

## WHO IS ISABEL ARCHER?

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In a fascinating paper, Patricia Rohrer has given us much to think about; there is Isabel Archer,<sup>1</sup> probably Henry James' favorite protagonist, and that small circle who surround her, watch her, manipulate her, and adore her. There is Richard Rorty to give the foil to unlock the secrets of Isabel Archer's education and the current dilemmas of American education. There is a further foil to both Rorty and James, a foil developed by feminist writers. But in the end, there is only one subject worth our hearing; that is Isabel Archer herself. Yet, can we really understand Isabel Archer without the cast of characters who surround her and according to William Gass, those who manipulate and use her?<sup>2</sup>

In this response, I do not want to disagree with Patricia Rohrer's interpretation of Isabel Archer's life narrative and her education. For there is much -- very much -- that I am extremely sympathetic with. My main concern is that with the single trajectory of individualism, we miss the complexity of Isabel Archer and the flawed nature of her quest. With a vision affixed on autonomy, or even the "strong poet," we cannot truly understand what Isabel Archer's allure has been for the novel's characters, for the author Henry James, and for numerous readers and critics. Thus, I turn to this question, of whether a purely individualist, autonomy interpretation of Isabel Archer can provide answers to why this heroine is simultaneously so alluring and so troubling.

Let's begin by applying Virginia Woolf's comment that because she never went to school, that institution that provides a "standard of comparison," she was never "able to compare...[her] gifts and defects with other people's."<sup>3</sup> Isabel Archer did not attend school and thus did not have a "standard of comparison." Some criticized how her father had brought her up and questioned whether she had any education (40). As striking during these scenes of the very early Isabel are the following traits and characteristics: a "ridiculously active" imagination (39), "seeing without judging" (39), restlessness and agitation (39), and "an unquenchable desire to please" (41). "She had a great desire for knowledge, but she really preferred almost any source of information to the printed page; she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering" (41).

How are readers of this novel to explain the seeming hiatus that exists between the various Isabels, the early American Isabel and the Isabel of Gardencourt, the Isabel of Gardencourt and Isabel, the unmarried heiress and traveler, and finally between these Isabels and the married Isabel? We can see this hiatus between the early American Isabel and the Isabel of Gardencourt from a number of perspectives. First, should we presume that the description of the early American Isabel is misconceived or that merely a voyage across the sea that certainly was not her first journey to Europe transformed the American Isabel into the Gardencourt Isabel? Though her cousin Ralph believed her to be "a very brilliant girl" (63), who was also "intelligent and generous" and had "a fine free nature" (64), the Gardencourt Isabel is also described as having a "strong will and a high temper" (47), "meagre knowledge, ...inflated ideals, ...[and] confidence at once innocent and dogmatic" (54). Thus, the weaknesses of the American Isabel still seem to reside in the Gardencourt Isabel. Furthermore, we are not witness to any extraordinary experiences that should precipitate the change during the Gardencourt visit. Unquestionably, the terms used most often to describe Isabel

Archer are imagination and mind, liberty and freedom. But her imagination is unfettered by life's experiences and knowledge, by achieving plans, executing responsibilities, and undergoing consequences. It is unadulterated imagination.

In a very real way, those who are her companions do little to moderate Isabel's weaknesses and shortcomings. After precipitating Isabel's life journey, her Aunt really does not have any plans of what she means "to do with" the girl beyond taking her to Paris and buying her clothes.<sup>4</sup> The passive, sickly Ralph, who is fascinated by and adores his cousin Isabel, wants to follow her career and becomes active enough to provide the resources for Isabel to pursue her imagination. Her Uncle, the dying scion, an active player of life's game, becomes passive, an acquiescing tool to achieve his son's dreams for Isabel.

But simultaneously, there is reference to another aspect of Isabel Archer's life narrative. Isabel herself refers to this aspect when saying, "I can't escape my fate" (118); "I can't escape unhappiness" (119). In response to Caspar Goodwood's exclamation that "one would think you were going to commit some atrocity," Isabel replies, "Perhaps I am" (143). In response to Henrietta Stackpole's fear that she is "drifting to some great mistake," Isabel says that she "must take the risks" (146). Throughout the novel, in preparation for the Isabel's eventual downfall, the imagery of light and darkness are interwoven, e.g., the "office" in which Mrs. Touchett finds her niece "on that melancholy afternoon in early spring" (33). Thus, from the very beginning of her journey, there is a dark undertone stalking Isabel, in the manner that it shadowed the lives of tragic heroes and heroines. We know from the beginning that Isabel's life narrative is not leading, as the optimistic yet simultaneously pessimistic Ralph assumed, to a glorious conclusion.

The question for us is, what are the reasons for this dark undertone? Should we assume, as Rohrer agrees in passing, that Isabel Archer's life can be interpreted through a feminist perspective? Should we interpret this shadow through existentialism or take Rohrer's view a step further and conclude that this darkness is the fate of the "strong poet?" The question is not which of these (and other) interpretations of the text is correct since "many partial readings of a text...can exploit discoveries made through such readings in pursuing a more complete understanding of the text."<sup>5</sup> Thus, instead of taking a negative, even destructive route, I prefer to question whether another interpretation of Isabel's education is equally valid.

At the same time that we paint the glory and goodness of Isabel Archer, the intelligence, imagination, and her insistence on freedom and liberty, we must also include strokes of another color, the error in judgment, the desire to please, her illusions, her faith instead of experience (163), and her thoughts about herself. In this two-sided, more probably, multifaceted, picture of Isabel Archer, we have a continual dialectic between the inner and outer, what others perceive and interpret, what Isabel thinks and feels, and what we readers understand, sometimes with horror, sometimes in amazement. In an ironic sense, possibly, we should speak of the miseducation of Isabel or the lack of education of Isabel. The failure of Isabel is that she lacks education, yet has a false sense of her accomplishment. Especially the unmarried Isabel, in all of her many phases, appears to be naive, foolhardy, and inexperienced.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that she has not been educated. None of her friends or relatives contribute to her education. Her father had assumed that the free, unfettered life with no real guidance was sufficient. Her Aunt thought that a visit to Gardencourt, to Paris to purchase clothes, and to Florence was sufficient. Ralph thought that providing Isabel with a fortune would be sufficient. They were all wrong. An education requires other more important components. An education requires others who care for and contribute to one's development. Isabel Archer did not have any of these others. It was no wonder that her education misfired.

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<sup>1</sup> All Page citations in the body of this reply are from Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> William H. Gass, “*The High Brutality of Good Intentions*,” in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton), 704-13. the Gass Article provided invaluable insights for this response.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Susan Douglass Franzosa, “Authoring the Educated Self: Educational Autobiography and Resistance,” *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 395.

<sup>4</sup> A slight rewording of James, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 147.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Kettle, “Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*,” in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton), 679.

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