

Draftings In

Volume 6
Number 3 *Draftings In Voices, Costumes and
Mirrors: Feminist Theory and New Concepts of
the Self in the American Novel*

Article 4

1991

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Recommended Citation

Mallin, Donna (1991) "Isabel Archer and the Persephone Myth: A Psychological Case Study," *Draftings In*: Vol. 6 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol6/iss3/4>

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Isabel Archer and the Persephone Myth: A Psychological Case Study

by Donna Mallin

In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Henry James has created a complex character, Isabel Archer, whose decisions defy glib interpretations. In particular, the ending of the novel in which Isabel chooses to return to Rome and a loveless marriage rather than to liberate herself from its constraints, is enigmatic. Since James chooses not to reveal Isabel's reasons for this decision, there is much ambiguity. What does this decision reveal about Isabel's psychological and moral development? And, in turn, what does Isabel's decision tell us about women's development in general?

This ambiguity has been the subject of much conjecture over the years. Recent critics continue to wrestle with the problem and come up with opposing interpretations of Isabel's final position. John Warner, looking at it from a religious angle, believes that in returning to Rome, Isabel resists two temptations (that of joining Ralph in death and that of succumbing to selfish passion with Caspar) and "achieves attunement to a reality wider than that of self" (356). Conversely, Sandra Fischer, who sees Isabel as a "repressed and rather mundane person," (48) interprets Isabel's return to Rome as accepting "the consequences of her entrapment" and rejecting "the opportunity for a new start" (56). Joseph Weisenfarth, on the other hand, sees Isabel's return as a kind of synthesis: "There she must pursue once again the passion for justice that has made the woman one with the girl and the lady. That, finally, is the only way that she can do justice to herself" (25). H.E. Skudder, however, sees Isabel as powerless. He describes "the apparent helplessness of her ultimate position, and the conjectured escape only through patient forbearance" (qtd. in Sangari 734).

Clearly, the novel's ambiguous conclusion invites varying interpretations based on readers' experiences, values, and ideologies. I base my own interpretation of the ending of the novel on Carol Gilligan's landmark study of women's moral and psychological development, *In a Different Voice*. In an attempt to correct the male bias of previous psychological developmental theories, Gilligan uses data generated by three research studies using women as subjects. I find in her work

insight into the puzzle of Isabel's ultimate decision. In fact, Isabel provides further substantiation of Gilligan's theory of women's development.

Gilligan describes the pre-adolescent girl as having a strong sense of identity. As Francine Prose puts it, there is "a clarity of vision, a confidence in what they know and see, a belief in their integrity and in their responsibilities toward the world." When we first meet Isabel Archer, she is certainly beyond pre-adolescence chronologically, but she fits the psychological profile of the pre-adolescent girl, probably because she has thus far evaded experiences critical to personal development. She has a healthy sense of self. She seeks experience and self improvement. She wants to be free to develop her inner resources through travel, art, and conversation. As she tells Caspar Goodwood, "I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (160). Living in relative freedom from dominating male figures, she is outspoken, opinionated, and seems to know what is best for herself, even to the point of refusing two marriage proposals which would be conventionally advantageous to her, because she fears they would stifle her personal development. She tells her cousin Ralph, "I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do" (149). She does what she believes is good for herself, even at the risk of hurting others. She tells Goodwood, "If I give you pain, I can only say I'm very sorry. It's not my fault. I can't marry you simply to please you" (156).

When Isabel later changes her mind and decides to marry Osmond, she is still in the throes of youthful confidence and idealism. She makes her choice and risks the disapproval of others. She listens to her own voice and knows what she wants. She is ready to marry now, having traveled extensively and learned much (351). She has found what she believes to be a soul-mate, someone who encourages her independent thought, who is not ambitious, and whom she can help with her fortune (346-7). She is ready to care for another as well as herself, to enter into a relationship (352). It is her marriage to Osmond – the critical experience she has thus far evaded – which pushes Isabel into Gilligan's "adolescent" stage of psychological development.

Gilligan uses the imagery of the Persephone myth to describe "the mysterious disappearance of the female self in adolescence" (51). As they get older, girls become apologetic and hesitant, "not knowing what they had known" (qtd. in Prose). As Gilligan puts it, "the secrets of the female adolescent pertain to the silencing of her own voice, a silencing enforced by the wish not to hurt others but also by the fear

that, in speaking, her voice will not be heard" (51).

When we next see Isabel, she has been transformed into Mrs. Osmond, is four years into her marriage, oppressed by her husband, and silent. Isabel's husband hates the very sense of self that she displays in the beginning of the novel, and she tries to stifle it and immerse herself in him: "He had thought at first he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he would like" (425). "She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was" (425). "He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. . . . He had really meant it – he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (427). "The real offense, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his – attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park" (431).

Again, while not chronologically an adolescent, she fits the model presented by Gilligan. Ralph notes the change in her: "The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. . . . she represented Gilbert Osmond" (392-3). Isabel believes that "If she had troubles she must keep them to herself" (401). In her relations with her husband, "Covert observation has become a habit with her; . . . She wished as much as possible to know his thoughts, to know what he would say, beforehand, so that she might prepare her answer. . . . she would recognize nothing until Osmond would have put it into words;" (417, 419). No longer free and outspoken, "she appeared now to think there was nothing worth people's either differing about or agreeing upon. Of old she had been curious, and now she was indifferent" (392). Like Gilligan's adolescent, she has fallen into silence and passivity.

We see in Isabel a woman who has resigned herself to her fate, no longer seeking self-expression and self-fulfillment but dutifully caring for her family and maintaining appearances. She fits the traditional view of the "good" woman as self-sacrificing rather than self-protective (Gilligan 139): "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" (404). In her effort to "play the part of good wife" (414), she comes perilously close to losing her integrity – something which she feels is still hers. She engages in guile and almost in deceit as she complies with her husband's wish that she arrange a marriage agreement between Lord Warburton and her stepdaughter,

Pansy. She says all the right words and goes through all the right motions, but she ultimately succeeds in her true goal of warding off Warburton's proposal in the interests of Pansy's happiness. She avoids conflict by equivocation, but, according to Gilligan, this ploy causes confusion to arise "about the locus of responsibility and truth" (164).

At this point in the novel a series of events occurs which forces Isabel to face her moral responsibilities. This crisis could provide her with an opportunity to progress beyond the adolescent stage of development. She could re-emerge, resurrect her "forgotten self," and again voice her own perceptions and needs. Gilligan describes this transition as facing the opposition between selflessness and responsibility to oneself. To continue to develop psychologically and morally, the individual must sort out the conflict between responsibility to others and responsibility to self.

This apparent turning point occurs when the conspiracy of silence surrounding Isabel is broken, and she discovers that her life of silence and self-effacement rests upon secrets and deceit. She learns that her husband and Madame Merle had been lovers, that Pansy is Madame Merle's daughter, that it was through Madame Merle's machinations that she married Osmond, and that it was through Ralph's machinations that she inherited her fortune. Armed with these truths, she is faced with choices. Her first choice is between defying her husband and travelling to Ralph's deathbed or staying in Rome, thereby acquiescing to her husband's wishes and her sense of loyalty to her marriage vows. Whatever decision she makes will hurt someone – herself, Ralph, her husband, or Pansy. She can no longer rely on being "silent" or "good" to resolve this dilemma. Her decision to go to Ralph seems a step toward valuing herself and her own needs. Recognizing at last that the marriage was a sham from the beginning, Isabel reasserts her independence and freedom – speaks in her own voice – and does what she wants to do: "All purpose, all intention, was suspended; all desire too, save the single desire to reach her much-embracing refuge" (506).

Back at Gardencourt, Isabel finds more silence: "The house was perfectly still – with a stillness that Isabel remembered" (568). She sits by Ralph's bed for three days before he speaks: "He recognised her and at moments seemed to wish to speak; but he found no voice" (574). As she waits, she fears that she will hear from her husband: "But he remained silent" (574). When Ralph finally begins to speak, so does Isabel. She blurts out her knowledge of his largesse. She admits that her marriage has been difficult. She acknowledges that Osborne married her for her money. She finds great relief in finally expressing her

repressed emotions, "for nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish – the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together. . . . She wished to say everything; she was afraid he might die before she had done so" (576). Isabel appears to be breaking free of her constraints and moving forward. But even in the midst of this catharsis, there is a hint that it may be merely an aberration: When Ralph asks if she's going back to Osborne, Isabel responds, "I don't know – I can't tell" (577). When Ralph invites her to stay:

"I should like to stay – as long as seems right."
 "As seems right – as seems right?" He repeated her words. "Yes, you think a great deal about that."
 "Of course one must." (577)

After Ralph's death, Isabel stays on at Gardencourt unable to make the choice that will allow her to emerge from her state of arrested development: "She lived from day to day, postponing, closing her eyes, trying not to think. She knew she must decide, but she decided nothing; her coming itself had not been a decision. On that occasion she had simply started" (580-81). Finally, Caspar Goodwood confronts Isabel and compels her to make a choice. She learns that she is capable of responding to his passion: "His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed" (590). Her decision occurs almost simultaneously with the kiss, although we do not know yet what the decision is: "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path" (591).

And that very straight path leads her straight back to Rome and the repression of her marriage. Isabel fails to take the final step to maturity described by Gilligan. Faced with a world that "in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea" (590), Isabel retreats to the safe harbor of form and responsibility to others. Gilligan describes this impasse of development in women: ". . . caught in the opposition between selfishness and responsibility. . . . they can see no way of exercising control without risking an assertion that seems selfish and hence morally dangerous" (143). Isabel ignores her responsibility to herself. She ignores the fact that, in doing justice to her marriage, she "threatens to do lasting injustice to herself" (Weisenfarth 20). She fails to listen to her friend, Henrietta Stackpole, who warns her to leave Osmond "before your character gets spoiled" (501). What is more, she finds no validity in her own voice. When she recognizes that "the confusion, the noise of water, all the rest of it, were in her own swimming head" (590), she begs

Goodwood to go away. She seeks the "very straight path" that will absolve her of having to take action and make moral decisions. By renouncing herself and obeying the rules rather than taking control of her own life, Isabel seeks to regain a kind of innocence, a retreat to childhood.

Although written over one hundred years ago, *The Portrait of a Lady* can be seen as a showcase of a problem of psychological development within society today. The story illuminates recently recognized questions surrounding the psychological development of women. Sangari refers to "the renewability of Jamesian value structures and the vocabulary he constructs for individual self-consciousness, in different ways and in different historical contexts" (734). She further states that "some current poststructuralist defenders of his [James'] *donnee* are now entranced by the infinite possibility for abeyance of meaning that his fiction seems to offer" (734). That these possibilities exist is pointedly illustrated in the variety of interpretations of Isabel Archer supported by the novel. They make the ambiguity of the ending not a weakness, but a strength.

Henry D. Herring, in his essay "Constructivist Interpretation," points out in a compelling way the interrelationships between literature and cognitive concepts. He sees that

literature serves a valuable cognitive/constructivist purpose rather than serving as merely a comfort or a pleasing aesthetic artifact. . . . Literature as knowledge or as a mode of acquiring valid knowledge about the world functions in two ways from a constructivist perspective: (1) the literary work provides an imaginative working out of the genuine complexity of belief sets about the world, and (2) the literary work corresponds to the human act of constructing experience. (233)

I found that *The Portrait of a Lady* provided an imaginative working out of the failure of Isabel Archer to achieve psychological maturity, and I found that it helped me to understand better Carol Gilligan's study of the psychological and moral development of women.

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