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## Places Where Things Have Happened: The Psychology of Location in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper studies the psychological significance of the different locations in the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* and argues that each place symbolizes a stage in the main character, Isabel's growth. The paper also connects two trajectories: the physical and the psychological, showing their interactions and thematic significance in the context of the novel. In general terms, the three major locations, America, England, and Europe represent childhood, teenage, and maturity, with several nuances that are explained in the paper. The paper concludes with a philosophical observation about the constructed nature of spatial significance in literary works and in life in general, arguing how the meaning we give to places, on both the individual and collective levels, is always subjective.*

**Keywords:** Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 19<sup>th</sup> century diction, psychology in fiction

### **1. Introduction**

One main feature of *The Portrait* is the wide geographical spectrum. Besides America, almost all the major capitals of Europe appear in the novel and serve as stations in Isabel's journey. This is an important aspect of the international theme that James employs in *The Portrait*, in addition to many other works. James's expatriate experience has a lot to do with his thematic tendencies. As an American-born who acquired British citizenship, he was sensitive to the significance of geography and physical travel and how they influence one's psychological and moral character. Besides, James was implicated in the "cultural wars" between the American new ideal and the European tradition, and he never failed to address this topic in his works, including *The Portrait*. This explains why he intertwines the novel's settings with its themes. Moving from one place to another is not just a physical movement but also signifies a shift in ideals in terms of the cultural environment and personal transformation in terms of the personal experience of the character(s).

This applies to the majority of characters in the novel, most of whom are American expatriates. Thus, this correspondence between the physical and the psychological is crucial to their characterization in the novel. The experience of Isabel takes centrality in this respect because, as the protagonist, she is the one character whose travel shows the correspondence between the physical and the psychological in its utmost impact. Isabel moves from America to England to continental Europe, and at each stage, she comes to mirror her surroundings, gradually losing a bit of independence with each move. Niemtzw observes the same in the following note:

*The setting itself again becomes psychological and reveals the terms of Isabel's struggles... Involved in such landscape, with a morality fixed so that the world outside domestic forms is dark while the forms alone are light" (383)*

In a sense, the deeper that Isabel goes into the continent, the more noticeable this trend becomes. In fact, to trace a psychological/moral trajectory that corresponds to and parallels the physical one from Albany to London, London to Florence, and Florence to Rome, with each new city representing a new degree of social and moral environment and a new psychological stage in Isabel's life, Anderson expounds on this trajectory, especially in terms of houses or what he calls "sheltered enclosures":

*The trajectory of *The Portrait of a Lady* is at first geographical, from the American provinces toward older and richer centers of culture, but it is also backward in time to the past that is increasingly dependent upon sheltered enclosures – Gardencourt, Lockleigh, Palazzo Roccanera – from a protection from a future that is partly comic (Henrietta Stackpole) and partly menacing" (149)*

Having shown that, in this paper, I trace the physical trajectory in terms of Isabel's subjective experience to envision the psychological/moral one that goes parallel to the physical one. The dialectic between these two parallel and interconnected trajectories reveals a number of important points, especially in terms of the images of America and Europe. I propose that the symbolic meaning given to America and Europe is not independent of the subjective experience through which it is communicated to us; neither can it be realized outside the system of signification in which it is activated. Hence, my main objective in this paper is to show the constructed nature of these images and, hence, their contingency upon their context. To do so, I discuss select phases in Isabel's physical travel, moving chronologically from America to England to

Continental Europe. This tracing includes, besides discussing Isabel's perceptions of the places, the comparative symbolism of each place. Tracing Isabel's psychological development allows us to relate the psychological trajectory with the physical one. The novel starts at Gardencourt and England and that is in itself significant, but we will move chronologically to better trace the trajectory, starting from Albany.

## 2. Isabel's Locations

We know about Isabel's life in America in flashbacks. One of the main places is the Albany House, which, architecturally and culturally, stands as a counterpart to Gardencourt. It is introduced later on after the introduction of Gardencourt, although chronologically, the Albany House belongs to an earlier phase of Isabel's life. Many significant points are implied in the description of this house:

*It was in an old house at Albany, a large, square, double house, with a notice of sale in the windows of one of the lower apartments. There were two entrances, one of which had long been out of use but had never been removed. They were exactly alike—large white doors with an arched frame and wide side-lights perched upon little 'stoops' of red stone, which descended sidewise to the brick pavement of the street. The two houses together formed a single dwelling, the party-wall having been removed and the rooms placed in communication. These rooms' above-stairs were extremely numerous and were painted all over exactly alike, in a yellowish white which had grown sallow with time. (Chapter III)*

The house is "old," which is very different from saying that it has "a history," like the case with Gardencourt. Here, the diction connotes decay and staleness. Unlike Gardencourt, the Albany House lacks "a name" and any well-defined architectural genre. There is a monotonous pattern in colors "painted all over exactly the same." Besides the architectural significance of this, it has political overtones. Sameness can also mean equality and, thus, democracy. Everyone is equal or "exactly the same," like the color pattern in this house. In this context, I remember earlier British commentators on America like F. Trollope, who provides a sharp critique of democracy, especially in its social manifestation, which results in the absence of any feasible hierarchy. The point here is that the Albany House might well represent American democracy in contrast to the aristocratic nature of Gardencourt; if Gardencourt is Romantic and ornate, the Albany House is realistic and plain. This is also evident in the "language of the marketplace," which "infuses all discussions" of it (Machlan, 399).

To Isabel, the house is associated with two important things: childhood and reading. She had "the happiest memory" there, especially when her grandmother lived there. An important asset to Isabel was the "uncontrolled use" of a library. She chooses "a mysterious apartment," which was traditionally called the office (Chapter III). On the other side of the House, there is the Dutch House, which dates back to the colonial time. This implies that even history in America is the history of the new, and the colonial time is the farthest point this history can reach back. The American house in Albany is not open to the world, either. The way Isabel lives there is to enclose herself to the corner of a room and devote herself to reading books and reverie without opening its door, which would give access to the outside. Albany, and by extension America, in Isabel's memory, is caught in this triangle of childhood, reading/reverie, and seclusion. I will keep this triangle metaphor and apply it to the other phases in her travel, with each of the three parts referring to an aspect of Isabel's life, namely, age, psychology, and social life.

It is natural that Isabel would look outside for gratification of all these childhood fancies and desires. In this light, it is understandable and expected that when her aunt arrives and decides to take Isabel back to Europe with her, Isabel drops the study of German philosophy without a backward glance. Thus, in her views of Europe from the beginning, she operates out of a romantic conception. This conception is activated as soon as she arrives in England, which is the second important locale in Isabel's journey:

*England was a revelation to her, and she found herself as diverted as a child at a pantomime. In her infantine excursions to Europe, she had seen only the Continent and seen it from the nursery window; Paris, not London, was her father's Mecca, and into many of his interests there, his children had naturally not entered. The images of that time, moreover, had grown faint and remote, and the old-world quality in everything that she now saw had all the charm of strangeness. Her uncle's house seemed a picture made real; no refinement of the agreeable was lost upon Isabel; the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world and gratified a need. (Chapter VI)*

This passage exemplifies Isabel's typical reaction to places and reveals the mechanism by which she interacts with her surroundings. Her reaction is always larger than the place itself; it is a world revealed. She immediately associates the place with her childhood excursions with her father. This added an "old world quality" and a "charm of strangeness" to her perception of England. The need that England gratified is the need for Romance, the need for materializing the imaginary world that she has developed and nurtured in her mind through reveries and the fictional world of books. This is evident in the immense way she questions Mr. Touchette about England:

*She questioned him immensely about England, the British constitution, the English character, the state of politics, the manners and customs of the royal family, the peculiarities of the aristocracy, the way of living and thinking of his neighbours, and begged to be enlightened on these points; she usually enquired whether they corresponded with the descriptions in the books. (Chapter VI)*

Here, Isabel reveals a hunger for knowledge, but the problem is that it is blurred by her romanticized image. Thus, she measures 'reality' against the 'descriptions in the books,' and she does not seem willing to accept anything less than her expectations.

In this context, Gardencourt stands as "a picture made real." One of the most significant functions of Gardencourt is that it stands for English life and culture, especially from Isabel's point of view. In fact, she is introduced into this "peculiarly English picture" through Gardencourt:

*The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch. It stood upon a low hill above the river—the river being the Thames at some forty miles from London. A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and the weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers. The house had a name and a history... it had been built under Edward the Sixth, had offered a night's hospitality to the great Elizabeth... had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell's wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged; and how, finally... it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker. (Chapter I)*

Many points are significant in this description. In addition to Gardencourt's being an integral part of an English picture, the historical dimension of the house is stressed by referring to all these figures and events that the house has witnessed in its long history. Thus, it has "a name and a history," and time "had played all sorts of pictorial tricks" but "only to improve and refine it." It was built under Edward the 6th, of early Tudor style, honored by the great Elizabeth's overnight stay, bruised in Cromwell's wars, and remodeled in the 18th century. All these qualities apply to English culture and life by extension. However, they are important for someone like Isabel, a young American woman who has just arrived from the 'new' world with a romanticized vision and "great expectations."

### 3. The Psychology of Place

Psychologically, by traveling to England, Isabel enters a new phase, a phase of gratification and aspiration. Gardencourt shows no decadence but religious aspiration and aestheticism. In England, she receives the unconditional love of Ralph and Mr. Touchette and the romantic endeavors of Warburton. In fact, as Machlan affirms, Isabel's "introduction to Gardencourt is an invitation to romance" (397). Thus, instead of the childhood/reverie/seclusion triangle of America, we now have an early youth/gratification/company triangle in England. The main feature of this psychological reality is that it is constructed by a romantic conception. Isabel has brought her romance to England and Gardencourt, an appointment that we will be returning to later on.

The third significant phase in Isabel's journey is her stay in Italy in general and especially in Rome. Before discussing Isabel's relation to Rome, let's see her relationship with the Palazzo Roccanera, the house where she spends her married life with Osmond. It is apparent at this stage that Isabel has changed a lot and the conditions of her life have transformed. She is married and to someone like Osmond. The Palazzo is referred to as the "house of suffocation," and it ironically materializes Isabel's early wish to live in places "where people have suffered." The Palazzo reflects its master's psychology, Osmond's egotistic, orderly, threatening, and clever nature (Wegelin 78; Laird 648). Besides this, the Palazzo represents the disillusionment of Isabel. An interesting thing to do here is to compare it with Gardencourt. The commonalities between these two places are as important as the differences. Both houses represent history, tradition and aestheticism, but in the Palazzo, these values are emptied out basically because Isabel's conception has changed. She no longer can see the Palazzo in the same light in which she saw Gardencourt. Unlike Gardencourt, which was an opening into life and romance, the Palazzo, in the closure of all this, is the marriage house and, therefore, the house of convention and responsibility and, to a certain degree, confinement.

Rome is the geographical context in which those symbolic aspects of the palazzo are activated. Isabel's relation to Rome is significant. Of course, the symbolic dimensions of Rome are important. It is the historical heart of Europe and the most ancient city, but it is also the seat of the Catholic Church. In this sense, Rome signifies tradition and rootedness as well as convention and rigidity. Again, we need to say that these are not intrinsic values in the place as such, a point that I will be returning to later on. Isabel's attachment to Rome is not far from these symbolic dimensions:

*She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins, the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places... She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. However, she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered. (Chapter XLIX)*

Isabel does not hate Rome; on the contrary, she develops a strong attachment to it and takes it "into her confidence." Again, she projects her feelings to the place. She identifies with the ruins and sees them in relation to "the ruins of her happiness." Isabel is "tenderly acquainted with Rome." Unlike England, which intensified her passion, Rome moderates it. Isabel needs this now as she has passed into maturity, which entails moderation of passion. It is also interesting to notice how Rome also signifies steadfastness, standing upright against the test of time. Rome is, in short, the place "where people had suffered." Rome means going further into Europe and the more Isabel does this, the more she comes closer to decadence, suffering, and convention. She also achieves initiation at this stage, which means accepting suffering as part of life and viewing life more realistically. If we want to come up with a third parallel triangle for this phase, it would be maturity/disillusionment/marriage.

### 4. Conclusion

Although the former discussion is, in a sense, eclectic, we can still use it as a basis for a number of conclusions regarding the dialectic between the physical and the psychological in the novel. In what follows, I would like to see some of

the implications of the former discussion in terms of the image and symbolic significance of America and Europe. The first observation in this regard is England's place in the physical/psychological trajectory. Geographically and physically, England is part of Europe. However, psychologically and morally, in the context of the novel, it is set apart and given a separate, independent place, not only in Europe but also in America. The middle position given to England is the first physical; for Isabel, it is the station between America and Europe, the entrance into Europe. Not only that, England and Gardencourt and, of course, their inhabitants like Ralph and Warburton provide Isabel with the happiest moments and initiate her independence, not least financially. This is why England and Gardencourt is the place she keeps coming back to and where the novel starts and ends. It is a place of nostalgia and happy memories. This is what Isabel's second arrival at Gardencourt indicates:

*Isabel's arrival at Gardencourt on this second occasion was even quieter than it had been on the first... The house was perfectly still—with a stillness that Isabel remembered ... She left the drawing-room and wandered about—strolled into the library and along the gallery of pictures, where, in the deep silence, her footstep made an echo. Nothing had changed; she recognized everything she had seen years before; it might have been only yesterday she had stood there. She envied the security of valuable 'pieces' that change by no hair's breadth, only grow in value, while their owners lose inch by inch youth, happiness, and beauty, and she became aware that she was walking about as her aunt had done on the day she had come to see her in Albany. She has changed enough since then. (Chapter LIV)*

Isabel is projecting her feelings onto Gardencourt again. Her wandering and strolling around the place is really a journey into the self, after which she discovers how she "was changed enough." It is a journey into an idealized self whose chance of its realization has been wasted. This is why this return journey "initially seems for her to signify personal defeat" (Anderson, 158). This defeat is fully realized by Isabel in Gardencourt because it has come to represent her point of reference in terms of success and happiness.

Going back to the triangle metaphor that I used to describe each phase, let us look at the second one about England and compare it with the other two. In terms of age, we have early youth. This is the middle stage between teenage (in America) and youth and maturity (in Europe). In terms of Isabel's psychological state, we have the gratification of desires and ambitions. This is a positive stage, although it remains, to a great extent, a psychological rather than actual gratification. Again, this is the middle and best stage between reverie and disillusionment. In terms of social life, England is the place where Isabel experiences and finds delightful and loving company. It is also the middle stage between loneliness and confinement. Thus, in the psychological and moral trajectory, the place of England echoes its geographical place between America and continental Europe.

Another important conclusion that has implications for all the former ideas is the constructed nature of the images' significations associated with different places and cultures. In the context of the images of America and Europe in *The Portrait*, there are three pertaining to their construction: Isabel's subjective experience, subject/object dichotomy, and the differential relation among these images. The point of reference for almost all the qualities we tend to assign to the different places is Isabel's experience: how she interacts and produces perceptions of these places. The perceptions associated with the places and, therefore, their moral significance are subjectively constructed and realized through Isabel's experience. America signifies innocence and individuality with reference to Isabel's life and the same applies to other places and their significations. This does not mean that these symbolic significations do not sometimes stand on their own; they do, but my proposition is that this happens on a theoretical level and in the form of generalization. In actual cases, there is always a context.

This leads us to the second factor in the construction of these images. The places/cultures are perceived through a 'subject,' Isabel, and thus, they assume an 'object' position. Wegelin refers to this subject/object factor in the following remark:

*His [James] focus shifts from Europe as the object of the American imagination to this imagination itself, and from the blankness or the illusion which is due to the lack of experience to the knowledge which is the result of experience; from the elimination of the taken notion about Europe, the object, to the acquisition of substance on the part of the American girl, the subject. (70)*

Europe is the object of American imagination in as much as America is the object of European imagination. This 'objectification' ends up moving from "the taken notion" of the place/culture to the acquisition of substance or experience. In this movement towards the subjective experience, the object is eventually eliminated because what remains is the subjective experience, the perception. These remarks are very insightful not only for our present topic but in relation to all stereotypical images that we form about other places and cultures.

Another factor in the construction of these images is that they are based on differentiation, a notion that I borrow from structuralist and poststructuralist theory. America signifies innocence and individuality as opposed to and in differential relation to Europe, which signifies decadence and convention and vice versa. Neither of them can have that signification standing alone. The two can also be said to form a binary opposition: America/Europe or America/England. As Krook affirms, one of the "great themes" in James is "the conflict of the aesthetic and the moral in a highly civilized society," which "received its first treatment in *The Portrait*" (Krook 95-60). With all binary oppositions, the meaning assigned to each part is different from the one assigned to the other. In addition, hierarchy and power are implied in these binaries. The privileged part, whether it is America or Europe, depends on the perspective one is seeing the relation. Another feature of this binary opposition is that it can be deconstructed, either by reversing its hierarchy or questioning its logic, which I tried to do in this paper. I would like to conclude this paper with a relevant quotation from the novel. It is when Ralph while talking about Gardencourt, makes the following insightful remark about:

"It's not a romantic old house," said Ralph. "You'll be disappointed if you count on that. It's a dismally prosaic one; there's no romance here but what you may have brought with you." (Chapter V)

This touches upon many points in the former discussion in terms of the subjective experience and the constructedness of images and perceptions. It is part of our nature to construct images of places and cultures that we get to experience. An important aspect is the elements we tend to bring and add from our dreams and wishes, in short, from our subjective experience, which is the case with Isabel. I think that James makes an insightful remark via Ralph's words, and we should think of this as to the images/significations associated with places like America, England and Europe in the context of fiction.

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