Regaining Self-reliance in *The Portrait of a Lady**

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Redeeming the flawed self is an effective way to terminate the potential of being victimized and maximize the power to be self-reliant. Self-reliance can be attained when we first focus on the mind reinterpreting the self in a positive way and then reject to be harassed and tortured by the memories of being victimized at any circumstances. This is what Isabel Archer does in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Because of her ignorance of complex human nature, Isabel mistakenly let her be set up by Madame Merle to marry Gilbert Osmond and confined in a wrong marriage. From an innocent girl who is free to do whatever she wants to an unhappy woman who is under the control of her husband, Isabel has to set her mind free from this marital prison and regain her self-reliance. For Isabel, simply admitting her mistakes of not sensing the wickedness of Madame Merle and Osmond is not enough; she shall accept the flawed self from the heart and take action in order to end her suffering and recover the ability to love her life. Isabel's willingness of transforming the self and returning to Rome has proven that she ultimately becomes a mature and responsible lady with self-reliance. In Isabel's mind, marriage is no longer smooth and happy, if there is more than love and consideration. However, her experience in this miserable marriage can be a catalyst that forces her to grow up and comprehend human nature which is imperfect, complicated and paradoxical.

Keywords: experience, responsibility, self-reliance, freedom, wickedness

Introduction

How can we encourage us to affront our victimization and set us free from it, if we are conscious that it is owing to our limited and inexperienced views on humanity which is never simple and uncomplicated? In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer was designated by Henry James to experience her unexpected failure in a bad marriage. Nevertheless, Pippin (2000, p. 12) argued that the miserable fate of Isabel is presented by James to reveal a good deal about the moral dimension of his international theme. As a realistic writer, James' novels are intensely related to the experience of actual human beings. What is realism? Realism is "faithful representation of life", and it carries the conviction of true reports of phenomena observable by others (Frye, 1985, p. 386). James vividly revealed his real observation of humanity in his novels and offered his readers an opportunity to see his heroes and heroines dramatically existing in their lives as in the realistic world. For James (1953, p. 98), according to Edel, experience exists alike in the pages of a book and in the life around him. Therefore, he created his stories at such moments become life and life fiction.

In *Portrait*, we can clearly see how Isabel is led by her mistakes to know the marriage which is not "What is expected of her" (Pippin, 2000, p. 133) as she initially assumes. With her remarkably active imagination (James, 2007, p. 49) and "fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, free expansion and

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irresistible action” (James, 2007, p. 50), the unmarried Isabel is originally a young girl who is free of the social net (Gordon, 1999, p. 140). She is obviously created by James as a typical self-reliant American heroine that represents Emerson’s idealism, the one whose theoretical approach to life is insufficient when faced with the machinations of the inhabitants of the Old World (Taylor, 2002, p. 100). In this regard, there is no difficulty to see how Isabel strives to protect her free self from being restricted by any traditional marriage, so she rejects to marry neither Lord Warburton nor Casper Goodwood. Although Isabel likes Lord Warburton, the gentleman from England, she consciously believes that she will no longer be herself if she marries him: “What she felt was that a territorial, political and social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he lived and moved”. Therefore, Isabel chooses to follow her instinct which persuasively tells her to reject—It murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own (James, 2007, p. 104).

As a matter of fact, Isabel is a person who thinks that she shall never forsake her free self for anything else. Because of this insistence, Isabel chooses to reject another suitor Goodwood who pursues her from America to Europe. When Isabel meets Goodwood in England, she immediately shows her unwelcome feeling of his coming,

Do not think me unkind if I say that it is just that—being out of your sight that I like. If you were in the same place as I, I should feel as if you were watching me, and I do not like that. I like my liberty too much. If there is a thing in the world that I am fond of... it is my personal independence. (James, 2007, p. 163)

In order to defend for her free self, Isabel successfully rejects these two suitors; nevertheless, she does not succeed when the third suitor appears with a hidden trap covered by pseudo image of freedom. She never anticipates that her mind will mislead her to instinctively trust Madame Merle at first sight and carelessly fall into the trap in which she no longer has the power to do whatever she wants as a self-reliant person.

In the eyes of Isabel, Madame Merle, an acquaintance of her aunt Mrs. Touchett from America, appears as an ideal image of freedom that she idolizes in her imagination. Isabel is introduced by Madame Merle to Gilbert Osmond, a poor American who lives long in Europe as an artist, and consents to marry him without sensing that Madame Merle’s real attempt is to get her huge money left by Mr. Touchett. Isabel’s first mistake is that she is not conscious of the real intention of Madame Merle, who is in fact not a genuine lady but a sinister “fortune hunter” (Gordon, 1999, p. 142). Deceived by Madame Merle, Isabel’s another mistake is that she does not understand the real nature of Osmond but impulsively and falsely assumes that she is able to enjoy her freedom if she marries him.

Brought by Mrs. Touchett from America to Europe, Isabel enters a different world in which she surprisingly inherits a great amount of money. Because of the persuasion of her cousin Ralph Touchett, Isabel is so lucky that she has huge money to enjoy her exciting life. Sadly, the unexpected inheritance does not bring her luck but torment. In other words, the inheritance is like an unknown force of fate that drastically changes Isabel’s life when it attracts wicked Madame Merle and brings her to Isabel’s world. According to Santos (1987, p. 307), Isabel mostly believes herself to be in complete control of her destiny as a completely free person who is able to choose her own fate under the circumstances. However, Isabel does not sense the trap she may be walking into. Her decision surprisingly brings her into a horrible marriage beyond her imagination and expectation, as an inevitable obstacle that Isabel needs to confront and challenge. As Gordon (1999, p. 143) argued that the freest woman, who was to devise a new destiny, finds herself imprisoned in the lightless dungeon of a marriage that would never have happened without a fortune, Isabel stays in her marriage as a loser who is incapable of perceiving the intention of Madame Merle and the nature of Osmond.

Nietzsche (1990, p. 103) told us, “For what is freedom? That one has the will to self-responsibility”. Isabel is confined in an unhappy marriage as a prisoner, but she never forgets to play her role as a lovely wife of Osmond and a considerate stepmother of Pansy, the daughter of Osmond. As Buell (2003, pp. 62-63) claimed, Emerson considers self-reliance as a personal life practice which indicated that though everyone falls short of self-realization much of the time, everyone has self-transformative capacity. Isabel’s original self-reliance is not steadfast, because she does not experience a lot of personal life practices, so she is easily deceived and defeated when she encounters the worldly-wise Madame Merle and Osmond. In order to get back to her self-reliance, Isabel needs to overcome her unhappiness in an improper marriage and transforms the flawed self in reality as to experience moral transformation. Moral transformation begins from a sense of radical dissatisfaction with aspect of one’s past life, but moral transformation is not basically a backward-looking matter. In moral transformation, we look forward (Govier, 2002, p. 134). There are three steps that Isabel has to do. First, she needs to accept her imperfect and inexperienced self that is aptly used and harmed by Madame Merle and Osmond. Second, she shall help herself triumph over the wickedness of humanity by taking action. For example, she has to fight for her feeling and cut off the connection with Madame Merle whose malevolence makes her suffer greatly. Third, the flawed self of Isabel can be adjusted to be more flexible and comprehend humanity mercifully by love and self-understanding. In what follows, we are going to deliberately analyze how Isabel transforms and regains her self-reliance.

To Accept the Flawed Self

Lack of experience with a self-absorbed mind is the crucial point why Isabel recklessly makes terrible mistakes. As an innocent abroad, who revitalizes the stale aristocracy with her vibrant energy (Shaw, 2002, p. 249), Isabel is happy, energetic and innocent before she meets wicked Madame Merle who is desirous of her inheritance. In other words, she is not smart and mature enough to know how to deal with the wicked side of humanity. Her innocence is in reality her ignorance, as Underwood (2006, p. 49) claimed, Isabel believes her observations are accurate, but they are colored by her ideals and constricted by her lack of information. Descartes articulates a vastly influential statement: “I think, therefore, I am (cogito ergo sum)”. Descartes elucidates that mind and body separate from each other as two different substances, and our consciousness is the only substance which exemplifies human existence. Cartesian mind-body dichotomy has a great influence on us, and most people are accustomed to understanding the self by means of their thoughts. However, simply relying on the mind is partial and unaccountable. Knowledge is essential to us, but it is in fact subjective and limited. As Nietzsche (1998, p. 80) argued, all the products of our thinking are bound to reflect the condition we are in. Different from Descartes, Nietzsche did not deny the function of the mind but he stressed that the body is the most important. For instance, Isabel’s single-minded viewpoints of Madame Merle and Osmond nevertheless inhibit her in self-deception. Also, Kaufmann (1974, p. 89) agreed with Nietzsche and argued, experimenting involves testing an answer by trying to live according to it. Thinking aids us to reflect on our conditions of life and learn to respond to them, but we shall not forget that the self shall be constantly shaped and developed not by thought but by experience, as Isabel does in *Portrait*.

Before she goes to Europe, Isabel is a girl whose thoughts are a tangle of vague outlines, which had never been corrected by the judgment of people who seemed to her to speak with authority and she has a zest to think well of herself (James, 2007, p. 50). Because of this fixed concept, Isabel consequently regulates her mind and hopes that she should never do anything wrong and her life should always be in harmony with the most

pleasing impression she should produce (James, 2007, p. 51). Nevertheless, Isabel's not doing wrong does not mean that she can keep her safe in a harmonious situation permanently. This thought of staying in harmony is too perfect to be practical in the real world, and it can also explain the reason why Isabel is unable to initially notice the bad intention of Madame Merle. To say it precisely, she is not powerful enough to protect her from being harmed, even though she assumes that she is free to do anything she likes. Isabel is free but imperfect. The reason is that Isabel does not have any chance to stimulate her to grow up and adapt to the real world. But Isabel is able to work it out if she willingly learns the lesson of life from her experience. By living and interacting with her husband Osmond in Rome, Isabel is ultimately aware of her error, which her cousin Ralph Touchett has warned her beforehand.

Ralph tells her that marrying Osmond will let her be put into a cage (James, 2007, p. 350). However, Isabel attempts to deny it and replies the reason why she likes Osmond is because he is pre-eminent and has noble natures which she has never had the pleasure of meeting one (James, 2007, p. 353). It is obvious that Isabel overreacts to what Ralph states in order to defend her initial view of Osmond. She is so attracted by Osmond's aesthetic way of life, so antithetical to Goodwood's business savvy or Warburton's reformer zeal (Shaw, 2002, p. 250). Her view starts to shatter when Isabel realizes that her husband is a person whose egotism is hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers and wants her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance (James, 2007, pp. 438-440). Likewise, Isabel feels regretful and upset because Osmond only considers her as a tool to manipulate to serve his vanity and not as someone to take care of with solicitude as well as to be with in loving intimacy (Armstrong, 1983, p. 134). In consequence, Isabel concludes that having a mind of her own is the reason why Osmond hates her (James, 2007, p. 442). Isabel's shortcoming was pointed by McCall (1999, p. 149): "Warnings were everywhere; she missed each and every one of them. She must live the rest of her life increasingly aware of her abject failure at the most important job she would ever have to do".

Isabel is disappointed when she becomes an unhappy married woman who has been locked in a "rigid system" that is deliberately manipulated by Osmond (James, 2007, p. 441). Living in the house of darkness, dumbness and suffocation (James, 2007, p. 439), Isabel is awakened by her misery to reflect upon her flawed self and intends to overcome it as a responsible person. As she says, "Whatever happens to me let me not be unjust," as she utters, "let me bear my burdens myself, and not shift them upon others" (James, 2007, p. 414). Obviously, Isabel still has her mind; she no longer wants to be a pretty doll for Osmond. In addition, she realizes that she is unable to bear this improper marriage if she does not have a mind of her own. Because of this awareness, her marriage, which symbolizes as the fall of her ideal life, can alternatively be the power that forces her to transform the self. As Taylor (2002, p. 108) argued, the fall of humankind is, thus, remained, no longer a prior event which still inhibits all men, but a present and internal condition of the individual self which acts as a spur for spiritual improvement.

Until now, Isabel is able to accept her failure in marriage, as she tells her friend Henrietta Stackpole, "One must accept one's deeds. I married him before the entire world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can not change, that way", and Henrietta replies, "You have changed, in spite of the impossibility" (James, 2007, p. 500). Henrietta's words can be implied as a symbol of Isabel's new start in the process of moral transformation. Isabel eventually makes a candid comment to confess her flawed self and knows that she shall take action for her own sake. When she observes the close and unnatural interaction between Madame Merle and Osmond: "Their dialogue had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them" (James, 2007, p. 417),

Isabel knows the next step she has to do. She needs to confront Madame Merle and stop being victimized and threatened by this woman who has arranged her marriage from the outset (McCall, 1999, p. 148).

To Take Action

When Isabel first meets Madame Merle, she instantly considers this new friend as a more agreeable and interesting woman with whom she is willing to share the things that she had not yet said to any one (James, 2007, p. 191). For Isabel, as Shaw (2002, p. 250) claimed, Merle is “the model of cultivated taste and self-possession, a wholly social animal and a truly mysterious person”. Isabel does not change her standpoint of Madame Merle until she finds out that Madame Merle plans everything for her marriage. Because of Madame Merle’s overstepping condemnation of her failure to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton, Isabel feels that there should be a secretive thing between Madame Merle and her husband. At last, she is notified of the relationship of Madame Merle, Osmond and Pansy by the utterance of her sister-in-law the Countess Gemini.

The unbalanced relationship between Madame Merle and Isabel is clearly shown in Shaw’s (2002, p. 250) statement: “While apparently harmless, she is the spider that will lure Miss Archer into the Web of Gilbert Osmond”. Isabel finally knows the real intention of Madame Merle and realizes that she is not a trusted friend that she should rely on. In contrast, Isabel does not choose to hurt Madame Merle with any injurious dictions and actions but understands that she is responsible for the marriage she chooses. As Taylor (2002, p. 135) claimed, recognizing that she has been the victim of an elaborate scheme of manipulation, perpetrated by Merle, Osmond and the Countess Gemini, Isabel is prompted to consider her own moral naivety. Isabel is unable to change the fact of being Mrs. Osmond, but she can at least prevent herself from being contaminated by the wickedness of Madame Merle and Osmond.

As Turner (1980, p. 228) remarked, Isabel’s experiences provide her with revelations about her capacity to transform ideas into meaningful realities. No sooner does Isabel transcend her mind and refuse to live in the shadow of Madame Merle than her power is recovered. When Isabel goes to visit Pansy in the convent but unexpectedly meets Madame Merle there, she simply makes up her mind: “She wishes never to look at Madame Merle again”. Madame Merle intends to persuade Isabel to accept her reason of visiting Pansy. Nevertheless, Isabel does not give any response but silently listens to Madame Merle, while her eyes are absent from the face of Madame Merle (James, 2007, pp. 563-564). As Armstrong (1983) argued:

Since Madame Merle’s opacity was a limit to Isabel’s freedom, here is a situation where knowing a limit is the same as transcending it...Isabel’s knowledge is power here because it allows her to transform her situation by engaging it practically—confronting Madame Merle rather than fleeing her or submitting to her passively. (p. 126)

Isabel’s inattentive response suddenly let Madame Merle realize that her secretive relationship with Osmond and Pansy has been disclosed to Isabel, and everything between them is “at end”. Detached self-reflection is required by most people at some stages of life (Vice, 2006, p. 105). Isabel requires positive self-reflection to revitalize her mind and then gets back her power. Isabel is never wicked as Madame Merle, but she can be alert and stay away from Madame Merle when they meet. From now on, Madame Merle is no longer the ideal image that Isabel idolizes. In contrast, she is an unwelcome and wicked woman that Isabel is determined to pass through. Consequently, there is nothing uncomfortable and harmful can be seen in the face of Madame Merle when Isabel looks at her again. When Isabel observes the confidence of Madame Merle is instantly replaced by a confession of helplessness, she knows that is a great moment for her, “a moment of

triumph” that she has been longing for (James, 2007, pp. 564-565). After all, Isabel successfully fights for herself and terminates her long-term unhealthy relationship with Madame Merle, as described in the narration, Isabel would never accuse her, never reproach her; perhaps because she never would give her the opportunity to defend herself (James, 2007, p. 565).

To Embrace Love

Emerson (1982, p. 178) claimed that nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. No one can be responsible for our lives except us; therefore, we are able to create our lives without asking others’ permission. This attitude is clearly shown in *Portrait*. Before she marries Osmond, Isabel is too proud and idealistic to comprehend and accept the dark side of human nature in the real world. On the contrary, she is foolishly choosing to cultivate the proud ideal of things in defiance of the ordinary world (Moody, 1989, p. 26). Because of this impractical perception, Isabel is misled by Osmond to assume that marrying him is what she wants. Only when she enters his life, will she break the perfect but false image of Osmond that she creates. After that, she is able to use her sad experience as a catalyst to transform into a real lady living in the world with an accountable and responsible attitude. As shown in the narration of *Portrait*, it was a proof of strength—It was a proof that she should some day be happy again (James, 2007, p. 574). After she successfully expels Madame Merle, Isabel is determined to fly to England and visit dying Ralph before his death. Her aim is to admit her mistake and release her repressed sufferings in front of Ralph.

Before the death of his father Mr. Touchett, Ralph asks him to change his will, as he says, “What I want is that you should kindly relieve me of my superfluity and give it to Isabel. Divide my inheritance into two equal halves and give the second half to her”. The only reason is because Ralph wants to give Isabel a chance to do absolutely what she likes. As he went on: “If she has an easy income, she will never have to marry for a support. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free” (James, 2007, p. 187). Ralph insists his request although his father ponders that this chance might let her “fall a victim to the fortune-hunters”. In contrast, Ralph replies: “That’s a risk, and it has entered into my calculation. I think it is appreciable, but I think it is small, and I am prepared to take it” (James, 2007, pp. 189-190). Sadly, Ralph never anticipates that Isabel who is fond of freedom so much would ultimately give up her freedom and succumb to Osmond.

The dilemma is that what Ralph perceives of Isabel’s decision cannot be understood by Isabel at the same time. At that time, Isabel is not aware that she has given up her freedom when she consents to marry Osmond; she only feels that she is in love and has to defend for her choice. We can say that Isabel needs to experience her mistaken marriage in order to understand what Ralph perceives. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles (Emerson, 1982, p. 203). Though the timing that Isabel chooses to grow up cannot be predicted by Ralph, what Ralph does for her however remains deeply in her mind. That is the reason why she has to meet Ralph again, telling him what she has learned and transformed through her experience in marriage. When Isabel confesses her mistakes in front of Ralph and lets him release his disappointment of her, she is mature enough to let go her discomfort as well as regain her self-reliance. It is obviously the power of love that connects them tightly again as before.

When Isabel says that Osmond marries her only for her money, Ralph does not scorn her but encourages her to let all the miseries go, as he replies, “I do not believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little”. He also suggests her to cherish what she has learned from her experience, as he wants her to remember that “If you have been hated, you have also been loved” (James, 2007, p. 591). Before his

death, Ralph tells Isabel, “You will not lose me—You will keep me. Keep me in your heart; I shall be nearer to you than I have ever been. Dear Isabel, life is better; for in life, there is love. Death is good, but there is no love” (James, 2007, p. 589). Ralph’s ceaseless affection to Isabel and his ghostly figure, “a dim, hovering figure in the dimness of the room” (James, 2007, p. 592) that appears to inform Isabel of his death will finally become an unshakable power of love that keeps supporting her free self constantly. Until now, Isabel’s eyes open to accept the imperfection of life and human beings though she decides to go back to Rome.

For Isabel, her return to Rome does not indicate a mere surrender to the conventional force of the marriage vow (Kettle, 1975, p. 683). Contrarily, it is a crucial point that proves Isabel has regained her self-reliance as a truly free person. As Taylor (2002, p. 138) also commented, Isabel returns to the scene of her error, for recognition of her own complicity enables her to retain a form of freedom, freedom not of the absolute variety but one exerted against the limits of chosen circumstances. She is no longer an impulsive and ignorant girl who does everything by her instinct and imagination but a mature woman who can be the master of her “self-determined life” (Pippin, 2000, p. 142) confronting any limited circumstances.

Developing from an inexperienced girl to a mature lady, Isabel makes her life meaningful as an impressive work of art. Even if Isabel falls into the bitters of life through her imprudent and flawed self, she is developed to overcome her weakness, take responsibility for what she has done and decide her future. What she learns from is to love her imperfect life no matter what happens. As Weisbuch argued (1998):

Isabel’s final choice, to return to her marriage, is her triumph, as this choice to marry in the first place is her utter defeat...Her decision, then, has nothing to do with resignation, nor with duty. She returns not at all to save Osmond; indeed, she could ruin him, given her knowledge. Though she never will do that and he may never even know that she could, the power in this marriage has shifted. (p. 115)

After all, Isabel transforms into an independent person who does no longer be victimized; her return to Rome is a “renewed commitment to life” (Veeder, 1992, p. 196), with which she can appreciate everything and live with self-reliance and freedom.

Conclusions

In his *The Art of Fiction*, James (1984, p. 65) claimed that do not think too much about optimism and pessimism, try and catch the color of life itself. This statement not only reflects James’ stance on life, but also indicates his attitude towards his heroes and heroines. To create a self-reliant portrait placed in front of his readers, James showed us how Isabel gets back her innate free self as her inevitable spiritual development. Isabel’s consciousness of her suffering is represented by James in terms of her capacity to establish correspondences between art and life (Turner, 1980, p. 236). By accepting her flawed self and revealing her thought to Madame Merle, Isabel is still free. In short, Isabel is developed to make her view broad and set her mind free.

When Isabel chooses to return to Rome, her marital life is no longer the same. It is no longer a misery but a down-to-earth life practice that she is going to live through. As Taylor (2002, p. 140) argued, Isabel’s “freedom” is the ability to brave future hardship, for, James seems to suggest, humanity is embodied in this process of ceaseless confrontation. After all, Isabel’s bitterness has been released, and a beneficial way of living is ahead of her to experience.

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