

Isabel's Growth and Metamorphosis: The Spatial Narrative in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract

As one of Henry James' best-selling novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* is also considered one of his most successful works. According to "The Third Space" proposed by Edward Suja, Isabel's movements in the novel is not only the background of the article but also influences the characterization of her. The author reveals the conflict between European and American cultures through the depiction of Isabel's choice of marriage, reflecting James' desire to pursue cross-cultural conflict, and the third space in which Isabel is situated also demonstrates her growth from a naive girl to a mature woman, and ultimately realizes her self-identity.

Keywords

The Third Space, Isabel, Culture Conflict.

1. Introduction

The Portrait of a Lady is considered one of Henry James' most successful works. Brownell has claimed that *The Portrait of a Lady* is "the best realistic novel yet published." (Bamberg 661) The book tells the story of Isabel Archer, a young American girl. After the death of father, her aunt takes Isabel to Europe, where she not only wins over several suitors, but also inherits a large sum of money. Unfortunately, she is later caught up in a plot by two American expatriates to marry a hypocrite-- Osmond. It is not until the end of the story that Isabel comes to her senses, and despite the fact that there are still suitors waiting for her, she chooses to face this challenging marriage head on, and in the process, Isabel manages to make the transition from naive young girl to a mature woman and find her self-identity.

In the late 20th century, "The Spatial Turn" begins to appear in the public eye and with the publication of Frank's *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*, the spatial issue is gradually taken seriously by critical theorists and become one of the focuses of narrative theory's attention. With Lefebvre's proposal of "The Third Space", which Suja highly identifies with and uses it as the pavement for presenting his own views, he opens up a new perspective on the critique of spatiality based on geography. Besides, he proposes a trinity of theories on space, society, and history, and constructs a geographic-historical materialism that enriches and develops Marx's historical materialism. In his book *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Suja elaborates on the three types of space in his mind, the first of which refers to "perceived space, directly sensible and open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description"(Edward 66) That is, it's a real physical space. The second space is physical space, which is "the representation of power and ideology, of control and surveillance." (67) The third space transcends the above two, and is another example of "othering". It brings everything together and is "radical openness and teeming imagery". (68) According to "The Third Space" proposed by Edward Suja, Isabel's movements in the novel is not only the background of the article but also influences the characterization of her. The author reveals the conflict between European and American cultures through the depiction of Isabel's choice of marriage, reflecting

James' desire to pursue cross-cultural conflict, and the third space in which Isabel is situated also demonstrates her growth from a naive girl to a mature woman, and ultimately realizes her self-identity.

2. Clashes in Reality

Based on the spatial practice proposed by Lefebvre, Suja puts forward his insights into the first space, arguing that "this materialized, socially produced, empirical space is described as perceived space...it is the material grounding for what I redescribe as Firstspace" (66). The series of places in *The Portrait of a Lady* serves as the map of Isabel's actions. "The place in which an event occurred was in his point of view of equal moment with the event itself; it was part of the action it had a part to play... it needed to be made as definite as anything else." (Miller&James 14)

To begin with, the old house in Albany, which relates closely to Archer's early life and constitutes the token of her personality, is unnamed but occupies a very important position in the first space of the text. This mansion, which belonged to Isabel's grandmother, is tall and large but outdated, "theses rooms, above-stairs, in a yellowish white which had grown fallow with time...with a notice of a sale in the windows of one of the lower apartments"(Henry 54) Because her grandmother loves to entertain guests in early years, the discipline here is not strict, which also cultivated her broad vision and unrestrained character. Here, Isabelle had a mysterious "office room", often used as her reading room, she loved its "pleasant musty smell and mysterious melancholy" (57) Besides, this mansion is a double house. Its symmetrical structure indicates Archer's double-sided personality. For example, there is actually a second exit of the house in this room, but Isabel refuses to look out, thinking it would destroy her theory. In fact Isabel is yearning for the freedom, but she is not able to abandon conventions completely. This is shown by her early education experience. Opposite to her grandmother's double house, there is a primary school for children of both sexes. Isabel has been offered an opportunity of laying the foundation of knowledge there, but she protests against its laws and quits schooling after a single day. Later, when she hears the hum of childish voices repeating the multiplication-tale, she feels indistinguishably the pain of exclusion as well as the elation of freedom. In addition, when she gets married and finds out the truth of her husband's conspiracy, she chooses to return to family rather than escape from it. This choice also explains her consideration on convention to some extent though it is partially due to her mental maturing.

The second one is the Gardencourt, belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Touchett. The author describes it as stately and quaint, "it had been built under Edward VI, 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...remodeled and disfigured in the eighteenth century, it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker." (32) It is still standing after such a long and difficult time, and it represents the long history and ancient traditions of Europe. Initially, Mr. Touchett buy this place only for its value, but later he gradually discovers the beauty of it, which also implies that Americans like him, who come to Europe for many years, identify with European culture. Furthermore, the historical elements are much of the taste of Archer, which helps her to show her real self in this "Garden of Eden". Isabel soon becomes the focus of attention there. Mr. Touchett takes great patience to answer any questions Isabel may have, and her cousin takes immense care of her, which seems to be a bright beginning of the European journey. But on the other hand, the old historical traditions also mean endless dogma. For example, when Isabel is chatting late at night in the drawing room with her cousin Ralph and Lord Warburton, Mrs. Touchett tells her that this is very inappropriate for a young girl. In Great Britain of that age, the unmarried young women are not supposed to stay with men at late night, and they are under control of their fathers or brothers, deprived of freedom. Archer does not

go back to her room soon as her aunt's instruction. She says she is glad to know the conventional rituals from her aunt. But the purpose of knowing is for making choice. That is to say, to obey it or defy it, she would like to make her own decision. This small incident also paves the way for Isabel to choose to leave the Gardencourt.

Next residence is the Palazzo Roccanera after Isabel's marriage— a palace by Roman measure. Osmond once told Isabel: "one should make one's life a piece of art." (350) So after their marriage, they choose the Palazzo Roccanera, which is luxurious and magnificent, like a real palace, perfectly fits Osmond's expectations for his life, but "the interviewer was perhaps disappointed" (389) Patsy's suitor Ralph also considers it as a dungeon, and every time he comes here with only images of young girls being confined here and eventually forced into evil marriages. He thinks it is a bad omen that a young girl who would become his wife is living here, and it is true that his humble status and wealth do not find favor with Osmond, who prefers the rich and powerful Lord Warburton to him. This incident also pushes Isabel to recognize the reality, in fact, from the time she met Osmond to the marriage is a conspiracy, she passively accepts it all, so she chose to rebel against her husband's order this time.

The novel also has a reference to the private house of Isabel's aunt, located in Italy, called Palazzo Crescentini. It is mentioned by Mrs. Touchett during her first meeting with Isabel, "You should go to Florence if you like houses in which things have happened - especially deaths. I live in an old palace in which three people have been murdered; three that were known and I don't know how many more besides." (61) which arouses Isabel's intense curiosity. James describe a dreamy house in the text, "though its green shutters were partly drawn the bright air of the garden had come in through a broad interstice and filled the room with warmth and perfume." (434) Such a beautiful appearance make Isabel forget its tragic essence, and it is here that she meet Osmond and finally step into tragedy.

The last one is Osmond's home at the top of one of Florence's hills. The author depicts this place in great detail, "The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure, with the far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves and which..." (316) The whole description is full of originality, but the author also implies that "it was the mask, not the face of the house" (316) which means Osmond is hiding something, and the location of the house also shows his arrogant. Later on, it is also mentioned that Osmond likes to decorate his mansion with small objects that can be found everywhere in an attempt to portray himself as a drunkard of art, all of which suggests that he is a hypocrite.

The Portrait of a Lady is basically about Isabel's travelling experience, but it almost becomes a story about Isabel's search for a house that suits her and belongs to her. From the perspective of modern women's theory of cultural space, the binary thinking of gender in society directly leads to the hierarchical configuration of social space, for example, society and space are divided into two, with public, productive and dominant space belonging to men who enjoy social privileges, and private, reproductive and subordinate space belonging to women who are in a position of power disadvantage. According to this view, because the house, which should be the private space of women. However, the space of the house is naturally closed and small compared to the public space, which indicates that women's living space is restricted. Isabel's journey is precisely characterized by the house, which not only confirms the close relationship between the house and women, but also implies that women at that time could hardly escape from the suppression of their existence. At the end of the novel, James sends Isabel back to Rome without telling her to enter any house again, which symbolizes that women would eventually break through the limitations of the house and move to a wider public space. Moreover, according to James, the fundamental value of the novel is to show life as it is, but "human nature is boundless, and the real also takes countless forms" (James 15). Therefore, this open ending design is not only a release of women's long-suppressed life instincts, but also a

release of the infinite possibilities of life for human beings, who seem to be able to extend their lives indefinitely.

3. Confusions in development

Suja considers the purest second space entirely ideational, “made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies.” (Edward 79) In addition to this, Suja refers to second-space epistemology as a modernist epistemology, arguing that it emerges based on a refutation of the dominant first space, using idealism against materialism and subjectivity against objectivity, and that second-space epistemology is actually a spiritual construction. Aside from the places that Isabel visits, it is the changes in her inner world during this journey that the author most wishes to convey, as James points out in his preface, “place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness...which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself...” (22) The focus of *The Portrait of a Lady* is not on recounting a series of events and representing Isabel’s movements, but rather on revealing what Isabel thinks and feels about the world she touches visually, including her perception of herself and those around her. Therefore, this flow of consciousness is not a passive reflection of real life, but is full of Isabel’s subjective thinking. By looking at the contents of this space, we witness Isabel’s development.

In America, her father’s and grandmother’s upbringing style have raised Isabel to be loose and casual, but it doesn’t mean she fears hardship. When the French nanny who takes care of the sisters runs off with a Russian aristocrat about three months after her father’s death, she is never alarmed or frightened, but regarding it as an important part of her upbringing. On top of that, due to her father’s belief in letting children see more of the world, Isabel has already crossed the Atlantic three times before she was fourteen. Although each stay is short, it keeps Isabel’s curiosity and dissatisfaction skyrocketing. As a result, when she grows up, Isabel has a strong desire to learn, but also loves to observe and think, enjoy experiencing life, and has a strong sense of independence. All in all, Isabel is still a young girl during this period, but the reader has already grasped her inner nature. These qualities will inform Isabel’s behaviour at different times in her life.

After arriving in Europe, Isabel has a great deal of autonomy and begins to pursue the ideal life she has in mind. During this time, she meets her gentle and kind cousin Ralph, the rich and powerful Lord Warburton, the malicious Madame Merle and Osmond. Based on Isabel’s own unquenchable thirst for freedom, she rejects the two suitors who might bring her a sense of constraint: the first one, Goodwood, a male chauvinist with a tough appearance, whose forceful attitude in courtship makes Isabel shy away; the other one, Lord Warburton, a man of grace and power, would have been a good candidate for marriage, but the time-honored dogma of the European aristocracy behind him frightens Isabel, so she rejects his proposal. In the end, Isabel chooses a poor artist, Osmond, which is unexpected but makes sense. Isabel hates anything that might stress her out, and Osmond is lack of money and power, and even need to rely on her fortune, making Isabel feel that she could maintain maximum freedom. In addition, Osmond’s melancholic artist’s aura greatly attracts Isabel, the girl who is full of desire for European culture is unable to resist a hypocrite with ulterior motives, and with Madame Merle’s help, Isabel completely fell under the infinite charm of Osmond’s commitment and dreams.

Isabel and Osmond after a few years of married life before she comes to recognize life for what it is. In his preface, James states that in artistic expression, he expects to produce the greatest effect with the least amount of ink. Isabel’s conscious activity during the period of her awakening is the best expression of this creative principle.

Like the formation of story dynamics in the material world, there is a “catalyst” event for the transformation of Isabel’s understanding in the psychological world, only this event was not

trivial. It left an indelible imprint on the depths of Isabel's consciousness, which contributes to the expansion and deepening of her awareness. The key event is the image of Osmond and Madame Merle alone together without ceremony, and it illuminates Isabel's heart like a flash of lightning. Their position in relation to each other, face-to-face, making her feel as if she has discovered something. This moment triggered Isabel's profound reflection on married life. Isabel does not move and no one interrupts her, but in this static scene, the reader sees her thoughts in the space of her consciousness. Once again, James employs the technique of montage to show the changes in the heroine's consciousness. Past, present, and future coexist in the same space, and Isabel's consciousness jumps back and forth so that the reader is presented with fragments of time and space. Since these fragments are not in an organic connection, and since the first consciousness is quickly drowned out by the one that comes after it, the reader is unable to see the full picture of what is going on. Isabel's life in the two years after her marriage is a blank in the text, but her inner activities show the reader this uncharted territory. Though it is only an overview, the reader can get the essence of Isabel's life from it and make a clear summary of her realization at this time: Their marriage isn't the happy high she'd aspired to be. She admits that she only see half of her husband's inner nature before, and says that underneath all of his disguises he hides a serpent. In fact, Osmond's transcendence is only a facade "In reality, he has never been a man indifferent to fame and position he unable to live without it" (578)

As the clock strikes four times, the reader exits Isabel's consciousness and returns to the objective world of the text. At the end of the chapter, however, Isabel's consciousness is re-framed in the image of her husband and Madame Merle in intimate company. Although this image triggered Isabel's all night of thinking, it does not allow her to realize its meaning. Therefore, as a puzzle to Isabel, it must lead her to further psychological exploration. When she learns that Patsy will not be able to marry Lord Warburton, Madame Merle's reaction awakens Isabel from a long nightmare. Her disappointment is so great that it amazes Isabel, thus making her realize that: "this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny...She was nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident she had so long supposed." (688) Finally, she comes to the conclusion that Madame Merle and Osmond are closely related. Thus, through the inner analysis and examination of the external reality, Isabel finally sees the truth under the masks of Osmond and Madame Merle, and also makes her realize the complexity of human nature and the dark side of life. Although Isabel feels pain after awakening, she also gains a kind of intellectual improvement and life expansion. In the face of unforgiving reality, Isabelle continues to use consciousness to overcome the despair and suffering of life, "life would still be a task she couldn't donate to for a long time to come... She would one day be happy again" (554) This belief is undoubtedly a symbol of Isabel's rise to power, and with her new experience, Isabel will be able to take control of a new situation in her life through her new choices. Thus, in front of Isabel's consciousness, the reader witnesses the whole process of her transition from ignorance to maturity.

4. Transcendence under fusion

Suja writes in his book: "The Thirdspace epistemologies can now be briefly re-described as arising from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstitution of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality, another example of what I have called thirthing-as-Othering." (81). He points out that the main purpose of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* is spatialization, which has far-reaching significance. Therefore, the epistemology of the third space proposed by him also remains open forever. Hao Juan, a Chinese scholar, points out that what Suja expects is the

pluralism of critical discourse brought about by the deeper integration of real space and imaginary space.

Based on the line of Isabel's actions, the transformation of regional space also brings cultural conflicts and fusion. The background of the story is the middle and late 19th century. After coming to Europe, Isabel is full of curiosity about everything, hoping to enjoy the customs of different places and learn different history and culture. On the other hand, under the influence of Emerson's transcendentalism, Isabel values freedom above all else. Besides, she never thinks bad things about getting along with people. In her mind, the world is so fancy that she falls into the trap of Osmond and Madame Merle so easily.

Isabel's attitude towards several suitors in the novel suggests her views on different cultures, and her final choice to move to Osmond in the United States also reflects her deep desire for cultural integration. First of all, Goodwood's tough style and plain appearance are not up to Isabel's standards, and although he runs a big company, he has little talent, let alone cannot win Isabel's favor, in fact, it also implies that Isabel refuses to accept American culture. Like in the old house, when there is clearly a second door within reach, she never opens it, thinking it would undermine her theory. The second suitor is Lord Warburton, an elegant and charming English gentleman. He enjoys great wealth and power, and could even naturally participate in the public affairs of the state. He seems to have it all, know it all, and be it all. Isabel likes this guy, and she is interested in the Warburtons' family and the English nobility. But she still refuses Warburton's proposal, because the enormous social pressure behind Warburton's identity make her feel stifled, and she does not want to lose her freedom. From the above, it can be seen that Isabel is not satisfied with European culture and American culture respectively. However, she is able to appreciate the elegance of European culture and advocate the freedom and independence of American culture, so she wants to find the best candidate for the combination of the two, but she is too naive, and finally fall into the hands of Osmond, a middle-aged widower who has no career and poor, except for a daughter Patsy. However, he does not threaten Isabel socially or financially, which makes her feel lucky to be able to support him with her dowry, so Isabel loves more the freedom Osmond gives her and the fusion of the two cultures in him.

As the author of this book, James' own experience is also an important factor in Isabel's final choice. Born into a wealthy family of American transcendentalists, he is greatly influenced by Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau. James travels frequently with his family, lives in many European cities as a young man, and does not become a permanent resident of Europe until 1875. During his long life, the status of Europe and the United States changed greatly, from the initial European disdain for the United States to the later American arrogance, this change of identity make the cultural clash between the two countries more obvious, but as time goes on, both sides begin to seek coexistence, and James is one of the active advocates. From his literary works, we can see the characteristics of cultural integration in the new stage of global modernization, and Isabel is one of the most representative characters.

In modern society, cultural exchanges among people from all over the world have become more convenient, and therefore wider and deeper. However, one side of the world raises its own people, and one side of the world creates its own culture. There are inevitably differences in the value judgement systems and cultural psychological structures formed by people living in different regions. So, when different cultures meet, reactions are bound to occur. How do we cope with intercultural communication? The idea of "selective extraction of the best elements and their creative reconstruction", as conveyed by Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady*, remains a relevant reference. It shows that no form of civilization is superior or inferior, but has its own strengths and weaknesses. In the process of cultural exchanges, they should not fight against each other because of their differences, but should explore the best elements of each other's civilizations in the light of their differences and integrate them for their own

purposes in order to broaden and deepen their own cultural life. The relationship between different cultures is thus one of mutual necessity and complementarity, and is continuously improved through mutual constraints and mutual reinforcement of different cultures, which is an important source of inspiration for the search for a harmonious path of development in the world of the future.

5. Conclusion

Isabel has spent her life actively exploring and trying to find her own identity, and although the process is tortuous and difficult, she always maintains a positive heart. The author deliberately weakens the sense of time by ambiguous time markers and time spans, and does not provide exact ages or dates, in order to highlight Isabel's inner feelings. We can be aware of her growth in knowledge and experience, her maturity in dealing with the cultural conflict between Europe and the United States, the contradiction between the outside world and her inner desire, and her success in self-identification, which also reflects James' deep thinking on these issues. In the face of the current cultural and national conflicts, we may as well learn from James' point of view, adhere to the all-inclusive, harmony without difference.

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