

American Literature & Culture
Prof. Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Mod 01 Lecture Number 03
Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady (Lecture 3)

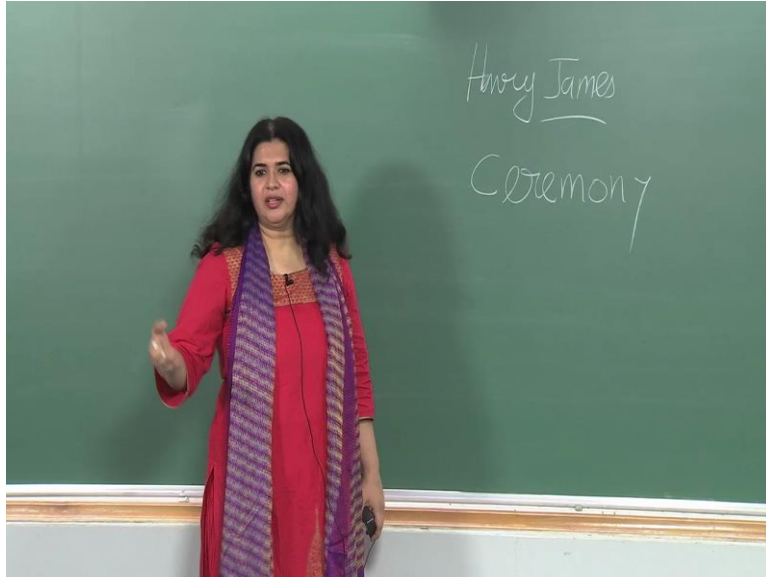
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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: Henry James is not going to start his work like, now this is a very high class of this society. He is not. He is going to the point and he will tell you this, these are ceremonies that are extremely important, there are circumstances in which whether you partake of the tea or not, some people of course never do, the situation is in itself delightful. Ok. It's supposed to be a very sophisticated and elegant kind of a ceremony, a delightful and people have to behave themselves, they have to be, in other words, at their best, yeah. It reveals them so they reveal themselves at ceremonies such as these. They dress for tea. They dress for dinner. So every situation, every circumstance is a, in other words, a performance, Ok. Have we talked of these things? Yeah. In one of our early questions we have talked about performance is

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Professor: is not about what we do on a stage. All the world is a stage. Ok, ceremonies like, very commonplace situation like having an afternoon tea is also a ceremony where people perform. In New York society, in London society,

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Professor: belonging to this particular class, the society to which these people belong to, people are always performing, Ok. So this is the most important aspect. Performance, everybody performs and our heroine Isabel Archer regret regrettably fails to see through these performances, Ok and the idea is very clear. She is an American. She is an American girl. She doesn't have that capacity to perform. Ok, she wouldn't be artificial, she is a natural, honest girl and we have already talked about another natural honest girl Daisy Miller.

So we continue with interior monologue in Henry James and he, when we know that sometimes he spends pages on fleeting impressions and its many ramifications. Henry James believes characterization is what makes stories and novels so personal. So character is destiny. Again I cannot stress enough on the relevance and significance of characters in and characterization in Henry James. And Henry James very effectively employs the techniques of point of view, interior monolog and the unreliable narrator, so the key features.

So now we are going to talk about the fiction of Henry James and these are the important features of Henry James. Interior monologue, psychological realities, points of view narration. In his *The Art of Fiction* which was published in 1884, it is an essay, he argued for the fullest possible freedom in the novelist's choice of theme and treatment. And he redefines experience as the subject matter of fiction and marks a crucial shift of realist fiction towards psychological realism and this leads us towards modernist fiction. We have been talking about stream of consciousness, psychological realism and stream of consciousness. For Henry James, novel is the ultimate art form, Ok and his ideas about form and points of view and also having the proper reader. Now why do you think that Henry James demands a proper reader? You are aware, of course, I am sure Wolfgang Iser and the... yes, yes but Wolfgang Iser gives us a term.

Student: The (())

Professor: The implied reader, Ok you have an implied reader who is he? A writer writes his fiction pitching his level towards a particular kind of reader. Do we agree to that? Ok. Yeah, all writers have a specific reader in mind. Do you think that is necessary for any writer to do that, to do that, to have a specific kind of readership? We are talking about readership now. Henry James is that kind of a writer who had a specific, who consciously wrote about a specific readership, it's not for all. It is for a specific readership, so the proper reader. Therefore the kind of fiction he wrote is not meant to be understood, therefore in the beginning what did I tell you about his style? Give me those few words. Pragya, do you remember? Style of Henry James

Student: Tentative, obscure

Professor: Good, tentative, obscure, clue chasing, so when the style of writing is tentative, obscure and chasing clues, it cannot be for the masses. Do we agree to that? It has to be a specific niche kind of a group and that is what he means by the proper reader. There should be a proper readership. Ok, and rather than his now...he wrote in and therefore we attach so

much of significance to Henry James' position as a novelist because till he came on the scene, novel writing was considered a form of entertainment, Ok a mass entertainment. You remember serialized novels? You keep on stretching a concept, Ok like a chewing gum till it snaps. Ok, why, because people like to read a story. So keep on giving them serialized kind of a novel, and once you have done with that, put everything together and bring out a novel. That is not what he did. Ok, so for him, novel writing is not a way of entertaining but rather for exploring the psychology of the characters and therefore this requires not a mass readership but a specific readership. So he brought the art of writing fiction and novel writing you know he put the whole think and he raised their standards to from where they were.

Ok now this is a quote from his *The Art of Fiction*. Experience is never limited and it is never complete. It is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind. Go through this, experience is never limited, never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of the huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of the consciousness and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. What is it talking about? Do you remember...? I will come to you, Ashmita. Do you remember you told me once that you have read *The Great Gatsby*? So how did this Nick Carraway describe *The Great Gatsby* in one of the first, you know, connect, can you connect these lines to *Gatsby*, *Gatsby's* character?

Student: *Gatsby* (())

Professor: No, but that's not...I am talking about this heightened sense of sensibility and sensitivity like an air, like a suspended huge spider trying to catch every airborne particle to imbibe, to catch everything that is visible as well as invisible, every airborne particle is not visible to us, right? Having such super-refined sensibility a writer, a novelist should have and that's how Nick Carraway describes *Gatsby*. In other words, he uses some other words to describe but the idea is same. *Gatsby* is the man of super-refined aesthetics, sensibilities and feelings. He feels too much, Ok he is unable to let go, that's his problem, Ok. That's what Henry James says, that's how a novelist should be, should be able to imbibe every kind of experience and should be able to feel every kind of an experience like a spider catching in its web every airborne particle, any comments here? Ok

Student: Better view, multiple points of view like (())

Professor: Yes, and also his extreme sensitivity and extreme attention to experience, to catching experience and to portray all kinds of experiences, this is important. Now James and his dialectics, he constantly probed the basic terms of critical discussion, and this is again we are going back to Henry James as a critic so he talks about life, representation, one of the first people to talk about these things in contemporary and modern day criticism. Of course the idea of representation has been discussed since the times of the classical writers.

I am sure you are aware of Plato and Aristotle, they have also talked about mimesis and representations but here James also talks about representations. Interests; interests of what? Writer's interest in people, experiences, reality, form of a novel, this is extremely important. Form of a novel, before that writers, novelists did not pay much attention to the form of a novel but here we are talking about plot. He actually started theorizing novel. He actually started theorizing characters more suitable to the twentieth century reader. Of course we all, again we are going back to classic writers Aristotle and we I have done a quite, a bit of Aristotle with you people.

So Aristotle has already talked about what's applaud, what's a tragedy, who is an ideal tragic hero. It has been done but here he fore-grounds character. Ok and he defines plot and then compares plot with character. So, as he fore-grounds character, he says and he asks what is character, but the determination of incident. That means incident is determined by character. What is incident, the illustration of character. How an incident is shared or informed, is it completely depends on the character. So character drives. Everything is derived from character.

I would like you to compare this with E. M. Forster's in these aspects of novel which I am sure you have done, Ok. Are you familiar? Not yet? Ok there are two great English writers,

Student: (())

Professor: Oh no, this is the seminal work, this, you have to know

Student: Passage to India

Professor: Passage to India? Yeah so E. M. Forster, his aspect of the novel and Walter Allen, I am not talking about Walter Allen here but you should note him, The English Novel, these are two twentieth century critics who have explained and who have gone at length to explain to us what is the meaning of plot, character and novel in general.

Now E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* published in 1927, he discriminates between flat and round characters. I am sure you are aware of this, flat and round characters. Now flat character is a stock character. A stock character, a stock situation, I think I have done all these things when I was doing drama, yes. Two dimensional characters as opposed to three dimensional characters, stock characters in other words is flat. It doesn't have too much of development or growth.

Sometimes it is interesting in particular situation because you see the earlier versions of Superheroes; who are our superheroes? Superman, Batman, Spiderman, are they very rounded characters? Yeah, I am talking about the earlier days of these comic book heroes. Were they very well-rounded? Yes or no? Ok and when did this roundness come? When people like Frank Miller stepped in and then you have Christopher Nolan who re-defined Batman and the anti Superhero John. Even earlier that earlier also we had someone like Tim Burton who did a series of Batman movies.

Ok so he started looking at the darker sides of Batman. Batman earlier was never like this. Since the inception of Batman the character was always flat. He is a cave proceder, that's it. There are no stream of consciousness. Ok there are no...There is no angst but now Christopher Nolan's hero is an angst-ridden hero. And we all know that. There are sides to his personality, unexplored dimensions to his personality. So that's what E. M. Forster talks about. There are certain situations when it is good to have a two, two dimensional character or flat character, a stock character; a comedian is a comedian ok.

He is there to give you a comic relief. Yeah, but, and flat character is presented without too much of individualizing detail. He is not an individual. He is a character. You see you look at this guy and you say, yeah, he is a comedian; he is here not for any plot development, just to give us some relief. So, this is not an individual but a type and let's get over with it. Again a flat character is often defined or described in a single phrase or sentence. It can, he can do. Azhar, any comments; want to add anything to me? No.

A round character on the other hand is three dimensional and is complex in its treatment and in motivation. There presentation is endowed with certain peculiarities. He is more true to life

because he is capable of surprising us. So a round character must necessarily be someone who is unpredictable. Otherwise it becomes flat, two dimensional stock character. A rounded character must have a capacity to surprise us.

Henry James, another key feature, these are the other; these are other key terms that he gives us by way of characterization. See he has theorized the lot of characterization, the art of characterization. So you have telling characters and showing characters. Look at the subtle difference. Telling characters, the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe and to evaluate the motives and dispositional qualities of the character. This is what Jane Austen does in *Pride and Prejudice*. Does she go at length to describe Elizabeth Bennet? Elizabeth Bennet may be a well-rounded character, I accept but do you think it is more of a psychological portrait or more of a telling character?

It is a telling character. Are there, do you remember a few lines from *Pride and Prejudice* where she tells you something of every sister and also the parents? This is the kind of woman, Mrs. Bennet. It is we know from the beginning. We don't have to read between lines to understand her motivation and her character, alright? Tell me some character that you feel very, author has intervened and has told us quite a lot about this. We know, you know she is a good girl, period. Don't expect any surprises here. When she is bad I will let you know. Ok then also I will let you know but I will let you know. So I am telling you that you have to right now consider this girl as a very good, model girl.

Ok a model student but when I feel that this girl is being not so model, I will tell you that also. So the author is going to take it upon himself, herself to tell you what the character is going to do. So it is a very important concept. In cinema, especially the old kind of films you know, you had people talking about the character. You know my son will come, studying in London. All heroes used to go to London once upon a time. The rich people, the boy from the wealthier families so hero would always and he will come. So you have already been told all this.

He is a very obedient, my son is a very obedient girl, boy he is going to marry any girl of my choice. You are being told this is the kind of hero you are, you should be expecting. A good boy, an educated boy yeah, it is not like it is not someone like who will suddenly emerge

from nowhere as in Ram Gopal Verma's Satya. Is there any telling about him? Do you know anything about Satya? Ok, he just emerges, erupts on the screen and he is showing you, this is a guy.

Make or try to make out whatever you want to make out of this guy but this is a guy. Ok, I am not going to tell you anything about him. You just see. Show a character. On the other hand, you having showing character, this is also known as a dramatic method. Readers or viewers infer what motives and dispositions lie behind what they see about you. They show a character. Now can you give me some examples here?

Student: Atticus, To Kill a Mockingbird

Professor: Atticus

Student: Yeah, he was like (()) person. We know that he was like, he doesn't judge a person (())

Professor: I am more interested in a character, a literary character where the author just shows a character and doesn't go deep into telling you about, I can right now think of a very good post-modernist novel, The English Patient. Ok, are you aware of The English Patient? Yeah Michael Ondaatje's novel, now there is the English, yes?

Student: The Catcher in the Rye

Professor: Yes, The Catcher in the Rye, good, yeah The Catcher in the Rye, the hero, Holden Caulfield and you have The English Patient where even the identity of the patient is suspect. Who is he? Ok, you are just shown a burnt man lying somewhere in Italy in a villa, Ok and he is, he is charred, his body is badly bruised, burnt and he is just waiting for his death. No one is telling you his motivation, his psychological turmoils; you are just shown this person.

And then when he starts talking, you have to connect the dots and put together the jigsaw puzzle and try to sort. It's a guessing game kind of a novel. You have to be constantly on alert. You cannot, this is a kind of novel which cannot be serialized or produced and written in installments; that next, to be continued. You have to read it. You miss a clue and then you miss the entire puzzle. And according to Henry James, of course, showing method is more effective, it's more dramatic.

Now I will compare James to another major writer of his age, Gustave Flaubert who wrote Madame Bovary, and people like James and Flaubert, they consider telling a violation of

artistry. A good artist should show and not tell. Therefore you are never told much about Emma Bovary, right, you are not explained. Nobody goes at great length to explain her character and her motivation. They, Flaubert and James, they recommend only showing characters.

Again we are in the realm of literary criticism. How a work should be judged. Authors should abstain from judging or making moral imperatives about character. This is important, Ok. Dickens judges, right? Constantly he judges. More modern writers, they shun from judging characters; again the concept of objectivity and impersonality. They have to be judged objectively and impersonally, do not get emotionally involved with the characters, any comments so far on anything that I have been going on; questions? Try to connect it with whatever you have done. You have done so much of fiction and literature already. Tell me something that I don't know.

Yeah, so the title itself suggests, *The Portrait of a Lady* that means it is about a lady, and it's a portrait. So like let me also introduce you to this term, bildungsroman and you already know that it's a German term, literarily it means a formation novel. An upbringing or education novel; whose education? Not ours but the character's, how the character, the lead character is educated, that means how he learns, how he grows. So *The Portrait of a Lady* too is a novel which can be considered a sort of bildungsroman, an account of the youthful development of its young protagonist. When we are first introduced to her, she is something else. Over a period of time, she turns into something else altogether. And influences on the protagonist, this is important feature of; this is a very important feature of bildungsroman who is always influenced by an older, more worldly character. Now the character of Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Professor: I will read you a few lines, they appear quite later in the novel but anyway Madame Merle's influence on her young heroine.

When Madame Merle was neither writing nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimneypiece; an art in which her bold, free invention was as noted as the agility of her needle. She was never idle, for when engaged in none of the ways I have mentioned she was either reading, she appeared to Isabel to read everything important, or walking out, or playing patience with the cards, or talking with her fellow inmates.

And with all this she had always the social quality, was never rudely absent and yet never too seated. She laid down her pastimes as easily as she took them up; she worked and talked at the same time, and appeared to impute scant worth to anything she did. She gave away her sketches and tapestries; she rose from the piano or remained there, according to the convenience of her auditors, which she always unerringly divined, unerringly divined.

Now Madame Merle and young Isabel Archer, what do you infer from this?

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Professor: Madame Merle is an older, elegant mature and much more worldly woman. Isabel Archer has everything, Ok except experience. And what this young impressionable woman, what does she gather from Madame Merle? Well, she becomes a sort of role model. She has everything, she, she can play the I mean, yeah, talking about woman of that century. Remember you don't have to, I mean that's what accomplishment was for women of that particular century. She could read, and she had read everything important. She perhaps (()) philosophy, history, arts and all, so she was an accomplished reader, she could play the piano, again which is an important part of a society of that nature.

She could play an instrument and that too, a piano. So you, you, it denotes a certain finesse, certain kind of elegance of character. She could, she was very good with handiwork like embroidery and she was graceful. She was a good, she was a good conversationalist, she was a good listener, she was a good speaker. So what more can you aspire to be? Ok, she dresses well and she is beautiful. So she becomes a sort of, that's what we are talking about. In bildungsroman you always have a mentor. Ok, a character has to be mentored and Madam Merle is a, whether it is a positive or a negative influence, that you will learn later. However Isabel Archer gets a mentor.

Ok bildungsroman also describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the ups and downs of life; so this is something that you will come across in The Portrait of a Lady, how Isabel goes through the rigor of life and attains maturity. And of course one of the most important bildungsroman of all times is Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther. There is

always a discovery, and most of the time the revelation is self revelation and self discovery. Not something, it is not a suspense novel. She realizes something about herself at the end; perhaps by then it's too late. However she attains maturity, she gains experience through that and the growth is complete. That's bildungsroman for you.

Now destiny plays a very important part in all Henry James' novels. We have already talked about that in his preface he describes Isabel Archer as a young woman who upfronts her destiny. At one place, while talking of one of her suitors Caspar Goodwood she says, sometimes Caspar Goodwood had seemed to range himself on the side of her destiny. He was the man she was destined to marry. And destiny is constantly referred to throughout the novel. It's that I can't escape my fate, she says later in the novel. Henry James was very apt at sketching woman protagonist and Isabel Archer can easily be considered a sort of new woman of the nineteenth century, the late nineteenth century and she can be placed aside some of the best portrayed heroines of that period.

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Professor: Ok, so you, you have great heroines like Elizabeth Bennet, Catherine Earnshaw from? Elizabeth Bennet is from Pride and Prejudice, Catherine Earnshaw? Well you like Gothic kind of novels.

Student: Wuthering Heights

Professor: Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff and Catherine, yes. Jane Eyre. Becky Sharp from? Vanity Fair, Thackeray. Haven't you heard of Thackeray?

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Student: Yes

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Professor: William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Dorothea Brooke is a character from? These are the seminal feminist heroines. You can't do feminism without these heroines. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

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Professor: We are also given another term ratiocination

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Professor: that is to reason methodically and logically and this is the point where Isabel Archer differs from all these great heroines. Because whatever she does, she is impulsive but in her mind, she seems to have given it a lot of thought and she seems to rationalized the thought. Ok, she may have been utterly wrong about her rationalizations but she does try to reason out things. She does try to think logically unlike Catherine Earnshaw who is extremely wild and whimsical and passionate, Ok. Isabel Archer has no such assumptions. She thinks that she is very rational.

She thinks she is very logical and very reasonable, Ok. Jane Eyre reasons methodically and logically all the time, no. She takes life as it comes. She doesn't have too much of a choice over here, she doesn't yeah but here Isabel Archer is one of the foremost intellectual heroines because she tries to intellectualize everything. You have to read the novel to understand. She is as different from Becky Sharp and Jane Eyre. Becky Sharp is also but in a manipulative sort of role. Her trick is how to hook the richest guy around. Ok, she is one of those heroines.

Student: (())

Professor: That's what I am saying.

Student: Elizabeth Bennet is also (())

Professor: Elizabeth Bennet is a, well; I am talking about portrayal of intellectual depth. Ok, now Jane Austen herself did not have that kind of intellectual depth to impose

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Professor: such, you know constraints on her characters

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Professor: Ok, But Henry James did. So you have to keep those novels side by side and understand that how far is Henry James able to probe into the psyche of his characters, especially his women characters, which Jane, people like Jane Austen do not.

Ok, at the end of the day, *Pride and Prejudice* is every girl's dream come true. It is still a fairytale. It is a perfect, you know, once upon a time and happily ever after. Ok, that's what, that's the kinds of times and that's the kind of person that she was, Jane Austen but Henry James was more, much more travelled. He had seen the world. He was very worldly. Therefore his characters reflect that. And there is a growth, a sense of growth, that's what, you know, separates his heroines from the other heroines. There is a sense of, immense sense of psychological growth, intellectual development. This is all intellectualist, less passion, less emotion, more intellect.

Again we come to the concept of innocence in James and his fiction is constructed around the series of innocence and every novel of his has an innocence. So you have *Daisy Miller*, you have *Isabel Archer* of course, you have the protagonist in *The American*, you have *The Bostonians* and also all these are innocents, suddenly transformed in an epiphanic insight into an evil conceal behind the mask and this is important. There is always an epiphany. You know what is an epiphany?

Student: Silent realization

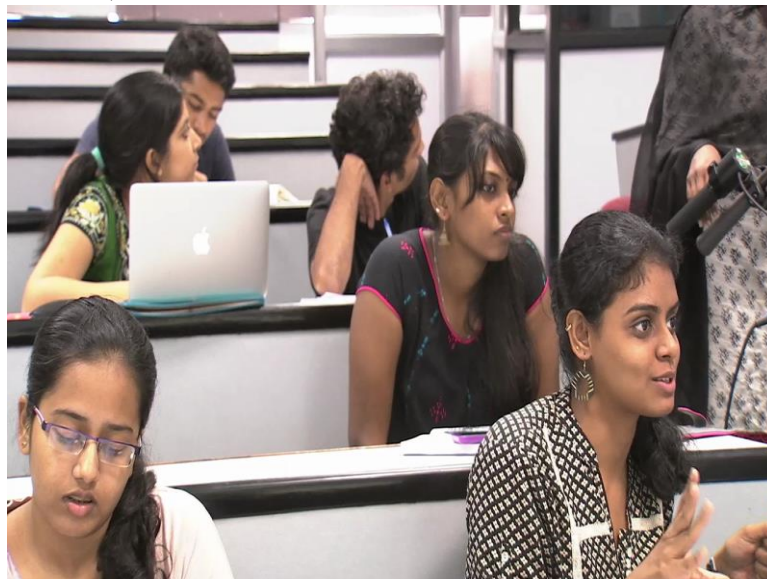
Professor: Realization of something, awareness of an evil concealed the mask of social, civilized and aesthetic being. The chief idea in James characters is again that the characters

are often blinded by their cultural innocence and therefore I talked of the idea of American, innocent American. They are innocent people, therefore they get deceived by the civilized, sophisticated worldly people, most of them are Europeans. And only on foreign ground can they recognize the other, ok there is always the binary, there is the other for Henry James' characters.

The innocent abroad and the evil European. And self realization happens only when they come into contact with this evil other. This recognition awakens their conscience out of its submerging in mundane social realism or the lure of the aesthetics. Now why do I use the term the lure of the aesthetics? Why? What is the lure of the aesthetics? The term is lure of the aesthetics.

Student: Characters are so taken by the surroundings initially, like when Isabel walks in and she calls it novel, the place looks like a novel

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Professor: Picture perfect, yeah

Student: Then suddenly they get epiphany; they realize that there is much more to it

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Professor: So overpowering aura of aesthetics, and this is, that means the idea should be, the implicit idea should be that Americans are aesthetically not so developed, right and it is only when...and see we are now talking about the Americans of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century when America was still a young modern country. And Europe was already old, ancient civilization. So naturally there is no comparison between the levels of aesthetic development, aesthetic development in terms of art and culture and society. So a young American always gets overpowered, overwhelmed by this aura and that's what happens to her also. She gets overpowered by the aesthetics of Gilbert Osmond, who she ends up marrying.

Ok so when we meet next I would expect you to have read, you have already read till chapter 12, so read till chapter 30, three zero, Ok and we will now look at, I will be starting from chapter 16 where Caspar Goodwood enters the scene and then we will connect it to the, so it is important that we get the chapters covered till chapter 30, thank you.

(Professor – student conversation ends)