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Travelling Women: The Reconstruction of Self and Gender Roles in *The Portrait of a Lady*

Nicoleta Mariana Iftimie[a]*

* Corresponding author: *Nicoleta Mariana Iftimie, nicoletaiftimie@yahoo.co.uk*

[a] *"Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iaşi, Romania, nicoletaiftimie@yahoo.co.uk*

Abstract

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The Portrait of a Lady, the novel dealing with the passage from innocence to maturity of Isabel Archer, the American young woman dispatched to Europe by her cosmopolitan aunt, presents a good number of feminine characters that display various modes of female social existence and various degrees of adherence to the norms imposed by Victorian England.

In the Victorian Age, gender roles were largely influenced by the *Doctrine of the Two Spheres*, according to which the public or social sphere implying work outside the house, social life, travel, power and independence belonged to the masculine gender, while women were generally restricted to the private sphere, in which they performed the roles of wives and mothers. *The Portrait of a Lady* displays a number of such 'immobile' women, limited to the confines of the narrow private/domestic sphere that assume a static role that was attributed to most middle and upper class women in Victorian society: Edith Keyes, the Misses Molyneux.

The paper will focus on three female characters that accompany Isabel Archer in her travels - Henrietta Stackpole, Mrs. Touchett and Mme Merle - with a view to discuss the way in which they challenge and/or adhere to the patriarchal gender roles imposed by Victorian society in the process of being immersed into other spaces and cultures.

Keywords: Gender roles; identity; private sphere; public sphere; Victorian society.

1. Gender Roles in Victorian England

Gender as a social construct is concerned with the delineation of features which characterise masculinity and femininity. As such, it refers to a set of beliefs and attitudes regarding the specific features of the two genders, as well as their appropriate conduct and specific roles in society.

Victorian England, like other European countries - and to a certain extent, American society as well - was based on the so-called *Doctrine of the two Spheres*, an old common law principle and post-industrial revolution ideology according to which women were restricted to the narrow confines of the domestic, private space, playing the roles of wives and mothers, characterised by submissiveness and an inferior status – that of objects or commodities –, while men were allotted the public/social sphere, associated with independence and mobility. Hence, the dichotomy between the characteristics attributed to a man and a woman: active, independent, dominant, strong, coarse were traditional male characteristics, whereas passive, submissive, weak, and fragile were features generally attributed to the feminine gender. As Showalter points out, "[t]he middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men" (Showalter, 1977: 14). Moreover, these harsh rules of behaviour imposed women to be confined to the restrictive domestic space. Any attempt for woman to enter the public space unaccompanied by a male represented a disgrace and the woman who dared do that was looked down upon and excluded from Society. As Harman (Harman, 1988: 373) notes down, in Victorian England "[p]ublic space is promiscuous space…and entry into it is inevitably compromising." As a result, "the general rule was that any woman in a public place of leisure, and unaccompanied by husband or other suitable male, was a prostitute" (Cunningham, 1980: 130).

James' *Portrait of a Lady* both conforms to the principles of the separate spheres doctrine and departs from it, thus displaying an elusive nature many critics have tried to disentangle. While some authors claim that the novel displays "the dominant male presence" through a paradox: "the predominant presence of female absence throughout the text" (Brown, 1996: 3), others consider that "[w]hat makes the novel unique is James's handling the gender roles. On one hand there are the outstanding female characters challenging the fixed gender roles imposed by the Victorian period, and on the other hand there are still women seen as 'objects'" (Kemaloğlu: 103). Indeed, the women appearing in James' novel could be divided into two main categories, if we are to take into account the mobility-immobility continuum. On the one hand, there are 'immobile' women, restricted to the narrow confines of the domestic sphere, who assume the passive role of "angels in the house" (Showalter: 1977: 14) bestowed upon them by the norms of a patriarchal society - Edith Keyes, the Misses Molyneux. On the other hand, there are the 'mobile' women of the novel - Isabel Archer, Henrietta Stackpole, Lydia Touchett and Mme Merle - who seem to travel even more than the male characters, each of them having her own reasons for doing so: for Isabel travelling is a means of acquiring knowledge and satisfying her curiosity about life; for Henrietta, Isabel's best friend, and a successful journalist, travelling is part of her job description; for Lydia Touchett, Isabel's aunt, travelling is part of her well-planned yearly schedule; for Mme Merle, travelling is a way of existence because she has no real home and as such, she is a kind of itinerant guest. Since public space, movement and travel were

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regarded in the Victorian epoch as attributes of masculinity, the frequent travels of Isabel Archer and of the other three female characters mentioned above may be 'read' as an attempt to enter the masculine public space, be accepted on equal terms with their male counterparts and thus reconstruct or redefine their social identity and gender roles.

This article will focus on three of these female characters - Henrietta Stackpole, Mrs. Touchett and Mme Merle – that accompany Isabel Archer in the travels that are meant to add a finishing touch to her personal identity, with a view to discuss the way in which they challenge and/or adhere to the patriarchal gender roles imposed by Victorian society in the process of being immersed into other spaces and cultures.

2. Henrietta Stackpole: The 'Defeminized' Woman

Henrrietta's conformity and/or challenge to the standard gender roles stipulated by the norms of Victorian society will be analysed along three main dimensions: gender, professional and cultural identity.

Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel's best friend, is the only woman in the novel who has a lucrative profession and assumes the traditional male role of a breadwinner - in her role as a newspaper correspondent for *The Independent*, she can support herself financially and is also able to take care of her widowed sister's three children. Due to her profession, Henrietta enters the social sphere, thus taking over some masculine characteristics and trespassing what was considered to be male territory: she exchanges opinions about the social and political issues of the day, expressing her own ideas (sometimes in a less tactful manner) out loud; in her discussions with male characters she tries to acquire the dominant status; unlike other feminine characters, she can move freely to different locations in America or Europe without being accompanied by a male person. Since Henrietta assumes many features which were attributed in Victorian times to the masculine gender, there are characters in the novel that regard her as "defeminized". This state of affairs "stems not so much from the absence of culturally desirable beauty as from her presence in the world of public, non-philanthropic employment" (Brown, 1996: 34).

Introduced as an object-of-discourse in Chapter 6 – "Henrietta Stackpole had the advantage of an admired ability; she was thoroughly launched into journalism and her letters (…) were universally quoted" (James, 2011: 78) – Isabel's friend appears on the scene only in Chapter 10 and is regarded differently by various characters: thus, while Isabel looks at her as a model and as "a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (James, 2011: 79), male characters echo biased views that stem from the displeasure caused by Henrietta's intrusion on male territory: not only does Henrietta have a job that permits her to be independent financially; her professional role allows and in fact requires her to invade the privacy of other people. Thus, Ralph Touchett expresses stereotypical male feelings with regards to Henrietta (albeit on a lighthearted tone) and calls her a 'monster', even before meeting her: "As a man I'm bound to hate her. She must be a kind of monster." (James, 2011: 115). Later in the book, Gilbert Osmond, Isabel's husband, echoes the same analogy, this time imbued with harsh irony and obvious dislike: "Miss Stackpole, however, is your most wonderful invention. She strikes me as some kind of monster" (James, 2011: 604). In Osmond's view, Henrietta appears

deprived not only of feminine, but also of human qualities. The metonymic use of the steel pen for Henrietta's profession – "You know I never have admitted that she's a woman. Do you know what she reminds me of? Of a new steel pen..." (James, 2011: 604) – symbolises Henrietta's transformation into a monster-woman, endowed with a sum of masculine qualities. Usually associated with masculine sexuality, the 'steel pen' becomes in Henrietta's hands a weapon which permits her to violate the other characters' private space. Even Isabel acknowledges her best friend's intrusion in other people's lives: "My poor Henrietta (…) you've no sense of privacy" (James, 2011:120).

The profession of a journalist, adhered to in Victorian times mostly by men, offers Henrietta the possibility of travelling unaccompanied by a male person, without being considered a fallen woman. Moreover, she can take over the role of travel companion or guardian, generally restricted to the male gender. Isabel, the heroine of the novel, is fully aware of this attribute when she says in a rather haughty manner in a discussion with her cousin Ralph: "With Henrietta surely I may go anywhere: she isn't hampered in that way. She has travelled over the whole American continent and can at least find her way about this minute island" (James, 2011: 168). On hearing about Henrietta's exploits, Ralph gladly gives up his role of travel guardian only to be guarded by Henrietta in a light-hearted and somewhat ironic remark: "let me take advantage of her protection to go up to town as well. I may never have a chance to travel so safely!" (James, 2011: 168). We witness here a shift in roles: Henrietta is to take over the masculine attribute of guardianship, which involves power and dominant status, while Ralph is to become the dependent partner, and thus acquires features specific for the feminine gender. Male power is thus transferred onto Henrietta, while Ralph, by virtue of his illness and non-involvement, takes over the feminine characteristics of feebleness and dependence. This shift in roles and power distribution will become more evident towards the end of the novel, when Henrietta decides to accompany Ralph from Italy to England and take care of him until the very end of his days. Her proposal is readily accepted by Ralph: "I notify you then that I submit. Oh, I submit!" (James, 2011: 613). The verb 'submit' used by Ralph in reply to this proposal, as well as the awareness of "his having abdicated all functions" (James, 2011: 613) when accepting to be accompanied, supervised and taken care of by Henrietta underline the shift of power and his dependant, submissive, feeble state in relation to Isabel's friend. As such, Henrietta trespasses once again male territory, acquiring dominant status and power in relation with a male figure.

Apart from her gender and socio-professional identity, we also need to discuss her national and cultural identity. As an American journal correspondent, she travels a lot both in America and in Europe and interacts with different kinds of people, of various nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. It is worth analysing if and how her immersion in various cultures and encounters with people coming from various parts of the world might produce changes in her cultural identity.

In a discussion with Lydia and Ralph Touchett, shortly after her appearance at Gardencourt, Henrietta identifies herself through her gender and nationality: "I like to be treated as an American lady" (James, 2011: 131). Throughout the novel, Henrietta's national identity is of paramount importance. She is an epitome of Americanism and the features that make up her personal identity – directness, self-reliance, ambition, perseverance, professionalism - converge towards this idea. In Isabel's eyes, Henrietta is the symbol of the American democracy and of the vast American space: "I

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like the great country stretching away beyond the rivers and across the prairies (…) A strong, fresh odour seems to rise from it, and Henrietta – pardon my simile – has something of that odour in her garments" (James, 2011: 127-128). While in Europe, Henrietta makes countless comparisons between America and the old continent and voices stereotypical views, which always point out the superiority of the American way of life.

Henrietta's immersion in the European culture, her travels, as well as her numerous social encounters will perform a change in her beliefs and attitudes: her stereotypical cultural knowledge regarding European civilization and lifestyle is gradually replaced by cultural understanding. Thus, if at first she scornfully calls Ralph a European and rebukes him for giving up his country - "Do you consider it right to give up your country?" (James, 2011: 123) -, at the end of the novel she is willing to leave America and relocate to London after her marriage to Mr. Bantling, an English gentleman. Isabel perceives this change in her friend's avowed principles and looks at it as a transformation in Henrietta's personal identity; while acknowledging the change, however, Henrietta considers it is a result of her new social status, which adds a new dimension to her gender role: that of a wife: "I AM changed; a woman has to change a good deal to marry" (James, 2011: 694).

3. Lydia Touchett: The Absent Mother and Wife

Lydia Touchett, Isabel's aunt, the one responsible for putting the plot in action by relocating her niece to Europe, is a strong-willed, cosmopolitan woman, an unusual mother and wife with a very clear yearly schedule: she spends most of her year in Florence, several months in America, where she takes care of her investments, a part of the year in London, and only a month per year at her husband's residence, Gardencourt. Situated at thousands of miles distance from the stereotype caring, submissive wife image of the epoch, which she flouts in many respects, Lady Touchett has turned a potentially unhappy marriage situation into an acceptable arrangement, by spending most of the year far from Gardencourt, "virtually separated from her husband" (James, 2011: 42). Hence, the nickname 'crazy aunt Lydia' bestowed on her by Isabel's father, which reveals the general feeling that she deviates from the well-established gender roles of the time. Since this 'arrangement' was Lydia Touchett's idea and her husband, Daniel Touchett, confined to a wheelchair, simply had to comply with it, we can discern here a shift in gender roles and distribution of power – the woman is the strong, dominant, active figure, while the husband, due to his health problems, accepts the role of the weak, fragile, passive member of the relationship.

Isabel's aunt also flouts the norms of Victorian society as far as her behaviour as a mother is concerned. Like Henrietta, she is also defeminised, but in a different manner: if Henrietta is defeminised as a result of her profession and her attribute of breadwinner, Lydia Touchett's defeminisation is performed though a denial of her roles of a wife and a mother. Due to her frequent travels abroad, she hardly takes care of her husband and son. There is an interesting shift in gender identities occurring between Mr. and Mrs. Touchett, which is also acknowledged by Ralph, their son. Mr. Daniel Touchett, Ralph's invalid and sedentary father appears to have more maternal qualities than Lydia Touchett, the mother: "His father (…) was the more motherly; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial" (James, 2011: 60). Therefore,

Lydia Touchett's frequent relocations and her partial neglect of family duties as stipulated by the male-dominant culture of the time result in a denial of her role as a mother. In the course of the novel, Mrs. Touchett makes an attempt to 'redeem' herself as a mother, by removing Isabel, her niece, from the narrow, domestic sphere in Albany and taking her to Gardencourt. However, after bringing Isabel to Europe, Mrs. Touchett refuses to play the role of a mother figure for her niece, considering somehow that her mission has been accomplished. When Ralph repeatedly asks his mother what she plans to do with Isabel, she rebukes him: "Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do everything she chooses" (James, 2011: 68). Her reluctance to become a surrogate mother for Isabel will pave the way for Mrs. Merle's taking over of this role.

Although she generally violates the gender roles and conduct rules imposed by the patriarchal society of the time, Mrs. Touchett nevertheless abides by the rules which concern Isabel's behaviour. When Lord Warburton pays them a visit at Gardencourt, Lydia Touchett does not leave the room until Isabel goes to bed because, as she says, "You can't stay alone with the gentlemen. You're not – you're not at your blest Albany, my dear" (James, 2011: 95-96).

4. Serena Merle: The 'Perfect' Lady

Serena Merle, a cosmopolitan American expatriate, is another travelling woman that appears in James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. This article will focus on the various facets of her national and gender identity.

Isabel first meets her in a suggestive *tableau* at Gardencourt – Mme Merle is alone in the saloon playing the piano – and tries to guess the nationality of the enigmatic guest, but she makes the wrong assumption, thinking that the visitor might be French. The auctorial voice adds to the difficulty of guessing who this lady might be "Isabel had taken her at first, as we have seen, for a Frenchwoman; but extended observation might have ranked her as German – a German of high degree, perhaps an Austrian, a baroness, a countess, a princess" (James, 2011: 226). Due to the many places she has visited as a result of her frequent relocations, Mme Merle has become a cosmopolitan expatriate whose national identity is difficult to guess.

She is endowed with many qualities that make her the embodiment of the 'perfect' lady, the 'Angel in the House' the women of the time were urged to become. She never gets bored, as she occupies her time doing all kinds of activities that are mostly circumscribed to the domestic sphere: "When Mme Merle was neither writing, nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery…" (James, 2011: 245). When not engaged in such activities, she would read, walk, play cards or talk with her friends. Moreover, she is an extremely pleasant and knowledgeable travel companion for Isabel in the course of her travels. She is endowed with so many qualities that, in the end she looks too good to be true. This is in fact what Ralph implies when saying about Mme Merle that "[s]he's too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete, in a word" (James, 2011: 316). Isabel admires Mme Merle a lot for the qualities she displays - "she was charming, sympathetic, intelligent, cultivated…she was rare, superior and preeminent" (James, 2011: 241); for Lydia Touchett, Serena Merle is a good friend and, according

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to her son, Ralph, she is also "the person in the world whom my mother very much admires" (James, 2011: 228). The only character that sees through the masque of Mme Merle's positive face[1] (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and speaks up her mind in a direct, though rather blunt manner in the first part of the novel is Countess Gemini, Gilbert Osmond's sister: "You're capable of anything, you and Osmond (…) together you're dangerous – like some chemical combination (James, 2011: 336).

Serena Merle's gender identity is completed through her three motherhood hypostases: biological, denied and surrogate mother (Brown: 1996). She is Pansy Osmond's biological mother, but, due to social conventions, she cannot disclose this relationship to her own daughter because at the time Pansy was conceived, both she and Gilbert Osmond, Pansy's father, were married to other partners. The identity of the apparent 'perfect' lady is thus reconstructed and redefined by the Victorian melodrama stereotype of the 'woman with a past.'

In order to conceal her past love affair, Mme Merle has to disguise her maternal feelings; she becomes a denied mother and chooses the next best role – that of a family friend – which gives her the possibility to see her daughter whenever she wants without raising suspicions. She is constrained to find a substitute or surrogate well-to-do mother for her own daughter. When Isabel receives a substantial inheritance from Ralph's father, Serena Merle decides that Isabel is the best option for a substitute mother figure. As a result, she starts manipulating both Isabel and her own former lover, Gilbert Osmond into marrying each other. In order to ensure her biological daughter a proper dowry so that she might marry into nobility and improve her social position, Serena Merle 'sells' Isabel, her surrogate daughter into marriage, perpetuating thus the main role of a mother in the Victorian epoch, i.e. that of finding a proper husband for her daughter. As Brown points out, by trying to sell her surrogate and later on her biological daughter into the institution of marriage, she acknowledges that "female survival in the (male)/public/social realm beyond the borders of the (domestic-based) mother-daughter relationship depends on the combination of men, money, and marriage" (Brown, 1996: 48).

It is only in the latter half of the novel that Isabel becomes aware of Mme Merle's real self. When Serena Merle comes to her to find out the reason that brought about the failure of the marriage arrangement between Lord Warburton and Pansy, Isabel realises that the ties between her husband and Mme Merle go far beyond mere friendship. The questions she asks repeatedly "Who are you – what are you? (…) What have you to do with my husband?" (James, 2011: 634) are meant to underline her bitter awareness of the gap between appearance and reality, between her perception of Mme Merle's identity (her positive face) and her real personal identity. The harsh, but direct answer given by her interlocutor – "Everything" (James, 2011: 635) – completes the deconstruction of Madame Merle's fake social identity and the disclosure of her real self. The masque has been ripped off.

5. Conclusion

In James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, the reader meets a complex web of characters that surround Isabel Archer, the heroine of the book. Out of these characters, the article has focused on three female travellers – Henrietta Stackpole, Lydia Touchett, and Serena Merle – who try to break the boundaries

[1] According to Brown and Levinson, 'face' refers to two basic wants of any individual: *positive face* is the need to be approved by the others; *negative face* refers to having one's thoughts and actions unimpeded by others.

that separate women from men, the female private sphere from the male public sphere. The study has delineated the multiple shifts in their gender and cultural identity, with a view to delineate the continuous reconstruction of their private and social self and point out their complexity.

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