



# On Isabel Archer's Growth in *The Portrait of a Lady* from the Perspective of European and American Cultural Integration

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**Abstract:** Henry James' novels focus on the theme of European and American culture. His ideal American culture is the integration of the cultural advantages of the two countries. This paper aims to show James' ideal culture and women's growth in *The Portrait of a Lady* by analyzing his criticism of Transcendentalism and analyzing Isabel Archer's psychological activities with the method of psychological realism. Isabel Archer's desire for European culture at the beginning reflects her willingness to accept European culture, which makes her better absorb European culture. Her choice of marriage reflects that she gradually recognizes and accepts the reality, and finds a husband who embodies the integration of European and American culture. She finally understands the significance of responsibility and morality and returns to marriage, which reflects Henry James' ideal of integrating two cultures.

**Keywords:** Isabel Archer, *The Portrait of a Lady*, cultural integration, growth

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## Introduction

When depicting the growth of Isabel, James shows the readers his idea of cultural integration. During the 19th century, Materialism pervaded in America, leading to the shallow social culture. James had a keen insight into social situation, and integrated it into his own writing. James is the critical successor of Transcendentalism and the pioneer of psychological realism. Transcendentalism pursues individual value and believes that individuals can change their own destiny by improving themselves. Meanwhile, it also advocates preventing the interference of all foreign cultures, and maintaining the independence of their own culture. James not only views, absorbs and discards Transcendentalism dialectically, but also has a deeper understanding of transcendentalism. Isabel embodies the advantages of Transcendentalism, but she also shows the blind arrogance of transcendentalism. Through her growth, James criticizes optimism in individualism and puts forward that we should experience the reality and learn from the relatively mature cultural achievements of Europe to develop American national culture. Meanwhile, as a representative of psychological realism, James focuses on the self-consciousness of the characters, focuses on the inner world, and rarely describes the behavior of the characters. Through this description, James shows his criticism of Transcendentalism and his pursuit of the ideal of European and American cultural integration.

Scholars abroad have carried out abundant research on the international themes and creative techniques of James. Lee (1978) analyzes the evolution of international themes in James' novels and studies the cross-cultural factors behind the protagonists of James' international theme novels. Cameron (1989) assumes that James is an excellent cultural researcher. Domestic researchers have also made important achievements in his attitude towards Transcendentalism and the study of Isabel's growth. Dai (2008) concludes that James not only absorbed the essence of Transcendentalism but also points out its shortcomings. Most scholars analyzed James' international themes or deeply analyzed the fate and development of the characters in his works. This paper chooses to study Isabel's mature road from the perspective of European and American cultural integration.

## 1. Isabel Archer's naïve character and her acceptance of European culture

Having grown up in the United States but with the experience of her father taking her on trips abroad as a child, Isabel has expectations and aspirations for Europe. "It covers the widest masses, embodies the largest society of language, and embodies the largest traditional society" (James, 2001). The elegance and shock of European culture deeply attracted her. Meanwhile, she has always maintained her self-independence and freedom when she is in Europe, which is the embodiment of transcendentalism that human transcendence mainly refers to making the mind independent of social civilization. Her own personality also laid the foundation for her integration into Europe and the absorption of European culture.

Dai (2008) views that People do not grow up alone in isolation. In some cases, the characters become indispensable factors that facilitate the growth of the protagonist. The characters that leave impacts on Isabel's attitude towards the European world is the Marle and Ralph, who serves as her guide on the path of her upbringing. He has been a patient listener

and guide to the frustrations on her path to European and American cultural integration. His life experiences and educational background make him the perfect embodiment of the fusion of European and American cultures. He fully understood Isabel's contradictions and gave her positive advice when she pursued the elegant European culture and insisted on the independent American culture. Isabelle understands that her cousin is a model of European-American cultural integration, and she will keep her sanity with his expectations and continue to walk the path of European-American cultural integration. Marle is also the embodiment of the Europeanized American ideal and the embodiment of the upper class. Abandoning the vulgarity and materialism of American culture, she retained her freedom and independence and combined them with the elegance of European culture. Her elegance and artistic flair inspired Isabel to embrace the old European culture.

## **2. The change of Isabel's marriage view**

### **2.1 The significance of Isabel's self-consciousness**

Xing (2017) points out American history is heavily influenced by Puritanism, which requires Americans to be God's chosen people because they simply believe they have a special destiny and a unique sense of superiority. The success of liberal democracy led Americans to pursue the tradition of independent spirit. Thus, James's description of the heroine Isabel shows the characteristics of Americans: innocence, independent personality, and an innate sense of self. Isabel is almost paranoid that all concrete social forms are restrictions on freedom and personality. "But I do not want to marry. I shall probably never marry and it is no kindness to a woman to urge her to persuade her against her will." (James, 2007: 159) In the face of Caspar's pursuit, she insists on her inner thoughts and self-consciousness. For freedom, she can give up marriage and be a non-marriage activist. Freedom is the endless experience of life, and her free thought has been reflected in her choice of marriage. "she made no secret of the fact that the fountain of sentiment, thanks to having been rather violently tapped at one period, did not flow quiet so freely as of yore." (James, 2007: 191) Through her conversation with Mrs. Merle, we can see she has great admiration and support for Marle's attitude towards emotion. She spares no effort to imitate her, hoping that she can learn to think and have independent thoughts just like Merle.

### **2.2 The integration cultures reflected in Isabel's choice of marriage**

The author endows the heroine with such psychological thoughts, which also shows his criticism of blind optimism of Transcendentalism. The goal of Transcendentalism is to break the shackles of Calvinism on human nature and ignores the impact of setbacks and difficulties on life. Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton reflects James' expectation of the Transcendentalist's self-development. She does not want to join the privileged class and enjoy a rich and noble ideal life. She also rejects Goldwood. Goldwood's life is mechanical and tasteless. He owns the temperament of a typical American man, which is what Isabel tends to get rid of. After rejecting two excellent men, under the influence of European culture, she forms many new thoughts. To pursue the freedom of consciousness, she marries Osmond who is an American art lover who lives in Europe. He not only has the individual spirit of American independence, but also the rich European cultural heritage behind him. He was always very elegant in communication with Isabel without any high-class posture. He has not only the shadow of American culture, but also the cultivation and demeanor cultivated by European ancient civilization.

## **3. The meaning of marriage failure**

### **3.1 The influence of a failed marriage on Isabel**

For Isabel, she changed her pursuit of absolute freedom and gradually understood the reality. Marriage is the beginning of her change. After marriage, Isabel is all faceted and puts on the mask of hiding herself and she is indifferent to everything and has an arrogant manner. It reflects the author's criticism of the limitations of naive and blind pursuit of transcendentalism. From indulging in the world of ideal and fantasy to feeling the bondage of real marriage, she changes from a simple romantic girl to a gorgeous lady. Before her marriage, Isabel thought Osmond was unique and free. After marriage, Osmond's nature is exposed. He is selfish and tries to control everything. Osmond hides his hypocrisy and selfishness behind the mask he wore everyday. Isabel's independent thought does not accord with Osmond's need for women's submission and obedience, which arouses his dissatisfaction and rage. The huge gap between the real marriage and the ideal marriage makes Isabel begin to doubt her own choice and the pursuit of the goal of different cultures. The failure of marriage is a huge obstacle on her way forward.

### **3.2 James' expectation reflected in Isabel's failed marriage**

Although US accumulated great wealth in the economic field through industrialization, its own culture was very shallow. James believes that US needs to absorb the essence from other national cultures to stimulate its own vitality. The

birth of Isabel's character highlights James's creative intention: to put a typical American girl in Europe with profound cultural heritage to investigate her fate, and then arouse the attention of Americans to their own spirit and culture. However, she is used by the negative representatives of European noble culture, Osmond wants to take full control of his wife, which shows the bondage of traditional European culture to women. Osmond just uses Mrs. Merle to gain benefits and maintain his male dominance. James assumes that neither pure American culture nor pure European culture is his ideal culture. He hopes that the independent and free spirit of American culture can influence European culture, and that mature European culture can promote the perfection of American culture. Isabel becomes mature after the failure of marriage. Although her body is bound by marriage, her spirit is free. No matter what the result, at the moment when she chose to return to Rome, her image is very noble.

## Conclusion

James' view of international culture is fully embodied in this novel. In his view, there is no distinction between the superior and the inferior in European and American cultures. Both cultures have advantages and disadvantages. It is an ideal cultural state to actively explore the integration of European and American cultures. It is precisely because the United States has no profound cultural heritage and is in the reflection of American culture that he creates Isabel, a heroine who is willing to go to Europe to receive cultural influence. Isabel is a typical American full of independent and free thoughts, but she is also full of yearning for European culture. Finally, she retains the original justice and morality of American culture and goes to the individual maturity. James thinks that neither pure American culture nor pure European culture is his ideal culture. Through the analysis of Isabel's growth, we can have a deeper understanding of James' ideal culture and the international theme of the integration of European and American cultures, which is also of practical significance to the study of cross-cultural exchanges in today's countries.

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