

American Literature & Culture
Prof. Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Mod 01 Lecture Number 08
Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady – Chapter 21 to 34 (Lecture 8a)

(Refer Slide Time 00:18)



(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: So let's talk about, as we come to the closing of *The Portrait of a Lady*, let's talk about Henry James and his idea of telling characters and showing characters

(Refer Slide Time 00:39)



Professor: telling characters and showing characters

How much do you think, he believes in telling or showing?

(Refer Slide Time 00:49)



Student: Showing

(Refer Slide Time 00:52)



Professor: Ok, so now this is what we were talking about at the beginning of our class or lectures on Henry James. Now how far do you think is this relevant to *The Portrait of a Lady*? If you think that he is showing you then how far does he succeed, any response there? Why do you think that he subscribes to the theory of showing character? This is something very important. This is, I think, the key to very intellectual and cerebral kind of a writer like Henry James or run-of-the-mill writer, Ok? May be not run-of-the-mill but also those who are not so intellectually driven, Ok, so there is, this is something that that proves like the touchstone, writers like Henry James, they believe in showing characters, Ok. Now how far do you think does he succeed in his attempts here?

(Refer Slide Time 02:01)



Student: Especially characters such as Madame Merle, initially we have no, if he, if he believes in telling characters then right at the beginning aware of her plans, or how she plans with proceeding with Isabel's life

Professor: Ok

Student: But it's only towards the end that we fully realize whether it is Osmond's character or Madame Merle's character's intentions, so.

(Refer Slide Time 02:24)



Professor: Alright, good, so Madame Merle is never shown to, never told to us, never described, the magnitude of her deception is never revealed to us in words but is only shown to us, Ok. So no one is going to turn around and say, look you did this to me, Ok or I am planning to do, but there are certain clues given all over the place. For example, when during

the last session we were talking about Madame Pearle sorry Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond and what were we told? That the conversation appeared as if it has been a, a play, a rehearsal; a rehearsal has already been done and here they were just enacting it, a performance, enacting a performance for the benefit of Isabel Archer. Ok, that's like showing character. These two characters are extremely deceptive, manipulative but he is not going to say all these in words. Ok, he is just going to describe you the situation, describe the situation to you and you have to draw your own inferences.

Gilbert Osmond and his house, now when we were first taken to this house, we were told that this house had deep walls, high walls, dark alleys, it wasn't very well lit and later on we are told this house had eyelids, right. And it turned its face away, it wasn't very communicative. This house did not communicate well. So again we are, now is it a telling way or showing way?

Student: Showing way

Professor: Showing way, he tells you a lot of things but he is not telling you anything about Gilbert Osmond. Through the metaphor of the house, Ok through this architectural imagery he tells you something about Gilbert Osmond. So again he shows you, he is not describing the character of, you remember David Copperfield and there is a character called Uriah Heep, he is a master manipulator and there is a gesture motif which he does all the time, he rubs his long thin hands, remember in case whenever he is up to something, he starts rubbing, yeah. Ashwin does that. What were those telling characters?

So, Uriah Heep says this so and so thing when he takes over the property of aunt, David Copperfield's aunt, Ok. He is the manager and then we realize that he has taken the complete control over the property and then he always says something rubbing his long thin hands and then he plans to marry Agnes Wickfield who is a childhood friend of David Copperfield and then when he announces that, again he is rubbing, and you know he always says, there is one standard line dialog, again a motif. What is that? He rubs his long thin hands all the time, the fingers all the time but there is something else that he keeps on saying about himself, refers to himself; I am an umble man, I am an umble man, he is hardly umble but this is the way a hypocrite would behave.

And that's Charles Dickens way of telling you about all, about this character. So very beautifully done, Ok, Charles Dickens happens to be one of the greatest storytellers, where as what is Henry James, greatest of storytellers or? Painter of characters, Ok so therefore, yeah, so he, a person who is interested in driving a story, a plot he will use these kinds of motifs the way David Copperfield Charles Dickens does in David Copperfield. The person who is more interested in depicting characters in very poetic way, not in prosaic way, he will tell you something, he will show you characters. I mean you read writer like, who is the author of The Devil Wears Prada? No idea? Have you read the novel?

Student: Seen the movie

Professor: Seen the movie, have you read, no one has read the novel, Ok so, Shopaholic series?

(Refer Slide Time 07:15)



Student: Sophie

Professor: Yeah, have you read any of her works?

Student: Sophie

Professor: Sophie Kinsella

(Refer Slide Time 07:20)



Professor: have you read the novel? Have you read the novels? Ok now there is a difference between the poetic rendering of a story and between very prosaic. So I would say these writers are extremely prosaic. They keep on and on and on about how they this is happening, somebody is harassing, torturing, bullying them, how life is happening. There is lot of telling. So I find that very prosaic but here Isabel will never talk about how much she is being bullied or exploited or manipulated by these characters, so that's old and extremely poetically. Chapter 24 for me,

(Refer Slide Time 08:01)



Professor: His sensibility had governed him--possibly governed him too much. There is a difference between sense and sensibility. Jane Austen tells you. What is the difference, Rukma; you nod your head so vigorously?

Student: I don't know Jane Austen's novel

Professor: So what's Rukma's opinion on that? What is sense and what is sensibility? Who can tell me; same things or different things, sense and sensibility? There are two sisters there, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Ok; one is governed by sense which is common sense. Remember rationality, remember we used to talk about rationality, in literary criticism you have done it, Age of Rationality, Age of Reason, are you aware of that, Azhar? Yeah and sensibility is more emotionally driven, that's the characteristic of the which period, as oppose to The Age of Reason, you have The Age

Student: (())

Professor: Romantic Age, Ok, so sensibility, sense is common sense, sensibility is feelings. Ok, one sister is, there is too much of sense in her and one sister is completely governed by the romantic imagination, yeah?

So this man has too much sense, that's what she is saying, no his sensibility had governed him. According to Isabel, he has heightened sensibilities, what is that, what does that mean? Heightened sensibility, she is not talking of sense, governed by sensibilities, highly emotional, highly aesthetic,

Student: Easily overcome by his (())

(Refer Slide Time 10:01)



Professor: Highly aesthetic

(Refer Slide Time 10:04)



Professor: highly refined, Ok extremely given to romantic imagination, perhaps this is what Isabel herself is. She projects her character on this person who she idolizes too much. This is the first man she had idolized, right? Yes, so this man is the projection of her own character. So far, Ok, later on it's a different story.

(Refer Slide Time 10:38)



Professor: It had made him impatient of vulgar troubles. Remember at one point he even declares that he has no patience with vulgarity, Rome is becoming too vulgar and we talked about vulgarity not in the common place sense of the term but vulgarity not as the way we understand vulgarity or obscenity but vulgar for people like Osmond is being too common, right? Common people are vulgar people, people who lack sensibility. Vulgar in Hemingway, vulgar in Tom Wolfe, when you will do the The Bonfire of the Vanities, it will mean

something else, vulgar here is just common person who has no refinement, no aesthetics, no sensibility, that's vulgar; had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history.

Again I will take you to this idea of nineteenth century phenomenon of aestheticism. That's how the aesthetes lived; constantly talking, negotiating, discussing, the works of art, the beauty, very little to do with the practical aspects of life. What was there to take care of the practical aspects of life? Most of them were wealthy people or were patronized by wealthy people. So the money was taken care of. In this case, Gilbert Osmond is not wealthy by himself but then he has, he is working towards it, Ok.

He is a man of refined sensibilities, he wants to, he is a collector, Ok and now he is going to find a patron in the form of his wife, Ok. We have been talking about art for art's sake and the aesthetic movement you remember that we were talking about, people like Goethe and Baudelaire and Flaubert and Mallarmé and Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater and we have already talked about the Aesthetic movement, it was also called the Decadent Movement, right, the Decadent movement where the idea was that the art should exist for the sake of itself and art should have no, none whatsoever to do with?

Student: Society

Professor: Society or even the moral aspect of it, Ok, so we have the didactic literature, aesthetes or the followers of Aesthetic movement did not believe in any sort of didacticism, which was about Art should also have a social message. Please be sensitive to these terms. So Aesthetic movement and Didactic movement; ideally it should be a mix of both, aesthetics completely divorce themselves from any thought of didacticism. Art should exist only for itself, that's the, that's the kind of person our man is, Gilbert Osmond.

(Refer Slide Time 13:49)

James: Notion of “Art for Art’s Sake”

- Aesthetes believed in crowding one’s life with maximum sensations;
- Repudiates the “art for art’s sake” mode of a purely aesthetic , decadent art.
- Freedom in James is impossible without independence from money & materialistic things.

(Refer Slide Time 13:50)

Rome

- Chapter 28, p. 310;



Professor: Ok so we have been talking about art for art sake, and then I take you to chapter 28 for me, page, page 310 for me. Look at the way it begins.

(Refer Slide Time 14:11)



Professor: Chapter 28, I am sorry it should be chapter 27 then it can't be 28 and we are talking about Rome here.

So chapter 27 opening lines, I may not attempt to report in its fullness our young woman's response to the deep appeal of Rome, to analyze her feelings as she trod the pavement of the Forum or to number her pulsations as she crossed the threshold of Saint Peter's. It is enough to say that her impression was such as might have been expected of a person of her freshness and her eagerness. She had always been fond of history, and here was history in the stones of the street and the atoms of the sunshine. She had an imagination that kindled at the mention of great deeds, and wherever she turned, some great deed had been acted. These things strongly moved her, but moved her all inwardly. It seemed to her companions that she talked less than usual, and Ralph Touchett, when he appeared to be looking listlessly and awkwardly over her head, was really dropping on her an intensity of observation. By her own measure she was very happy; she would even have been willing to take these hours for the happiest she was ever to know.

(Refer Slide Time 15:57)



Professor: And Rome does this to her, the happiest feeling. What sort of person does she come across?

Student: Adventurous

Professor: Adventurous. The romantic imagination, yes, so romantic, she is not like willing to take part in all these adventures, ok but she is happy to hear about these things, to sense these things, Ok. In this way, she is a kindled spirit of, Gilbert Osmond, Ok. None of the other suitors have been like this. They don't get carried away, moved to this extent by the splendor of stones and castles and old ruins but she does, Ok so, in this way, perhaps this is the genesis of her attraction towards Gilbert Osmond, love for old things, Ok. If you want to strike the metaphor, then you can, you can look at Gilbert Osmond himself, like an old, decaying thing in ruins, Ok and she takes a fancy towards, but why would anyone do that?

Student: She was always looking for exotic

Professor: She is always; perhaps that's part of her character. She was always looking for the exotic. Ok. Caspar Goodwood is too common place for him, for her, yeah.

Student: (())

Professor: Yes

Student: That's how she first takes fancy to him

Professor: Yes

Student: She was born in America and then Madame Merle comes and she goes for the most exotic (())

Professor: Please note that her aunt, Aunt Touchett, Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle, they are all Americans who are in exile, self exile but they are all living in European climes. So

they are in one way or the other, tainted by Europe, Ok and she gets carried away by this corrupt notion, that's what, Henry James is not going to tell you anything about who is corrupt and who is incorruptible or something like that. It's very clear to us that who is innocent for Henry James, for him, Ok; The Americans who live in America; Ok, Europeans who have been, sorry Americans who have been living in Europe for too long, they are already tainted and corrupt.

Student: (())

Professor: Mr. Touchett lives in England.

Student: Yeah but he is (())

Professor: So he has retained that American-ness in him, yeah. And now see when she goes and walks through the ruins of Rome she is also accompanied by Ralph Touchett and do you think again, he says I am going to be a spectator of your career? And here we find him watching over her, observing her very carefully, how she is responding to these, to Europe. That's what he is interested. This is one more thing, this image figures quite conspicuously in the novel, some place, The Dying Gladiator of the capital museum which she visits at one point. This is one of the architectural highlights of Rome, The Dying Gladiator and do you think it could be her or even her knight in rusty armor, Gilbert Osmond? The Dying Gladiator, yes, and this is one of the figures that she stops before and observes very carefully, The Dying Gladiator, so again Henry James is telling, is showing you something. He is showing you a work of art and perhaps leading you towards something else.

Student: (())

Professor: Could be, why not? Yeah, he is also there.

(Refer Slide Time 20:24)



Student: tell (()) as a gladiator

Professor: Yeah, a warrior

(Refer Slide Time 20:31)



Professor: you see even old Touchett, old man is dying, Ralph Touchett is anyway dying because of his weak lungs and Lord Warburton, we are talking about, he is dying breed. He is dying breed as in the feudal class, the British feudal class, that's also on the verge of collapse. So many people are dying, and so is Gilbert Osmond, yeah.

Chapter 33, there is a conversation between Mrs. Touchett and Isabel.

(Refer Slide Time 21:02)



Professor: Got it? Yeah, Aunt Lydia “If he’s not her friend he ought to be--after what she has done for him I shouldn’t have expected it of her; I’m disappointed.” “If you mean that Madame Merle has had anything to do with my engagement you’re greatly mistaken,” Isabel declared with a sort of ardent coldness. “You mean that your attractions were sufficient, without the gentleman’s having had to be lashed up? You’re quite right. They’re immense, your attractions, and he would never have presumed to think of you if she hadn’t put him up to it. He has a very good opinion of himself, but he was not a man to take trouble. Madame Merle took the trouble for him.”

Now what does this mean? It was a setup. It was a setup and this has been told to her several times by different people. Even Ralph Touchett cautions her but then, by this time she has gone way too far. “Be angry with me, not with him,” said the girl. “Oh, I’m always angry with you; that’s no satisfaction! Was it for this that you refused Lord Warburton?” “Please don’t go back to that. Why shouldn’t I like Mr. Osmond, since others have done so?” “Others, at their wildest moments, never wanted to marry him.” Liking him is something else altogether but marrying him, nobody, God forbid. There is nothing of him. “Then he can’t hurt me” “Do you think you’re going to be happy? No one’s happy, in such doings, you should know.” “I shall set the fashion then.

What does one marry for?” “What you will marry for, heaven only knows. People usually marry as they go into partnership--to set up a house. But in your partnership you’ll bring everything.” “Is it that Mr. Osmond isn’t rich? Is that what you’re talking about?” Isabel

asked. “He has no money; he has no name; he has no importance. I value such things and I have the courage to say it; I think they’re very precious. Many other people think the same, and they know, show it. But they give some other reason.” “I think I value everything that’s valuable. I care very much for money, and that’s why I wish Mr. Osmond to have a little.” Now you can figure this out.

(Refer Slide Time 23:26)



(Refer Slide Time 23:36)



Student: Isabel also tells Touchett at one time, it’s the fact that he has no substance.

(Refer Slide Time 23:41)



Professor: Therefore, all the more it adds to his attractions, yes. So therefore, I am marrying a perfect non-entity. So she wants perhaps a person to bask or maybe she thinks that this kind of partnership, partnership would work because here a woman is bringing in everything for a man. May be this is Henry James' notion of feminism, Ok, early feminism. Ok see Henry James used to give these things a lot of thought. He has written a great book called The Bostonians which is all about the rise of feminism in America, Ok and what he thinks of it. Perhaps these things were already being discussed in society, and then you know, equal status for men and women. So if women get into marriage just for the sake of security and money, why can't a man do that as well? That's her way. So that's perhaps Henry James' feminist take. But then does it work in our society that way?

(Professor – student conversation ends)