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**FEMALE SUFFERING IN HENRY JAMES'S NOVELS: THE AMERICAN,
DAISY MILLER, WASHINGTON SQUARE, THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY, THE
BOSTONIANS, AND THE WINGS OF A DOVE**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of
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PREFACE

We all live together, and those of us who love and know, live so most. We help each other even unconsciously, each in our own effort. Sorrow comes in great waves - no one can know that better than you - but it rolls over us, and though it may almost smother us it leaves us on the spot and we know that if it is strong we are stronger, inasmuch as it passes and we remain. It wears us, uses us, but we wear it and use it in return; and it is blind, whereas we after a manner see.¹

Henry James wrote these consoling words to Grace Norton, one of his numerous woman acquaintances, in whom he saw, much less the friend than the mother, after his own mother's regretted death, and the man who so often lent a sympathetic ear to his female listeners used a particular touch of human kindness here to evoke what he was deeply concerned with in the greater part of his novels: human suffering, a very simple as well as a very complex aspect of man's psyche, deeply-rooted, yet not bound to a definite historical or cultural background. One could describe this as a theme, a leitmotif, a sign, a symbol, keywords in literary criticism, but I would rather not use words of this kind, as they tend to harm the spontaneous flow of writing of both the author and the critic. Without over-emphasizing one dimension of the work seen as a whole, I wish to investigate further the area of suffering which appears to be close to the heart of Henry James's psychological fiction.

The reader, of course, wonders why add yet another study to all the bulk of Jamesian literature, the author being a great favourite with a host of critics and scholars year after year. The answer is that my concern is female suffering in James's novels, which has already been explored, but perhaps not too exhaustively. "I suspect it is the tragedies in life that arrest my attention more than the other things and say more to my imagination"², James wrote in a letter to W.D. Howells, and it is the tragedies in women's lives that captured his emotions most.

It is not my business to find out exactly why James was always more interested in women than in men in his private life and in his fiction, although he never married and did have lots of men friends as well. These are autobiographical elements that have been analyzed to the last possible detail by a more experienced pen than mine. It has also been pointed out often enough why it was the woman hero who best met the

requirements of James's imagination. The novelist possessed an "extraordinary capacity for representing and identifying female consciousness"³, states Ruth Bernard Yeazell in the latest *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. And as early as the chapters called "The Conquest of London 1876-81" in his biography does Leon Edel assume that "from now on the female protagonist took possession of the Jamesian scene"⁴. As to my modest object in this and the following chapters, it is to examine why Henry James created so many suffering heroines.

However, I do not want my dissertation to be understood as merely written from a subjective feminine point of view, although no woman writer can totally avoid an honest and justified feminism. In his work *Henry James and the Woman Business*, Alfred Habegger presents interesting arguments about this topic, warning in his introduction that the views of some strong feminists of our time "seriously underestimate James's condescending view of women" and that they should not be "compromised by a need to rehabilitate James for feminism"⁵. The fact remains that the writer had a very obvious predilection for women characters, and in his major novels his heroines are suffering women. The following chapters are an attempt to enhance the understanding of their private and public tragedies.

Notes

¹ Henry James: Letter to Grace Norton (July 1883), quoted from *The Life of Henry James* by Leon Edel (Vol. 1, Penguin Edition, Book V, *The Conquest of London 1876-1881*), p. 684

² Henry James: Letter to W.D. Howells (March 30th, 1877) from *Henry James/Letters* (edited by Leon Edel, Vol. II, 1875 - 1883), p. 105

³ Ruth Bernard Yeazell: *Henry James* (Columbia Literary History of the United States, General Editor Emory Elliott, 1988), p. 683

⁴ Leon Edel: *The Life of Henry James*, Book V, *The Conquest of London 1876-1881* (Vol. 1, Peng. Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1977), p. 591

⁵ Alfred Habegger: *Henry James and the Woman Business* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5

INTRODUCTION

Henry James's work, like that of all great authors, has been assessed from the most various points of view. Critics of his own time and those who have seriously dealt with Jamesian fiction ever since his death in 1916, have all highlighted it from almost every possible positive and negative point of view. As a result, each new critic of the *master* is inevitably frustrated by the fact that all, really and absolutely all, seems to have been said or written about him. In fact, old and new criticism, ranging from classical to formalistic approaches, from structuralism to deconstruction, has apparently explored every facet of James's work: the darkest and noblest sides of his heroes' and heroines' souls have been profoundly studied, and the author's own character, his consciousness and imagination psycho-analysed on the Freudian couch.

And yet, can the sources of Jamesian criticism ever finally dry up? I daresay they can't, and this, one is inclined to believe, is good for James, good for the critics and all the interested readers, as there remain possibilities to find in the author's fiction hints for further study. Among these unexhausted theories remains an extensive investigation into the female psyche which the writer excelled in describing, an attempt to elucidate first the obvious, clearly recognisable, then the more numerous hidden and mysterious reasons why his heroines suffer for much of their lifetimes - at any rate the attentive reader very often sees and feels them suffer physically much less than morally and mentally. In this respect, J.A. Ward quotes James saying, in his critique of Baudelaire, that evil exists "deep in human consciousness causing suffering that is not physical but emotional and mental"¹. 'To discover why the writer of psychological novels made his woman characters suffer and never really let them enjoy their lives in peace and happiness will be the essential aim of the present work.

James had evidently developed a special interest in women, not only during his literary career but also in his private life, as biographical and autobiographical details point out with sufficient clarity. But in this concentration on female characters, on what M.D. Springer calls "the woman issue"², there was more than just an interest, a

predilection. The young author's early readings already testify that he felt more attracted to women than to men writers, all the more so because he found it increasingly difficult to be at ease in the male American society.

Between 1864 and 1867 he read and reviewed the American women's fiction of the 1850s and 60s. The James of this period, who was to represent women's characters and lives astutely himself later on, was deeply impressed by Rebecca Harding Davis's *Margret Howth* (1862), dealing with the suffering of one single woman; he also read what five important women writers - L.M. Alcott, A.M. Crane, R.H. Davis, A. Whitney and E. Stoddard, all five given the name "Civil War women agonists" by Habegger³ in whose study of James they occupy a central position - described as the ordeal of womanhood. Although James, as a man of his time - he cannot really be blamed for it - was contemptuous of woman's suffrage and, again according to Habegger⁴, used the expression "woman business" with not a small amount of masculine arrogance in a letter to his father (14 January 1870), he found himself, in his review of A.M. Crane's *Opportunity* (1867), "unexpectedly responsive to the portrait of an ardent and independent girl struggling against an intangible bondage"⁵. Thus condescension slowly gives way to respect, especially if the heroine is suffering.

And suffering women found James's sympathy in real life before they were dealt with in his fiction. His own sister Alice and his cousin Minny Temple are outstanding examples to illustrate this aspect of the novelist's emotional life. Henry James endured the lifelong physical weakness and recurrent mental derangement of his spinster sister with more than dutiful patience and brotherly love, giving her an absolute maximum of time and care without grudge or complaint and making all possible arrangements to let her feel at ease and be comparatively happy despite the unfortunate circumstances of her life. Whether there was incestuous yearning in Alice's madness as is pointed out by Habegger⁶, or even in the unconsciousness of James himself is irrelevant; the truth is that the writer did his very best to lessen his sister's pains, of whatever nature they may have been.

The influence of Minny Temple on James's life and writings is perhaps found less easy to assess. The second daughter of the senior Henry's second sister undeniably played a significant role in her cousin's life, but it is hard to explain the ambiguity with which James admitted, in his notes and letters, that he felt relief after her death. During her lifetime he had unmistakably adored and worshipped Minny with a relative's tenderness, feeling for her the love he was capable of feeling; as a matter of fact, he could never have loved her as a man loves a woman, even if she hadn't been his cousin, because he probably had these lifelong physical and emotional inhibitions that his biographers as well as his friends and critics have discussed without ever discovering any real substance or definite proofs.

James, it is true, must have loved Minny Temple "as much as Winterbourne, uncertain and doubting in his bewilderment, loved Daisy, or the invalid Ralph loved Isabel: a questioning love, unvoiced, unavowed"⁷. It actually became a love that turned into an enormous compassion and yearning to soothe his young and helpless cousin's physical pains. But what led James to write at the end of a letter to his brother William, as a reaction to Minny's death, "I can't put away the thought that just as I am beginning life, she has ended it"?⁸ Of course, in an immediate response to his cousin's passing away, he does express his shock and deep affliction in a letter to his mother. Yet he communicates his more philosophical thoughts to William, soliloquising on his own strength, a vitality that strangely grew after the young woman's death. It was almost as if the loss of her physical presence liberated him from the inner frustration of not knowing how to express his love to Minny, as he had long since realised how painfully impossible it was for him to find out exactly what his relationship to her consisted of. Now he could really worship her as a saint, admiring her purity, her goodness, her loveliness in a vision he had formed in his mind, a vision that was much easier for him to cherish than the woman in flesh and blood. "Dead, Minny was Henry's, within the walls of his mind"⁹, Leon Edel rightly judged in his long and fine analysis of what Minny could have meant to Henry during her short life and after her death. Henry James did not, understandably, spend the rest of his life mourning for Minny Temple,

but the influence of his pretty cousin on his life and literary work was truly overwhelming, and I believe most critics agree on this. There were other important women in the novelist's life, but none was, to my mind, so gracefully represented in his writings as Miss Temple, in the shape of Milly Theale, above all, the outstanding character in *The Wings of the Dove*.

However, it is not only Milly Theale who was modelled after the suffering young woman from real life and who evidently bears the most obvious resemblance to the author's dead cousin, but nearly all of James's great heroines were more or less kindled with sparks of Minny Temple's personality; her sufferings had a noticeable impact on the presentation of figures like Daisy Miller, Claire de Bellegarde, Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, Olive Chancellor, Verena Tarrant and others. Yet, unlike Minny Temple and Milly Theale, these women hardly suffer physically or die from an incurable sickness. They are victims of their own or others' mistakes, of jealousy, falseness, greed, injustice, cruelty, bigotry, the whole catalogue of human heartlessness. Accordingly, the fate of the "dove" is doubly tragic as she too suffers from the deeply-felt disappointment inflicted upon her by thoroughly money-conscious friends, a human failure which causes greater pain than invincible tuberculosis.

Premature death is also the fate of the young and adorably naive and vivacious *Daisy Miller*, the frivolous "all-American girl" of James's early novel, but the reasons why this heroine must suffer in her short life are not to be found in the sickness that abruptly ends it. The "pretty American flirt" with the yet unformed personality and uncompleted education is only apparently ignorant of the social code of behaviour displayed by the European Americans of the time. She does suffer when her frivolity is severely and openly criticised by Mrs Walker, one of those American ladies living in Rome and presenting to the world her supposedly unerring social judgement. Although Daisy is greatly amused when her compatriots are furious at her ostentatiously shocking behaviour, her "apparently inexhaustible" good humour does not help her to overcome her inner frustration and increasing unease at being publicly ostracised. In spite of her youthful independence Daisy Miller simply cannot continuously ignore the

many cold shoulders turned towards her, so that her inner unhappiness finally makes her deliberately defy her fate in the Roman Colosseum at night. If she had not, in her own way, suffered from Winterbourne's and her fellow Americans' lack of honesty and cold indifference, she would most probably not have exposed herself to the risk of dying from Roman fever.

As for Claire de Cintré, the unhappy heroine of *The American*, the novel whose equally unhappy ending has often been criticised, she would not have chosen her death-like life in the convent, had not a combination of tragic circumstances made it impossible for her to make a different choice. Most modern, twentieth century women would of course have energetically protested against her mother's cruelly unjust decision, supported by the whole inveterate, aristocratic family clan, but poor Claire did not have the moral strength to oppose the iron will of the Bellegardes, who had erected a wall between her and freedom as impenetrable as that of the Carmelite convent. In fairness to the heroine we must admit that the obstacles on the way to a certain degree of independence for the aristocratic woman at that time were insurmountable, which was not the case for the little, impudent Noémie Nioche, her brazen counterpart from a lower social class. But even if Claire demurely accepts her fate in unquestioning obedience, we sense her everlasting suffering behind the convent walls.

In *Washington Square* the humiliation inflicted upon the main woman character is again of parental origin. Now it is the father who causes his daughter's lifelong, ironically unnecessary suffering, and the experienced reader knows that the theme of strict, filial obedience with its regrettably negative consequences is often dealt with in the literature of the time. James himself has admitted his admiration for the great French "raconteur" Honoré de Balzac whose *Eugénie Grandet* inspired the American's novel. Like Eugénie, Catherine Sloper is the victim of an intransigent father whom nobody and nothing can rouse to pity and understanding for a daughter too soft and weak, and hence at the mercy of a cruelly oppressing personality. Both Eugénie and Catherine are quietly, yet deeply in love with men of their choice, but they are strictly forbidden to marry them for seemingly financial reasons. There are,

however, different motives behind the decisions of the two fathers: Eugénie's father is morbidly avaricious, thus preventing his wife and daughter from doing anything on their own and the girl from falling in love with someone not able to live up to old Grandet's financial expectations; Catherine's father, on the other hand, not only cheats her out of her due share of inheritance, but even of the natural amount of fatherly love, which is far more tragic and leads to deeper suffering. James quite significantly ends his novel by evoking the sadness of Catherine's sitting down on her sofa, as it were till the end of her life.

The situation is more complicated in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James's masterpiece of the so-called middle period. Young and beautiful Isabel Archer, the American girl whose aunt has convinced her to accompany her to Europe, goes ashore thinking the whole world to be at her feet. She does indeed possess all the qualities to conquer her surroundings, and soon she is in a position to live as she pleases. She is rich and independent, charming and intelligent, knowing exactly what she wants and setting out to enjoy one exciting experience after the other. For a long time she holds all the trumps, and the author makes the reader joyfully share the innocent young girl's expectations of a happy life in the best social circles at the most beautiful places in Europe. Before her catastrophic marriage she moves around like a princess, or rather like a young woman more sensitive and emancipated than most female counterparts of her age, making her numerous suitors dependent on each of her encouraging words or gestures. Had the novel gone on in this optimistic, nearly melodramatic strain, it would have been a brilliantly written account of a young American woman's experiences in Europe. James, however, did not intend to write merely a novel of entertainment; as usual, he probed deep into his characters' consciousness to discover the motives of their doings, the reasons for their troubles and the consequences of their suffering, which does not make for a light-hearted romantic love-story. Describing Isabel's plight, James has definitely shown - if proof was still necessary - that he is a great master in analysing the female psyche: it is in *The Portrait of a Lady* where the reader is impressed by those passages of an exquisite beauty and a high literary value in which

the heroine sagaciously seeks to find out why she of all persons has been deceived by an utterly self-centred and cruel husband. James makes Isabel interpret her case with a psychological insight so rare and so specifically feminine that there hardly remains a doubt about the author's perspicacity in dealing equally successfully with a male or female consciousness.

The relevance of this statement is of course quite obvious concerning *The Bostonians*, one of the novels in which James doesn't send his heroine on a cultural and social trip to Europe. Although Basil Ransom, the uncomplicated man from the South, is James's "hero" in this novel, there is no mystery about the far greater importance the writer grants his women characters. It is difficult to see how James could have ignored, in choosing the subject of *The Bostonians*, the rising awareness and development of feminism in the western world of that time. In making Olive Chancellor's and Verena Tarrant's relationship the centre of his plot, the author can't have avoided gathering a sufficient amount of information concerning women's growing desire for freedom and emancipation at the time. However, Henry James was more interested in the repercussions of this theme on the minds of his two women characters, especially on Olive's sensitive psyche, but to a certain extent on Verena's as well. As in all the novels that are going to be discussed in this work, James has used his very special psychological insight to describe, delicately and painstakingly, the two women's suffering when they become aware of what is really happening to them. Olive's ordeal, caused by Verena's naiveté and Basil's gradual taking the young girl away from the woman who oppresses her, is evident as the novel unfolds, but Verena, too, is not safe from her part of suffering in spite of the apparent happy-end. Why this is so, and how James has dealt with the suffering of the heroines in his major novels, the author of the present study will attempt to elucidate in the following chapters.

Notes

¹ Joseph A. Ward: *The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p.5

² Mary Doyle Springer: *A Rhetoric Of Literary Character/Some Women of Henry James* (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.3

³ Alfred Habegger: *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.23

⁴ *ibid.*, p.7 (A. Habegger quotes Henry James in a letter to Henry James Sr.)

⁵ *ibid.*, p.24

⁶ *ibid.*, p.25

⁷ Leon Edel: *The Life of Henry James, Book I, The Untried Years 1843-1869* (Vol. I, Peng.Ed.), p.194

⁸ Henry James: *Letter to William James* (March 29th, 1870), quoted by L. Edel in *The Life of Henry James, Book I*, p.272

⁹ Leon Edel: *op.cit.*, p.275

CHAPTER ONE: THE HEROINES' SUFFERING

The subject-matter of this dissertation being human suffering, female suffering precisely, some brief indications about the nature of the grief afflicting the human mind for a shorter or longer period of time may seem necessary. As for physical pain, which is only treated as a minor topic in *The Wings of the Dove* and to a lesser extent in *Daisy Miller*, it is quite evident that the present study is not the place to deal with scientific descriptions and explanations of what belongs to the purely medical domain, like the anatomical and physiological data about pain. Concerning the experience of pain, however, it is known to be largely psychological and subjective, and might as such have interested Henry James, the expert on psychological matters. But the author is particularly drawn to the various layers of consciousness at which mental suffering takes place. What he considers as relevant is the threshold of moral suffering, not of physical pain.

At this point it is also significant to mention that James's fiction does not present cases of female insanity, despite the fact that his own sister, Alice James, greatly suffered from neurasthenia all through her short life, during which the author couldn't have cared more for her physical comfort and mental well-being, as James himself and his biographer Leon Edel have poignantly asserted. It is however not surprising that James rejected the madwoman as a topic in his novels, since female insanity has been treated as a fictional subject mostly by women authors, feminist philosophers and theorists, from Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century to contemporary feminists. "The deranged woman who haunts the margins of nineteenth-century women writers' texts as the symbolic representation of the female author's anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition",¹ is not James's affair. Furthermore, the writer himself, it must be acknowledged, was not at all a feminist as some critics suggest because it helps their purpose, and he did not show any great interest in the particular ordeal of the Victorian women, often perceived as irrational

and unstable, and whose lives were characterized by a lack of meaningful work and genuine friends.

If one takes a closer look at James's heroines, one discovers a different kind of suffering. In the first place, they are all, from the frivolous and immature Daisy Miller to the placid and serene Milly Theale, quite intelligent young women who know exactly what they want. They consider the various shades and stages of their suffering and the various reasons for their grief with lucid minds; theirs is not the mental derangement of several nineteenth century fictional characters like Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*, Charlotte Brontë's *Bertha Mason* or Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley*, for example. Unlike these women and many others, from Ophelia to the mad Miss Havisham, James's heroines do not suffer from the plight shared by most unmarried Victorian women, considered a social problem and "stigmatized by terms like 'redundant', 'superfluous' and 'odd', and who were also regarded as peculiarly subject to mental disorders."² This does not mean the latter are less lucid than James's fictional women, but they are driven to madness by a society not yet able to cope with female assertion, ambition or self-interest. In fact, the phenomenon of the Victorian madwoman is one of the logical consequences of the cruelly unjust restrictions on the feminine role in both social and political matters. The other, less depressive and in the long run more positive and effective reaction to woman's legal powerlessness is their struggle for the right to vote. Although this fight is carried out with equal vehemence and fanaticism on both the old and new continents, it is clear that American women enjoyed more private and social independence than their English, French or other European counterparts. This is why James's mostly American women characters are not prevented by all too rigid social standards from developing their feminine personalities.

Socially less inhibited therefore than the Victorian woman and hardly ever drawn towards insanity, the Jamesian heroine exercises her mind in many subtle ways to find out the reasons for her own suffering and eventually tries to put an end to it. She is called Claire de Cintré or Catherine Sloper or Isabel Archer, and her "intellectual", psychologically more intricate suffering has repeatedly been belittled or mocked at by

Jamesian critics who argue that the novelist's characters have actually nothing to complain about, since they all belong to the financially carefree upper social classes. If they had to worry about how to feed their own and their families' mouths, they certainly would not have the time to meditate upon highbrow problems totally inaccessible to the practically-minded ordinary people. This is an aspect of Jamesian criticism that has been explicitly and sufficiently dealt with by D. Krook in the first chapter of her now already classical book about Henry James, *The Ordeal of Consciousness*. The critic analyses three aspects of what she calls the "representativeness" of the Jamesian heroes and heroines, the first being their dramatic function comparable to that of the kings, queens and princes in Shakespeare's plays. Like these, James's millionaires and heiresses are the "acknowledged symbols of supreme power and prestige in their society", and "consequently what 'happens' to them - their vicissitudes, their 'rise and fall', their suffering and joy - is exemplary and instructive for the purposes of drama in exactly the way that Shakespeare conceived the fate of a Hamlet, a Macbeth, a Lear to be exemplary and instructive."³ Secondly, in a more limited sense, they are not like the common people because they are rich, often very rich, refined, well-educated, living very elegantly and indulging their cultivated tastes. The third, more important, sense in which the Jamesian heroes and heroines are 'high personages' is that they are very superior people. They are "endowed in an extraordinary degree with the gifts of intelligence, imagination, sensibility, and a rare delicacy of moral insight; and they are all extraordinarily articulate about all they see and understand."⁴ Hence the suffering of these superior people is not the pitiful suffering of the ordinary men and women, it is the tragedy of the highly intelligent and imaginative. This view is perhaps not to be taken at face value because, in reality, suffering is suffering, whatever one's social class.

What D.Krook wants to get at is to prove that, given such human material, James could exhibit the fundamental human passions with more dignity and beauty than if he had 'only' been confronted with the 'lower' passions of the common people. This sounds rather insulting and contemptuous towards men and women who are no lesser human beings merely because they have fewer means and opportunities than the

wealthy representatives of the upper social classes. But the answer that D.Krook gives to the question why Henry James only deals with the titled and the moneyed or those who aspire after titles and money is probably what James had at the back of his mind when selecting this fragmentary part of society he decided to write about. What he certainly didn't do, however, was to despise or even ignore the ordinary people - he was too much a well-mannered gentleman to do that - but it was essentially a matter of choice, which the reader and the critic must accept. James was the writer of the rich, as Dickens was the writer of the poor - both men's fiction can be questioned as to the social classes it chooses to deal with, but these doubts are irrelevant concerning the value of the two novelists' work.

Notes

¹ Elaine Showalter. *The Female Malady, Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Virago Press Limited, 1987), p.4

² *ibid.*, p.61

³ Dorothea Krook: *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge University Press, 1962). p.13

⁴ *ibid.*, p.15

CHAPTER TWO: WALLS WITHIN AND WITHOUT

In his early novel, *The American*, the second novel he wrote and the first to be dealt with in the present study, James chose a family that did not strike so much by its riches - which were not to be underestimated though not as high as could be expected - but rather by its nobility, the Parisian aristocratic 'élite' to which it belonged. The Bellegardes, whose acquaintance the much wealthier American happened to make at his expense, could indeed not in the least be compared to any of the more common people. And the fact that they were one of the oldest, most prestigious families of the French capital at that time made it all the more difficult for Claire de Cintré, the heroine of *The American*, to find a way out of the extremely entangled situation occasioned by her would-be husband. Her dilemma, which she will eventually not be able to solve, and all the suffering she must have gone through before and after her decision to retreat behind the Carmelite walls of the "rue d'enfer" has not been dealt with at all or quite insufficiently in the critical works about *The American*. In fact, critics and readers alike are almost completely left in the dark as to the motives of behaviour of the beautiful Bellegarde woman. Why even women critics like Constance Rourke, Carolyn Porter or Jeanne Delbaere-Garant hardly consider the heroine's plight in the early Jamesian novel is not really astonishing, however. The author has indeed devoted the greater part of the story to his male character, and as Oscar Cargill pointed out in *The Novels of Henry James*, he does give the reader very little chance to probe Claire's mind, having thus made of her one of his weakest female protagonists.

James's greatest failure in the book is not to acquaint his reader thoroughly with his heroine; he withheld a great deal about Claire de Cintré in the mistaken notion that any development other than fragmentary of her character would detract from the presentation of his hero¹.

And in a note a little further on, the same critic asserts that "with this protected type of eligible young French woman James plainly had no acquaintance at all. His autobiographical volumes and letters confirm this."²

The novelist clearly confirms this in his letter to W.D Howells on March 30th 1877, "I have written my story from Newman's side of the wall, and understand so well how Madame de Cintré couldn't really scramble over from her side" The passage occurs not long after his often quoted words, "We are each the product of circumstances and there are tall stone walls which fatally divide us."³ That the walls between Newman and Claire are first symbolic and then real at the end of the novel is quite obvious in *The American*, but the reason why James only made shadowy and hesitant attempts at explaining Madame de Cintré's motives for finally refusing her suitor is that there is also a wall between himself and the woman of his story.

In his early novel James presented and understood his male hero much better than his heroine, going so far as to ignore himself the strange tribulations of Claire's mind. "I was so possessed of my idea", he admits in his preface to *The American*, "that Newman should be ill-used - which was the essence of my subject - that I attached too scant an importance to its fashion of coming about."⁴ This is partly due to James's own difficulties in finding access to the aristocracy of the French capital. "There is a large element of self-identification in James's treatment of Newman and of his experience in Parisian society",⁵ says R. Poirier in *The Comic Sense of Henry James*. Ironically enough, walls do not only rise then between Newman and the clan of the Bellegardes, between the novelist and his female protagonist, but above all between Henry James himself and the social and literary Parisian elite of the 1870s. When the writer went to Paris in the autumn of 1875, it was with the firm intention to have close contacts, if possible, with the high society and the literary circle of the town. But his experience in Parisian society turned out to be disappointing and his literary dissatisfaction especially made him admit to his brother William in a letter written in July 1876, one month only after the first instalment of *The American* in *The Atlantic*, that

my last layers of resistance to a long-encroaching weariness and satiety with the French mind and its utterance have fallen from me like a garment.⁶

The same argument is used by Martha Banta in her introduction to *New Essays on The American* of which she is the editor,

The twelve months that had launched the story of Christopher Newman's confrontation with the 'walls' of Parisian society marked a difficult period during which James himself had had to come to terms with those elements - internal as well as external - that seemed to prevent him from becoming the cosmopolitan man he urgently desired to be. Still, he had made several important discoveries: The parochialism he detested characterized the French literary clique as well as the tight little world of the American 'set'; this same incapacity for cultural and personal breadth also existed, he would argue, in *The American*, within the well-guarded minds and imprisoned lives of the aristocratic French society represented by the Bellegarde family.⁷

Yet, all of this does not exhaustively explain why James was so reluctant or even perhaps unable to present his reader with a concise portrait of Madame de Cintré, an analysis of the female psyche in which he was to excel in practically all his other shorter and longer novels. The reader is thus as frustrated and shocked as Newman himself when confronted with the mysterious woman who actually remains a "virtual blank" all through the novel as C. Porter points out in her essay 'Gender and Value in *The American*'.⁸

Apart from the fact that James has great difficulty in finding a clue to the enigmatic conduct of the French noblewoman, he unfortunately doesn't seem to be really interested in her as a character. In fact, he is not altogether wrong because, in a way, he remains faithful to the title of his work, which is 'The American', Christopher Newman, a Christopher Columbus voyaging in the opposite direction, a 'new man' eager to discover and explore the Old Continent - the description of his own and his characters' adventures in the Old World being another theme very dear to James's heart. Newman's story, the motives behind his actions, his feelings, his sufferings, his disillusionments and disappointment, and his final magnanimity are thus clearly unfolded before the reader's eyes, but what goes on in Claire's beautiful head remains the novel's enigma. Why she refuses, in the end, to become Newman's wife is obvious, even logical enough, but how much suffering has brought about this decision is hardly, if at all, revealed by the author. One is totally ignorant of whether Madame de Cintré has fought against her mother's iron will which the latter shows in her cruel rejection of the daughter's husband-to-be, after she had already accepted him. There are not even many hints in the novel that would prove the younger woman to be less cold in her behaviour

towards Newman than her mother. The reader has the impression that she majestically moves through the high-ceilinged, cold and gilded rooms of her Parisian house which is as inaccessible as herself: everything is perfect about her, from the immaculacy of her white dresses to the flawlessness of her character and manners and the purity of her soul. Mrs Tristram calls her a saint, and alluding to the cruel treatment inflicted on her by her mother and elder brother, she finds that "a persecution is all that she needs to bring out her saintliness and make her perfect."⁹ In the same order of ideas Oscar Cargill states in a note to his chapter on *The American* that "the limitation of Claire de Cintré is her coldness, her perfection."¹⁰ Tom Tristram calls her "a great white doll of a woman who cultivates quiet haughtiness."¹¹ And in her work *Henry James The Vision of France* the Belgian critic Jeanne Delbaere-Garant goes one step further, criticizing Madame de Cintré as "one of those beautiful statues completely void inside which he (Henry James) so easily detected in the French literature and especially in the French theatre of his time. Deprived as she is of moral freedom and of personal determination she could have been created by a French playwright of the time."¹²

One evident clue to her behaviour is indeed her strict submission to her family's authority. Newman gets a first glimpse of eventual difficulties he might have as a future suitor of Claire when Mrs Tristram tells him the story of the woman and her noble background.

She was married at eighteen, by her parents, in the French fashion, to a disagreeable old man. But he had the good taste to die a couple of years afterward, and she is now twenty-five. Her family, on each side, is of fabulous antiquity; her mother is the daughter of an English Catholic earl. When I (Mrs Tristram) was a girl, I was put into a convent here for my education. It was a silly thing to do with me, but it had the advantage that it made me acquainted with Claire de Bellegarde.. I took a tremendous fancy to her, and she returned my passion as far as she could. They kept such a tight rein on her that she could do very little, and when I left the convent she had to give me up.¹³

Phrases like "She was married by her parents" and "she had to give me up" reveal that Claire was not only brought up in the strictest way possible, but she was actually denied the smallest amount of freedom. From her childhood on she had been under her mother's thumb - her father was probably on his daughter's side, but he didn't have

anything to say - and she had never been allowed , for whatever reason, to make a decision of her own. Not only was she refused permission to do anything she wanted or might choose to do, but she knew that all Bellegarde decisions, without exception, had to be in strict accordance with the name and honour of the family.

In this the Bellegardes do not differ from most ancient European aristocratic families which have always judged and acted according to extremely severe and exclusive principles of pedigree and etiquette. Were James still alive today, by the way, the cosmopolitan and cultured American tourist would again wonder at the seemingly unchanged code of behaviour and court ceremonial displayed by our still very numerous monarchs and respected, old-established nobility. And if James's hero, Christopher Newman, wants "to possess the best article in the market" (p.71), "a thing every man has an equal right to" (p.72), he is as yet unable even to sense how difficult, even impossible in the end, it will be to get his "article"; "he may get it if he can" (ibid.), he says in the same context, ignoring the fact that there will be immense barriers in his way, his commercial attitude towards life and his business-like way of handling things being an impediment rather than an advantage in his courtship of Claire and her family.

The young woman's suffering and its presumed causes are first mentioned by Mrs Tristram just before Newman meets Claire for the first time. The American lady has seen the latter with eyes "red with weeping" (p.119), and, without having directly asked for the reasons of Claire's tears, Mrs Tristram knows that they are due to her friend's "wicked old mother and her Grand Turk of a brother" (ibid.). Of course, the American, used to a society in which women are fairly independent of mothers, fathers, brothers and husbands even in the nineteenth century, wonders, "Why does she let them bully her? Is she not her own mistress?" (p.120). Whereupon Mrs Tristram explains to the young man why, in the name of family honour and prestige, Claire becomes a victim, a puppet in the hands of a tyrannical mother and brother :

Legally, yes, I suppose; but morally, no. In France you must never say Nay to your mother, whatever she requires of you. She may be the most

abominable old woman in the world, and make your life a purgatory; but after all she is ma mère, and you have no right to judge her. You have simply to obey. The thing has a fine side to it. Madame de Cintré bows her head and folds her wings. (p.120).

Claire is never allowed then to "act for your (her) own pleasure, but for the advantage of her family." (ibid.). In the same scene Newman's motherly friend breaks the news that the young noblewoman is about to be sold a second time. The family needs money and the next husband should in any case be a better bargain than the first. "They are not rich, and they want to bring more money into the family", (ibid.) reveals Mrs Tristram. Under the given circumstances it is indeed very difficult for the reader and for the American hero above all to understand why Claire will finally be ordered to refuse him. Feelings like love and pity, even those of the nearest relative, are of no importance for the Bellegardes as we know, but why they resist the temptation of a millionaire son and brother-in-law remains a strange, but not an entirely mysterious decision. In spite of the highly alluring sums of money that would assure definite financial security the Bellegardes put family honour before money. This is what J.A. Ward points out in *The Imagination of Disaster*, "Claire's mother and brother reject the easy comfort of Newman's millions because they cannot reconcile the source of the money with family honor ..."14 And they obviously do this in the climax scene of the novel, the great feast the Bellegardes have organized to present their daughter's and sister's future husband to the Parisian high society, the closed circle of their exclusively aristocratic acquaintances. On this occasion old Mrs Bellegarde becomes aware of something she has always known in her subconscious self: Newman can never be her son-in-law. From one moment to the other she has ruled this out, and no one or nothing in the world can ever act against this irrevocable decision of hers. What Newman has exactly done to bring about this decision - a gesture, a laugh that was perhaps too loud, an indication of too typically an American, a more spontaneous and much less reserved sort of behaviour, is in the end not so relevant as the verdict itself. And the irony, the tragedy of it all is that Claire must and finally does accept it despite all logical and emotional arguments. "She is not

only obliged to obey her mother", R.Poirier points out in *The Comic Sense of Henry James*, but she is also "fated by the history of her family to accept a lifetime of unhappiness."¹⁵

The months between the above-mentioned feast and Claire's last conversation with Newman must have been a time full of suffering for the innocent young woman. Although the author, for the reasons that have been disclosed, quite insufficiently informs his readers about this point, anyone sensitive enough may guess how completely shattered she has certainly been. If she has honestly loved her American enough to marry him - Henry James is not clear about this point, either - her family's decision must have come to her as a shock inflicting great pain and distress. In fact, Newman sees this distress in her eyes when she tells him he cannot marry her, "Will you grant me a last request?" and as she looked at him, urging this, her eyes filled with tears. 'Let me alone - let me go in peace. I can't call it peace - it's death. But let me bury myself. So - good-bye.' "¹⁶ The word 'death' is especially telling as it shows Claire's intense suffering caused by the obligation to refuse the man she would secretly have liked to elope with, had there not been the insurmountable barriers put up by her family between Newman and herself.

Finally James leaves her alone in her silent sorrow; knowing her mother and brother's cruel mercilessness the reader may indeed well imagine the heroine suffering quietly, but nonetheless very deeply. By now there is no longer the slightest doubt that Madame de Cintré entirely submits to the relentless commands of her mother of whom she is quite simply afraid. Never would she have had the courage and the nerve of Mademoiselle Noémie Nioche who, totally unhampered by any social restrictions, does exactly as she pleases, very much at ease even to bully her weak father and enjoying the enviable independence of a Daisy Miller or an Isabel Archer. Yet, poor Claire has had to pay an enormous price for her noble birth: not only has she been robbed of her personal freedom, but she was sold to one husband and is about to be sold to another one, whom she refuses, however, - the only revolt the shabby remnants of a free will make her capable of. But this one and only defiance is realized through a sacrifice more desperate

and more momentous than any: within the walls of the family retreat of the picturesque village of Fleurières, the woman whose tragic destiny it is to be more and more "cintré", to have the belt, symbolized by her name, more and more tightened, reveals to her speechless suitor that she has chosen the thick walls of a nunnery to separate her forever from the outside world. So Claire changes one prison for another, and in a desperate attempt to justify her irrevocable decision to the shocked Newman she finally betrays all the suffering she has gone through so far. Having failed to defend her family and blacken herself, she declares she too has feelings and she "must do as they force me - I must, I must. They would haunt me otherwise", she cried with vehemence, 'they would kill me' " (p. 352). Now the young woman lacks the courage to grasp the last chance to run away from her family as well as from her own decision to become a Carmelite nun. What makes her suffering more acute is the fact that, being what she is, it is impossible for her to escape.

'No, I was not right', she exclaims, 'I - am not cold! I believe that if I am doing what seems so bad, it is not mere weakness and falseness. Mr Newman, it's like a religion. I can't tell you - I can't. It's cruel of you to insist. I don't see why I shouldn't ask you to believe me - and pity me. It's like a religion. There's a curse upon the house; I don't know what - I don't know why - don't ask me. We must all bear it. I have been too selfish; I wanted to escape from it. You offered me a great chance - besides my liking you. It seemed good to change completely, to break, to go away. And then I admired you. But I can't - it has overtaken and come back to me.' Her self-control had now completely abandoned her, and her words were broken with long sobs (p. 353).

Poor Claire, of course, isn't selfish, but one feels that there is no way for her of going beyond these pathetic words of self-justification. Given the tragic circumstances of her life and the "curse upon the house", Madame de Cintré simply can't escape either from her past or from her self-chosen future, and one can't help doing her justice in accepting her final argument for what it is: her own will and her own conscience have ordered her to hide her pain forever behind the walls of the "rue d'enfer".

Notes

¹ Oscar Cargill: *The Novels of Henry James* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p.51

² *ibid.*, p.51, note 35, p.58

³ Henry James: Letter to William Dean Howells, March 30th, 1877 from *Henry James: Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel, vol.II 1875-1883 (Macmillan London Limited, 1978), p.105

⁴ Henry James: *Preface to 'The American'* from Richard Palmer Blackmur: *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1962), p.35

⁵ Richard Poirier: *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of Early Novels* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p.49

⁶ Henry James: Letter to William James, July 1876 from *Henry James: Letters*, ed. by L. Edel, p.58

⁷ Martha Banta: *New Essays on 'The American'*, ed. by Martha Banta, The American Novel Series, General Editor Emory Elliott (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.7

⁸ Carolyn Porter, 'Gender and Value in *The American*', in *New Essays on 'The American'*, ed. by Martha Banta (C.U.P., 1987), p.128

⁹ Henry James: *The American*, Penguin Classics, ed. with an Introduction by William Spengemann (Penguin Classics, 1986, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England), p.120

¹⁰ O. Cargill: *op.cit.* note 36 p.58

¹¹ Henry James: *The American*, p.76

¹² Jeanne Delbaere-Garant: *Henry James: The Vision of France* (Société d'Éditions "Les Belles Lettres", 95, Boulevard Raspail, Paris, 1970), p.268

¹³ Henry James: *The American*, p.74

¹⁴ J.A.Ward, *The Imagination of Disaster*, *op.cit.*, p.43

¹⁵ R.Poirier, *The Comic Sense of H. James*, *op.cit.*, p.45

¹⁶ Henry James: *The Americans*, p.314

CHAPTER THREE: THE AMERICAN FLIRT AND THE AMERICAN WALLFLOWER

Among Henry James's women characters, whose sufferings this study attempts to assess, Claire de Cintré stands out, of course, as the only French young lady, this being one of the reasons, as we have seen, why the author had difficulty in understanding and presenting her as poignantly as his English and especially his American heroines. If we consider "Henry James's sallies into the souls of women" (Mary D. Springer in *A Rhetoric of Literary Character / Some Women of Henry James*),¹ it is certainly the souls of the American women, from Daisy Miller to Milly Theale, he had the greatest understanding for and sympathy with. In the line of American heroines Daisy Miller is chronologically the first and probably the youngest. In her the author has first studied the American female, therefore calling the first edition of his work *Daisy Miller: A Study*. Only later, in the New York edition, does he leave out the subtitle. There is obviously another reason why James had first added the words 'A Study' to his novel which is really more a long short-story. Leon Edel explains: "He (Henry James) thought it (Daisy Miller) so 'thin' that he called it 'A Study' - as if it were something in an artist's sketchbook."²

From all we know about James and from what we become aware of in perusing the short novel, it is also Daisy Miller whom the author has particularly become attached to. Although Daisy is a young girl, in her late teens probably, he often talks about her as a child, which underlines his tenderness for her, a sort of fatherly love out of which grows a certain tolerance of her blunders. The American lady's young daughter, whom the writer mentions in his preface to the New York edition is "a child of nature and of freedom",³ and as an answer to a Philadelphian critic calling James's story "an outrage on American girlhood",⁴ James describes her as "the ultimately most prosperous child of my invention".⁵ A little later, in the same preface, comes the well-known remark which reveals its author's unconcealed fondness for his mind's child, "my supposedly typical little figure was of course pure poetry",⁶ which he says in response to a "gentle lady's" and "admirable critic's"⁷ finding fault with the falsified

image given of the typical American girl by her male writer friend. Good-natured and nearly amused, especially because Daisy Miller has been his first great popular success, the novelist doesn't seem to care about negative remarks at this stage. "Does it really matter", he might wonder, "if my fictional character does not entirely correspond to the real image of the American young girl of the 1870s?" Daisy is pretty and charming, lovely and innocent, and everybody likes her, except the few wicked American ladies - one tends to call them that if one is enchanted by Daisy in turn - who behave like all-knowing, sanctimonious matrons in the Rome of James's tale. Having Daisy Miller in mind, but speaking about the woman in the nineteenth century in general, Elizabeth Allen says, "The least problematic version of the American girl was that which stressed her youthful ignorance and innocence. Her spontaneity thus becomes that of a *child*"⁸ (my italics). Like most critics Mrs Allen stresses Daisy's youthful attributes, innocence and spontaneity, but also ignorance. In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Daisy Miller* G. Moore has the same idea, but he also underlines the difference between American and European girls. "Ultimately", he believes, it is "a story about America, about a way of life which made its children, and especially the girl-children, as different from Europeans as chalk from cheese".⁹ According to him, to Mrs Allen, and other Jamesian critics and readers alike, the novelist was convinced that the American girl was not only different from her European counterpart, but in some ways also superior. It must be said that in the nineteenth century American girls - not so much the married women as marriage often put an end to the behaviour made possible by their premarital freedom - enjoyed an independence of family and social backgrounds that European girls could only dream of. Elizabeth Allen, for example, quotes James Bryce who, in his *The American Commonwealth* (1889), is of the opinion that

Three causes combine to create among American women an average of literary taste and influence higher than that of women in any European country. These are, the educational facilities they enjoy, the recognition of the equality of the sexes in the whole social and intellectual sphere, and the leisure which they possess as compared with men. In a country where men are incessantly occupied at their business or profession, the function of keeping up the level of culture devolves upon women.¹⁰

And, speaking of young, unmarried girls, E. Allen herself thinks

they had a freedom greater in America than in Europe; they went out by themselves, had 'gentlemen friends' and enjoyed themselves generally at their own leisure. Often given greater education than their European counterparts, and certainly greater freedom of knowledge they could, as Kipling said, both talk and think. Encouraged in brightness and vivacity, what better representatives of young, free and democratic society?¹¹

Most of this applies to Daisy who, with her freshness and honesty, her purity of heart, and above all her freedom of mind and character sets out to discover Europe, not unlike Christopher Newman, in the way that he, too, comes to the old continent with a typically New World innocence. But whereas Newman impresses the Europeans more by a money-gained independence than by his generous open-mindedness, Daisy astonishes and finally shocks her American compatriots in Rome with behaviour apparently reflecting a young girl's innate freedom to do exactly as she pleases. In his fresh and unadorned little tale James lets his heroine indeed move with enchanting "insouciance", an enviable state of mind that has not only probably characterized the majority of rich young women in the second half of the nineteenth century, but youth at all times. This lovable characteristic, particularly developed in Daisy Miller, unfortunately disappears in most middle-aged and older adults. Daisy, with her yet unformed personality and uncompleted education, is therefore a type, but a most adorable one. The only problem in her situation, during her short stay in the Italian capital, is the very annoying fact that she happens to meet the wrong people at the wrong place, and it is precisely this misfortune that causes her misery and her death. Considering her utterly spontaneous, carefree and cheerful manner wherever she appears in the Roman drawing-rooms or the lovely out-of-door places of the ancient city, many readers will not discover any traces of sadness and pain in the charming young lady, perhaps not until the very end of the novel.

But there are, in fact, moments of suffering before this, although the author, as in most of his novels about suffering women, does not over-emphasize them. While the perplexed Winterbourne is wondering - he will wonder throughout the whole tale, by the way, his selfishness and cowardice preventing him from judging Daisy justly - whether

he has before him a completely innocent but ignorant young lady or a pretty, frivolous flirt who consciously transgresses the norms of behaviour established by the society of the time, Daisy goes on prattling about herself and her social success in New York. But when her new gentleman friend is very embarrassed to explain why she cannot be introduced to his aunt, Mrs Costello, she immediately grasps the truth; she exclaims that the latter does not want to see her and asks Winterbourne, who is "touched, shocked, mortified by it",¹² "Why don't you say so? You needn't be afraid. I'm not afraid." And the "little laugh" she then gives does not of course mean that she is amused or entertained by the news that Mrs Costello does not wish to enjoy young Daisy's company; her laugh rather expresses pain at not being received by Winterbourne's aunt: "As though from behind the protection of her fan", says Kenneth Graham, "from some shadowed depth of her personality, Daisy responds with her pain to the judgmental world that now threatens to exclude her".¹³

Miss Miller now certainly wonders with a twinge of sorrow why she is suddenly excluded by someone who doesn't even know her properly. At this stage she cannot be expected to guess the true reason for her being coldshouldered; even if given a hint, she could only vaguely imagine why Mrs Costello rebukes her own and her mother's behaviour towards their courier Eugenio. Daisy, whom Winterbourne patronizingly pities in his thoughts as not being very deep, and ignorant of many things going on around her, is however intelligent and alert enough to sense that the lady, who apparently has too many headaches to allow anyone's visit, simply refuses to see her. And with another little laugh she declares, "Gracious! she is exclusive!"¹⁴ betraying here a feeling of being wounded and disappointed as well as directing a touch of irony against the unknown aunt. Winterbourne realizes that injury has been done, but that nevertheless he needn't worry or even console his companion, who already seems to have forgotten the conversation and turns to her approaching mother. This is what Daisy does throughout the whole story; she never really shows that she is hurt or how much she is suffering which makes people around her suppose she is a tough and insensitive girl whom they may treat as roughly as they please. Until the end of the tale

her way of hiding her grief will be particularly convenient for Winterbourne, who hesitates all along over whether to condemn Daisy for the same reasons as the American colony in Rome snubs her or to save Miss Miller from the Mrs Walkers and Mrs Costellos of the world.

There are two other crucial scenes in the short tale in which the attentive reader feels Daisy's suffering as a reaction to people's misunderstanding of her nature: the girl's disobedience in the Pincian Gardens and her lingering with the Italian gentleman, Mr Giovanelli, in the moonlit Colosseum. Daisy's conduct in the Pincio shows her ignoring the rules of proper behaviour followed by the American matrons living in Rome; she, at first, just wonders at Mrs Walker's premonitions, as she doesn't know that it is quite wrong to "walk off to the Pincio at this hour to meet a beautiful Italian". (p.86). It seems that she only becomes aware of her blunder when Mrs Walker reminds her of her imprudence and disapproves of the girl's insisting on walking around the Pincio instead of being safely taken around in the American lady's carriage. Daisy's defiance comes as a surprise to Mrs Walker who loses patience in the presence of someone so young and inexperienced, who should be more than grateful to accept the well-meant advice and warnings of a lady who knows that it is improper for a girl to walk in a public place in the company of two gentlemen, but unescorted by her mother for example, or any other serious chaperone. What Daisy has done, let alone what she originally intended to do, namely to walk without any attendance at all to meet Giovanelli, is not merely a flagrant violation of the rules, but her indecency, her frivolity, a lack of a "certain indispensable delicacy" (p.90) are almost regarded as a crime by the lady in the carriage, who finds the girl "naturally indelicate" (p.94). Feminists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries therefore condemn Mrs Walker and the conservative Mr Winterbourne, who naturally sides with the older woman, and applaud Daisy who disobeys her out of a feeling of intuitive revolt which does no harm to her general good-naturedness.

Even if her fellow-Americans' judgments were unobjectionable, Daisy Miller could not be entirely blamed for her presumed ignorance of the dicta applied by them.

Who could have taught her, "uncultivated" (p.91) as she is, and as Winterbourne calls her, accurately? Certainly not her father who is always absent, and not her mother, either, who is "imbecile" (ibid.) - here Mrs Walker's judgment is right, too, for a change. But "elle s'affiche" (p.97) the latter indignantly tells Winterbourne three days after the incident in the Pincio; Daisy makes a scandal, she says and, soon assisted by her American friends, decides to ostracize the young girl from now on. Yet, Daisy is not stupid; her lack of education may explain her naiveté, even her vulgarity, as J.A. Ward puts it, "Daisy Miller is a story in which an apparently inoffensive, even charming vulgarity is a moral limitation"¹⁵. But she could never be called an imbecile like Mrs Miller. Just as in the garden scene in Vevey where the young girl understood perfectly well that Mrs Costello did not want to see her, she suddenly realizes, while Mrs Walker is remonstrating with her about her unacceptable behaviour in the Pincio, that she is doing something wrong in the eyes of the adults, although she herself does not find fault with her conduct, which she heartily defends in the presence of Winterbourne, Giovanelli and the severe Mrs Walker. Daisy's "violent laugh"¹⁶ shows the reader that she is as shocked about the older lady's attitude as that lady is shocked about Daisy's audacious act. Miss Miller, however, does not seem to mind a lot as she daintily minces off with her beautiful Giovanelli, cheerfully chattering as if nothing embarrassing at all had happened. But she has certainly felt a pang at being publicly blamed for something trivial, something not worth talking about in her opinion. Despite her being "a fearful, frightful flirt" (p.99), as she admits to Winterbourne, she is inwardly vexed, explaining with her characteristic frankness that her own point of view is quite different from Mrs Walker's, " 'But did you ever hear anything so cool as Mrs Walker's wanting me to get into her carriage and drop poor Mr Giovanelli; and under the pretext that it was proper? People have different ideas! It would have been most unkind; he had been talking about that walk for ten days' ". (p.98) And when Winterbourne patronizingly tries to make her understand that flirting is not proper in young unmarried women, Daisy declares, " 'It seems to me much more proper in young unmarried women than in old married

ones' ". (p.99). Her own instinctive morality is evidently closer to that of the twentieth century than to the prudish, more hypocritical nineteenth century's view about love and marriage.

At any rate, it must have been with more than a pang that she notices Mrs Walker's cutting her at one of her parties. Winterbourne has seen how pale Daisy's pretty face becomes when the American lady ignores her. The young lady is just growing aware that not only Mrs Walker but all her reactionary fellow-Americans have started to disdain and reject her. Although she keeps her good humour and seems to have forgotten Winterbourne's soft rebukes as well as Mrs Walker's harsher reprimands, she suffers from the many cold shoulders suddenly turned on her and reacts by beginning to reject herself. In fact, Daisy Miller now starts sinning consciously against the established code of behaviour, provoking and defying the ladies who judge and criticize her merely because they are older and wiser. Thus she excludes herself more and more from the closed circle of the Americans. "Acting so spontaneously in a world of narrow restrictions", says H. Fox in *Henry James A Critical Introduction*,¹⁷ she is magnificent in her defiance". Yet, the acts of defiance, even though committed with a sense of pleasure, show Daisy's distress and revolt at her being treated unjustly. Never once does she complain about her being ostracized, but the process of her self-rejection will lead her to the Colosseum at night.

As malaria or the Roman fever as it was called until the completion of the draining of the Pontine marshes in the 1930s was still endemic in this place, it was nearly suicidal to go there especially during the night. This, however, is precisely what Daisy does, running headlong into the trap of death. And it is not Mr Giovanelli who could have prevented her, the headstrong and obstinate young lady who once told Mrs Walker that she was more than five years old. It is thus finally not her recklessness, her childish carelessness, her unreasoning which lead her to disaster, but her own choice not to let anyone save her, and, at the same time, her reluctance to save herself. In this context, M.Mackenzie is right in suggesting that "Daisy Miller's passion is more difficult to distinguish from suicidal self-rejection than at first appears."¹⁸ But none of the

Americans present in Rome, least of all Winterbourne himself has registered this, or grasped Miss Daisy's true nature; her so-called recklessness and provincialism hide an existing vulnerability. She has cared and probably suffered more than anyone has imagined: gestures and words of hers have disclosed the deep inner wound which has brought about the final tragedy. "Of course I care to know" Daisy exclaimed seriously. 'But I don't believe it. They are only pretending to be shocked. They don't really care a straw what I do.'"¹⁹ And Daisy has cared for Winterbourne, too. It is not until her mother tells him that Daisy, who has taken great pains on her deathbed to make Mrs Miller promise to break the important news to Winterbourne that her daughter has never been engaged to Mr Giovanelli, that the stiff American gentleman realizes this and that he has definitely missed all his opportunities to tell her he has cared for her as well. He, of course, is too conventional to show a sufficient amount of courage and understanding to admit this before the young girl's death. Instead, everything seems lost upon him when, in the moonlit Colosseum, he reflects, "She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer respect" (p.111). So, forsaken by all except by Giovanelli, who remains her kind and harmless pretext for defying the world of conventionality till the end, Daisy has stopped caring about herself, her last words poignantly underlining her personal tragedy, " 'I don't care', said Daisy, in a little strange tone, 'whether I have Roman fever or not' ". (p.113) The author himself expresses pity and tenderness for his female protagonist after her death, making his male character stare at the "raw protuberance among the April daisies" (p.115) and realize too late that she was hurt, that he did her injustice and that above all "she would have appreciated one's esteem." (p.116)

Another young lady, who would certainly have appreciated at least a minimum of esteem, is Catherine Sloper, the heroine of James's *Washington Square*. Unlike Daisy Miller, this American girl does not die of people's lack of esteem and understanding for her true nature, but her suffering is just as real. Both Daisy and Catherine must swallow offenses and mental injuries inflicted on them by men and

women who underrate their personalities. But this is the only similarity between the two protagonists as their characters and the circumstances of their lives are quite different. In fact, the young American flirt staying in Europe to enjoy herself, and dying there because not allowed to do so, has practically nothing in common with Catherine Sloper, the quietly suffering American wallflower whose own trip to Europe is only an episode of the story. Daisy is a brilliant social success, which unfortunately leads people to judge her according to what she appears to be; Catherine, on the contrary, is hardly observed and talked about by anyone in the New York society of the mid-nineteenth century, but, at the beginning of the novel at least, she is judged for what she is, a dull and insipid girl. Already at her birth, her father, Dr Sloper, is tremendously disappointed because, to him, she cannot make up for the loss of his only boy child, "a little boy of extraordinary promise,"²⁰ who dies at the age of three. When the Doctor's adored wife also dies shortly after Catherine is born, the widower is inconsolable at finding himself so suddenly robbed of what was dearest to him. Being what he is, a very bright physician and scientist, who, "save when he fell in love with Catherine Harrington, had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever", and whose "private opinion of the more complicated sex was not exalted" (p. 32) can only find refuge in a lifelong habit of treating his daughter with more or less crude irony. At the worst, on numerous occasions, this irony turns into a cold and bitter sarcasm which deeply offends Catherine.

Yet, until the unfortunate relationship with Morris Townsend has brought a turning-point of love and passion into her usually dull and boring life, her father is nice enough to her, but nothing more. It is Catherine's submission and docility to him, her natural and unquestioning filial love which are clearly shown in the young girl's conception of life: "on the whole, he was very kind to her, she was perfectly aware of this, and to go beyond the point in question seemed to her really something to live for" (p.35). Doctor Sloper, moreover, would like to be proud of his daughter, but he hardly finds anything to be proud of; not exactly stupid, she does not distinguish herself through grace, beauty and intelligence, making a very modest figure in whatever she

does or wherever she goes in the New York of her childhood, her adolescence and her adulthood. The doctor "had moments of irritation at having produced a commonplace child, and he even went so far at times as to take a certain satisfaction in the thought that his wife had not lived to find her out". (p.35.)

Catherine's fictional father, Henry James himself, does not seem to have had a particular liking for this daughter of his mind, either. Why else should he have excluded *Washington Square* from the "New York edition" of his works and why should he have written to W.D. Howells that it was a "poorish story"²¹ or to Grace Norton in the same year describing the novel as "a slender tale, of rather too narrow an interest" and saying that "I don't, honestly, take much stock in it"?²² Many critics, however, have liked the novel; some have even called it a small masterpiece. The issue of the novel's critical value, however, is less relevant in the present context than the question about Catherine's dulness, a point about which critics don't agree. Most of them support Dr Sloper's opinion about his daughter's lack of intellectual brightness. In comparing Isabel Archer and Catherine Sloper for example, H. Fox is right when pointing out that the latter "always occupies a secondary place even in the limited intellectual circles of New York ", and that "her nature is too narrow and confined."²³ Catherine Sloper remains James's timid and self-effacing wallflower character all through the long tale, it is true, but Fox is wrong when accusing her of being "really incapable of rebellion" and, a little further, as being "inherently and innately inferior."²⁴

In fact, as the reader is soon to notice, the young woman is capable of revolt: sure of her love for Morris she will make up her mind to marry him against her father's will. Of course, she has been too gullible since the beginning of her relationship with Townsend, not being aware at all of the latter's intentions while courting her. Despite this, her naivety can be understood to a certain extent; it is not completely innate, but partly due to the education given her by an all too strict and unloving father and a histrionic, over-romantic aunt, who is not unkind to Catherine but who has failed to teach her how to become a self-confident and independent young lady braced to cope with her father's injustices. Before Morris Townsend steps into Catherine's life,

however, Dr Sloper does not treat his daughter unjustly. In fairness to him James says that "it must not be supposed that Dr Sloper visited his disappointment upon the poor girl, or ever let her suspect that she had played him a trick. On the contrary, for fear of being unjust to her, he did his duty with exemplary zeal, and recognized that she was a faithful and affectionate child."²⁵ But he only does his duty, which is not enough to make of her a happy child. Besides, both Dr Sloper and aunt Penniman are unable to judge her correctly. The Doctor believes Catherine not intelligent enough to realize how stupid her aunt is.

Both she (Lavinia) and her brother, however, exaggerated the young girl's limitations; for Catherine, though she was very fond of her aunt, and conscious of the gratitude she owed her, regarded her without a particle of that gentle dread which gave its stamp to her admiration of her father. To her mind there was nothing of the infinite about Mrs Penniman; Catherine saw her all at once as it were, and was not dazzled by the apparition. (p.35)

Whether dull and commonplace or rather guileless and excessively docile to a father who scarcely deserves such respect, Catherine, it may be realistically supposed, would never have deeply suffered from her father's lack of affection, if she had not happened to fall in love with a selfish fortune hunter. The story that now unfolds is very nearly the same, except of course for the names, as the one "Mrs Kemble told me last evening", the novelist reports in a notebook entry from February 21st 1879²⁶, "of her brother H.'s engagement to Miss T." James's Morris Townsend is modelled upon this certain H.K.,

a young ensign in a marching regiment, very handsome ('beautiful'), but very luxurious and selfish, and without a penny to his name. Miss T. was a dull, plain, commonplace girl, only daughter of the master of King's Coll., Cambridge, who had a handsome private fortune (£ 4000 a year). She was very much in love with H.K., and was of that slow, sober, dutiful nature that an impression once made upon her was made forever. Her father disapproved strongly (and justly) of the engagement and informed her that if she married young K. he would not leave her a penny of his money. It was only in her money that K. was interested...(ibid.).

And James's close friend Frances Anne Kemble goes on telling him the story which becomes the gist of *Washington Square*. In his novel James echoes Mrs Kemble's criticism about the young girl, but only to a certain point. As indicated he does not accuse his heroine of a deficiency in intellect, and he no longer lends his supportive

voice to Dr Sloper after Townsend has started to pursue the unattractive Catherine for her money. In the early chapters the author, like Dr Sloper, refuses "to be intimidated, by sentimental reasons, from enjoying the comic possibilities of Catherine's deportment. Indeed, before the affair with Townsend becomes passionate enough to reveal the hidden depths of her character, she offers little else to an agile mind than a subject for ironic pleasantries."²⁷ Poirier also points out that until Catherine's and her father's trip to Europe there is nothing in the novel that would suggest that the young woman is not "stolid, tedious and dully sweet."²⁸ But, according to the same critic, James's and Sloper's ironic voices "begin to separate entirely at the point when Catherine and her father leave for Europe."²⁹

Before the trip, and for a good third of the novel, Catherine, although self-effaced and devoted to an all-powerful father, does not complain about her uneventful life; and when Morris starts to visit her regularly in Washington Square, she even becomes quite happy, but characteristically very quiet about her love; she is indeed not the kind of person who falls in love head over heels and is blinded by an overwhelming passion. If passion there is, it doesn't show in her discreet behaviour. "If she had been told she was in love, she would have been a good deal surprised; for she had an idea that love was an eager and exacting passion, and her own heart was filled in those days with the impulse of self-effacement and sacrifice."³⁰ Yet, her present which "had suddenly grown rich and solemn." (p.67) is by and by tinted by melancholy which will grow into utter sadness. When she finds the courage to inform her father that she is engaged, she receives the first of a series of painful blows. In fact, the soft "Ah" Catherine utters after Dr Sloper has frankly said he doesn't like the young man and doesn't approve of his courtship expresses a pang of grief in what may be called the first exciting period of her life. Her voice becomes "timidly argumentative" (p.85) and she even "broke into a vehement protest" (ibid.), although James makes his narrator say that he doubts "whether Catherine was irritated" (ibid.); the girl's nature certainly prevents her from indulging in any too violent displays of temperament. But she senses that she will soon have to suffer more because her father's behaviour suggests

possibilities that will make her "feel sick" (p.87). After the Doctor has made it quite clear that he is against his daughter's engagement to a man who has spent his fortune on a life of leisure and who appreciates Catherine's money much more than her personal merits, he asks her sarcastically, "You won't think me cruel?" (ibid.) Miss Sloper is evidently not reassured by this question, but she still doesn't accuse her father and goes on admiring him, since her confidence is as yet unbroken; "if you knew how I feel", she tells him, "and you must know, you know everything - you would be so kind, so gentle" (ibid.)

It is by now obvious that the Doctor cannot stand the gentleman presumably in love with his daughter. But one must not do him injustice as he has tried not to judge Morris too rashly; the scientist in him is used to thinking of people in categories, and his opinion about the young man in question seems to be unambiguous: "The position of husband to a weak-minded woman with a large fortune would suit him to perfection" he lets aunt Penniman know (p.71). Before his judgment of Townsend is quite definite, however, he gathers a sufficient amount of information from his two sisters: Lavinia whom he hates to talk to as she annoys him with her "mock romanticism" (p.68) but whose opinion he has to consult nevertheless, because he himself has appointed her to play the role of his daughter's mother, and Mrs Almond. The latter is Sloper's more reasonable and down-to-earth sister who has an honest and disinterested liking for Catherine. It is she who suggests her brother should "give the young man the benefit of every doubt" (p.62). The doctor follows her advice since he is willing to have a second conversation with his daughter's suitor, this time in private, and to ask Mrs Montgomery, Townsend's sister, about him. Neither consultation, however, contributes to attenuating Sloper's disapproval. "Your absence of means, of a profession, of visible resources or prospects, places you in a category from which it would be imprudent for me to select a husband for my daughter," (p.89) Sloper brusquely tells Townsend who is unable to convince him of the contrary despite his very clever and persistent argumentation. The jovial fellow finally loses his temper when told that Catherine may remain just as miserable as his lifelong wife, or as the daughter suffering from her

father's lifelong tyranny. But he does not give Catherine up, despite the fact that he really has no chance, after Dr Sloper has departed from Townsend's sister "with the words gently humming in his ears - 'Don't let her marry him ! ' " (p.104)

In the meantime Catherine is suffering in silence. "Poor Catherine", James says so often in his novel that the sentimental reader tends to fall into melodramatic outbreaks of compassion for the heroine. Often, she is to be pitied, it is true, for reasons that are all too obvious; but the young woman's behaviour in the only emotional crisis of her life is much too dignified as to deserve the repeated use of the adjective 'poor'. Her conduct remains unchanged, Miss Sloper having decided merely to be patient, for the time being. Surprised at the absence of mute reproaches and sulkiness in her manner, her father again misjudges her when reflecting, "that his daughter was not a woman of great spirit." (p.105) But she perhaps thinks it wiser not to display any sign of revolt yet and to be a good daughter to her father while hiding her disappointment; after all, he might still realize how wrong his opinion about her lover is. Catherine, it must be added, would certainly have liked to have her attitude supported by her aunt; Miss Penniman, however, has such ridiculous visions of a secret marriage between two guilty people in a subterranean chapel that she is more of a hindrance than a realistic and efficient counsellor in this affair. More than this, she combines her efforts, as it were, with those of her brother and Morris to make her niece miserable. This is not what she means to do, of course, but her secret meetings with Catherine's suitor and the many private conversations she has with him in her brother's own house while Sloper and his daughter are touring in Europe, make of her an extremely meddlesome, even deceitful person, a real nuisance.

So it is with an admirable patience or a terrible naivety - it depends on the reader's point of view - that Catherine waits for a change in her father's attitude. Moreover, she is still convinced that Townsend is not after her money and that the purest love and truth are seated in the young man's eyes." (p.107) She has the idea that "if she should be very good, the situation would in some mysterious way improve". (ibid.) Still incapable of disobeying her father, she has no mental reaction to her situation, an

early critic of *Washington Square* judges. Her strength is of the passive order - "a strength of resistance, a capacity for suffering and silence".³¹ On the other hand, it is essential to notice that Catherine's way of proceeding is not merely dictated by an excessive gullibility or an unfounded optimism, but also by the hope of bringing her father round diplomatically; again one should beware of seeing in the young woman someone simple-minded, too stupid to tell her father the truth to his face. "To be good she must be patient, outwardly submissive, abstain from judging her father too harshly and from committing any act of open defiance".³² Her present strategy is to play for time, to trust in God, to expect "a good deal of Heaven".³³ She relies on God although she is not a particularly pious girl like Balzac's Eugénie Grandet to whom she is often compared. But, in truth, Catherine Sloper is not really a second Eugénie Grandet.

Having tenaciously bided her time, the girl from Washington Square once more tries to win her father over to her side, but she is again disappointed when told that Townsend is a "selfish idler"³⁴, and that every attempt to make Sloper change his mind is absolutely pointless because he will never consent to a marriage. His cynical remark that she can, of course, wait until his death, if she likes, makes her tremble and utter a "cry of natural horror". (p.124) Catherine ultimately fails to move her father to pity as her timidly tentative words, "I think Morris - little by little - might persuade you" are given the cruel reply "I shall never let him speak to me again. I dislike him too much" (p.125). This comes as a second blow to the girl whose long and low sigh expresses a deep sorrow which she thinks wrong to exhibit outwardly, however. Dignified as she is and this, it must be repeated, has nothing to do with dulness and simplicity, she finds it inconsiderate to act upon her father's feelings and admits she has merely tried "to effect some gentle, gradual change in his intellectual perception of poor Morris's character. But the means of effecting such a change were at present shrouded in mystery and she felt miserably helpless and hopeless." (ibid.) These words clearly show the reader that her present suffering will probably find no end, especially because she "had exhausted all arguments, all replies." (ibid.)

To be fair to Sloper, he does pity Catherine; for the moment there is not yet the icy coldness in his eyes that he turns upon her in the often-quoted scene in the Swiss Alps. But he is quite convinced that his argument is correct, which it is, however much we pity the young woman. And she is to be pitied, as Brian Lee, the author of the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Washington Square* notices, "The depth of her poorly articulated emotion in contrast to the superficial, malicious or merely silly attitudes of her loved ones is what finally moves the reader and enlists his sympathy". (p.20) What really pains Catherine is not her father's verdict " 'If you marry without my consent, I don't leave you a farthing of money' " (p.125), but rather his warning " 'If you see him, you will be an ungrateful, cruel child, you will have given your old father the greatest pain of his life' ".(p.126) Such a wounding sarcasm - which Catherine seems to take at face value - makes the poor girl - the adjective 'poor' is justified here - show her grief; her tears are overflowing and she raises her hands towards a father who feels sorry for his daughter, it is true, but who believes he ought to act cruelly as he is sure he is right. Here and elsewhere in the novel, James seems to insinuate that Dr Sloper need not be so unrelenting and trample on Catherine's feelings even if he has judged the unhappy girl's suitor with extreme justness. Furthermore, the Doctor is right again when he tells aunt Penniman that his daughter will not die of one or more dreadful nights, which is true since Catherine does look astonishingly fresh after having spent a night "quivering beneath a father's curse", (p.130) her heart nearly breaking; this, however, is to be attributed to her normal physical and moral strength, and in no way does her morning freshness deny or diminish her mental grief.

On hearing about Catherine's distress and her father's message that she will not get a penny if she marries without his consent, Morris Townsend is nonetheless shrewd enough not to show the slightest negative reaction and to let the girl keep her illusions about his continuing love for her. The couple decide to marry against the Doctor's will, but Townsend makes it clear to the artless young woman that he prefers to wait a while; he is indeed not happy about the dilemma of either "losing Catherine and her possible fortune altogether or...taking her too soon and finding this possible fortune as void of

actuality as a collection of emptied bottles". (p.142) For the time being he is satisfied that Catherine has agreed to give up trying to reconcile her father to the idea of a marriage, and he cunningly draws back, refusing to fix the date of a forthcoming wedding-day. Despite the fact that Catherine continues to believe in Townsend's love so sincerely that she does not suspect he is playing with her, she begins to develop into a stronger, more mature woman. She remains naive, but obstinate as well, having made up her mind to defy her father, to go against his orders, even if she breaks under the burden of the price she has to pay. This decision has actually cost her, as the author reveals, "a great deal of deep-welling sorrow, sorrow of the purest and most generous kind, without a touch of resentment or rancor". (p.148) But there is something like anger in the always obedient and considerate girl when she feels her father's contempt.

Catherine's anger and brave resistance to her father do not vanish during the tour through Europe which Sloper organizes with the intention to take his daughter's mind off her ridiculous infatuation with Morris. But she sticks, as the Doctor had once believed she would not, and she will stick until the end of the affair. She pursues her way with an "unaggressive obstinacy". (p.146) The stay in Europe proves to be a failure for both, though not from the cultural point of view, of course. Each of them is in the same impasse as before, and Catherine has not suffered less; on the contrary, the scene in the Alps brings home to her a reality of her father's behaviour of which she is afraid. " 'Should you like to be left in such a place as this, to starve?' " (p.155) he asks her with a cruelty unusual even for him; but his unending frustrations have exasperated him at last. For Catherine, too, the worst is still to come. On her return to New York she is soon painfully reminded of her aunt's prying methods. Neither is she pleased at the idea that Mrs Penniman has entirely taken charge of Morris, allowing him to come to their house as often as he liked and even letting him sit in Dr Sloper's study. These impudent manners make the gentle Catherine speak to her aunt with an authority and maturity which she also manifests in her first conversation with Morris after her trip to Europe. She has kept her modesty, but she declares to her lover with a surprising resoluteness that she has given up her father for him, a sacrifice which, as she explains no less

clearly, has been extremely hard to make; she is still suffering at the thought and consequences of it, but she is quite determined. Morris is taken aback by this doggedness and strength to which he can only respond with anger and cynicism.

What the Doctor has always foreseen is about to happen, and Catherine's short, but serene and innocent, happiness ends abruptly: the fortune-hunter has become tired of hunting his prize which, though accessible now, will not bring him the money he has coveted since he first saw young Miss Sloper. On the other hand, the Doctor's judgment about his own child has been erroneous. He could never have imagined, he tells Mrs Almond, that she could become so defiant, " 'she is absolutely glued. I have passed , in consequence, into the exasperated stage. At first I had a good deal of a certain genial curiosity about it; I wanted to see if she really would stick. But, good Lord, one's curiosity is satisfied! I see she is capable of it, and now she can let go' " (p.170). Yet, he is again right in foreseeing that " 'if she doesn't let go, she will be taken off - sent tumbling into the dust' ". (p.171)

That this is precisely what Morris Townsend intends to do is the not altogether surprising news that first comes to aunt Lavinia's ears. Taking into account that lady's twisted mind, there is no helpful answer to be expected from her, when Morris announces he must give the girl up. He adds in a very cowardly way that it wouldn't be bad if the aunt could in some way prepare the path of retreat. This is, however, asking too much of too weak a woman who can only meddle in people's affairs without being of any real, practical use. Poor Catherine, and now the term is more than relevant, is then told the bitter truth by her fiancé himself. Having given up everything for Morris, already laying out her 'trousseau' with the content of someone quietly waiting for a great event, she is bitterly disappointed, deeply wounded and humiliated. Quite understandably, in what is "almost the last outbreak of passion in her life", (p.185) she gives herself up to the pain of having so brutally been disillusioned, betrayed and forsaken by the deceitful Townsend. As Charles G. Hoffmann justly affirms, her disillusionment is not "the discovery that Townsend is an adventurer, but rather that he betrayed the ideal of love she had experienced in loving him and he had promised in

return".³⁵ The brief triumph she has savoured and the satisfaction she has drawn from the prospect of soon marrying a good and handsome young man have been too intense for her not to suffer from the disenchantment for a long time afterwards. How long she has silently buried herself in her grief, but not shown any outward sign of it, in her characteristically dignified manner remains her secret. She also keeps to herself the meagre triumph she enjoys because she never lets her father know the complete truth. "It was his punishment that he never knew," the narrator reflects, " - his punishment, I mean, for the abuse of sarcasm in his relations with his daughter. There was a good deal of effective sarcasm in her keeping him in the dark, and the rest of the world conspired with her, in this sense, to be sarcastic".³⁶

Although "her poor little heart is grievously bruised", (p.201) as Mrs Almond believes, Catherine swallows her grief and decides to embrace the destiny of an old spinster. The critic Mary Doyle Springer finds her "heroic in her choice of defiance and in her courage to face what she comes to understand. But we are never made to feel that she could have acted, other than to resign herself statically to spinsterhood".³⁷ Catherine will not remain tragically unhappy for the rest of her life as time will inevitably succeed in soothing her pain, but she will never again let anything more intense than the trivialities of everyday life happen to her. Therefore she refuses suitors who may console her, just as she refuses Townsend himself, who treacherously tries to woo her a second time, after many years of absence. She settles down with her emptiness, regretting but accepting the fact that something has snapped in her life that can no longer be repaired. She must live with the knowledge that two people have caused her suffering of the worst kind which can be accepted, but never forgotten and undone.

'From her own point of view', she meditates, 'the great facts of her career were that Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring. Nothing could ever alter these facts; they were always there...Nothing could ever undo the wrong or cure the pain that Morris had inflicted on her, and nothing could ever make her feel toward her father as she felt in her younger years. There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void'.³⁸

Some critics underline the pathos here, like Millicent Bell who finds "the phrase 'trifled with her affection' belongs to the context of sentimental pathos, which offers as a

model the history of the wronged female martyr who must die unconsolated or live the living death of a lonely recluse ('there was something dead in her life'). James's ending would seem to conform to the sentimental platitude that not to marry is the tragic aborting of female destiny".³⁹ This is what twentieth-century women would rightly consider as a "sentimental platitude", but the end of James's nineteenth-century story is not bathed in melodrama, but it poignantly fits the rest of the novel, in which a weak and timid heroine of the previous century has spent all her efforts and made what sacrifices she could for the one emotional adventure of her life which, rather than enhancing it has ended by ruining it. To fill the hollowness, the old maid sits down with her needle-work "for life, as it were",⁴⁰ to quote, like most critics, the author's very impressive words that close the door upon Catherine's story. The woman in Washington Square is resigned to accept her fate, having no strength left to fight against it anyway. She finally feels neither hate nor love: "Everything is dead and buried", she says to Morris (p.218), heroically drawing a line under a miserable chapter of her life, but real death will not for a long time put an end to her suffering.

Notes

¹ Mary Doyle Springer: *A Rhetoric of Literary Characters*, op.cit., p.211

² Leon Edel: Introduction to the second section of the second volume of *Henry James: Letters*, op.cit.

³ Henry James: Preface to *Daisy Miller*, Penguin Classics, ed. with an Introduction by Geoffrey Moore and Notes by Patricia Crick. (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1986), p.40

⁴ *ibid.*, p.41

⁵ *ibid.*, p.41

⁶ *ibid.*, p.43

⁷ *ibid.*, p.42

⁸ Elizabeth Allen: *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.31

⁹ Geoffrey Moore: Introduction to *Daisy Miller*, op.cit., p.36

¹⁰ E. Allen: *A Woman's Place*, op.cit., p.20

¹¹ E. Allen: op.cit., p.22

¹² Henry James: *Daisy Miller*, op.cit., p.66

¹³ Kenneth Graham: 'Dynamics of an Enigma', essay published in *New Essays on James's 'Daisy Miller' and 'The Turn of the Screw'*, edit. by Vivian R. Pollak (Cambridge University Press 1993), p.44

¹⁴ Henry James: *Daisy Miller*, op.cit., p.67

¹⁵ J.A. Ward: *The Imagination of Disaster*, op.cit., p.28

¹⁶ Henry James: *Daisy Miller*, op.cit. p.93

¹⁷ Henry Fox: *Henry James: A Critical Introduction* (J.E. Westburg, 1968), p.25

- ¹⁸ Manfred Mackenzie: *Communities of Honor and Love in Henry James* (Harvard University Press, 1976), p.81
- ¹⁹ Henry James: *Daisy Miller*, op.cit., p.108
- ²⁰ Henry James: *Washington Square*, Penguin Classics, ed. with an Introduction by Brian Lee (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1986), p.29
- ²¹ Leon Edel: *Henry James: Letters*, op.cit., H. James: Letter to W.D. Howells from 31st January 1880, p.268
- ²² Leon Edel, op.cit., H. James: Letter to Grace Norton from 20th September 1880, p.308
- ²³ H. Fox: H.J.: *A Critical Introduction*, op.cit.p.31
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ Henry James: *Washington Square*, op.cit., pp.35-36
- ²⁶ Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James The Authoritative and Definitive Version* (Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.11-12
- ²⁷ R. Poirier: *The Comic Sense of Henry James*, op.cit., p.64
- ²⁸ R. Poirier, op.cit., p.66
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ Henry James: *Washington Square*, op.cit., p.67
- ³¹ Joseph Warren Beach: *The Method of Henry James* (1918; rev. edn, Philadelphia, Penn., 1954), pp.228-232
- ³² Joseph W. Beach: *The Method of H.J.*, op.cit., p.33
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ Henry James: *Washington Square*, op.cit., p.123
- ³⁵ Charles G. Hoffmann: *The Short Novels of Henry James*, p. 34
- ³⁶ Henry James, op.cit., p.199
- ³⁷ M.D. Springer: *The Rhetoric of Literary Character*, op.cit., p.81
- ³⁸ H. James, op.cit., p.203
- ³⁹ Millicent Bell: *Meaning in Henry James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991), p.78
- ⁴⁰ H. James, op.cit., p.220

CHAPTER FOUR: ISABEL ARCHER

THE TRAGEDY OF A MISTAKE

My novel is to be an *Americana*, the adventures in Europe of a female Newman who of course equally triumphs over the insolent foreigner.¹

In this extract from a letter written to W.D. Howells before *The Portrait of a Lady* was completed, Henry James informs his friend that his new novel will again deal with the international theme, but this time it is to be a woman travelling from America to live her adventures on the old continent and triumph over the wicked European. When writing this letter, the author either forgets that the villain in *The Portrait* is going to be an American himself, though having lived in Europe for years, or considers Gilbert Osmond as a foreigner, an expatriate who has become an integral member of the Italian society which he has adopted, his numerous years of absence having totally estranged him from his home country. In any case, all the successful ingredients of *The American* and *Daisy Miller* seem to be reunited in what is going to be James's masterpiece of his middle period: a well-to-do and physically attractive American man or woman setting out for England, France, Switzerland or Italy, exporting there what one would nowadays call the American way of life, a style of living which was, roughly speaking, as different from that of the old Continent as it is today, and trying to become initiated into European customs and traditions. Like Christopher Newman and Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer is going to strike the Europeans by her newness, her typically American spontaneity, her love of freedom in thoughts and acts, characteristics not so common in the Europeans of the time. But these three Americans', and other Jamesian heroes' experiences, on the old Continent are far from pleasant and refreshingly natural. The cultural visitors to Europe suffer for being different, for loving their independence more than the strict code of behaviour dictated to them by the rigid, tradition-following European society, in which appearances are often valued more than truth and honesty. Although they may in their own way triumph over the "insolent foreigner", it will be at the cost of more or less intense suffering and deeply-felt disillusionment. Of course,

these are the recurrent themes of the majority of James's novels, but they are differently treated from work to work.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* James develops his ideas as he has never done before. It is a known fact, and I will only mention it briefly, that readers everywhere, critics of older and more recent times have praised or admired a work which is outstanding from more than one point of view. One may not share F.R. Leavis's opinion that it is the best novel ever written, but it is undeniably one of the masterpieces of English and American literature. This chapter will not discuss why this is so, but why James's analysis of Isabel's suffering has made of her the unforgettable lady of the Portrait. We have witnessed James's "parti pris" for the lovable Daisy Miller; we have seen how he has grown a little fonder of Catherine Sloper after she has been victimized by her father and her lover than he was at the beginning of *Washington Square*; but in *The Portrait of a Lady* the novelist is actually in love with his heroine from the beginning to the end, and it is not only the novelist who adores her, but also many learned readers. "Isabel Archer may be the fictional heroine above all others with whom modern literary intellectuals are certain to fall in love,"² writes Harold Bloom. Most Jamesian scholars also agree that the author is justifiably proud of particularly those pages which deal with her suffering, after the deception of her marriage. "It is the portrait of a character", James writes to W.D. Howells three months after the above-quoted letter, "and recital of the adventures of a woman - a great swell, psychologically, a 'grande nature', accompanied with many developments."³ In this novel James has actually succeeded in drawing the complete portrait of a young woman whose nature and ideas he admires for what they are, not finding fault with or moralizing about what may become of them under the given circumstances of the story. In fact, the writer never harshly criticizes his heroine and lets her develop freely, adding touch by touch until at the end of the novel the picture of Isabel is that of the 'grande nature' mentioned in the second letter to Howells. Although the imagery of portrait painting is more than accurate as James employs it throughout the work, it might nevertheless be misleading; the portrait within a frame indeed suggests something definitely finished,

an accomplished image with set traits. But James neither wants to present us with the finished picture of a saint nor that of a pitiable martyr; even the Isabel of the end of *The Portrait*, however beautiful and dignified she is in the full possession of her regained freedom, would still be able to develop, in yet other episodes of her life to come.

Because freedom and independence play such an essential role in Isabel's nature, and because she represents everything that is truly and typically American, it has often been said that her author has largely identified with her. As Millicent Bell puts it, Isabel is "like James, the motionless see-er who is an affectionate, spectatorial witness of his characters' efforts as he gives them their lives, their plots", and she goes on referring to James's "recognition of his own identity with female life in a society which kept both women and the artist at the periphery of social power."⁴ That James felt better in a women's society on most occasions in his life, that he might have had more of a woman's than of a man's soul in himself, seems to be true by and large, as Leon Edel has adequately argued in his biography. But to make the discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* pivot around the delicate and largely mysterious problem of James's sexuality, or to give the novel a psychoanalytical treatment based on the Freudian ego-theory which explains Isabel's masochistic behaviour through a repressed mother image, as two recent critics have done, is interesting enough, but not entirely faithful to the novelist's intentions. A psychological reading of the heroine's flux of consciousness seems to be a more accurate approach, especially because Henry James applies for the first time, albeit unintentionally and unconsciously, what his brother William had originally defined as the "stream-of-consciousness" technique. Trying to follow what goes on in Isabel's conscience rather than judge her from external acts only or consider the mere machinations of the plot is what most critics have done in their respective studies of the novel. "The portrait of Isabel is the portrait of a mind", said an early critic, C.P. Kelley, in 1930, "rather than that of a person with physical form and body, and it takes the whole novel to give the complete portrait."⁵ All of this does not mean that Isabel Archer is not a woman of flesh and blood, a pretty, self-confident

young girl like Daisy Miller, who later develops into a mature woman, not unlike Milly Theale, although both women suffer differently. Moreover, Miss Archer is the first of James's women characters who does not merely endure her fate, and whose suffering does not end with an early death like that of young Daisy. Again, unlike James's other American heroine of the early novels, Catherine Sloper, Isabel does not sink into a life-long passive existence. Beautiful, intelligent and clever, she has the world at her feet throughout two thirds of the novel, and above all numerous theories in her head. "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,"⁶ we are told at the beginning of chapter six. But a few pages before this, her generous aunt, Mrs Touchett, who has taken Isabel away from the old house in Albany to show her the world, finds "she thinks she knows a great deal of it - like most American girls; but like most American girls she's ridiculously mistaken." (p.43) The girl's aunt is right: it is a typical aspect of the American mentality then and now to have no inhibitions about believing in one's own power and knowledge. As Ralph Touchett pointedly remarks to his mother, the young girl does not strike him as inviting his compassion; nor does she lack self-assurance in her manner and appearance.

It is important here to underline the Emersonian dimension of Isabel's moral conduct and inspiration. Her behaviour being essentially based on intuition, Isabel is what J.A. Ward calls "the Jamesian innocent, an embodiment of the principles of Emersonian transcendentalism", but in spite of being one of the innocent characters, she cannot be identified with a total goodness, she rather represents "an ultimate moral achievement."⁷ And one of the reasons why she is going to suffer so much from the disappointment of her marriage is that she has no evil, no wickedness in herself to oppose to Osmond's cruelty, to balance out the latter's mischief, as it were. "Searching for a tragic flaw in Isabel", thinks H. Bloom, "always leads to the banal discovery that, like Emerson, she lacks that grand New-Critical, neo-Christian, T.S. Eliotic virtue - a Vision of Evil. But Isabel is the heroine of the American, post-Christian version of the Protestant will; she is the heroine of all ages... What matters is the integrity of her will.

For her, love entails her conferring of esteem upon others, and accepting back from them only her own authentic self-esteem."⁸

Yet, the force of her will and self-esteem cannot preclude the existence of evil which is unavoidable. So Isabel, too, encounters evil, and like all other Jamesian adventurers she is "doomed from the beginning, because of the nature of the world in which they live, to meet and be defeated by the force of evil,"⁹ J.A. Ward rightly suggests. "Therefore", he goes on in the same chapter, "if the heroes and heroines are good, they rarely achieve happiness or success. Often the complexity of life itself is the villain."¹⁰ Notwithstanding the wickedness she herself is going to face in the short period of time Henry James allows the reader to share with her, Isabel firmly believes that to confront the world she is sufficiently equipped with the Emersonian values she was brought up with: love of freedom, self-reliance and self-responsibility. She knows that her mind often reacts more quickly than most people's, but this, the author warns us, produces a certain impatience on Isabel's part, not to be confounded with a feeling of superiority, however. James patronizingly but understandingly admits that "her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags."¹¹ Thus Isabel often thinks she knows or knows better, but the high opinion she has of her own knowledge ought to be excused as she has never really had the chance to pit herself against the "people speaking with authority." She possesses this truly Emersonian trust in her individual judgment, and she is practically obsessed by the idea of never doing anything wrong. It is in this light that the author presents her in her new European environment.

Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant... (p.53)

James concludes with his own touch of tenderness. Firmly decided never to appear 'hollow' or 'narrow-minded', Isabel knows, however, that there are "other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul." (p.55)

After she has been in England only briefly and had no experience yet of the European ways, she is very astonished at being reprimanded by her aunt for taking too much liberty. " 'You're too fond of your own ways' ", Mrs Touchett tells her, having judged indecent her niece's wish to sit up with two gentlemen, among whom is her own cousin Ralph by the way, late at night. " 'Yes, I think I'm very fond of them. But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do' ", replies the young girl. " 'So as to do them?' asked her aunt. 'So as to choose', said Isabel." (p.71) This often-quoted dialogue proves that the Jamesian heroine stubbornly clings to her philosophy of life which consists in freely choosing her course of action, an attitude which is clearly influenced by Transcendentalism's idealism and stress upon individuality, as has been mentioned. In her freedom of choice the young lady of the portrait is of course allowed to go beyond the mere banality of just doing as she pleases, and perhaps thereby shocking the people around her, as Daisy Miller does. Isabel will have to struggle to maintain her typically New World mentality of tackling life unhampered and spontaneously, of holding her head high in any situation. Still in England, the first stop of her adventurous journey, she senses that not all people are as happy as herself, "a thought which for the moment made her fine, full consciousness appear a kind of immodesty. What should one do with the misery of the world in a scheme of the agreeable for one's self? It must be confessed that this question never held her long. She was too young, too impatient to live, too unacquainted with pain." (p.56) Before this meditation she has admitted to her cousin that she is "afraid of suffering", but also that "people suffer too easily" and that "it's not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that." (p.49) The latter assumption may be true, but who ever escapes some sort of suffering in life?

Isabel Archer, in spite of the greatness of her mind and her intense wish to act as she chooses, will not be spared, either. For the greater part of the novel, however, Henry James lets her move in her much-cherished freedom, with her own romantic

vision of happiness, which is "a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see." (p.171) Thus Isabel's lucid mind, that remarkable mind of hers which Lord Warburton has earlier admitted to be so very much afraid of, does not prevent her from sharing mostly romantic dreams about life with many young people of her own time and later. And as most young adults' dreams about a happy and careless future are usually never realized, Isabel's life will also turn out to be quite different from what she expected when still on the lawns of Gardencourt. More than half way through the novel, Ralph Touchett, the man who has the tenderest feelings and the greatest understanding for his cousin, delicately and tactfully tries to warn his young relative against the man she has chosen to be her husband. Of course, at this point of the novel, Isabel has made the momentous mistake of choosing to marry the wrong man. While she is engaged to Gilbert Osmond, she inevitably cannot see anything wrong with him since she is truly happy and content; she is indeed honestly convinced that she has fallen upon the man who best suits her aspirations and ideals. For her he represents what she has not found in her other male acquaintances, mainly her two suitors, the American Caspar Goodwood and the Englishman Lord Warburton, and Osmond lacks what she detests in the latter young men. For one thing, her fiancé is older than both Goodwood and Warburton, which makes him wiser, to Isabel, and much more capable of judging life, through the experiences he has had, of which not all have been as edifying as Isabel would have liked them to be, if she had known. Unfortunately she ignores all the negative traits of her suitor, but she is not to blame because Osmond belongs to that category of people who show their fine qualities but are very good at hiding their flaws, which will only emerge in time.

Until Isabel's unfortunate chance encounter with the latter gentleman, an ominous meeting, for which the insidious Madame Merle alone is responsible, she has moved around like a princess, charming, attractive, enjoying the company of people she chooses to make acquaintance with. So far, she has ignored the darker sides of life, except that she has been confronted with her cousin's invalidism, which has not made her worry beyond measure because Ralph's health is not too troublesome as yet. He and

Isabel's other men friends are at her feet, ready to fulfil any of her wishes. For her part, she believes she is entirely free and, above all, perfectly able to find out herself who will be the best choice for her future husband. Her judgment and her sensibility, her perfect mind, which is not meant ironically here, have not failed her yet, and therefore she thinks she is right to have refused two offers of marriage, mainly because she doesn't want to give up the liberty she is so fond of. In fact, she would lose too much of what is dear to her if she became the wife of the extremely rich American Caspar Goodwood or the English Lord Warburton, who combines wealth and a prestigious aristocratic name. In a conversation with Goodwood much earlier in the novel Isabel has made it clear that, if she married him, she would no longer be independent. But the American retorted, "It's to make you independent that I want to marry you'... and '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.'" (p.172) At that time Isabel did not want to understand that her suitor was right: a woman without means simply can't be independent, but if married to an American magnate like Caspar Goodwood she could realize her greatest dreams, free of all annoying and humiliating money problems. But Isabel is obsessed by the idea that she belongs, by birth and nature, "quite to the independent class." (ibid.) Goodwood, on the other hand, is convinced that, one day, she will weary of her independence; in this point, however, he is wrong since Isabel will, after her marriage, temporarily lose the freedom to do exactly as she pleases, but she will do her best to get it back. Before falling under the spell of Gilbert Osmond, she also declines the courtship of her English Lord. About six months after she rejected him for the first time, she sees him again but regretfully admits she has no better answer for him. Incidentally, Isabel gives Lord Warburton this negative answer in the Forum of Rome, among the ruins of an old civilization - like that which Warburton represents - which points out James's tendency to use places and also names like Newman, Cintré, Daisy, Merle and Archer, for example, as symbols; this, by the way, is part of the melodramatic aspect of some scenes in *The Portrait* and

other novels. James's sporadic weakness for melodrama, however, cannot be criticized given his time of writing, and it never leads to triviality or shallowness.

Why Miss Archer does not want to become the wife of an English peer may be more difficult to understand. After all, he is a refined specimen of British traditions and nobility, an elegant and obliging, but not at all arrogant or pretentious aristocrat; on the contrary, he is rather reserved, not embodying such a self-confident and money-inspired virility as Caspar Goodwood. It seems as if Isabel were afraid of precisely Lord Warburton's nobility which, were she married to him, would oblige her to conform to a particularly restrictive social existence just as, in her opinion, the American's hard masculinity would not leave enough room for her own independent aspirations. Although she is frightened by her own courage and sheds tears of perplexity each time she turns down a suitor, Isabel, upon reflexion, is satisfied with her decisions, taken freely and uninfluenced by anybody or anything. For her, Gilbert Osmond does lack what she dislikes in the other two gentlemen, it is true; but it is one of the most striking ironies James ever uses in his novels that the young woman, who desperately wants to keep her independence and abhors the idea of having to live according to a tight set of conventional rules, is subjugated by a man who represents pure conventionality.

To understand why Isabel will suffer so intensely from the gravity of her mistake, once she has discovered it, one must realize that during their engagement she really feels attracted to Osmond, who honestly declares he is in love with her; for a period of time, the two people have indeed been in love and shown each other respect and admiration. It is unfair to Isabel to say she has been naive, even limited in her judgement about Osmond or blinded by her obstinacy and her theories. Elizabeth Allen is, of course, not wrong when saying that "Isabel's impressions are too theoretical to survive in the real world, and are also too consciously divorced from any practical perception,"¹² but isn't this the case for many young people who set out to discover the world and haven't yet had the opportunity to convert their theories into practice? Isabel is not to be blamed, either, for liking in Osmond what she feels is absent in others, for example his capacity to be silent about things most

gentlemen would draw attention to. At first it is sheerly impossible for her to see behind his way of withholding remarks and refraining from action; she admires this as being original and above all as a sign that he does not care for appearances and the mercenary aspect of life. It must not be forgotten that Isabel is afraid of the huge sum of money she has inherited, and she is persuaded that her riches will be considered with a sufficient amount of discretion and even disinterest by her fiancé. It is strange but plausible that she whose head is full of ideas and ambitions should fall for someone who has decided " ' to be as quiet as possible.... 'Not to worry - not to strive nor struggle. To resign myself (himself). To be content with little.' " ¹³ Although her imagination completes the somewhat dry account he gives of himself, for her it is essential that he has managed to keep his independence and that, like her, he dreads vulgarity. Thus there are several of Osmond's characteristics, especially some of his idiosyncracies that strongly appeal to Isabel; it is worthwhile emphasizing that both characters are not fundamentally different, and that they might even have built a happy marriage on what limited them in their natures, if both of them had had the courage to disclose to each other not only their positive qualities but also their flaws.

In fact, Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, realistically underlines her brother's conceitedness and criticizes him for never really having done anything, precisely that feature of his character which Isabel finds attractive because he presents it to her in a different light, modestly and convincingly, almost jokingly,

'There were two or three people in the world I envied - the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome - for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn't be I didn't care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honours. ... I don't mean to say I've cared for nothing; but the things I've cared for have been definite - limited. The events of life have been absolutely unperceived by any one save myself.' (p.286)

The novelty of the understatement must have greatly pleased the innocent and unknowing Isabel, who "feels a private thrill, the consciousness of a new relation"(p.280) not long after she has been introduced to him. On the whole, his reservedness, his desire not to mingle with other people's affairs, to keep aloof

and meditate about or contemplate life and art, a life filled with the realization of high-flown ideals rather than the often sordid business of everyday activities, all of this sounds very agreeable to Isabel; she can't understand, at least not until long after her marriage, that Osmond, although loving her in his own way, does not really consider her as a human being with whims and weaknesses, but more like an object of art to be put aside into a showcase along with his other valuable objects. This is what he reflects upon after he has found out with "such happy hilarity that his joke needs to be explained", (p. 328) that Isabel has turned down an English Lord's offer to become his wife.

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 in the idea 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. (ibid.)

The young lady who has thus succeeded in discarding a rich American as well as an English peer for fear of being pinned down as a specimen condemned to play a rigid role in a rigid society, runs without hesitation into a ready-made cage which Osmond holds open and then closes upon her. "Part of her - the theorising, idealising part - is quite prepared to be placed in Osmond's collection", finds Tony Tanner, "the lady is half willing to be turned into a portrait."¹⁴ It is a matter of free choice, she informs her cousin, who is not to worry because she is going to like her cage. She takes great pains to explain to Ralph that Osmond is a fine, self-less creature, who wants her to know everything, and that is what she likes him for. Their marriage will be based on a mutual exchange of knowledge and a common appreciation of the fine arts.

He prefers art to life, [says Tony Tanner in the same essay] and so does she: he has more theories than feelings, more ideals than instincts, and so does she. He is a collector of things, and she offers herself up to him as a fine finished object. Isabel's accepting Osmond's proposal of marriage is the uncertain self thinking it is embracing the very image of what it seeks to become.¹⁵

In Ralph's opinion, this is only his young, inexperienced cousin's illusion, and he desperately tries to tell her so. Caring for her lovingly without once expressing

the desire to become her husband because of his ill-health, he honestly wishes her the very best - why else should he have made of her such a wealthy woman? For this reason he finds it extremely difficult to describe the vision he has had of her future and then mention the disappointment and the pain he feels at seeing her " 'come down so easily or so soon...' Suddenly someone tosses up a faded rosebud - a missile that should never have reached you - and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me', said Ralph audaciously, 'hurts me as if I had fallen myself.' " ¹⁶ Full of admiration for her husband-to-be, Isabel is naturally unable to understand Ralph's grief, and she is even insulted when he flings at her, " 'you were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante.' " (p.374) Unfortunately for Isabel, Ralph has the right view of things; but his poor cousin is blinded, in spite of all contrary reasoning, by her love and esteem for a man whom she needn't marry for mercenary reasons, "who has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference". (p. 375) She proceeds to make a list of his qualities to justify her choice, "of which she felt only the nobleness and purity." (p.376) So there is no one and nothing to prevent Isabel from making the tragic mistake. "One's in trouble when one's in error" (ibid.) concludes Ralph without hope that she may yet change her mind.

It is, however, not quite self-evident that the future is dark during the happy period of the couple's engagement. Except for some hints at Osmond's egotism, James does not describe him all too negatively. Just before the marriage, he lets Gilbert make this declaration,

Theoretically I was satisfied, as I once told you. I flattered myself I had limited my wants. But I was subject to irritation; I used to have morbid, sterile, hateful fits of hunger, of desire. Now I'm really satisfied, because I can't think of anything better. It's just as when one has been trying to spell out a book in the twilight and suddenly the lamp comes in. I had been putting out my eyes over the book of life and finding nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly I see it's a delightful story. My dear girl, I can't tell you how life seems to stretch there before us - what a long summer afternoon awaits us. (p.381)

The flattering words, pronounced at this stage of the story by a man quite content to marry a beautiful young lady, obviously fail to show how he can later on change so totally, and how "the long summer afternoon" will lose its "golden haze" so

rapidly. Yet, Henry James's refined sensitivity and his psychological insight into the delicate matters of the mind will reveal the darker side of Osmond's character in due time. In fact, the novelist gives his plot a three-year break, perhaps to grant the couple enough time to succeed or fail in their marriage. The first sight of Mr and Mrs Osmond after this interval implies that it has failed. Gilbert Osmond is shown in an extremely unfavourable light, standing near a fireplace and talking very rudely and ironically to the nice young Rosier who would like to marry his daughter; at the same time he is casting cold and indifferent glances at the people around him whose conversations he refrains from joining. He has manifestly turned out to be an entirely different man or rather he is showing his true character now. Isabel Osmond, physically as attractive as before, appears "framed in the gilded doorway ... the picture of a gracious lady". (p.398) The reader may now contemplate the beautiful portrait of the lady; but the lady has lost her natural freshness and vivacity. Although she moves like a living portrait in his gallery, Philip Sicker observes, "Isabel finds herself framed by social forms and displayed each night before the vulgar and acquisitive, the blandishing and the backbiting. In her role of perpetual hostess, she is condemned to wear a mask that bears no resemblance to the inner self that she had imagined."¹⁷ What is striking about Isabel and Osmond is that they both, purposely revealed by the author in separate rooms, seem stiff and unapproachable. The black velvet of Isabel's dress hints at the name of their dwelling-place, the Palazzo Roccanera, the black rock being very suggestive of the darkness which affects their relationship and which gradually fills their hearts. It is thus not only the ancient city of Rome whose ruins are symbolic of Isabel's fate, but also the name of a house, in this case a palace the darkness within whose walls implies Osmond's hardness and Isabel's obligation to face the blackness of the rock. The reader is reminded of Claire de Cintré's Carmelite walls which stand for hell on earth or an eternal prison out of which the poor woman cannot escape. "But none of the houses in *The Portrait*", insists Professor Andrew Hook, "are as negative and life-denying as the 'house' whose inner reality is Osmond himself."¹⁸

Inside her palace, however, Isabel smiles radiantly and moves about with splendour, but inwardly her smile has frozen. Ralph, on a visit to Rome has instantly seen that "a mask completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it."¹⁹ It seems to him that she, who of old acted so spontaneously and regarded personal freedom as the highest luxury, has been robbed of precisely that ideal, and Ralph, "in all this, recognised the hand of the master; for he knew that Isabel had no faculty for producing studied expression." (p.426) The kind and sympathetic Mr Touchett has painfully noticed that Mrs Osmond is no longer the joyful and carefree Miss Archer; "the free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good heavens, what a function!' he then woefully exclaimed. He was lost in wonder at the mystery of things." (pp. 426-427) Yet, what he discovers when first looking at his cousin three years after her marriage is not part of the "mystery of things" since Isabel's change does not come as a surprise to him. Long before meeting her again in Rome, he has sensed her future doom in the darkness of the Roccanera Palace that imprisons her. Ralph is also completely right when he finds out that in Gilbert Osmond's world everything is pose and effect, arranged with calculated subtlety to keep up the appearances "not to please the world, but to please himself by exciting the world's curiosity and then declining to satisfy it. It made him feel great, ever, to play the world a trick." (p.427) Tragically enough, Osmond has played this trick on his wife, who is made to represent, to advertise him in a world in which conventions count more than anything else. He presumptuously believes the world needs him and not he the world and feels free to tantalize society by deciding which people to include or exclude from his chosen circle. Isabel, who once believed he did not care a straw about what people said or thought about him, and liked him for this exquisite aloofness, must have noted with increasing bitterness throughout the years that he is, after all, a great snob depending on conventions and traditions. In a Notebook entry of March 16th, 1879, James says, "The idea of the whole thing is that

the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes, a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional;" (p.13) and two, pages further he mentions "Isabel's exquisitely miserable revulsion, ... his (Osmond's) wordliness, his deep snobbishness, his want of generosity etc.; his hatred of her when he finds that she judges him, that she morally protests at so much that surrounds her."²⁰

Before her midnight meditation during which she makes a long and deep analysis of her marital situation Isabel realizes that three years have been sufficient for her to find the reasons for her dissatisfaction, but also that she must never be unjust and make others responsible for her misery. "The sole source of her mistake had been within herself. There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked and considered and chosen. When a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one way to repair it - just immensely (oh, with the highest grandeur!) to accept it. One folly was enough, especially when it was to last for ever; a second one would not much set it off."²¹ James's heroine is fair, obviously; she knows it is her mistake, and she cannot blame anybody else for having been duped into believing Osmond's lovely words and admiring his apparently selfless aestheticism. Even when still ignoring the whole truth about Madame Merle, Isabel is certain that this lady is partly responsible, just as Osmond is, but that she alone could have avoided the disastrous marriage.

The happy young girl of the first half of the novel has thus turned out to be the suffering woman of the second half. Although she stoically accepts and endures these long months and years, perhaps a lifetime of suffering, Isabel would do everything to avert it; she is not the kind of woman who would suffer for the sake of suffering. On the contrary, "she could never rid herself of the sense that unhappiness was a state of disease - of suffering as opposed to doing." (p.450) In the often-quoted midnight vigil Isabel probes the nature and the mystery of the mistake that has irrevocably changed, if not ruined her life. With a fair amount of courage and honesty she explores the realm of her consciousness to find out the reasons for the failure of her marriage and hence for her suffering. Isabel is realistic enough to notice the deep clash between her and Gilbert,

the result of a deception on either side. It is not unimportant to emphasize that Osmond, too, has been wronged and suffers from his misjudgement. The girl whom he courted three years ago has also deceived him. "She had effaced herself when he first knew her", she reflects, "she had made herself small, pretending that there was less of her than there really was." (p. 462) They have both regarded each other as a work of art, a portrait to be handled with caution, to be looked at with admiration and enchantment, but they have both reckoned without eventual defects of their portraits. "Isabel has to suffer", states Dorothea Krook, "because she had not the courage to be herself, completely and uncompromisingly, against all temptations."²² If Isabel has not shown Gilbert her complete self while they were engaged, she did not do so with a malignant forethought, but merely because she was so delighted to have met someone with a disinterested, non-mercenary view of life that she found it unnecessary to impose on him the full force of her will and the magnitude of her imagination all at once. Deeply charmed by the extraordinary nobility of his character, she greatly appreciated that he "would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance."²³ As has been pointed out, Osmond has not revealed his own cold and ironic self from the beginning, either; he has been sincere in his admiration for her, but his aim in choosing Isabel as a wife, has always been to objectify her, worse, to take pleasure in trying to refine her imagination to see what might become of it. Before their marriage he compared her intelligence to a silver plate and fancied the very sophisticated and inhuman gesture of "tapping her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring." (p.380)

During the first year of their marriage Osmond succeeded in doing so, and both their imaginations took harmonious flights. Unfortunately for him, Isabel's imagination has by and by ceased to ring when he decided to tap it. It has become too strong, too independent of him so that he can no longer direct or manipulate it. All of a sudden it must have dawned on him that he could no more exhibit his pretty wife in his showcase along with his other precious belongings, and he had begun to mistrust and finally hate

her. "He had discovered that she was so different, that she was not what he had believed she would prove to be. He had thought at first he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he would like. But she was, after all, herself - she couldn't help that; and now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his mind." (p.462) Isabel knows that she can hardly reproach him with anything: he has committed no crime, he is not violent, not cruel, he would never physically hurt her - the sheer animality of brutal force being by nature opposed to his utterly refined manners. But the young woman has found out that the hatred of the mind hurts far more than the hatred expressed by the body. It is the cruelty of his mental repulsion, of the ever-growing animosity that darkens Isabel's world and makes her suffer. "Suffering with Isabel was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure." (p.461) Thus the very ordinary phenomenon of pain, even though it is mental grief, manifests itself in the higher spheres of the intellect. The woman finds out that the vision she herself has created of her husband does not correspond to reality. The man, whom she has misread, who she once believed she could truly and honestly love, has "deliberately, almost malignantly put the lights out one by one," (p.462) Isabel meditates with bitterness. To describe her plight in her interior monologue she often refers to the image of darkness and imprisonment, as when she speaks of the four walls she feels confined in: "It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her." (p. 466)

This, of course, is a tragically frustrating experience for a young American woman, who, by definition as it were, cherishes her personal freedom more than anything else. No longer able to develop her own ideas, to broaden her own mind in the company of a loving husband who would grant her the liberty to defend her opinions even if they were not his own, Isabel does seem to be surrounded by a darkness in which there is no gleam of light, not the least flicker of hope. The cold-hearted cynicism with which he wants her to get rid of her ideas, of her individual self practically, offends and

humiliates her to such an extent that she is mentally suffocating. "He would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance." (p.465) Of course, there have always been women, to whom a nice physique has seemed sufficient to achieve a life-long happiness; but Isabel is clearly cast in a different mould. She has dreamt of a marriage in which both husband and wife could freely communicate their thoughts and accept each other's ideas. The problem is that he can't stand her ideas and ridicules them with a destructive sarcasm. "The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his. ... It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching. He didn't wish her to be stupid. On the contrary, it was because she was clever that she had pleased him. But he expected her intelligence to operate altogether in his favour, and so far from desiring her mind to be a blank he had flattered himself that it would be richly receptive." (p.469) Perversely selfish, "he had expected his wife to feel with him and for him, to enter into his opinions, his ambitions, his preferences." (ibid.) Taking this into account, we can say that the relationship does not only suffer from the phenomenon of estrangement, a frequent cause for the separation of couples now and in former times, but from mental cruelty, which is also a frequent reason for modern divorces; in fact, this would certainly be the motive of a possible divorce between Isabel and Osmond, were they to live in the present age. However, the couple is not going to separate, because they are both reluctant to break up a marriage for which they are responsible.

It is the woman who suffers most in this disastrous union, mainly because she has lost so much more. It is Isabel who can no longer breathe, that is, her mind is suffocating as it is strangled by Osmond's arrogant, extremely cynical intellect which does its work surreptitiously. "He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling" (p.466), Isabel judges with shudders running down her spine. "Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers." (ibid.) Furthermore, the confines into which Isabel has been lured are not merely of an intellectual nature, but they are the result of the unbending social system which has equally contributed to building

oppressive walls around the poor heroine. As yet, there is no escape from her prison, "she seemed shut up with an odour of mould and decay." (p. 469) For her it is "a horrible life", and she wonders, "how could anything be a pleasure to a woman who knew that she had thrown away her life." (p. 471) Isabel is thus fully aware that she has to cope with the consequences of her mistake, above all, to face the fact that she has been victimized by a man who has slowly but surely unveiled his true self. What is particularly frightening and ironic about the revelation is the total lack of tolerance and generosity, of the nobility of a mind which had so impressed her at the time of their engagement. In these moments of deep mental distress, when Isabel examines her fate, the catastrophe of her marriage in the light of her own and her husband's guilt, she thinks of Ralph, as "a lamp in the darkness" (p.471) for her depressed and humiliated ego. With a sadness and tenderness so intense that it nearly hurts her, Isabel now understands her dear cousin's warnings, amazed at how he could have known all about her plight long before it actually bore down upon her. Until his death she is touchingly concerned about being near him and helping him to soothe his pains. She doesn't tell him the truth about the gloom of her married life for fear of making him suffer even more, as "she didn't wish him to have the pain of knowing she was unhappy." (p. 472)

Despite the hopelessness of a prison-like life, however, Isabel is not the kind of person who would endlessly complain about her destiny. Like all James's great women characters, she is a very dignified human being who does not give up if no solution is to be found and keeps on struggling; in trying to disentangle herself from the intricacy of the conditions imposed on her by Osmond, she experiences yet further drawbacks, as when she realizes that Madame Merle had arranged her marriage. "It had come over her like a high-surfing wave that Mrs Touchett was right. Madame Merle had married her." (p. 563) To be alone with her grief, to meditate upon how deeply false the latter had been to her, she wanders among the ruins of Rome which she has taken into her confidence. "In a world of ruins the ruins of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe", and James makes her drop "her secret sadness into the silence

of lonely places." (p. 563) The young lady, who of old had left her hometown of Albany to enjoy months and years of fun and happiness in the lively cities of Europe, has now become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome, "as the place where people had suffered" (p. 564). The final insult she has to swallow is related to the information given her by the Countess Gemini, who discloses the whole truth about the perfidious Madame Merle. Pansy Osmond is the child of the union between her father and Merle, his first wife having died childless hardly three years after their marriage. On hearing this and all the details about her husband's and Madame Merle's dark machinations, Isabel, for once, cannot keep back her tears. "She felt bruised and scant of breath; her head was humming with new knowledge." (pp.597-598) S. Gorley Putt has used a relevant comparison when analyzing the young woman's suffering, thinking that "we have shared an exposure of human vulnerability as raw as anything in the paintings of Francis Bacon."²⁴

This last blow makes Isabel firmly decide to leave Rome for England, where she hurries to the deathbed of her cousin against the expressed wish of her husband who has forbidden this journey. Isabel feels there must now be a kind of relief to her suffering and reacts in a way she has long thought of - acting "in direct opposition to his wishes."²⁵ There has been much debate about the strangeness of Isabel's return to the unhappiness of her married life in Rome. Modern readers especially cannot understand why she does not escape to America with Caspar Goodwood, who passionately implores her to leave the darkness of her life with Osmond once and for all and start a new life with him in the brightness of the New World. Isabel's loyalty to Pansy being but a minor motive, her faithfulness to her husband, in spite of the failure of their marriage, is the real reason for her return. After all, one must not forget that the lady of *The Portrait*, however free and independent her American upbringing and her cultural background have made her, is a young woman of the nineteenth century when woman's liberation and emancipation, though already talked about and secretly wished for, were conceptions largely absent from women's minds. For Isabel, too, the institution of marriage is imperishable, and the links uniting her with Osmond are not to

be broken, as has been said, despite mutual hatred and intense suffering. "He was her appointed and inscribed master", she once reflected, and "constantly present to her mind were all the traditional decencies and sanctities of marriage. The idea of violating them filled her with shame as well as with dread." (p.503) 'This is what Elizabeth Allen means when saying that "Isabel cannot imagine a course of action which has no existence in, or relation to, a society where women live through and for their husbands, fathers and sons."' ²⁶

In a discussion with her friend Henrietta Stackpole, who is much less conventional than her and thinks differently about the indestructibility of marriage bonds, Isabel admits she is wretched but also that she " 'can't publish my (her) mistake. I don't think that's decent. I'd much rather die', ... 'I don't know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate: one can't change that way.' " ²⁷ In this respect Isabel is similar to Osmond who insists on fulfilling the duties imposed by a marriage, whether successful or not; he, too, wants to keep up appearances, a shining surface, loathing to let the world know about the disaster of their relationship. Yet, for her, something else is far more important, namely the feeling of being free again - as the defiant trip to see Ralph demonstrates; what she has learnt in certainly not only one midnight vigil is that she will never give in to Osmond's manipulations and keep her mind free, even if she does as he bids to feign a successful marriage to the selected social circle in which they move.

To my mind, this does not only mean what Dorothea Krook believes Isabel is doing when she says she is "going back to Osmond and enduring, simply enduring, her life with him, as the only expiation open to her." ²⁸ It is true that her ordeal is not finished, but there might be new possibilities of development for her aspirations as she has acquired a truer vision of herself, of her husband and the cruelty of life. With this knowledge a mature Isabel returns to Rome in spite of Goodwood's often-quoted passionate kiss that she feels like white lightning and which nearly drowns her. James

uses this frightening image of the death-bringing waters to suggest that his heroine recoils from a sexual experience that also involves the death of freedom. Although the latter point is important and critics have dwelt upon it, I think that the novelist would rather have readers and critics believe that Isabel refuses to follow Caspar Goodwood, because she has grown fully aware of the responsibility of her choice; she is at last able to judge in the light of a genuine, a more realistic kind of freedom, as she is now liberated from her former book-fed, too theoretical and romantic ideas. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell emphasizes in the already quoted *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, "it certainly can be argued that *The Portrait of a Lady* is too ready to make marriage symbolize the necessity of commitment. But Isabel's final gesture should primarily be read in the context of the novel's extended exploration of the possible meanings of 'freedom': from her original, prototypically American belief in an independence that defies all limits, Isabel gradually arrives at a sense of freedom that is largely a state of consciousness."²⁹

At the end then, the portrait of the lady is complete: Isabel Archer- Osmond does not only strike by her physical beauty, but above all by the beauty and the newly-acquired wisdom of her mind. She is now ready to accept the compulsions of life, to go beyond her suffering and face further challenges. She will grow young again, as Ralph says just before dying, "I don't think that a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little."³⁰ In fact, she has been hurt more than a little, but her plight has given birth to new and lasting insights.

Notes

¹ Leon Edel: *Henry James: Letters*, op.cit., Letter to W.D. Howells from October 24th, 1876, p.72

² Harold Bloom: *Henry James: Modern Critical Views*, ed. and with an Introduction by H. Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.7

³ Leon Edel: *H.J.: Letters*, op.cit., Letter to W.D. Howells from February 2nd, 1877, p.97

⁴ Millicent Bell: *Meaning in Henry James*, op.cit. p.103

⁵ C.P. Kelly, Extracts from 'Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism' (1938) in *Henry James: Washington Square and the Portrait of a Lady, A Selection of Critical Essays* ed. by Alan Shelston (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1984), p.121

- ⁶ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, The World's Classics, with an Introduction by Graham Greene (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.51
- ⁷ J.A. Ward: *The Imagination of Disaster*, op.cit., p.11
- ⁸ H. Bloom: *Henry James*, op.cit., p.12
- ⁹ J.A. Ward: *The Imagination of Disaster*, op.cit., p.11
- ¹⁰ J.A. Ward: *ibid.*
- ¹¹ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, op.cit., p.52
- ¹² E. Allen: *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*, op.cit., p.65
- ¹³ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.285
- ¹⁴ Tony Tanner: *Modern Judgments: Henry James* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p.147
- ¹⁵ Tony Tanner: *Modern Judgments*, op.cit., p.148
- ¹⁶ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.373
- ¹⁷ Philip Sicker: *Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.63
- ¹⁸ Andrew Hook: 'Henry James (1843-1916)' in *American Literature in Context III 1865-1900*, General Editor Arnold Goldman (London and New York: Methuen 1983), p.45
- ¹⁹ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.425
- ²⁰ L. Edel and L.H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks of H. James*, op.cit., p.15
- ²¹ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.440
- ²² Dorothea Krook: *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, op.cit., p.57
- ²³ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.467
- ²⁴ S. Gorley Putt: *Henry James: A Reader's Guide* (Ithaca, New York, 1966), p.157
- ²⁵ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.503
- ²⁶ E. Allen: *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*, op.cit., p.71
- ²⁷ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.532
- ²⁸ D. Krook: *The Ordeal*, op.cit., p.352
- ²⁹ Ruth Bernard Yeazell: 'Henry James' in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, op.cit., p.676
- ³⁰ Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.630

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BOSTONIANS

JAMES'S UNFORTUNATE FEMINISTS

I fear *The Bostonians* will be, as a finished work, a fiasco, as not a word, echo or comment on the serial (save your remarks) have come to me from any quarter whatever. This deadly silence seems to indicate that it has fallen flat. I hoped much of it, and shall be disappointed having got no money for it I hoped for a little glory.¹

Apart from his financial worries, it is, to a greater extent, Henry James's disappointment and frustration that emerge from this letter written to his brother William in 1885. Why have people been silent about his new novel, why does the author think it may become a fiasco? The reason is hardly because *The Bostonians* does not treat James's cherished international theme; there are other novels whose story is set on American ground, like *Washington Square* whose heroine has been to Europe, it is true, but her trip is not essential to the meaning of the novel. In *The Bostonians* the role of Europe is reduced to being considered by Olive as an eventual means to get Verena out of the danger zone created by Ransom, but on second thoughts, the young woman reflects that this would not prevent her kinsman from following her 'protégée' even there. In this American novel the all-pervading and unfamiliar 'American-ness', the so-called local colour should have pleased James's readers who did not appreciate his frequent visits to Europe; but the nature of his account of Boston and its intellectual 'élite', which evidently does not represent the country as a whole, surely occasioned the real hostility to the novel. At the time, the American public was, in fact, more used to finding what for them was true 'local colour' in *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Blithedale Romance*, whose themes seem to have been further developed in *The Bostonians*. In the same letter as the one mentioned above James himself calls his story "as local, as American, as possible, and as full of Boston: an attempt to show that I can write an American story...". The subject is very national, very typical. I wished to write a very American tale, a tale very characteristic of our social condition."² This very "national" subject has not seemed very "typical" to most Americans, however. At any rate, Henry James must have shocked at least some of his readers, who might not have been pleased

to see themselves in the novel's main characters, or disliked to see Miss Peabody, Hawthorne's reforming sister-in-law, represented by Miss Birdseye, otherwise he would not have written, in another letter to his brother, dated June 13th, 1886, "... if I have displeased people - this was done wholly without invidious intention. I hadn't a dream of generalizing - and thought the title simple and handy, and meant only to designate Olive and Verena by it... I didn't mean to cover Miss Birdseye and the others..."³

A theme that James has indeed never dealt with before is politics and public speaking, the latter having a special impact on the America of the nineteenth century's final decades. The American soil was then particularly fertile for preachers and orators of any kind. It is known that Henry James Sr enjoyed the exercise of making speeches and sermons at home, at church and probably elsewhere. We also know that from the 1870s to the 1890s Boston, the American town of higher education and erudition par excellence, was fervently involved in public oratory. In this matter, Millicent Bell asserts Lionel Trilling's correctness of view when he speaks of the two novels - Trilling includes *The Princess Casamassima* - as being "set apart from James's other novels by having in common a quick responsiveness to the details of the outer world, an explicit awareness of history, of the grosser movements of society and civilisation."⁴ Verena being a naturally and highly talented public speaker, a real model of rhetorical eloquence is, of course, an evident and essential point of the story.

On the other hand, it can certainly be argued that *The Bostonians* is not a typical James novel, in the sense that here the author shows a marked interest in naturalism, a more or less scientific approach to his characters. When he wrote the novel, James was under the influence of the French writers Flaubert, Zola and Daudet, still having in his ear their heated conversations, in which he had for the most part not actively taken part during the winter of 1875-76. To a certain degree James has been inspired by Alphonse Daudet's *L'Evangéliste*. The American clearly admired the French work, saying in his Notebook entry before writing *The Bostonians* that Daudet's *L'Evangéliste* has given him "the idea of the thing. If I could only do something with that pictorial quality."⁵ M. Bell equally mentions this influence when she

finds that *"The Bostonians"* is the least representative of his favored method of centering upon a chosen sensibility whose inner drama makes the story. James's reversion to a more traditional narrative voice and his relinquishment of narrator-identification with any one of his characters results, in part, from his interest in naturalism, his desire to see all his characters with an equal, scientific coolness."⁶ James's responses to the French naturalist group, in general, however, are not altogether positive. On reviewing Zola's *Nana* in 1880 he criticized the "indecent" of the subject, which is not at all surprising given that James, the acknowledged and perfect gentleman, neither expressed vulgarities in his works, nor, one can imagine, ever uttered a vulgar or indecent word in his whole life. How far exactly the novelist has been influenced by French naturalism is of course not the point of this study, but it can be said about it concludingly that *The Bostonians* does not fulfil the prescriptions of Zola's *Le roman expérimental* and therefore does not sustain the theories of the Jamesian critics Perosa, Powers and Buitenhuis, all three quoted by M.Bell in this matter. Powers, for instance, is cited by the latter as saying that "heredity and environment are determining agents in the lives of the principal characters. (especially Verena)."⁷ In his own critical work *Henry James and the Experimental Novel* Sergio Perosa also mentions the laws of social determinism as greatly influencing the men and women in James's novels. 'There is truth in all of this, obviously, but is it not quite a general truth that we are all influenced by our heredity, our historical and social background? *The Bostonians* shows, perhaps a little more than James's other novels, that society may sometimes overwhelm the individual in an unwished-for manner. As H.Fox points out in his treatment of *The Bostonians*, "James shows the ego-universe controlled by society. Olive Chancellor and the entire group of feminists are representative of mass social pressures that threaten to engulf the individual and that disenable him to arrive at a true spontaneous selflessness... . When Verena leaves the Boston Music Hall, for example, she is not merely disassociating herself from Olive Chancellor but from the whole audience in the hall whom Olive represents."⁸

Notwithstanding these various elements of change which displeased certain readers of the novel, the major theme that James has alluded to here, but never really dealt with in his previous novels is the woman question or the emancipation of women, a delicate, but much agitating subject-matter whose tentative origins are to be found in Napoleonic times. Without giving a detailed survey of the history of women's liberation from the French revolution to the present century I just want to hint at some outstanding events in the evolution of feminism which have left their mark on a movement that has been and still is of crucial importance for women as well as for men; one must acknowledge this, even if one approaches the topic unencumbered by the passion and fanaticism of numerous past and present feminists. One of the first women from the English-speaking world to have been engaged in the feminist cause was Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) was based on the Enlightenment philosophy which provided women with an "arsenal of weapons" as Anne-Marie Käppeli calls them in her essay "Feminist Scenes": "the ideas of reason and progress, natural rights, individual fulfilment, the positive influence of education, the social utility of freedom, and the axiom of equal rights."⁹ In England the Reform Bill of 1832 meant the beginning of the suffragist movement which was launched in New York, where, in 1833, feminists joined their cause to that of the blacks, but despite this action, women had no access to the antislavery conference in London. In 1850 the first International Women's Congress was held in America, in the state of Massachusetts, and at the end of the Civil War women who had fought for the rights of the slaves then felt a poignant injustice in not being granted the same political rights as the freed slaves. More than once does Miss Birdseye refer to this aspect of the movement in *The Bostonians* on remembering her pride and self-sacrifice, when she made her own small but useful contribution to the Southern slaves' relief from bondage and suffering. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) caused a lot of agitation in the women's world and among politicians. In the House of Commons Mill even became the spokesman for the feminists. From 1870 on, sixteen years before the publication of the Jamesian novel, American women intervened regularly in local meetings and in

Congress. *The Subjection of Women* and also the German's August Bebel's *Die Frau in der Vergangenheit Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Woman in the Past Present and Future 1879) became classics for feminists at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1888 the International Council of Women was founded in Washington which paved the way for numerous national councils and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1904. One year before the famous Emmeline Pankhurst had already launched the Women's Social and Political Union in England. After the end of the first World War women in most Western democracies obtained the right to vote, some earlier, some later, like the French women who, strangely enough, were not allowed to go to the polls until after World War II.

Considering all this female upheaval which had started long before James set out to write his novel, he simply could not eschew the woman question in a story whose subject was to be very "national" and very "typical" as he had said. What, according to his own words in the above-mentioned Notebook entry of April 8th, 1883, he wants to discuss in *The Bostonians* is "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf." At the beginning of the same entry he states even more clearly,

The characters who figure in it are for the most part persons of the radical reforming type, who are essentially interested in the emancipation of women, giving them the suffrage, releasing them from bondage, co-educating them with men etc. They regard this as the great question of the day - the most urgent and sacred reform.¹⁰

James's use of the third person plural is as ambiguous as what critics say about his attitude towards the "most urgent and sacred reform." The extract from the Notebooks does not indeed seem to show James very much in favour of feminism; the use of "they" is deliberately distancing, especially since the novelist does not encourage women here or elsewhere, by openly stating that he supports their cause. The reader may well wonder whether the lack of clear and positive comments in favour of the women's movement is not a possible sign of male egotism or cowardice. Many critics appear to think so; even those whose opinion is moderate as regards this aspect in James's writings speak of ambiguity or ambivalence. Thus in an objective compilation of

historical data about women, which mentions Henry James but a few times, the impartial Nicole Arnaud-Duc finds *The Bostonians* an "ambiguous novel" which, however, "paints a marvellous portrait of male reactions to feminist determination."¹¹ It is doubtless very difficult to find out what the novelist really thought about women's wish for political emancipation and greater independence in other domains.

One suspects that James must have been, like probably the majority of men at the time and still many today, rather sceptical towards the woman question. His own mother, although highly educated, gave up reading her books under the impulse of her authoritarian husband who wanted her to be there only for himself and the family. Despite his admiration for his father James did not blindly accept all his opinions, however. Yet, he was surely influenced by the antifeminists in his environment, and like them, did not or did not want to believe in women's equal, if not superior abilities. When talking about the shrewd Mme Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the man, who is normally so discerning in his choice of words, makes a remark for which not only feminists would condemn him or at least consider him with disdain, "She knew how to think - an accomplishment rare in women."¹² Even if this were meant as a joke, it would be one of the bad sort. Equally offending words are used in James's literary criticism, where he wrote in 1867, "We speak, of course, of a first-class imagination - as men occasionally have it, and as no woman (unless it be Mme Sand) has yet had it."¹³ Although he was very young when he wrote this, it is not surprising that James is harshly criticized by ardent and more moderate feminists. Patricia Stubbs is one of those who believe the novelist to be strictly against women. "The thing we find in James's novels", she says, "is not so much an indifference to sex, but a refusal to recognize *women's* sexual and emotional nature." And, a little further, after having praised Olive's passionate commitment to emancipation, "but Olive is a lesbian. So her feminism, her intensely magnetic personality and the power this gives her over Verena are immediately rationalized as the product of 'perversion'."¹⁴ Olive being a lesbian or not is a minor problem in the novel; let it just be said that not once does James openly state the young woman's homosexuality, and in the Notebook entry to *The Bostonians*

he specifies, "The relation of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England."¹⁵ There may well be an unconscious lesbian feeling that partly explains Olive's so utterly captivating Verena, but as I have said, this is not the heart of the matter. Moreover, when Stubbs thinks that "for James, real emancipation and the hard work it brought went hand in hand with a kind of withered sexlessness" (the allusion is to the minor character Dr Prance)¹⁶, this is a very harsh judgement, if one considers that Dr Prance is not a completely unattractive woman, although she has evident masculine traits. A. Habegger is another critic who works up James's hostility to feminism and analyzes it by referring to the author's father's complicated and often paradoxical views about sexuality. Henry James Sr was obsessed with sexuality, according to Habegger. Deeply under the influence of the French social theorist Fourier the elder James published a pamphlet in favour of free-love, then refuted and violently attacked it because of various, especially religious pressures. It may hence be assumed that the novelist's own problems with sexuality were not helped by the confusion the peremptory father had created around this delicate subject which deeply embarrassed the son.

On the other hand, James's own nature and his personal decisions may have been the reason for what M. Bell calls his "empathy with women, with their exclusion from power and with the fear of marriage."¹⁷ Not many writers have indeed described women so positively, at times even with perceptible tenderness, showing such a deep understanding for their problems and conflicts as James. A man who himself had a more feminine than masculine sensitivity cannot possibly have been totally hostile to the cause of women. The writer who created heroines like Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer and Milly Theale, to name but the most outstanding, cannot have been at heart a real anti-feminist. Even if he made some spiteful statements against women, even if he praised his brother for attacking J.S. Mill, James by and large defended women. It is appropriate here to make a difference between his being on the side of women in general and his pleading directly for the emancipation of women. The latter only was perhaps his weak point as he never overtly advocated the feminine cause. But we can argue that

this was not his business as a novelist. He just did not need to stand up in public and proclaim himself a fervent adherent to women's suffrage. To debate or plead for their cause was the task of political theorists and activists.

J.C. Rowe, who dedicates a whole chapter of his critique to the impact of feminism on three Jamesian works, also underlines the author's identification with women, but, in his view, this identification is so successful because it is based on James's own literary defense: the writer is sympathetic to the larger social issues of feminism because the way he uses 'the other sex' allows him to ascertain his identity as an author. This is important because it explains why James's feminism is limited. "Not because of its 'earliness' ", as Rowe asserts, "with respect to more progressive developments of twentieth-century feminism, the fundamental limitation of James's feminism is its subordination to a literary model, which fails to suggest any effective means of social transvaluation and seeks only the consolations of art."¹⁸ This seems to be a genuine vision of the novelist's very special attitude towards women since it implies why the Jamesian heroines are not the noisy, impassioned suffragettes, but the still suffering victims. This does not mean they are too weak to defend and assert themselves in a brutish man's world, but the conditions of their various destinies are such that they have very limited choice.

If most women in James's works have strong characters and marked personalities, there is one who does not match this description, and that is Verena Tarrant of all persons, one of the heroines of *The Bostonians*, the most explicitly feminist of his novels. Even Catherine Sloper has more staying power than Verena, who has been endowed with an extraordinary gift of eloquence, but who unfortunately lacks any power and originality of her own. Among those who confirm this negative aspect of Verena's personality the critic A. Habegger is the severest when he speaks of the girl's "singular hollowness of character,"¹⁹ which he associates with the hollowness James believes to find in the cause of women's emancipation. Two minor characters in the novel do not think that Verena possesses a first-rate intelligence, either. Dr Prance, according to Basil Ransom, seems to consider Verena as being "rather slim,"²⁰ and Mrs

Luna, Olive Chancellor's indiscreet and often tactless sister, has a much lower opinion of the young girl, calling her "a vulgar idiot". Even though provoked into making such an unnecessarily harsh judgment, the woman does not think highly of Verena.

At first the young heroine is presented to the reader and her private New England audiences as a medium who only starts to talk if given a stimulus by her helpful father. What she talks about is the long sufferings and victimization of women and the necessity of their liberation. But, before Olive's teaching her the history and numerous facets of the woman question, one might be led to think that Verena could just as well expound any other topic because she does not appear to be deeply impressed by the implications of her own argumentation. Although dependent on her father, who winds her up like a moving toy, she keeps on speaking endlessly, but she does so most convincingly, above all most beautifully and charmingly, as James never gets tired of emphasizing throughout the novel. She literally enthralls her listeners who are fascinated, not only by her overwhelming rhetorical capacities, but by her fresh, young beauty. In fact, despite the author's not having endowed Verena with a strong character and outstanding qualities of discernment, notwithstanding her gift of remembering whole passages and organizing her memory, she is unambiguously shown as a natural, unspoiled, enchanting young woman whose charisma captivates all those who get to know her and her extraordinary voice. Two people, among her early listeners, are more than impressed by the girl whose flaming red hair is often associated with her passion of speaking: one, Olive Chancellor, is spellbound by the girl's naturally flowing eloquence, but more so by the contents of her speeches. "Verena had moved her as she had never been moved." (p.70); the other, the Southern gentleman and Olive's kinsman Basil Ransom, is attracted by her feminine beauty. Thus Verena passes from her father's hands to the two entirely different spheres of influence built up by Olive and Ransom. She now becomes the tug-of-war of these two, realizing by and by that if she succeeds in fleeing from one, there is no means of escaping from the other. Yet, for the greater part of the novel, Verena does not suffer from this emotional dilemma. Young and carefree, she is rather made for enjoyment than for suffering. Furthermore, she has too long been

under the wing of Olive as to be ready to follow Basil without numerous hesitations although she likes him from the beginning. The net which Miss Chancellor has spun around her is at first impervious as she manages to play the role of parents, of friend, of sister, of teacher and adviser all at the same time. And the innocent girl likes to see the holes in her previous education filled up with useful knowledge about art and literature, but above all about the woman cause; she feels at ease in Olive's comfortable home, especially as she is free to visit her parents as often as she wishes, free also to do what she wants to, except fall in love with a young man.

Even after this has happened, Verena naively believes she will always faithfully return to Olive. "I thought we had agreed that we were to do our work in the midst of the world", she says pleadingly after one of her companion's apprehensions concerning the danger represented by Ransom,

facing everything, keeping straight on, always taking hold. And now that it all opens out so magnificently, and victory is really sitting on our banners, it is strange of you to doubt of me, to suppose I am not more wedded to all our old dreams than ever. I told you the first time I saw you that I could renounce, and knowing better today, perhaps, what that means, I am ready to say it again. That I can, that I will... (p.261).

Before the girl really suffers from being torn between her woman-friend and her lover, she does everything with such good nature, such lightness of step that she seems to have no difficulty in overcoming any obstacle in her life. What Olive and Basil both admire is the generosity of her mind with which she does what is demanded of her. When Olive, for example, decides to break off their common stay in New York where Verena is invited to give other lectures after the ravishing one she has already given, the young girl submissively accepts; being used to please everyone, she has no problem in renouncing her own pleasure yet another time. It is in this city, however, that she first suffers from not being able, out of gentleness, to tell Olive the whole truth about her feelings towards Basil; instead, she sobs in her friend's arms and begs her to leave New York at once, only to escape from Mrs Burrage and her son, another suitor of the popular and already well-known girl.

But a few weeks later, in the ladies' Cape Cod summer retreat, Verena is really tortured by her lack of courage to inform Olive once and for all about her love for

Ransom. The young girl does not ruthlessly betray Olive, their deep and supposedly everlasting friendship, their inner communion of ideas and emotions, the solemn vows they have sworn each other, the life they have shared; when reflecting that "she was to burn everything she had adored; she was to adore everything she had burned", she must admit, however, that "the extraordinary part of it was that though she felt the situation to be tremendously serious, she was not ashamed of the treachery which she - yes, decidedly, by this time she must admit to herself - she meditated." (p. 332) Why should she be ashamed, one may wonder in the end, and argue that, after all, Verena is just an ordinary young girl who has fallen in love and yielded to the passionate entreaties of an equally ordinary young man. But Verena is shocked by her own way of changing sides so rapidly, and by the suddenness and intensity of her passion. She has certainly never wanted to hurt and crush Olive's feelings and abandon their common ideals, and she still abhors the thought of it. She ponders that "formerly she had been convinced that the fire of her spirit was a kind of double flame, one half of which was responsive friendship for a most extraordinary person, and the other pity for the sufferings of women in general", and she looks "aghast at the colourless dust into which, in three short months (counting from the episode in New York), such a conviction as that could crumble;... why Basil Ransom had been deputed by fate to exercise this spell was more than she could say - poor Verena, who up to so lately had flattered herself that she had a wizard's wand in her pocket." (ibid.)

Poor Verena indeed, because she may just not be sensible enough to realize that her views about womanhood and women's past and present conflicts have never been as deep-seated in her heart and as integral a part of herself as she always thought they were. She is really much aggrieved, full of sorrow the reason for which she cannot fully grasp, but also "dreadfully afraid" when looking up at Basil from her place at the dying Miss Birdseye's feet, "that he would betray her to Miss Birdseye - let her know how she had cooled off. Verena was ashamed of that now, and trembled at the danger of exposure; her eyes adjured him to be careful of what he said. Her tremor made him glow a little in return, for it seemed to him the fullest confession of his influence she had yet

made." (p. 344) And yet, once more honestly sorry for Olive and helpless at the sight of her utter dejection, Verena still succeeds in backing out, though only for a short time, telling Ransom that she cannot possibly leave Olive as the apostasy would be too cruel for her friend. But after this "instinctive contortion" (p.348) as Basil is inclined to call Verena's relapses into a state of submissiveness and faithfulness to Olive, the young man becomes the triumphant winner in this long battle ardently fought between him and his kinswoman for a much sought-for trophy. Although there is certainly genuine love in Basil's struggle for Verena, the reader does not fail to notice the selfish, commercial aspect in his as well as Miss Chancellor's desperate attempts to win over the ignorant girl as a prize. However hard Olive tries to hide this in her conscience, the fact remains that she has paid a large sum of money to get Verena under her roof; on the other side Ransom - James obviously wished his readers to be aware of the pecuniary aspect of his name - is not uninterested in perhaps improving his financial situation with Verena at his side. In her fine view of James's women in the public world E. Allen also suggests that the author defines Verena as "clearly and unequivocally a thing, an object with currency value."²¹ A little later she comes to the same conclusion as most critics when stating that James "bases the entire action of *The Bostonians* around battle for which the prize is Verena Tarrant - a prize which can be bought or carried off as spoils of war. Indeed, the final scene is one of abduction. Verena is a Helen for whom Ransom storms the city of Troy - or, in this case, the Boston Music Hall."²²

What is worse and more bitterly ironic for a girl whose vocation and aim in life have been to devote her magnificent rhetorical gift to woman's liberation from man's domination, is to be subjugated herself by a man who even refuses her the ultimate triumph in the great Music Hall; the long-prepared and minutely organized lecture should have been the climax of the girl's present career. Verena, it may be supposed, does not rush into her lover's arms before that event which she wants to take place, although one has to admit she does not make great efforts to persuade Ransom not to carry out his romantic escape with her from the Music Hall at the story's melodramatic end. Weeks before this she has sat with Olive, for hours, in complete silence, and full of

shame and humility for having broken another promise and abruptly cutting the bond between them by her surrender to Ransom.

She has forsaken a "morbid old maid", as Basil calls his cousin for an "honourable young man"²³ who selfishly wants to silence her in public, to stop her activity and to keep her at his home where "the dining-table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that." "The most charming woman in America" (ibid) will thus entertain her husband in brilliant, private conversations. James, it is true, makes his readers aware more than once, as has been seen, that Verena's feminist convictions are short-lived; he observes Ransom pouring out to the surprised girl his speech on the merits of an old-fashioned marriage and finds that "it is to be feared that Verena was easily satisfied (convinced, I mean, not that she ought to succumb to him, but that there were lovely, neglected, almost unsuspected truths on his side)." (p.337) Nevertheless the author shows the heroine's tears at the end of the novel, "not the last she was destined to shed" (p. 390), implying that after being manipulated by Olive, she will also be denied complete freedom by Ransom, women having been, as it is Olive's dismal conviction, "from the beginning of time the sport of men's selfishness and avidity" (p. 353). It is really to be feared that the kind of quiet and private life that Basil now offers her may turn out, as S. Perosa states, an "enslavement of an even more painful kind."²⁴ Therefore chances have diminished that Verena will ever be fortunate enough not to be dominated by anyone. Dependence on others seems to be her fate, but her weakness, "her incomplete personality, will-less, over-pliant, and moulded by those with whom she has come in contact,"²⁵ as H.Fox analyzes Verena's shortcomings, are largely responsible for this fate. Thus individual weakness is at the basis of Verena's capitulation to Basil and to Olive at an earlier stage.

The one flaw that characterizes the otherwise nearly perfect Verena Tarrant is, of course, totally absent in Olive Chancellor, who, as her name suggests, exerts power over others in spite of being very shy and reserved by nature. From the time she virtually buys Verena from her parents until the abrupt end of their relationship Olive imposes her strong will on the guileless young girl. In fact, on first hearing Verena

speak at Miss Birdseye's, Olive is so overwhelmed by the suavity and persuasiveness of the girl's voice and the message of her speech that she is instantly aware that Verena is not destined to stay with her parents for the rest of her life. Hence Olive very soon decides to invite her to come and stay at her own home, where she bullies her gently, but nonetheless effectively into accepting the role she wants the girl to play in her company and elsewhere. Verena, the naturally docile and uncomplicated girl, evidently plays the role to perfection until it becomes sheerly impossible for her to conceal her genuine affection for a man. This special relationship between the two young women has often been deprecated as being lesbian, which cannot be categorically denied, but, as already indicated, this is of no real relevance for the main interest of the novel. At any rate, what links the two ladies is to be found at a more abstract, intellectual level; it is an exchange of ideas, a communion of souls more than the need of each other's physical presence, although the latter is indispensable and pleasant, of course. In all probability James wanted to present an extraordinarily deep, but healthy friendship between the two young women, as J. Fetterly, often quoted in the criticism about *The Bostonians*, states, "At no point does James even faintly suggest that he is writing a novel about the abnormal, the unnatural, the perverse, or that the drama of the story resides in pitting the forces of health and sanity against those of depravity."²⁶

If there is something perverse in Olive, it is her almost abnormal determination to have Verena all for herself in the sense that she thinks it her mission to guide and instruct the girl on her way to become the most famous orator Boston has ever seen. Having been quite unfortunate so far in trying to find a girl or a woman interested in devoting her time to the serious problems of the woman question, Olive seems to be deeply impressed by her sudden luck in meeting the unknown Miss Tarrant. From now on she has only one aim in view, and she stubbornly sets herself the task to make Verena follow the same goal, that of bringing about a great change in people's opinions about women's rights. In all her subsequent decisions and activities concerning Verena and her future career, it becomes more and more obvious that Olive would truly make any effort, any sacrifice to guarantee Verena's success. For the strong-minded feminist

of Charles Street it would simply be unthinkable if Verena's fabulous gift of speaking in public were left unexploited. In this long and fascinating work Olive is neither a dictator - she is too fond of the girl to inflict pain on her - nor a nineteenth century Pygmalion or Professor Higgins - Verena's vocation is innate and her talents only need to be developed - but rather like a modern public figure's efficient but discreet manager and bodyguard; the young woman is naturally too frail to be physically compared to a bodyguard, but she largely makes up for that with the subtle means and tricks of her very capable mind which shield Verena from all risks and dangers except from Basil Ransom against whose power and influence all of Olive's weapons fail. In fact, what Miss Chancellor excels in doing is fighting for what is dear and important to her, and she pursues her struggle with an extraordinary courage until the bitter end. Modest and humble as she is, she only considers Verena's greatness, detesting the idea of being in the limelight herself. But it is she who pulls the strings, who prepares and organizes Verena's performances, from the background, like an invisible force, as it were.

Yet the meticulous zealot pays a huge price for the career she plans for her unusual companion. "This friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of soul."²⁷ not only costs Olive a lot of money, which she cares about least, but also patience and perseverance, and above all disappointments - indeed a series of emotional shocks, shattered hopes and broken illusions, which cause her deep suffering, especially at the end of the story. But already at the beginning of the novel Basil Ransom, upon first seeing his kinswoman, knows that she belongs to the class of people who take things hard. It is therefore almost commonplace to notice that Olive is as strict and demanding towards herself as towards others, and if one thing is crystal clear in the novel, it is the fact that this woman possesses an exceptional capacity for suffering; not many are indeed able to suffer as she does, in silence, not opening herself to anybody, let alone bothering anybody about her troubles. One might even believe her, despite the hint of Jamesian irony, when she reveals to the reader "the most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature", which is that she "might some day have such a chance, that she might be a martyr and die for something." (p.13).

As for Olive's moral refinement, she may be compared to Henry James himself who never consciously hurt a person's feelings, and who could keep in the background, if necessary. Like his heroine James dreaded any sort of vulgarity. When Olive visits Verena in her parents' home before the young girl comes to live with her in Boston, she finds the benighted and vulgar atmosphere in the latter's house sickening and seizes the first possible opportunity to leave, not without thinking that Verena "was not meant for that, and Olive would save her." (p.114). James, however, the great party-goer and companion of dozens of lonely souls, was not so shy as Olive, who "was subject to fits of tragic shyness, during which she was unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror." (p.10). This extreme, almost morbid bashfulness as well as her mistrust of men in general explain why she is and will always be an old maid by nature, by definition, as it were, as Ransom says wittily, "Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being. She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet." (p.17). In this, Olive resembles James, too, who chose to remain a bachelor for life. On the whole, the unmarried author hardly ever presents successful marriages in his novels. The difficulties he himself encountered in this respect seem to be reflected in the failures of his characters' marriages or in other protagonists' decisions not to marry at all. M. Bell describes this as "the fear of marriage"²⁸ which the novelist shares with his female characters.

Aside from Olive's and his (James's) own personal sources of disinclination for marriage, [she continues], James does view the problem sociologically and philosophically. Olive's radical feminist rejection of marriage is consistent with her ideology. It is dreadfully true that Verena is only free if she rejects marriage and so maintains her uncompromised and unrestricted capacity to be. The dreadfulness of this truth is shown in the novel by the total absence in it of any model of successful or happy marriage.²⁹

In Ransom's view, it may be added, Olive is a "ticklish spinster"³⁰ on top of everything. It is indeed strange to see a woman whose courage and willpower outweigh defects in her character being so oversensitive in her reactions to quite harmless offenses. An inconsiderate remark, someone's unwelcome presence may hurt her to the core of her being. Just at the moment when Olive is most enchanted by Verena on her first visit to Charles Street, for example, she is so disconcerted by Ransom's sudden

interruption that she cannot hide her vexation. She winces at an uncalled-for intrusion into her privacy and recoils like a wounded animal at the mere sight of something that injures her taste. "Her most poignant suffering came from the injury of her taste", James tells the reader, when he makes Ransom wonder why his cousin has dragged him to a place like Miss Birdseye's; "he did not know then, and he never knew, that she mortally disliked it", but in her career "she was constantly exposing herself to offence and laceration ", and although "she had tried to kill that nerve, to persuade herself that taste was only frivolity in the disguise of knowledge, her susceptibility was constantly blooming afresh." (p.27). Olive's susceptibility and self-consciousness are part of her complicated psyche. A woman who takes life so hard cannot relax and laugh happily once in a while. She can only feel very strongly, either in a positive or in a negative way; when in the latter mood she gives her interlocutor a look that reminds him of "the glitter of green ice." (p.18).

Thus Olive's way of taking matters so seriously accounts for her considering the woman question, her "sacred cause" as she likes to call it (p.34), with an unequalled devotion and absorption. When she thinks of the misery of her sex, her mind is full to the brim with excellent intentions about what she, Olive Chancellor, will do to relieve women's pain and bondage.

She would do something to brighten the darkness of that dreadful image that was always before her and against which it seemed to her at times that she had been born to lead a crusade - the image of the unhappiness of women. The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned. (pp.33-34).

Olive is possessed by what she calls her mission, and she is prepared to spread the word, that is to have it spread by someone more articulate than herself. That is why Verena's company is such a blessing for her as she can study the long history of "feminine anguish" (p.158) along with the girl, initiate her into the topic, and thus provide her with a multitude of background information which she so dreadfully lacks as her father has not educated but only inspired her. Although she has no faith in her

capacity to speak up in public, Olive excels in elucidating the most complicated passages to Verena and is very

eloquent when she reminded Verena how the exquisite weakness of women had never been their defence, but had only exposed them to sufferings more acute than masculine grossness can conceive. ... All the bullied wives, the stricken mothers, the dishonoured, deserted maidens who have lived on the earth and longed to leave it, passed and repassed before their eyes, and the interminable dim procession seemed to stretch out a myriad hands to her. (pp.158-159)

Olive admits that there are also bad characters among women, "but their errors were as nothing to their sufferings; they had expiated, in advance, an eternity, if need be, of misconduct." (p. 159) At last she instils thoughts of revenge into Verena who

was immensely wrought upon; a subtle fire passed into her; she was not so hungry for revenge as Olive, but at the last, ... she quite agreed with her companion that after so many ages of wrong ... men must take their turn, men must pay! (p159)

This subtle indoctrination which Olive imparts to her eagerly listening friend reveals that she is the brain, not only the organizing manager, behind the one who performs, one is tempted to say only performs.

In Olive's long analyses of women's ordeals the language strikes us as overblown, tortuous and very sentimental, however. Miss Chancellor certainly possesses an astounding knowledge about the subject that means everything to her; she also seems to be honest in her wishes to help the suffering women and support their cause by every possible effort and sacrifice, but her endless meditations and lectures on the subject arouse in the reader a strange feeling of disbelief, an impression that, despite the erudition in Olive's thoughts and words, they sound hollow and superficial, pure theory upon which no practical action follows. It comes as a surprise that in a novel which largely deals with women's conflicts in a world of male domination, there are no measures taken against this abominable situation. Words are simply not followed by deeds, and this is the great weakness in both heroines' feminism. In the same context M. Bell pinpoints Olive's and even Verena's vagueness about women's future. "Olive is nowhere said to envision a better state in which there will be an ultimate reconciliation between the sexes when man will have learned to treat woman as his equal", and a little

further, "the female liberation that these two zealots envision is strangely without a sense of more concrete futurity."³¹ (pp.136-137) In fact, one could hardly imagine Olive taking part in a suffragettes' march and shouting for women's rights. She and Verena ardently believe in their cause, but their involvement hardly advances the precise goals of the early women's movement.

But even without taking part in any concrete action destined to bring about a change in the life of women, Olive Chancellor believes she suffers enough as a woman, individually, and for women in general. She has admitted that one of her greatest desires is to suffer for a cause and become a martyr. Clearly, Olive's wish to suffer is masochistic to some extent, especially when, at an early stage of the novel she reflects, upon facing the prospect of visiting Verena's vulgar mother, "her only consolation was that she expected to suffer intensely; for the prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket."³² Moreover there is in Olive's experiences and confrontations with other people plenty of unnecessary suffering, pains she could very well avoid if she did not occasionally indulge her neuroses of protectiveness; in her attempts to protect her own sensitive self and Verena's moral and spiritual sublimity she is exposed to all kinds of blows and defeats. J. Gabler-Hover sees in this "part of a complex defense mechanism that she constructs in an attempt to rationalize her own personal feelings. These feelings are based on vindictiveness, not virtue."³³

Yet, as the novel progresses, there is less self-inflicted suffering, but two people unconsciously combine their efforts to heighten Olive's grief until it is no longer bearable in the end. After she has settled down with Verena in her Boston home for life, doing everything possible for the girl's career and their common ideals, the worst that could happen to destroy what Olive has so painstakingly built up, is Verena's falling in love and forgetting all her promises never to let herself be entrapped by a man. In doubt, from the beginning of their relationship, lest Verena should run the risk of giving up what her friend calls "all our wretched sisters - all our hopes and purposes - all that we think sacred and worth living for,"³⁴ Olive, in her own solemn and over-earnest

manner, makes her promise not to marry. Realizing, however, that she may have asked too much, she corrects her own words, making her jealousy, her "restless, hungry jealousy" (p.119) responsible for demanding Verena's promise so rashly. She explains, half apologizing, that she only wants the girl's confidence,

I don't want your signature; I only want your confidence - only what springs from that. I hope with all my soul that you won't marry; but if you don't it must not be because you have promised me. You know what I think - that there is something noble done when one makes a sacrifice for a great good. Priests - when they were real priests - never married, and what you and I dream of doing demands of us a kind of priesthood. (ibid.)

But in Olive's mouth these words express a powerful expectation rather than a mere wish as her subsequent deep disappointment about Verena's gradual failing her shows how firmly she has believed in her companion's faithfulness. She would even go as far as to accept Mr Burrage as her protégée's suitor and eventual husband, this young man being a lesser evil compared to the enormous danger represented by Basil Ransom. Burrage would at least leave her some place beside Verena whereas Ransom can't even stand Olive's presence for a short time. Olive knows exactly that there is absolutely no compromise possible between herself and the Southerner, and in the struggle for Verena there can only be one winner. Her fear of Ransom taking Verena away from her is therefore more than justified. The sickening apprehension nearly drives her out of her mind; when Verena and Ransom meet in New York, enjoying a long and intimate walk in Central Park, Olive behaves like a jealous parent or husband who realize that things have been hidden from them. She is grief-stricken on hearing how light-heartedly, without the least intention in the world, the young girl hurts her so deeply. In New York Miss Chancellor also discloses how unjust and perfidious she can be; in her heart-rending complaints about Ransom's intrusion into their female universe and her passionate entreaties she disguises the highly imperious woman who coaxes the helpless girl into doing as she, Olive, pleases. Her emotion-laden language comes so near a threat, even blackmail, that poor Verena is almost afraid of her friend's inner wrath which Olive barely succeeds in dissimulating.

In the final scenes of the novel Olive's suffering becomes less selfish; at the summer retreat in Marmion she has suddenly stopped acting like the frustrated adult

who punishes a disobedient child, and she slowly understands that her case is irretrievably lost because Verena has made her choice. She has used all her strength, her authority, but also her profound and protective love and devotion to maintain Verena's "purest and holiest ambitions" (p. 327) only to find her enemy set on taking away what is dearest to her.

Olive put forward no claim of her own, breathed at first, at least, not a word of remonstrance in the name of her personal loss, of their blighted union; she only dwelt upon the unspeakable tragedy of a defection of their standard, of a failure on Verena's part to carry out what she had undertaken, of the horror of seeing her bright career blotted out with darkness and tears, of the joy and elation that would fill the breast of all their adversaries at this illustrious, consummate proof of the fickleness, the futility, the predestined servility, of women. (p. 327)

If the reader has disliked Olive until the last third of the novel, thinking of her as a morbid spinster, not much better than a slave-keeper, he probably looks upon her with greater sympathy during her terrible ordeal in the weeks at Cape Cod. The author also feels sorry for her when he asks the reader to avert his look from the physically and mentally suffering woman who faces fate with dismay and desperately tries to find answers to unanswerable questions. What forces our respect for Olive's way of dealing with her hopeless situation is her bravery and her will to fight until the very end; "and there was nothing weak about Miss Olive, she was a fighting woman, and she would fight him (Ransom) to the death, giving him not an inch of odds." (p. 338) Most critics agree in emphasizing James's pity for the frail and tragic woman who walks up and down the beach during Verena's endless excursion with Ransom in a boat. Having fully understood the bitter reality of her young friend's deserting her, she is overwhelmed by the disillusionment; she has been given a deadly wound, and she can hardly rise from the depth into which she has fallen; "she ached with the bitterness of her melancholy, she was dumb and cold with despair. She had spent the violence of her terror, the eagerness of her belief, and now she was too weary to struggle with fate." (p.351) With a great deal of psychological insight and sensitivity James describes Olive's Calvary, her immeasurable sadness at having found out that whatever she has done was useless, as the young girl finally meant much more to her than she did to Verena.

Olive's epiphany is complete in the final scene, just before and at the moment when Ransom runs away with Verena from the Music Hall. The shock at finding Verena lost forever suddenly passes from her face to make place for a new-found fierceness of energy. Like a real heroine Olive faces the Boston crowd which has come to admire Verena and objects, at least at the beginning of the lecture 'show', to having to listen to a mere substitute. But Verena's audience calms down and shows generosity towards a woman whose courage has allowed her to overcome her reticence, and, in doing so, to outgrow herself. Thus Olive, despite her weaknesses, joins the group of James's heroines who develop their true personality through hardship and suffering. It is indeed Miss Chancellor who triumphs in Boston, on the great occasion which should have confirmed Verena's success. Olive has not only become the martyr she has always wanted to be, but, all things considered, she is the strongest person at the end of the novel. The couple who have caused so much of her suffering have finally not succeeded in causing her defeat.

In this way *The Bostonians* is a novel about women's struggles to free themselves, but if we take into account that Olive more than Verena is a suffering woman, independent of all political and sociological aspects of women's emancipation, it becomes evident that other young Jamesian heroines like Daisy Miller, Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer or Milly Theale are the characters of novels that treat the woman question as profoundly as *The Bostonians*.

Notes

¹ Henry James: *Letters* ed. by Leon Edel, Vol.III, 1883-1895 (London: Macmillan, 1981), Letter to William James October 9th, 1885, p.102

² Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, op.cit., Notebook entry April 8th 1883, pp. 19-20

³ Henry James: *Letters* ed. by L. Edel, Vol. III, Letter to W. James June 13th 1886, p.12

⁴ M. Bell: *Meaning in Henry James*, op.cit., quot. L. Trilling in note 8 p.367

⁵ L. Edel and L.H. Powers, op.cit., p.20

⁶ M. Bell: *Meaning in H.J.*, op.cit. p.134

⁷ M. Bell: *Meaning in H.J.*, quot. L.H. Powers in note 4 to chapter 'The Bostonians', p.367

⁸ H. Fox: *Henry James: A Critical Introduction* (J.E. Westburg, 1968), pp.35-36

⁹ Anne-Marie Käppeli: 'Feminist Scenes' ed. by Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot in *A History of Women: Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, General Editors (Harvard University Press, 1995), p.483

¹⁰ L. Edel and L.H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks*, Notebook entry April 8th, 1883, p.18

¹¹ Nicole Arnaud-Duc: 'The Law's Contradictions' ed. by G. Fraisse and M. Perrot in *A History of Women*, op.cit., p.85

¹² Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, op.cit., p.201

¹³ Henry James: *Essays on Literature; American Writers; English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, Vol.I (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p.1156

¹⁴ Patricia Stubbs: *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979), pp.165-166

¹⁵ L. Edel and L.H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks*, Notebook entry April 8th, 1883, p.19

¹⁶ P. Stubbs: *Women and Fiction*, op.cit., p.170

¹⁷ M. Bell: *Meaning in H. James*, op.cit. p.135

¹⁸ John Carlos Rowe: *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p.91

¹⁹ A. Habegger: *Henry James and the "Woman Business"*, op.cit., p.218

²⁰ Henry James: *The Bostonians*, Penguin Modern Classics (Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1966), p.335

²¹ E. Allen: *A Woman's Place*, op.cit., p.92

²² E. Allen: *A Woman's Place*, p.95

²³ Henry James: *The Bostonians*, op.cit., p.337

²⁴ Sergio Perosa: *Henry James and the Experimental Novel* (The University Press of Virginia, 1978), p.23

²⁵ H. Fox: H. James: *A Critical Introduction*, op.cit., p.217

²⁶ J.C. Rowe: *The Theoretical Dimensions*, op.cit., quot. J. Fetterley in note 12 to chapter, 'The Bostonians' p.268

²⁷ Henry James: *The Bostonians*, op.cit. p.70

²⁸ M. Bell: *Meaning in Henry James*, op.cit., p.135

²⁹ M. Bell: *ibid.*

³⁰ Henry James: *The Bostonians*, op.cit., p.23

³¹ M. Bell: *Meaning in Henry James* op.cit., pp.136-137

³² Henry James: *The Bostonians*, op.cit., p.97

³³ Janet Gabler-Hover: *Truth in American Fiction: The Legacy of Rhetorical Idealism* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), p.174

³⁴ Henry James: *The Bostonians*, op. cit., p.117

CHAPTER SIX: THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

SUFFERING IN EXTREMIS

She would have given everything to live - and the image of this, which was long time to remain with me, appeared so of the essence of tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art.¹

One cannot dispense with these often-quoted lines from James's autobiography concerning his beloved cousin Minny Temple whose life and character and premature death through an incurable sickness so resemble that of Milly Theale, the heroine of *The Wings of the Dove*, the author's second last novel. James devoted more than forty pages to the memory of Minny in *A Small Boy and Others*, including the letters in which Mary Temple - her nickname was Minny - described her hunger for life and for new acquaintances, but spoke very little of her suffering and her imminent death. Such was Minny and such is Milly in the novel, a beautiful young girl who would also have given everything to live and who is hardly able to understand her physician's verdict that she is doomed. As James puts it in his Notebooks where he writes about the idea, which is the "occasion aiding" to wrap Minny's ghost "in the beauty and dignity of art" mentioned in the autobiography, "she learns that she has but a short time to live, and she rebels, she is terrified, she cries out in her anguish, her tragic young despair. She is in love with life, her dreams of it have been immense, and she clings to it with passion, with supplication. 'I don't want to die - I won't, I won't, oh, let me live; oh, save me!' She is equally pathetic in her doom and in her horror of it. If she could only live just a little; just a little more - just a little longer."²

If we except Daisy Miller, whose frivolity and carelessness have caused her death and who might have been saved by Winterbourne, Milly Theale is the only heroine of James's greater novels who suffers physically as well as mentally. The sickness from which she suffers remains unnamed in the novel, and this does not really matter so much, as the result of any incurable disease would be just the same. Although the writer hesitates himself in his Notebook entry between "consumption" - as

tuberculosis was preferably called in James's time - and "heart-disease or whatever."³ and although there is complete silence in the novel about what ails young Milly, except for a few hints before her death, the sickness was probably tuberculosis, the cause of many deaths before the turn of the century. The German Nobel prize winner Robert Koch distinguished the Tbc bacteria in 1882, and soon afterwards medicine was developed against the disease, it is true, but the infirmity continued to afflict not only the common people but numerous celebrities like writers and opera singers for years to come. On the only occasion when the word "consumption" is used in the novel, Kate Croy asks of Merton Densher, "Isn't consumption, taken in time, now curable?" 'People are, no doubt, patched up.' But he wondered. 'Do you mean she has something that's past patching?' " The reader, however, is still left in the dark as to poor Milly's ailment that is apparently "past patching"⁴. Even after Miss Theale has visited her famous doctor in London for the second time, and after Mrs Stringham has reported Sir Luke Strett's conversation about Milly's affliction to aunt Maud Manningham, the sickness, which, after all, is the central point of the novel around which all other themes pivot, remains a complete mystery. We are only told that it is not what Milly thought it was, and that, after two thirds of the story Sir Luke still does not speak of a case. The verdict, however, has been clearly uttered, and Milly takes it in on her long way back to the hotel and during her meditation in Regent's Park. At any rate, hers is the eternal tragedy of the young and innocent victimized by incurable disease. Like Minny Temple, Daisy Miller and Milly Theale, uncountable young men and women, before and after them, in fiction and in real life, have had to die, in the prime of their lives, cut off from an often promising future by a fatal sickness. Inspired by his beautiful and lively young cousin's long suffering and death, James has dealt with this universal, immemorial theme in his special way, that is beautifully, in a masterly novel. The death of a beloved person who, filled with a great passion for life, suddenly saw this life, which meant so much to her, abruptly ended, has haunted the author until the end of his own life. With all the past and present victims of terrible diseases, James has asked the inevitable, unanswerable question, why he or why she of all persons? Why are so many young people condemned

to die so uselessly? Why the curse, why the irrevocable fate? "He whom the gods favour dies young;" Plautus's saying does not seem to be an adequate answer or even a genuine consolation.

In the preface to the New York edition published in 1907 James expresses the same thought about the subject as in his Notebook entry and his Autobiography,

The idea, reduced to its essence is that of a young person, conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to 'put in' before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived.⁵

Although perfectly aware of what it means to be pain-stricken, physically or mentally - James had often been surrounded by sick people, and the care he gave his ailing sister Alice is almost legendary - the novelist does not want his heroine to be constantly crying and lamenting about her inescapable fate. It is with his innate discretion and sensitivity that James accompanies Milly Theale on her difficult way from the doctor's practice back to her hotel and from London to her Venetian palace where death puts an end to her suffering. One does not even have the impression that she suffers a great deal from physical pain as she seldom complains about fatigue or other symptoms of her sickness. Neither does she herself give the impression that she is an invalid suffering unbearable pain.

'She has none of the effect - on one's nerves or whatever - of an invalid', [says Kate], 'she's so wonderful. She won't show for that, any more than your watch, when it's about to stop for want of being wound up, gives you convenient notice or shows as different from usual. She won't die, she won't live, by inches. She won't smell, as it were of drugs. She won't taste, as it were, of medicine. No one will know.'⁶

Later in the novel, when everyone knows that Milly will actually die, she will say to Lord Mark, " 'You won't see me suffer - don't be afraid. I shan't be a public nuisance.' " (p.349) It is Milly's life, albeit short, her joy in living and her zest for life that James examines above all. He admits that one cannot avoid assisting at "the whole course of ... (her) disintegration and the whole ordeal of (her) consciousness," but that "the expression of her state and that of one's intimate relation to it might therefore well need to be discreet and ingenious."⁷ In the same vein James goes on to say, a little

further, "Let him (the poet) deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle."⁸ Whether, then, James has drawn Isabel Archer after his dead cousin Minny more than Milly Theale, as has been suggested by critics who prefer to find the heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady* modelled after the dead Miss Temple, is finally not of crucial importance, as both fictitious heroines are outstanding Jamesian characters as far as their strength and independence in the struggle against adversity, different but awful in both cases, are concerned.

My young woman, who is the heroine of 'The Wings of the Dove' would herself be the opposition - to the catastrophe announced by the associated Fates, powers conspiring to a sinister end and, with their command of means, finally achieving it, yet in such straits really to stifle the sacred spark that, obviously, a creature so animated, an adversary so subtle, couldn't but be felt worthy, under whatever weaknesses, of the foreground and the limelight.⁹

And James goes on asserting how Milly would affect the attitudes of other people through the human interests which she might develop if she were to squeeze as much life as possible from what remains at her disposal. She would draw people, as James explains poetically, into her sphere of attraction like the German Rhine-maiden, "as by some pool of a Lorelei,"¹⁰ a siren who lured sailors on the Rhine to their doom. This is indeed what the enchanting young Milly will do, bring final disaster upon the couple Kate Croy and Merton Densher, and to a lesser degree upon those who have relied on her money, - those who, in other words, have used the young American heiress perfidiously. The beauty of it all is, of course, that Milly is the most innocent person in the novel and that the failure of Kate's and Merton's relationship is independent of her will. Yet, at the same time, the most cruel irony of her short life lies in her being used, in the name of love, by all those around her, except her dear companion Mrs Stringham or Susie Shepherd - again James has chosen a name for its symbolic value - and the great doctor. As the novelist makes clear in his preface, what makes her attractive to others is her being

possessed of all things, all but the single most precious assurance; freedom and money and a mobile mind and personal charm, the power to interest and attach; attributes, each one, enhancing the value of a future. From the moment his imagination began to deal with her at close quarters, in fact,

nothing could more engage her designer than to work out the detail of her perfect rightness for her part; nothing above all more solicit him than to recognize fifty reasons for her national and social status. She would be the last fine flower - blooming alone, for the fullest attestation of her freedom."¹¹

Milly has indeed everything, except that "precious assurance", the knowledge that her life is not in danger. What makes of her the "heir of all the ages" as James says in the Preface or "the potential heiress of all the ages"¹², as Susie calls her in the novel, is precisely that she is "the last fine flower" of an "old" New York stem."¹³ In Milly Theale, as before in Olive Chancellor and above all in Isabel Archer, but to some extent also in Daisy Miller, James praises and enhances the American inheritance, all those attributes that are typically American, and particularly that special American kind of freedom and independence.

There goes with it, [James believes], for the heroine of "The Wings of the Dove", a strong and special implication of liberty, liberty of action, of choice, of appreciation, of contact - proceeding from sources that provide better for large independence, I think, than any other conditions in the world - and this would be in particular what we should feel ourselves deeply concerned with. ... To be the heir of all ages only to know yourself, as that consciousness should deepen, balked of your inheritance, would be to play the part, it struck me, or at least to arrive at the type, in the light on the whole the most becoming.¹⁴

Thus the "heiress of all the ages" possesses youth, beauty, gentleness and brilliance of mind and character, but she is tragically "balked" of this and of her American inheritance by the relentless progress of her disastrous sickness.

For reasons of plot and structure, James only introduces his young American heroine in the third book of the first volume, and presents her in his typically mysterious but not superficial manner as the

slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably, angular young person, of not more than two-and-twenty summers, in spite of her marks, whose hair was somehow exceptionally red even for the real thing, which it innocently confessed to being, and whose clothes were remarkably black even for robes of mourning, which was the meaning they expressed.¹⁵

Apart from the fact that one remembers Verena Tarrant's beautifully red hair - James may have associated the splendour of naturally red hair with the splendour of youth - the description of Milly Theale's physique is as remarkable as the account of her

thoughts and doings throughout the novel. 'There is clearly a hint at her sickness in the adjectives 'pale', 'haggard' and 'angular' and the characterizing adverbs 'constantly' and 'anomalously', but the adverbs 'delicately' and 'agreeably' are significant in so far as they express the author's wish to present Milly as a living, not a dying heroine up to the very end of the story. As to Milly's mourning clothes, we are told that she is the only survivor of a shipwreck in which all the members of her family died. Death is thus already inseparable from Milly before her own predicament becomes the theme of the novel, but, strangely enough, James does not view the event in question with his usual sympathy. On the contrary, the fact that Milly is an orphan, devoid of any family links and responsibility in America and elsewhere, is noted with satisfaction rather than with sadness because it is precisely this situation that guarantees her the great amount of freedom that she actually enjoys.

From the start the novelist has thus made his heroine free from all financial worries, a state in which Isabel Archer does not find herself when, equipped merely with her independent and adventurous mind she sets out to discover Europe where, by chance, so much money is heaped on her that it becomes her doom. Milly's tragedy is that she travels to Europe to admire some of its beauties, too, and to experience the pulsating life in London, for example, but chiefly to find a doctor who may heal her of her incurable sickness. With all the money in the world, however, Sir Luke cannot save her life. This is but one aspect of the heroine's predicament, one might even be compelled to call it a minor one, if Milly's impending death were not in itself the greatest tragedy that could happen to an innocent young woman. What heightens the catastrophe of Milly's case is that money puts up barriers instead of abolishing them, barring the way to true friendship and happiness. Milly's forgiving Densher and probably Kate, too, at the end of the novel, by bequeathing to them her money, is an act of "benevolence", according to J. A. Ward, which, however, "cannot purify her money. It is appropriate that the practical result of her gift is to sever Kate and Densher, for it was a want of money that kept them from marrying in the beginning. Milly is not corrupted by her money; yet the possession of it causes her destruction. Money destroys

those who are associated with it - those who have it, those who desire it, those who contend for it."¹⁶ In James's late novel money causes such an imbroglio of intrigues and conspiracies around the main character that a very subtle mind is needed to disentangle it. For this plot the author has had to invent some nefarious characters although he takes care not to make them entirely bad, as Milly is not entirely good, either. When Milly invites her friends to the Venetian palace in the last third of the novel, however, her wearing a white dress, and Densher, in his thoughts, associating Kate with the colour black is rather a meaningful detail. On the other hand, Kate being likened to "a creature who paced like a panther"¹⁷ in the scene where she warns Milly not to stay with her new-found, money-obsessed London friends, is significant in this respect as well. But, on the whole, Milly is not perfect, which is confirmed by E. Wagenknecht's analysis where the critic states that "James has taken pains to 'humanize' Milly by indicating that she did possess limitations."¹⁸ In fact, the heroine dies as a martyr, but she has not chosen her martyrdom. Although Milly's ostensible act of forgiving and redeeming before her death surely epitomizes Christ's lesson of loving one's enemy, she is not a saint. The young woman's hunger for life and her choice of pleasures, among which are luxurious clothes and jewels, do not distinguish her from most human beings. The fact that she feels greatly flattered, at times, by her friends' honest or feigned compliments shows that she also shares many people's vanity. In this respect I agree with Wagenknecht when he argues that perhaps too many modern critics "call every character in fiction who lives nobly and sacrificially a 'Christ-figure'".¹⁹ Even if it is justified to recognize in Milly's dove-like nature a Christian symbol, she does have human weaknesses. Likewise, Kate Croy as well as her aunt, her father and her sister are not purely evil. Yet, for all of them money counts more than anything else. Lionel Croy would renounce any parental feelings and duties for the sake of the money he could get if his daughter married a rich man. His brilliant sister-in-law, Aunt Maud Manningham or Mrs Lowder is jealously guarding her equally brilliant niece until a superbly rich husband turns up. Aunt Maud, who talks of herself as "Britannica of the Market Place,"²⁰ and who the author humorously compares to a "picturesque ear-ringed

matron at a market-stall" while she listens to the account Mrs Stringham gives her about her protégée's sickness, "tossing the separate truths of the matter one by one, into her capacious apron" (pp. 320-321), does not regard Merton Densher as a suitable husband for Kate. In her view Lord Mark's fortune would rather suit her niece's and her own image of a grand marriage; therefore she eagerly consents to her old friend Mrs Stringham's innocent and well-meant desire to match Merton Densher with the dying Milly so as to assure her some last moments of unspoilt happiness. The climax of ruthless perfidiousness is of course reached when Kate Croy herself proposes to her lover the ugly deal of lying to Milly about their engagement and of his pretending to fall in love with and eventually marry the unsuspecting victim only to get the money after her death. Thus the young American is mercilessly deceived by both Aunt Maud and her niece for the sake of an immense inheritance. Densher, the executor of this devious scheme is also to be blamed because he has given his assent, but his guilt is expiated in the end, since he both feels sorry for what he has conspired to do and, above all, experiences the deepest kind of compassion for the suffering Milly. His final falling in love with the dying Milly leads to his redemption and his incapacity, at the end of the novel, to disagree with Kate when she penetratingly remarks that Densher's love for the memory of the dead Milly will forever be the insurmountable obstacle to the re-establishment of their former relationship.

The basis of this unfortunately so important obsession with money is, in Dorothea Krook's opinion, "the uneasy relation between an America growing steadily richer and a Britain growing steadily poorer which has become one of the commonplaces of Anglo-American relations."²¹ But Milly innocently, almost happily, ignores all of this, unable to understand that so much ado can be made at Lancaster Gate, the house of her English friends and acquaintances, the meeting place of some of London's rich and powerful whom it is Aunt Maud's pleasure, her social pride and duty to invite. In his first conversation with Milly, on the latter's appearance as a guest in Aunt Maud's house, Lord Mark realizes that his remark " 'Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing' "²² does not really impress the American girl who, as D. Krook points out,

knows nothing of these material pressures that lie beneath the gracious surface, and therefore knows nothing of their demoralising effects upon the human spirit, even the most intelligent, most cultivated, most imaginative of human spirits. Indeed particularly (this is James's grand point) upon the intelligent and imaginative - like Milly's dear friend Kate Croy ... Lacking such knowledge, Milly Theale is accordingly very slow to see herself, the fabulously rich American, as a proper object of exploitation.²³

The only time Milly profits from her money is when she uses it for her own convenience, that is when she rents the Palazzo Leporelli in Venice and the protection of the servant Eugenio who brings home to her the conception, "hitherto ungrasped", James points out consistently with what he has previously said about Milly's indifference towards money, "of some complete use of her wealth itself, some use of it as the counter-move to fate."²⁴ James even seems to applaud his brave young heroine when, for once, and just before dying, which justifies the act even more, she does not mind squandering her money, and "amused herself ... with possibilities of meeting the bill. She was more prepared than ever to pay enough, and quite as much as ever to pay too much. What else - if such were points at which your most trusted servant failed - was the use of being, as the dear Susies of the earth called you, a princess in a palace?" (p.342)

What distinguishes Milly much more than her enormous wealth and what others certainly also recognize in her - but unfortunately less than her much sought-after money - is these princess-like qualities of her own nature. When we look at her moving with light, soft steps through the novel and through her splendid palace in Venice before she lies down to die, we cannot but admire the grace and grandeur with which James endows this special heroine.

She had arts and idiosyncrasies of which no great account could have been given, but which were a daily grace if you lived with them; such as the art of being almost tragically impatient and yet making it light as air; of being inexplicably sad and yet making it as clear as noon; of being unmistakably gay and yet making it as soft as dusk. (p. 129)

It must be repeated, however, that her "designer", as James calls himself in the Preface, has avoided making of Milly Theale an immaculate saint. She is a human being of flesh and blood with flaws like everyone else, but hers are very few in number. She simply

represents the dove of the title James has given his novel. There is of course, a religious connotation of the word 'dove' and in many other overt or concealed allusions in the text of the novel. When Milly who, significantly, is fond of abysses - "there are no abysses. I want abysses," she answers Susie "with a strange gaiety" after the latter has used the word "labyrinth" (p.174) to describe the intricate social relations in London which Mrs Lowder has just discussed with her - is contemplating an abyss in the Swiss Alps, "a view of great extent and beauty, but thrown forward and vertiginous," (p.134) "she was looking down on the kingdoms of the earth." (p.135) This is clearly a reference to the episode in Matthew 4 where Christ is tempted by the devil, as hardly any critic fails to mention. For reasons that largely remain unrevealed, James does use more Christian allusions in this novel than in others. In spite of her human weaknesses Milly is justifiably considered as a Christlike figure, a martyr, whose life is sacrificed at the altar of human greed and wickedness, a dove descending, like the Holy Ghost at Whitsuntide, on the heads of the humans to redeem them. After Milly's death at least Densher is redeemed, and Kate makes him realize that, although he might not have been in love with her while she was living, " 'your change came; she died for you then that you might understand her. From that hour you did.' ... 'And I do now. She did it for us.' ... 'I used to call her, in my stupidity - for want of anything better - a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to that they reached. They cover us.' " (p.508) In fact, when earlier in the novel, Kate who, one must remember, does not embody the evil principle as such, warns Milly to flee from the corrupted society she has happened to get acquainted with, she explains, " 'We're of no use to you - it's decent to tell you. You'd be of use to us, but that's a different matter.' " (p. 235) And on her friend's questioning her, " 'Why do you say such thing to me?' " Kate answers, " 'because you're a dove.' " (p. 236) Milly's identification with a dove and her pose in the Swiss Alps which reminds the knowing reader of Christ's temptation in the desert "suggest", as M.Bell also underlines, "that religious tradition is being invoked - but there is no need to see allegory in the novel. Milly is not Christ, but James wanted to introduce the powerful vocabulary of the tradition which insists on the immeasurable value of the spirit and the ethic of generous

love in the place of the modernism exemplified by Kate and Densher."²⁵ Like Christ, it is true, Milly is tempted, as has been seen, to succumb to the base human greed for money and the passion of human love, "to possess the fullest human satisfactions, including love,"²⁶ according to M. Bell. And like Christ, Milly instinctively knows that suffering is common to all men and women, rich or poor.

In the beautiful pages that follow Milly's second interview with her doctor, the young woman, who now has a full insight into the state of her health or rather ill-health, selflessly and peacefully muses about human suffering, the condition of all mankind. In Regent's Park she observes,

the real thing; the real thing was to be quite away from the pompous roads, well within the centre and on the stretches of shabby grass. Here were benches and smutty sheep; here were idle lads at games of balls, with their cries mild in the thick air; here were wanderers anxious and tired like herself; here doubtless were hundreds of others just in the same box. Their box, their great common anxiety, what was it, in this grim breathing-space, but the practical question of life? They could live if they would; that is, like herself, they had been told so: she saw them all about her, on seats, digesting the information, recognising it again as something in a slightly different shape familiar enough, the blessed old truth that they would live if they could. All she thus shared with them made her wish to sit in their company; ...²⁷

What we discover here is that Milly's "future actions and language will be based on faith," as J. Gabler-Howe argues, "a faith in life and in other people that is paradoxically born of a sense of community in suffering," and a few lines further that "Milly's Christlike apprehension of human suffering, her equation of the smutty sheep and the idle lads who bleat like lambs, foreshadows her eventual sacrifice to the flock, as the suspense surrounding Milly's imminent death resembles the scene before Christ's crucifixion."²⁸ One may not go as far in one's religious interpretation of several scenes and especially of Milly's tragic end the final pages of the novel, but the truth is that the dying Milly is capable of a genuinely divine gesture, that of forgiving and giving her enemies what was part of herself, her material possessions and, first and foremost, a lesson in true human love and charity. There is no denying the fact that forgiving those who have hideously betrayed her is an archetypal principle of Christian ethics.

But it is not James's sole object to emphasize Milly's Christian virtues and make the readers solemnly bow to a haloed young heroine. The suffering protagonist of *The Wings of The Dove* would not truly be a Jamesian character if she did not equally possess what Dorothea Krook calls "her supreme Jamesian quality, her self-consciousness."²⁹ Milly's lonely walk in the park after the momentous interview with Sir Luke strangely resembles Isabel Archer's well-known midnight vigil in which she dives deep into the various layers of her consciousness to discern possible motives for actions and conceivable reasons for the ordeal she has to suffer. Like Isabel, Milly searches in her own consciousness for answers to her own doubts which, however, differ from Isabel's, questions about her strange disease, her impending suffering and death, about how she will be able to follow her doctor's advice of enjoying life, and being happy, in the midst of people whose honesty and compassion she eventually may start to doubt. Milly's otherwise terrible fate allows her at least the totally unselfish and devoted help of her kind Susie who, as Milly knows, would drown herself for her younger companion, as well as her own blessed ignorance of her friends' betrayal. But it is chiefly her passion for self-knowledge, for which "she is prepared to suffer pain, confusion and humiliation, and finally total deprivation and loss."³⁰ Milly realizes this rather early, knowing that she is stricken, and that "her life, especially by the fact of this second interview (with Sir Luke), was put into the scales."³¹ Although James clearly does not indulge in sentimentalizing poor Milly's case, he shows, in a moving scene, the depth of friendship which gives relief in even the darkest hours:

Her companion went to her, met by her with an embrace in which things were said that exceeded speech. Each held and clasped the other as if to console her for this unnamed woe, the woe for Mrs Stringham of learning the torment of helplessness, the woe for Milly of having her, at such a time, to think of. (p.315)

Furthermore, the sympathizing author does let the two women cry, but only a few times, because Susie, understandably, cannot openly lament in Milly's presence and because Milly's pride prevents her from doing so more than twice, as she reflects, "what she herself wanted was not, for the third time to cry, as it were, in public." (p.208) Milly, it is true, does not want any pity. " 'She won't even', Mrs Stringham explains to Aunt

Maud, "if she does have occasion. She won't shed a tear. There's something that will prevent." 'Oh!' said Mrs Lowder. 'Yes, her pride,' Mrs Stringham explained in spite of her friend's doubt." (p.319) Kate also wonders about a change that has taken place in her American friend and comes to the conclusion that

poor Milly had a treasure to hide. This was not the treasure of a shy, an abject affection - a concealment, on that head, belonging to quite another phase of such states; it was much rather a principle of pride relatively bold and hard, a principle that played up like a fine steel spring at the lightest pressure of too near a football. Thus insuperably guarded was the truth about the girl's own conception of her validity; thus was a wondering pitying sister condemned wistfully to look at her from the far side of the moat she had dug round her tower. (p. 339)

And as E. Allen suggests, Milly determines not to be herself impersonalised further into, literally, an 'object' of pity. She will control the response to her illness by 'allowing' others to pretend it doesn't exist."³²

Milly's pride naturally brings about her isolation and loneliness; she is conscious of "the air", that was for her, "from the very nature of the case, destined never to rid itself of a considerable chill. This she could tell him (Sir Luke) with authority, if she could tell him nothing else; and she seemed to see now, in short, that it would importantly simplify. ...; but they all together wouldn't make - well, I don't know what to call it but the difference. I mean when one is - really alone."³³ But she is bravely and stoically responsible for the solitude she creates herself and for herself within the walls of the Venetian Palazzo. She explains to Lord Mark why she wants to enjoy the beauty and the stillness of the Palace alone, why she doesn't want to come down. Upon Lord Mark's enquiry why she never wants to go down, "she shook her head both lightly and mournfully enough at his not understanding. 'Not even for people in Veronese costumes. I mean that the positive beauty is that one needn't go down. I don't move in fact,' she added - 'now, I've not been out, you know. I stay up.' " (p. 345) The fact is that, for a long time Milly silently suffers from physical pain and mental apprehension. She has had premonitions of her approaching death throughout the novel. During her stay in the Swiss Alps she once wondered,

'if I shall have much of it.' Mrs Stringham stared. 'Much of what? Not of pain?' 'Of everything. Of everything I have.' Anxiously again, tenderly, our friend cast about. 'You "have" everything; so that when you say "much" of it' - 'I only mean,' the girl broke in, 'shall I have it for long? That is if I have got it.' She had at present the effect, a little, of confounding, or at least of perplexing her comrade, who was touched, who was always touched, by something helpless in her grace and abrupt in her turns, and yet actually half made out in her a sort of mocking light. 'If you've got an ailment?' 'If I've got everything,' Milly laughed. 'Ah that - like almost nobody else.' 'Then for how long?' (p.139)

And when first invited to a dinner-party at Mrs Lowder's Milly wonders whether the anomaly of her being able to recognize so quickly "in glimpses of an instant the various signs of a relation" does not mean that "her doom was to live fast." (p.157) On the other hand, as early as when she gives herself the time to meditate upon her condition in the park,

it was as if she had to pluck off her breast, to throw away, some friendly ornament, a familiar flower, a little old jewel, that was part of her daily dress; and to take up and shoulder as a substitute some queer defensive weapon, a musket, a spear, a battle axe - conducive possibly in a higher degree to a striking appearance, but demanding all the effort of the military posture. She felt this instrument, for that matter, already on her back, so that she proceeded now in very truth after the fashion of a soldier on a march - proceeded as if, for her initiation, the first charge had been sounded. (p. 214)

Milly Theale finally dies, not so much because she draws her breath with pain, but because of the cruelty of those who have accelerated the moment of her death. The disappointment caused by their betrayal, as Densher later informs Kate, has robbed her of her last strength, her courageous will to go on suffering and surviving against all odds. She dies in silence, "she has turned her face to the wall," (p.421), as Mrs Stringham reports to the wondering Densher. "She dies", and I cannot but share E. Allen's opinion,

because the weight of manipulation and objectification she has to face as being perpetrated on her shatters her ability to control her existence in the world. Yet her death shadows the book from the beginning. She left New York specifically because she was ill. Unlike the pattern of Daisy Miller, which suggests that Winterbourne might have saved Daisy and which minimises the ripples caused by Daisy's death, *The Wings of the Dove* weights the destructiveness of social structures more heavily, and also increases the importance and implications of Milly's resistance to them.³⁴

But Milly has also triumphed in silence. Densher admits to Kate, at the very end of the novel, that he can never forget the sacred character of his last face to face confrontation with Milly, a memory that is so intense that words cannot express it. As Laurette Voza beautifully puts it, "C'est l'un des grands moments où le silence jamesien intervient, seul capable d'exprimer l'indicible, l'ineffable qualité de cette tragédie muette."³⁵

To this there is nothing more to add, and we let the ghost of the dead Milly, the wings of the dove hover over the villains of this world.

Notes

¹ Henry James: *Autobiography* ed. with an Introduction by F.W. Dupee (New York: Criterion Books, 1956), p.544

² L. Edel and L.H. Powers: *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, op.cit., Notebook entry Nov. 3rd 1894, pp.102-103

³ *ibid.*, p.102

⁴ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. with an Introduction by John Bayley and Notes by Patricia Crick, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1986), p.102

⁵ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., Preface, p.35

⁶ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.284

⁷ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., Preface, p.36

⁸ *ibid.*, p.36

⁹ *ibid.*, p.37

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.38

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.38

¹² Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.125

¹³ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, Preface op.cit., p.38

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.38

¹⁵ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.123

¹⁶ J.A. Ward: *The Imagination of Disaster*, op.cit., p.128

¹⁷ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.235

¹⁸ Edward Wagenknecht: *Eve and Henry James: Portraits of Women and Girls in His Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), p.167

¹⁹ E. Wagenknecht: *Eve and H. James*, op.cit., p.168

²⁰ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.73

²¹ Dorothea Krook: *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, op.cit., p.204

²² Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.157

²³ D. Krook: *ibid.*

²⁴ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.341

²⁵ M.Bell: *Meaning in H. James*, op.cit., p.294

²⁶ M.Bell: *ibid.*

²⁷ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.215

²⁸ J. Gabler-Hower: *Truth in American Fiction*, op.cit., p.200

²⁹ D. Krook: *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, op.cit., p.209

³⁰ D. Krook: *ibid.*

³¹ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.206

³² E. Allen: *A Woman's Place*, op.cit., p.165

³³ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.208

³⁴ E. Allen: *A Woman's Place*, op.cit., p.173

³⁵ Laurette Veza: Henry James: *Le Champ du Regard* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1989), p.159

CONCLUSION

THE HEROINES' STRENGTH AND TRIUMPH

She found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair - as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage - only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. 'I shall never be better than this.'

There is no need for Milly Theale, whom Lord Mark admiringly calls "the image of the wonderful Bronzino,"² the sixteenth-century Florentine painter of the beautiful Lucrezia Panciatichi, to be any better because she is perfection. In this portrait which so resembles the pale and pretty Milly we also find traits of the other five heroines whose suffering has been dealt with in this work. As for the physical beauty of the lady painted by Bronzino, the Jamesian women, from Daisy Miller to Milly Theale, possess it to a great extent, except perhaps Catherine Sloper, who remains a rather unattractive wallflower to the end of her life. Isabel Archer is thus not the only lady who is immortalized by the word 'portrait' in James's fiction, but the author has created equally memorable portraits of his other great heroines. In Daisy Miller's face, as in Claire's or Isabel's or Olive's we may recognize the same "Michael-angelesque squareness", the same "eyes of other days", the same sadness, after she has been deceived by Winterbourne, as that expressed in the face of the Italian lady. What really characterizes all these women, however, is that they are "unaccompanied by a joy", the keywords in the interpretation of the Bronzino portrait. Like Milly, who looks at it through tears, they have all shed tears of sadness and desperation because they have all suffered during a shorter or longer period of their lives. We know that only two of them have had to die because of physical sickness, but as has been pointed out, Daisy Miller and Milly Theale rather died of mental grief, although Roman fever and tuberculosis were the direct reasons for their premature deaths. The six protagonists, if we exclude

Verena Tarrant whose suffering is only briefly alluded to at the end of *The Bostonians*, all have to undergo ordeals, for which there are of course various reasons; but there is one common element in their plight: despite the differences in their family and educational backgrounds and social situations, all the young ladies have been deceived or betrayed by lovers, mothers, fathers or friends and acquaintances. Daisy Miller has suffered much more from being exposed to the icy treatment of her compatriots than from catching malaria in the Roman Colosseum. Claire de Cintré's and Catherine Sloper's intense suffering has been caused by a cruel mother on the one hand and an unyielding father on the other. In Isabel Archer's case it is the obstinately self-centred husband who tortures his intelligent young wife's mind, whereas Olive Chancellor's mind is troubled and hurt by the deception of her woman friend who is lured into marriage. Finally poor Milly Theale is betrayed by her best friends, the deceitful Kate Croy, her clever aunt and Merton Densher, who becomes the victim of the two women's insidious plan of getting Milly's money after her death. It is clearly the old-age problem of interpersonal relations which is at the origin of the Jamesian heroines' unremitting suffering. The novelist, whose major works are often given the label of psychological novels, showed a far-reaching interest in this problem and went to great pains to present deep and subtle analyses of how their particular predicament affected his women characters. Being so seriously concerned with the difficulties and impediments that often destroy his heroines' relationships with lovers and friends, James could not well have presented stories with couples living happily ever after. Of course, the author did not mind the pursuit of joy and serene happiness as an aim of life, but he had probably realized two things: first, truly happy people are extremely rare and secondly, long accounts of people devoid of any earnest problems seldom make for artistically interesting and satisfying novels, at least not of the kind in which James excelled. There were indeed affinities between the writer of masterly psychological novels and his brother William, the eminent psychologist. Inspired by the suffering of women he knew in real life, he could not possibly have been less interested in the impact of suffering on the women in his fiction. The presence of numerous women friends and acquaintances

in James's life had taught him how to listen to the story of their afflicted minds and aching hearts, and he had thus gained a profound insight into the female psyche.

The true Jamesian heroine, who often suffers in isolation, separated from the world by the high and dreadful walls of a nunnery, a palace or the ruins of a site reminiscent of long-gone ages, as in the case of Claire, Daisy, Isabel and Milly, does not easily succumb to the tragedy of her fate, however. Her strength lies in the never-ending struggle against the relentless and ruthless blows of destiny. Although Catherine Sloper sits down with her needlework for the rest of her life, as it were, she has triumphed before sitting down; she has resisted, that is, the fortune-hunter's second offer to marry her and accepted the dull life of a spinster with a bitter-sweet equanimity. Taking into account Daisy Miller's youth and inexperience, the novelist has clearly pointed out the heroine's fight against cruel indifference until the scene in the Colosseum at night. Isabel Archer, in James's masterpiece of the middle period, offers a grand example of one who has triumphed in her struggle against cruelty and inhumanity in her final acceptance of her responsibility for her own fate. Olive Chancellor at last triumphs over her own weakness and disappointment in the significant Music Hall scene. Milly Theale's strength lies in the magnanimity of her selfless act of forgiving those who have conspired against her. Milly's love and charity outdo evil and death. Claire de Cintré, it must be added, is an exception in so far as she is the only un-American heroine among the suffering women presented in six of James's major novels; Like all the other protagonists she suffers from a hopeless situation - there is no way of winning the fight against the tyranny of an unrelenting mother and brother - but the reader has the impression that she gives in too rapidly under immense pressure. The French heroine does not triumph at the end of her ordeal, unless her choice to enter the severe Carmelite convent and thus escape her mother's order to marry an older gentleman for money is a small personal victory for Claire, given the rigid observance of family honour in the French aristocracy at the time.

On the other hand, the heroine of *The American* cannot be allowed to possess, as a representative of the impoverished European higher social classes, the typical

strength and independence of mind that especially distinguishes Isabel and Milly, James's greatest American heroines, largely influenced by the Emersonian virtues of self-reliance and freedom of the individual being. Miss Archer, in particular, sets out to conquer the world, ready to face any obstacle or difficulty on her way, only to find herself almost overwhelmed by an unforeseeable, tragic destiny which, against her keenest expectations, she succeeds in mastering in the end. Both Isabel and Milly are "the heiresses of all the ages" to the extent that they embody the typically American power of endurance and the determination not to give up. Milly, the dove spreading her wings in protection over her enemies, even uses military language when thinking of how she is going to proceed in her fight against the sickness that will put an end to her young life.

Finally, all the Jamesian heroines treated in the previous chapters possess the quality the novelist liked so much to endow his characters with, a habit of probing into one's consciousness for reasons and motives that might explain the tragedy of one's fate. With unremitting zeal and great lucidity of insight these women characters make every effort that might help to disentangle their muddled and often unbearable situation. Isabel's midnight vigil, Olive's lonesome walk on the beach, and Milly's meditation in Regent's Park, are outstanding examples of the Jamesian capacity for digging deep into the consciousness to find out ways of handling one's problems and overcoming one's personal ordeals. Yet, although the heroines of *The American*, *Daisy Miller*, *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Wings of the Dove* fight and suffer with exceptional courage and will-power, as they have learnt to cope with adversity, their suffering is silent and dignified. Their struggle takes place in their hearts and in their minds. Catherine Sloper buries her sorrow in the privacy of her room at night and shows her father, in the morning, an astonishingly fresh face on which there are no traces of tears. Olive collapses in another crisis of sadness and lamentation after her long silent walk while she is being betrayed by Verena and Ransom, but she is also able to spend hours of silent suffering with Verena, thinking of their common plight. After her mind's long soliloquy about her hopeless situation, Isabel

finds new strength to pursue her way of the Cross without showing anybody signs of her personal tragedy. And Milly's words, "I think I could die without its being noticed,"³ highlight her discretion and her humility in suffering.

It is as if James himself, whose style is uncommonly complicated in his later novels, wished to use a very simple and moving sentence as a token of respect for the dying Milly: "She has turned her face to the wall."⁴ Like Milly, the other Jamesian heroines have turned their faces to the wall, but their courage and their pride, the dignity of their suffering, remain in the readers' memory.

Notes

¹ Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*, op.cit., p.196

² *ibid.*, p.194

³ *ibid.*, p.201

⁴ *ibid.*, p.421

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