

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 01 Lecture Number 07
Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady – Chapter 21 to 35 (Lecture 7)

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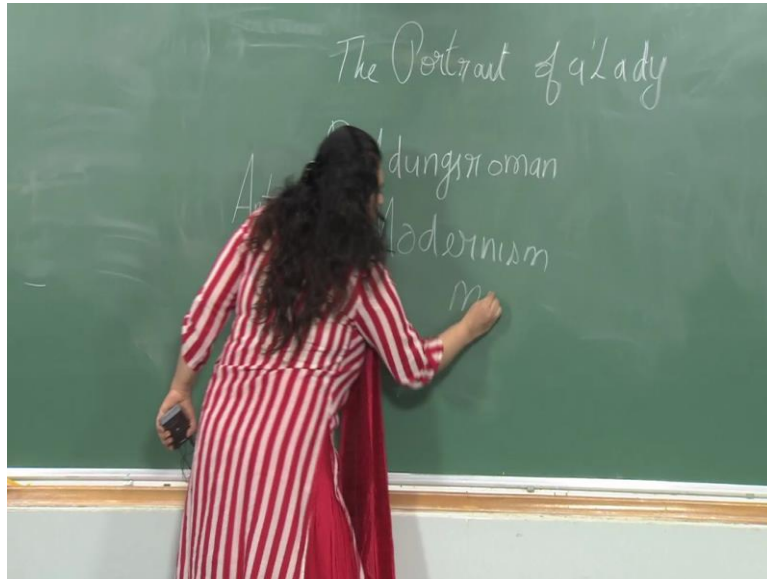


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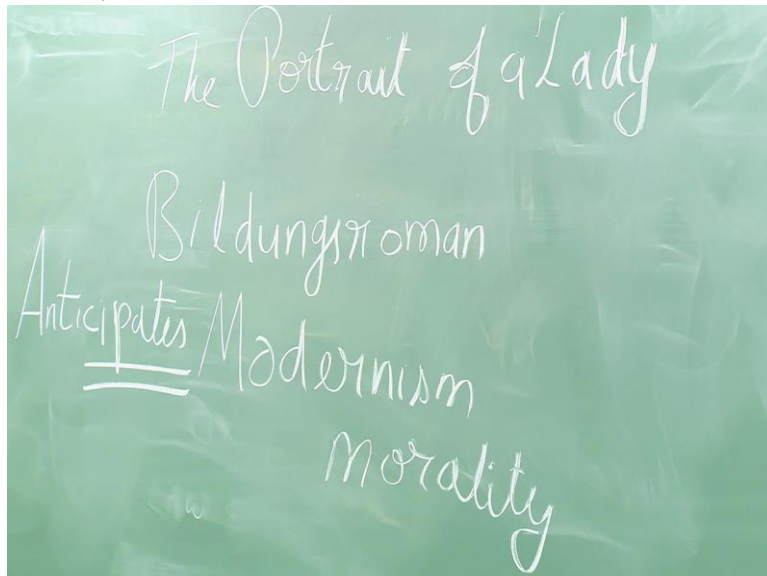
Professor: So at the beginning while talking about The Portrait of a Lady we have been talking about the novelist Henry James and how he anticipates modernism please be aware I am not calling him a modernist. We know who the modernists are. But there are certain features in Henry James and I said that these features were present in the works of Henry James and later on they were present very conspicuously in the works of the so-called modernists.

So what features are we, what have you realized? I mean you are on chapter thirty or so. What have you discovered? Some certain forms of interior monologue, certain experimentations with points of view and also the fact that characterization, Ok, now he is a, generally we refer to Henry James as a writer who had a very strong moral sense Ok, deep sense of morality in his books. Now what morality are we talking about?

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Professor: Look at this particular chapter 23, 23, meeting of Isabel and Gilbert Osmond. I hope you are there on chapter 23. Gilbert Osmond came to see Madame Merle.

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Professor: Now again this is a setup. This man has been praised to the skies, to the limits by? By Madame Merle; Isabel Archer and now, now that you are somewhat familiar with The Age of Innocence, you remember Newland Archer? Yes that's our hero and Isabel Archer is our heroine. I am not making any comment here; major comment here but just trying to draw your attention to that Edith Wharton considered Henry James as her mentor, yeah.

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. Professor: So you will find here

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Professor: if you are into that kind of literature, then you will find the kinds of overlaps that happen in the works of both these writers. They were very similar, extremely alike in several senses.

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Professor: Ok, Gilbert Osmond came to see Madame Merle, who presented him to the young lady lurking at the other side of the room. Isabel took on this occasion little part in the talk; she scarcely even smiled when the others turned to her invitingly; she sat there as if she had been at the play and had paid even a large sum for her place.

Now what do you understand by that?

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Professor: She has been a, the major part of the conversation is taking place between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, these two fascinating, sparkling characters in the eyes of Isabel, Ok and they are holding the stage and she is a mere spectator. , what, what meaning can you derive from this?

Student: The marriage is arranged sort of.

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Student: and Isabel

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Professor: Isabel will always spectator against at her own wedding, yeah, so this is going to be her fate, Ok. But here why do we get the impression that she is just like a teenager gawking and being overawed by these two very sterling characters? Ok, sparking, fascinating characters who have so much to offer, so much to talk about where as she feels tongue tied in their presence. She doesn't feel that she is up to the mark where these two people are concerned. And do you think this is a very peculiar where Isabel is concerned? She is a girl who never stops talking.

At one point somebody made a comment that she is always contradicting people, she never agrees with people but here she is absolutely mesmerized overawed by these very intelligent seemingly very bright people. She doesn't think she, she is their equal Ok, and that's again the dichotomy between Americans and Europeans. That's what Americans have been, you know that's a part of the American psyche, you are never as good as the sophisticated European.

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Professor: so Mrs. Touchett was not present, and these two had it, for the effect of brilliancy, all their own way.

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Professor: So, effect of brilliancy, the way they talk, the way they converse and don't you find it very strange that the idea that they have been, these two have been lovers at one point, is never brought up. Yeah, is never, ever hinted at.

Student: The Countess

Professor: The Countess, yes but her part comes much later in the novel, Ok when it is she who reveals the plot to Isabel Archer

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Professor: but here these two that is the way

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Professor: these people plan the entire plan setup. They organize the entire setup; that if you had been lovers at one point; why not reveal it to them, just for the sake of honesty? Yeah, money matters more,

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Professor: because the idea was

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Professor: to present Gilbert Osmond as something, extraordinary, larger than life character. Ok he, he is way above having relationships, adulterous relationships with women, married women particularly and even fathering a child with her. We have to remember that Madame Merle had Pansy when she was very much married to Monsieur Merle. So that's the whole sinister plot.

Now what's so wrong with all this? What's so wrong? Let's assume Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond were lovers at one point, they are no longer lovers now and knowing Isabel Archers' proclivity for brilliant men, challenging men, Madame Merle has, in a way, done a

huge favor to Isabel. She never hid the fact that Gilbert does nothing for a living. She never hides the fact that he has a daughter; she never hides the fact that he has no money.

Student: (()) talks about it, it is that exaggerated modesty

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Student: that is another factor.

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Student: Even in Madame Merle's character, it is not that she exaggerates other qualities

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Student: It is her modesty that is exaggerated. So that is what draws Isabel towards her. So similarly Gilbert Osmond's exaggeration, the honesty, how Madame Merle is completely honest about him, it could be another reason Isabel is attracted to

Professor: Yeah, so

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Professor: she, it looks like whatever is there about Gilbert Osmond has been revealed to Isabel Archer. There is nothing, Ok, all his sterling qualities as well as his shortcomings, so called shortcomings of not having enough money, Ok, doesn't matter. I have so much. He can live off me, my husband Ok. Anyway Isabel is not the kind of woman who ever cared much about owning things. And she says Ok, so my husband, he does care about owning things. He has the taste for the, that is because he is a man, he is a cultivated man and I am not.

I am just a naive American girl. He is a cultivated European man. Naturally he has every right to acquire things. At the end she does not realize that she herself is one of the things that he covers. And then she becomes a part of the furniture. And he is extremely fond of beautiful, he is a collector Ok, and collecting is also kind of fetish. People collect and collect and collect and don't know what to do, but they just, they want to collect and add it to their collection. She is a part of his collection, of even women. Ok, that's what he has been doing all along. But this fact is hidden from him. And so what is there at the center, the moral center, the theme of deception and as I have been saying again and again that this is, the theme of deception which is very strong in Henry James.

So there is nothing wrong, man not having money, no one finds, he never lies about it, his financial status. He never says I have lot of money and I lost my money. He never had any money to begin with. And he has no other qualification; that he is going to earn more money. He is very forthright about it. There is no lying about that. What is, what is the moral problem here? What is the moral dilemma here; the deception. I considered her my best friend and she hid something, a vital piece of information from me. That is important.

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Professor: They talked of the Florentine, the Roman, the cosmopolite world, and might have been distinguished performers figuring for a charity. Now what does it mean?

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Professor: Distinguished performers figuring for a charity, you know performers at one point they used to perform before the very wealthy, very rich class of people seeking like patronage. It looks like the entire thing has been, it's an act, this brilliant conversation that these two are holding forth, is a part of the act and who is going to be their patron, the wealthy patron, Isabel, yeah.

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Professor: It had all the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal. If you practice your presentations very well, they will automatically look extremely enlightened, very well presented, it looked like the entire thing had been rehearsed. Is it from Isabel's point of view?

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Professor: It is from omniscient point of view. Ok,

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Professor: he is telling us all the things

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Professor: Madame Merle appealed to her as if she had been on the stage, but she could ignore any learnt cue without spoiling the scene--though of course she thus put dreadfully in the wrong the friend who had told Mr. Osmond she could be depended on. This was no matter for worse, once; even if more had been involved she could have made no attempt to shine. There was something in the visitor that checked her and held her in suspense--made it more important she should get an impression of him than that she should produce one herself. Besides, she had little skill in producing an impression which she knew to be expected: nothing could be happier, in general, than to seem dazzling, but she had a perverse unwillingness to glitter by arrangement.

Mr. Osmond, to do him justice, had a well-bred air of expecting nothing, a quiet ease that covered everything, even the first show of his wit, of his own wit. This was the more grateful as his face, his head, was sensitive; he was not handsome, but he was fine, as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi. And his very voice was fine--the more strangely that, with its clearness, it yet somehow wasn't sweet. This had really; this had had really to do with making her abstain from interference.

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Professor: It's a very complex complicated character. He wears an air about him that he has; he hasn't come here for anything. He hasn't come here with an ulterior motive of winning over the lady, what has he come here for is just a performance. Madame Merle is a little shaky but not him, yeah. He never let; he never lets the guard down. Ok and this makes, you know, this is Henry James' way of telling us that he is all the more dangerous, Ok. With Madame Merle there is a hint that her facade may be shaking and she is not at her best, she is brilliant today. They have rehearsed the whole thing today but there are times of lapses. In him, there is none.

Ok, he is very well prepared, so well prepared that he makes the whole thing look extremely effortless and therefore, so he is, therefore he is often called, Gilbert Osmond is often referred to as one of the most despicable villains in all of Henry James' works, because he wears his cleverness so well. There is never a chink in his armor. And he never repents, Ok. This is one quality, I mean, of a supreme villain. There is not a tinge of repentance till the end. So whatever he does to, he destroys whoever comes in his way. He manipulates people; later on how does he treat his own daughter? Come on, I am sure it comes by chapter thirty four. Yes Student: She is the model of the (())

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Professor: She has been raised

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Professor: to be the model,

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Professor: Does she doesn't know any other way?

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Professor: she doesn't know any other way.

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Student: He told not to pass the door and so she doesn't.

Professor: Yes.

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Professor: so do we come across her admirer, her suitor? Not yet. Ok.

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Professor: We are also talking about the novel in terms of its bildungsroman quality, Ok, portrait as a bildungsroman. So far, what are the features of bildungsroman? Azhar, can you tell? It is all there but what are the features of bildungsroman? Ok do you think this novel is leading towards, it is called one of the greatest bildungsroman novel ever written. Ok so what are the features? I just want you to go back.

Student: Bildungsroman is usually associated with the male character so that is not there, for one.

Professor: Ok go on

Student: But attaining maturity and revelation at the end and all that is there.

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Professor: Ok, so

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Professor: just want to correct you at this point that bildungsroman is historically associated with male characters because they were the only ones written about but it does not mean bildungsroman should necessarily map out only the lives of male character, it can be very well applied to female characters as well. Ok it is a bildungsroman, it is about a woman who comes of age, Ok her growth, and travel and spaces, I think they play a very strong part in most novels of bildungsroman. Ok so the hero or the heroine, they travel, they explore, it is a journey, it's a metaphorical as well as a literal journey.

It is not just, very often bildungsroman can also be a journey, or spiritual growth, a spiritual journey, Ok, you know but more often than not, it is a mix of both, physical as well as figurative journey. Ok, she, so physically also she traverses across places, countries, continents, Ok, there is a growth. All the places she goes to, it sort of adds to her growth. So the girl who comes from Albany, the beginning, she was just reading a book. After that do you ever see her reading a book, because she has met so many interesting characters who shape, who inform her character.

Student: (())

Professor: Absolutely

Student: Towards the end

Professor: She has seen the world.

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Student: Yes

Professor: She has seen the world and absolutely,

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Professor: Absolutely

Student: Towards the end

Professor: She has seen the world. She has seen the world and absolutely, she is mature now. Ok, so the journey may not have been extremely pleasant but she has seen the world and perhaps at one point this is what she wanted to do. She wants to experience, that's what Ralph Touchett tells her, drink the cup to the last drop.

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Professor: I go to the next page where Ralph Touchett, She thought Ralph's judgments distorted by his trials, but she flattered herself she had learned to make allowance for that. "Do I know him?" said her cousin. They are talking about Gilbert Osmond. "Oh, yes, I

'know' him; not well, but on the whole enough. I've never cultivated his society, and he apparently has never found mine indispensable to his happiness."

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Professor: Ok, naturally a person like Gilbert Osmond so cagey, how he describes him. Right, it is a house, it is totally uncommunicative. And Ralph Touchett is anything but uncommunicative. He talks and talks and tries to understand and then probe in deep into the psyche of people and generally he may be weak in health, he may be dying but he is very alive in other respects whereas Gilbert Osmond who is in the prime of his prowess, physical prowess, he is already dead where his spirituality is concerned. He lost the, most important he has lost capacity to love people. Ok he just owns people. So he owns Madame Merle, he owns his daughter, he owns his wife. He owns things.

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Professor: Oh yes, where was I, indispensable to his happiness. Who is he, what is he? He's a vague, unexplained American who has been living these thirty years, or less, in Italy. Why do I call him unexplained? Only as a cover for my ignorance; I don't know his antecedents, his family, his origins. For all I do know he may be a prince in disguise; this is the second time the man is referred to a prince. Madame Merle calls him a prince in exile, which is more, which is quite romantic, a prince who has been sent out from his country. For Ralph he may be a prince in disguise but a disguise. He is a camouflaged character. He rather looks like one, by the way--like a prince who has abdicated in a fit of fastidiousness and has been in a state of disgust ever since. He used to live in Rome; but of late years he has taken up his abode here; here as in Florence. I remember hearing him say that Rome has grown vulgar. He has a great dread of vulgarity.

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Professor: What is vulgarity according to Henry James' times? What is vulgar for you? This is, this is, yeah I am interested in knowing what you people find vulgar. It can have various connotations today. Ok, it can be modern. It can be artistic. A poet, a painter is using his artistic license here, Ok, so what is all this? And Gilbert Osmond is from yet another period. Henry James and his characters are very modern for that particular, so you see why Henry James, again the question.

It's also the language, Ok the kind of language he uses, the kind of exact; he is very precise in his use of words. The words are important. And when he uses a word when something like vulgar appears to Gilbert Osmond, it is not what you are talking about, what vulgar means to you all, it's not just a word here which he says is a vulgar word. Rome is getting vulgar and he has a great dread of vulgarity. What is vulgarity, yes Ashwin?

Student: (())

Professor: Not at all. Gilbert Osmond is above all these things. Of all the people he cannot be, morality of that kind is not a; See when I say moral center, moral universe of Henry James I am not talking about very let's say traditional concepts of morality such as chastity, Ok. I am not talking of relationships, moral and what is moral or immoral about relation. That's totally beyond that, everything is acceptable, even for Gilbert Osmond. Now tell me for Gilbert Osmond, what is morally apprehensible, reprehensible?

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Student: (())

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Professor: Perhaps, vulgar for Gilbert Osmond or for a man like Gilbert Osmond is commonality, common place yeah. Common kinds of people, common acts and one of the common acts of the nouveau riche is show off, is to showoff of their newly acquired wealth, Ok. That's what he finds vulgar. We have to be very careful about what is vulgar for him and what is vulgar for us. It's not the same thing.

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Professor: Ok, so he has a great dread of vulgarity; that's his special line; he hasn't any other that I know of. He lives on his income, which I suspect of not being vulgarly large. Ok, you often use the word filthy rich. Ok, so he is not filthy rich. And he is being very sarcastic here. Um He's a poor but honest gentleman, that's what he calls himself. He married young and lost his wife, and I believe he has a daughter. He also has a sister, who's married to some small Count or other, of these parts; I remember meeting her of old. She's nicer than he, I should think, but rather impossible. I remember there used to be some stories about her. But I don't, I don't think I recommend you to know her. But why don't you ask Madame Merle about these people? She knows them all much better than I." "I ask you because I want your opinion as well as hers," "A fig for my opinion! If you fall in love with Mr. Osmond what will you care for that?"

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Professor: Ok, here is again Ralph Touchett who knows his cousin quite well and if you have begun to fall in a person like Mr. Osmond, go ahead and commit your blunder. He doesn't stop her. You see this is important.

Student: (())

Professor: Osmond?

Student: Ralph, Ralph

Student: Touchett

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Student: He genuinely believes that she had ability to see through (())

Professor: He thinks

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Professor: that she is, may be infatuated, maybe she is attracted but I don't think she is going to go as far as ending at getting married to him. Ok, so this is something he trusts that she has innate sense of some kind of sense, some common sense in her. And that will eventually prevent her from making a blunder, decision that is so, so blundering. Ok, but that doesn't happen.

Ok. Now I move on a few couple of pages

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Professor: and what Gilbert Osmond talks about himself. Italy, all the same, had spoiled the great many people; he was even fatuous enough to believe at times that he himself might have been a better man if he had spent less of his life there. It made one idle and, it made one idle and dilettantish and second-rate; it had no discipline for the character, didn't cultivate in

you, otherwise expressed, the successful social and other “cheek” that flourished in Paris and London. “We’re sweetly provincial,” said Mr. Osmond, “and I’m perfectly aware that I myself am as rusty as a key that has no lock to fit it. It polishes me up a little to talk with you--not that I venture to pretend I can turn that very complicated lock I suspect your intellect of being.

But you’ll be going away before I’ve seen you three times, and I shall perhaps never see you after that. That’s what it is to live in a country that people come to. When they’re disagreeable here it’s bad enough; when they’re agreeable it’s still worse. As soon as you like them they’re off again. I’ve been deceived too often; I’ve ceased to form attachments, to permit myself to feel attractions. “You mean to stay--to settle? That would be really comfortable.” “Ah yes, your aunt’s a sort of guarantee; I believe she may be depended on.” “Oh, she’s an old Florentine; I mean literally an old one; not a modern outsider. She’s a contemporary of the Medici.” Who are the Medici’s?

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Student: (()) Italian family

Student: Galileo

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Professor: One of those great Italian families, aristocratic, when we were doing, when we were doing, Galileo. We came across the great Ludovico's family Yeah, he comes from one of the great Italian families and the Medici's is one of the, so she, she may be the Englishwoman but at heart she is a Florentine. And what is Florence depicted as, represented as, a very provincial place. And look at the way he flatters her. Someone like you as modern, as elegant, such an intellectual being, Ok what in of great interest can you find in a place like this and in a man like me?

And I have grown very cynical about life. I don't find, form attachments easily because I know where I am living, people of your stature, they don't really like to stay here forever. Ok so this is. I am definitely not one for you. By saying that, he is making her feel more attracted towards him. He is playing it down. So that's the way some people do operate.

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Professor: This is what Isabel thinks of him.

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Professor: Next page, His sensibility had governed him--possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything--his taste alone perhaps, as a sick man consciously incurably, incurable consults at last only his lawyer: that was what made him so different from everyone else. Ralph had

something of this same quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship.

Now these are important words that appear when you talk of Henry James' characters, dilettantish and connoisseur. What is dilettante? Who is a dilettante? Don't disappoint me so much. Please tell me who is a dilettante?

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Student: Who does not...

Student: Person who pretends to

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Student: really like things like high culture

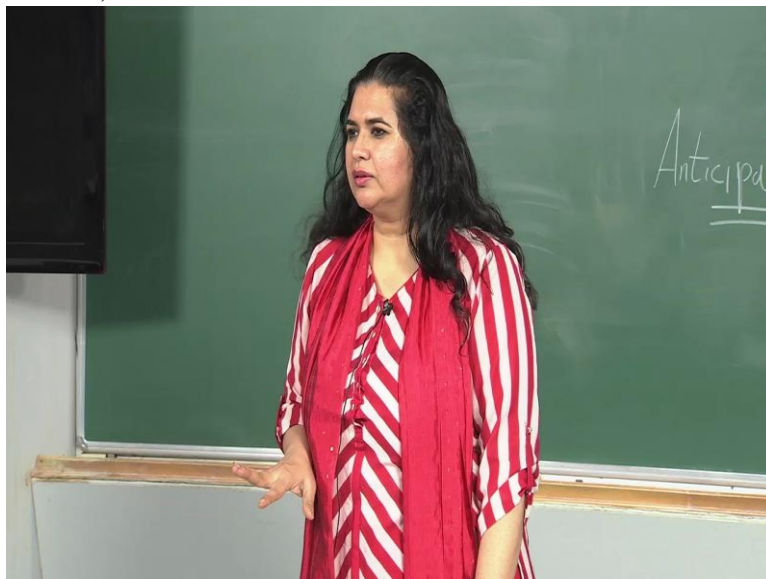
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Student: but actually has no real knowledge.

Professor: Is that what you have been told?

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Professor: A dilettante is not necessarily a pretender. Ok, a dilettante dabbles in several things. A dilettante person dabbles in several different things. That's how, why he refers to himself as a dilettante? Ok, he is a dabbler, he is a sampler. He takes a sample of this thing and that thing and yeah, he may not be a master of all, Ok he may not be the best judge but he has, so because of his interest in too many things of high culture, perhaps and it is always high culture, it is never popular culture or low culture, it's always high culture, matters of high culture, he is interested, gravely interested, seriously interested but never is able to master things, Ok. Connoisseur...?

Yes, yeah. He calls himself a dilettante, she thinks of him as a connoisseur. And because he has expressed so much of interest in her, she thinks of herself as his priceless work of art, that you see this connoisseur of everything, he represents everything that is of good taste to her. This man with excellent taste, little money but how does it matter in love? Ok, but at least he has great taste.

Alright I will skip a little bit.

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Professor: and I come to this point, the idea of disinterestedness. That is the work of art that pleases for itself and not for any other reasons so we are coming to that point. It has, this is also a very interesting point from literary criticism point of view. A work of art, who talked about it? Work of art pleases for itself, only for itself and not for any, art for art's sake, Ok. Yeah? Adorno, Adorno is pop culture. Yes, yeah.

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Professor: The entire Frankfurt school yeah, but I think you are getting the two things mixed here. Are you talking about dilettante? Dilettantishness that you may;

Student: (())

Professor: See it has been the part of literary criticism since the days of Matthew Arnold, right, he talks. Uninterestedness is different from disinterestedness. Uninterested is you are not at all interested. Disinterest is dispensing with the prejudices, yeah. So you have an objective, you are objective; you are able to look at certain things with an objective and approach and disinterested approach. It is not to be confused with uninterest or lack of interest. Ok, this thing has been discussed by Matthew Arnold.

So coming to Isabel

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Professor: she wants to be disinterested as if she was the only person who is in danger of not being so. Will he be so disinterested when he has the spending of her money? That was her idea before your father's death, and it has acquired new charms for her since. She ought to marry someone of those, someone of whose disinterestedness she shall herself be sure; and there would be no such proof of that as having a fortune of his own, his having a fortune of his own." "My dear mother, I'm not afraid," Ralph answered. "She's making fools of us all. She'll please herself, of course; but she'll do so by studying human nature at close quarters and yet retaining her liberty. She has started on an exploring expedition, and I don't think she'll change her course, at the outset, at a signal from Gilbert Osmond. She may have slackened speed for an hour, but before we know it she'll be steaming away again. Excuse another metaphor."

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Professor: What metaphor is used for her, metaphor, train, or that of this vehicle? She has chosen her own, she is on an expedition, she slackened speed for an hour but before we know she will be steaming away soon, Ok, excuse me for this kind of a metaphor, perhaps this is a vulgar metaphor to describe a lady. That's what she is, she is on an expedition.

Now, nobody will ever tell you the motive of why she married a person like Gilbert Osmond, in spite of knowing all his weaknesses. Ok, why does she choose him? And that is another, you know, some kind of a psychological that requires some kind of psychological probing into a character like Isabel Archer. Perhaps it's her own provinciality that affects and that is an important concept, key concept in Henry James. Provincial characters seeking out the world, Ok provincial people, small town people on an expedition and then learning things about themselves so we go back to your concept of bildungsroman, male or female but again we are talking, the people from starting of small with very provincial settings and then exploring the world and then soaking in the impressions, Ok, the various kind of people they meet, they come across.

Ok so I will wind up today's lecture by talking about Henry James's notion of art for art's sake because someone, I think at the beginning of this class asked me what is such a great difference between Henry James and the so called Aesthetes, the so-called people who, the people like Oscar Wilde and all that. So it is a fact that Aesthetes traditionally believed in crowding one's life with maximum sensations. Who are the Aesthetes, apart from Oscar Wilde, give me names fast.

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Student: Rossetti

Professor: Rossetti, Ok, the entire Pre-Raphaelite group, Ok.

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Professor: Walter Pater, have you come across Walter Pater? Unfortunately no, Ok. Take down the names somewhere, Walter Pater, the Pre-Raphaelites, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire, you remember Baudelaire from France, yes.

At the same time, James repudiates the art for art's sake more for purely aesthetic decadent art. So money as I have been telling you about is very important. Material things of life are extremely important in Henry James as well as in Edith Wharton. We have done some little bit of Edith Wharton and don't you agree material things are so important? Yes. You are

defined by the houses you live in, the clothes you wear, the kind of music you listen to. If you are not listening to opera, you don't belong to our society. The art work is your hanging, so it's again like you know the Americans, Americans who had newly acquired so much of wealth and the dying Europe, the impoverished Europe. Europe was almost finished by that time while America was on the rise, all that new money.

Can you draw some parallels, this is interesting, between that world and today's world? The Old Order is changing, the new money, the growth of new money, aren't you seeing all that around yourself again?

Student: Yes

Professor: Yes?

Student: Post-liberalization

Professor: Post-liberalization, aren't we finding that suddenly a new crop of moneyed class is coming up, Ok and the old stable order has completely changed? Yeah? The so-called celebrity culture, Ok, people becoming famous and well-known overnight just because, that's what has happened to Isabel, don't you think so? Yeah, she is like, what do you call this, star of a reality show. She has inherited all this wealth and suddenly she has become a glamorous icon, otherwise why would Gilbert Osmond be ever interested in someone like her? She is well beneath him in every respect. It's the money that has made her an overnight star. Perhaps you can compare the two. Ok, so we continue in our next class that's on Tuesday

(Professor – student conversation ends)