failed to marry such an excellent man.

Isabel would prefer to ignore her old suitor, but as usual, she cannot escape Lord Warburton's presence. His appearance during Isabel's meditations emphasizes the foolishness of her decision to marry Osmond.



With Mrs. Touchett hovering nearby, Lord Warburton explains that he has no idea that Isabel was still at Gardencourt. He suggests that the Misses Molyneux would be delighted to see Isabel again, inviting her somewhat awkwardly to visit them at Lockleigh. Warburton continues a slightly strained conversation with Isabel, but refrains from mentioning his engagement. Despite his awkwardness, Isabel recognizes his sincere depth of emotion at Ralph's loss and his kindness in trying to comfort Mrs. Touchett and Isabel.

After Lord Warburton takes his leave of the women, Mrs. Touchett retreats inside, and Isabel takes a seat in the garden. She recalls that she sat on the very same bench where she received Caspar Goodwood's letter detailing his pursuit of Isabel to England, followed by Lord Warburton's face-to-face encounter with Isabel in which he revealed his desire to marry her.

Isabel sits there in the garden for some time. Twilight is well upon her when she suddenly realizes that Caspar Goodwood is standing near her. She rises abruptly, but he grabs her hand and sits her back down, also taking a seat on the garden bench. Isabel recognizes a dangerous determination in his presence.

Goodwood tells her that he knows that Isabel is unhappy in her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, as he had spoken with Ralph on the matter. Goodwood despises the vile Osmond, calling him "the deadliest of fiends," but Isabel calmly responds that her marriage is none of his business. Goodwood is undeterred, having promised Ralph that he will take care of Isabel.

Goodwood reiterates his life-long love for Isabel and scandalously suggests that he can offer her an escape from Osmond—they can start a new life together overseas. He tells Isabel that nothing is stopping her from leaving with him, for she is without children and can ignore social convention. Isabel begs Goodwood to do her the kindness of leaving her, to which he cries out, "don't say that. Don't kill me!"

Like Ralph, Warburton represents the Old World values of chivalry and compassion. James's novel focuses on romantic relationships and female friendships, having notably lacked detail on the firm friendship hinted at between Ralph and Warburton.



Isabel continues to fixate on distant memories and nostalgic dreams of what could have been. Since learning the entirety of Osmond and Madame Merle's deception, she seems to have been lost in a daze and unable to make decisions about her future.



The story again comes full circle, with Goodwood approaching Isabel in the very same place she received previous letter of commitment to her. Goodwood treats Isabel with familiarity when he physically pushes her back down in her seat. His intense physicality is perhaps one of the reasons Isabel finds herself so attracted to him.



Isabel tries to mimic her earlier successes in diverting Goodwood's attentions by declaring that her marriage is none of his business. However, Goodwood is aware of Osmond's dangerous, even "fendish" behavior. He wants to act on his desire to save Isabel from her miserable marriage and also carry out his promise to Ralph to protect her.



Goodwood offers Isabel an escape to a happier lifestyle, but it comes at the expense of her moral integrity. Goodwood's devotion to Isabel is evident in his claim that her rejection of him once again would "kill" him.



Crying, Isabel repeats her plea for Goodwood to leave. Instead, he glares at Isabel before embracing her in a passionate kiss. The narrator compares the kiss to “white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed.” However, Isabel breaks from the extraordinary kiss and escapes from Goodwood into the garden.

Two days later, Goodwood visits Henrietta Stackpole’s residence in London. The servants at Gardencourt have advised him that Isabel is in London. Goodwood is upset to learn that Isabel is no longer there; Henrietta tells him that Isabel departed for Rome earlier that morning. Goodwood is devastated at this news, frozen in his shock. Henrietta takes him arm, advising Goodwood to “wait” and walking away with him “as if she had given him now the key to patience.”

James again suggests that Isabel and Goodwood's relationship involves intense sexual desire, evident in the heated kiss that Goodwood initiates. Falling into old patterns, though, Isabel leaves Goodwood, knowing that she is causing him immense emotional pain.



Isabel's departure for Rome suggests that she has decided she must adhere to her marital responsibilities and social convention, despite the great personal costs this will bring. Pansy's vulnerable state may also be a factor that has persuaded her to return to Osmond. Goodwood is understandably devastated that Isabel has left him permanently once more. Henrietta's advice, however, suggests that there could more to the story concerning Isabel and Goodwood. However, James ends his novel here.





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