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Isabel Archer's Romantic Identity Quest: Ruin and Realization

by Alan Lange

I approach *The Portrait of a Lady* with a decidedly romantic and masculine bias, empathizing with Isabel's aesthetic quest while realizing the futility of it, at least in her circumstances. The Romantic Identity Quest, defined by writers like William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson and which has shaped much of Western culture, is based on a male model of personal development. While the quest may appeal to women, its results fulfill strictly masculine expectations of detachment from the Mother figure. Isabel Archer's quest exemplifies the feminine equivalent of the male's traditional romantic trek, but for Isabel there is no sense of identity or awareness waiting at the end of her search. Instead, her journey traces the consequences of rejecting the traditional feminine development based upon relationships and attachment. The question to be considered is not whether Isabel made the wrong choice in marrying Osmond, but whether she doomed herself to a life of misery even before that by selecting a goal that seems contrary to feminine psychological and emotional needs.

Typically the Romantic Identity Quest demands the separation of self from society as the seeker is drawn to some distant point where he communes with Nature or perceives Truth or conquers adversity. The individual aligns his spirit with the cosmos, bringing his soul in harmony with the eternal and infinite. Significantly, the seeker, upon discovering these principles, finds his identity conferred on him; it is not an inevitable evolution of his personality. Thus assured of his new self, he rejoins the rest of humanity to lead the examined and rarefied life. By searching without, he finds his identity within. Henry David Thoreau tested his principles of the simple life by living alone on Walden pond, and upon discovering his identity, returned to the city of Concord, strengthened by what he had learned. The same holds true for Walt Whitman, who left his home in New York to seek his identity in New Orleans. After three months there, Whitman returned with a new sense of identity, that of the prolific and sensual poet. If males traditionally or biologically find their sense of meaning in principles

and abstractions, as Carol Gilligan's study suggests, then the Romantic Identity Quest satisfies the masculine longing to discover universal truths that transcend the historical moment.

Such a theory is based on age-old observations of psychological differences between the sexes. To quote Gilligan:

For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. (8)

Following this contention further, it becomes apparent that "for men, identity precedes intimacy" but for women "intimacy goes along with identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationships with others" (Gilligan 12).

In defining her identity, Isabel Archer rejects intimacy, preferring instead, like the male, to separate herself from the familiar surroundings of her New York home and set out for the unfamiliar – in her case the complex world of European culture.

Before undertaking her quest, Isabel presents herself as a restless personality, an unusual sort not bound by conventional mores. She is not the typical timid maiden awaiting a proposal of marriage, a husband, a home, children, and domestic bliss. From the outset of the novel, Isabel's independent, almost aloof, nature becomes evident; for her, marriage is abhorrent and confining. Admiring Henrietta Stackpole because she "was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (51), Isabel disdains even thinking about marriage, believing "that a woman ought to be able to live to herself . . . and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex" (52). Freed from marital considerations, Isabel remains unattached and ready to begin, like some transcendental quester, "planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (52).

Isabel abandons America for Europe, trusting that there she will realize the fruition of her cultural quest in the timeless masterpieces of the Old World. America, apparently, lacks the rich heritage necessary for aesthetic revelation and identity. The oppressive industrialism, the

shrinking but primitive frontier, the ever-creeping corruption of political parties – this decadent milieu did not seem conducive to the Romantic Identity Quest. Firmly convinced that art will provide the illumination she craves, Isabel resolves to better herself by contact with European Culture, especially that inspired by the Renaissance. Perhaps on a deeper level, Isabel resolves the symbolic importance of Italy and wishes to experience her own rebirth in the country where da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Correggio produced their highest achievements.

Having left America and England, Isabel gladly journeys across France to Florence, where she first encounters Gilbert Osmond in person. Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett's friend and Isabel's ideal, has painted Osmond in vivid strokes, tantalizing Isabel with remarks that he would be brilliant for her, "a person not to miss." Thus primed, she finds the embodiment of her ideal partner in Osmond, who is depicted as "an original without being an eccentric":

He was certainly fastidious and critical; he was probably irritable. His sensibility had governed him – possibly governed him too much; it made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything – his taste alone perhaps, as a sick man consciously incurable consults at last only his lawyer: that was what made him so different from every one else. Ralph had something of this quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr. Osmond it was the keynote, and everything was in harmony with it. (260)

With a piercing beam, Osmond begins to shine his radiance into Isabel's soul. That certain light which radiates from Osmond is his aura of aesthetic perfection; he is the personification of the completed identity quest. Earlier Isabel had contemplated the vaguest possibility of marriage: "Deep in her soul – it was the deepest thing there – lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely" (52). Joining her life to Osmond is the consummation of the Identity Quest. The match has the appearance of fitting together like a puzzle: "Osmond had the attachment of old acquaintance and Isabel the stimulus of new, which seemed to assure her a future at a high level of consciousness of the beautiful" (351). Isabel perceives life in majestic dimensions: "Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a

sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment" (430). Flippantly disregarding nearly everyone's admonitions, Isabel marries Osmond.

Regrettably for Isabel, her perception of life does not coincide with Osmond's. Her sacred identity quest has been desecrated by a man posing as a priest of good taste and breeding. In seeking the world without, she uncovers the illusion within her own heart and the deception beneath her husband's smooth facade. It is characteristic of Isabel to put on a good front, attempting to lighten her troubles by an almost magical reversal:

She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours. (347)

Isabel's aesthetic quest to define her identity leads to an ill-suited marriage with a pretentious and cold hearted dilettante. Trapped in a marriage with a man who seems to despise her because she has a mind of her own (431), Isabel becomes a changed person, no longer curious, prone to exaggeration and indifferent to arguments concerning truth. "The free, keen girl had become quite another person" (392).

When Isabel decides to visit England to be at her dying cousin Ralph's side, the reluctant truce between Osmond and Isabel escalates into angry conflict. There had always been resentment and bitterness between Ralph and Osmond, but Isabel's decision to see Ralph constitutes a declaration of war. Isabel is given this ultimatum: "If you leave Rome to-day it will be a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated, opposition" (535). Choosing to defy her husband's vehement objection, Isabel visits Ralph; on his deathbed she and Ralph declare their love for each other.

After Ralph's funeral, Isabel is confronted by Goodwood, who reiterates his love for her. Telling her that she is "the most unhappy of women" and that her "husband's the deadliest of fiends," Goodwood offers Isabel his support, proposing that she run away with him. Weary of words, Goodwood embraces her: "His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed" (590). The lightning image is overpowering in its suggestion; it is reminiscent of that earlier "certain light" Isabel hoped to see when considering the possibilities of love. Here, that "certain light" has intensified to the magnitude of a lightning bolt. Overcome by such a startling revelation, Isabel flees, needing time to ponder the sudden image wrought by this osculatory

luminescence. From this moment on, Isabel is a different woman. Henrietta implies as much when she consoles Goodwood by saying, "Just you wait." Her words suggest a change in Isabel, that the new Isabel will, in time, return to Goodwood.

The ending is rich in possibilities. Edward Wagenknecht agrees that the ending is "open," noting that "we cannot be quite sure that Isabel returns to Osmond to stay" (91). Elizabeth Sabiston, in noting Isabel's transformation, agrees that by visiting Ralph on his deathbed, "her motive is not romantic idealism, but rather deep feeling, love and compassion for Ralph" (136). After Goodwood's kiss and her return to Osmond, Isabel is "spiritually free," free of Osmond, her past, and her enslavement to the aesthetic quest. Sabiston concludes that "whatever our uncertainties at the ending," Isabel is the "enigmatical and complex architect of her own fate" (137-38). Austin Wright excuses Isabel's tragic mistakes as errors of judgment, not of morality. In delineating her moral discovery, he offers this statement concerning Isabel's growth: "Now she learns to distinguish between art, taste, and manners, on the one hand, and morality and humanity on the other. When they clash, she sacrifices the artistic to the moral" (203). In other words, Isabel begins to realize that her aesthetic identity has stifled her human potential as an authentic person capable of love and self actualization. Put in contemporary terms, Isabel has discerned that "the elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle" (Gilligan 23).

The ambiguous ending of the novel, when interpreted in its romantic context, can only shed a hopeful ray on Isabel's conversion; rather than seeking art, she has now discovered life and love. As in the Gilligan model, Isabel finds her identity in intimacy, not separation. In attempting to find her identity, Isabel has traveled from "the world without to the world within," learning the ironic truth that her real self had been deceived by a Romantic Identity Quest that offered art as an imitation of life; her authentic self lay within herself all the time.

That "very straight path" leads the way to her new and integrated identity, that of a woman freed of her past suffering and liberated from the constraints of a hollow and unsatisfying aesthetic ideal, a woman ruined but now redeemed by her realization that love is the true identity quest.

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