

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 01 Lecture Number 09
Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady – Chapter 35--- (Lecture 8b)

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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: Ok, do you think

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Professor: flashbacking is a very popular device in films? Yeah, they use it to; you know taking you back to a particular time, when they do flash-forward which is more experimental. Generally they don't, but then we did Kubrick, that famous cut today and then it flashes

forward, skipping thousands of years of progress in human civilization. You understand now, so flashing forward means prolepsis. So therefore pro and analepsis means flashing back, flashback. So starting off with one scene and then suddenly going, jumping to something that has already happened so that is ana and when you are going forward and you are skipping a few, that is pro, so flashing forward, Ok.

So now I am on chapter, the last few pages of chapter 35, last few paragraphs chapter 35.

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Professor: Who is she in conversation with?

Student: Countess Gemini

Professor: Good, Countess Gemini who is also Osmond's sister and the last few lines “You’re very brilliant--you know that’s the way you’re always spoken of; you’re an heiress and very good-looking and original.”

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Professor: Now only a novelist can use a word like, an adjective like that. Good looking, yes, you are an heiress, yes and you are rich, all these things but you are an original work of art or you are an original character. This, only a novelist like Henry James would use, in connection with heroine or with his lead character, you are an original, and that is what is more important. See, this is the way, so we go back to how important characterization is in Henry James, don't forget these things. We have been talking about the, the foregrounding of characters in Henry James, right? So how important characters are, and this is, there are various perspectives, points of view about Isabel Archer. She is described by various people at various points. Do we agree? Anu, do we agree to that? Isabel Archer, well Archer, if she is at the center of the novel, we don't have just one uni-dimensional view of her. We are given different perspectives; there are several perspectives about Isabel Archer. Do you agree to that? Can you give me some other examples? Like Gemini says you are thought of, that means there is a general perception about her. Ok, is there anyone else who thinks like that about her? Ralph Touchett, Ok, he also regards her with certain degree of amusement because she is someone who is going, he is dying. We have already seen that, that he dies in the end and in the novel also, the last, the penultimate chapter of the novel is about Ralph's death. He dies and, then she is in mourning and that is quite a symbolic kind of mourning. She is in mourning for the rest of her life. She mourns, Ok, that's her destiny. So character is destiny. You remember that's what we have been talking about of all Henry James' characters? That's how he describes his theory of characterization. Character is destiny. Character is plot, Ok. If there is a, Ok, so the novel is like this because she is like this. This kind of woman can have only this kind of plot, Ok. That's the idea.

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Professor: Our family's very good, you know; Osmond will have told you that; and my mother was rather distinguished--she was called the American Corinne. But we're dreadfully fallen, I think, and perhaps you'll pick us up. I've great confidence in you; there are ever so many things I want to talk to you about. I never congratulate any girl on marrying; I think they ought to make it somehow not quite so awful a steel trap.

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Professor: At the, even before she is marrying, we are told she is getting into a

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Professor: steel trap and I never congratulate a girl on marrying.

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Professor: Don't you think this is quite revolutionary for those times? Yes? If you say it today to a modern woman perhaps yes. Ok, but something like this happening in a novel that was published 150 years ago, this is quite a daring feat.

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Professor: I suppose Pansy oughtn't to hear all this; but that's what she has come to me for-- to acquire the tone of society. There's no harm in her knowing what horrors she may be in for. When first I got an idea that my brother had designs on you I thought of writing to you, to recommend you, in the strongest terms, not to listen to him."

That's a sister talking about her brother.

"Then I thought it would be disloyal, and I hate anything of that kind. Besides, as I say, I was enchanted for myself; and after all I'm very selfish. By the way, you won't respect me, not one little mite, and we shall never be intimate. I should like it, but you won't. Someday, all the same, we shall be better friends than you will believe at first. My husband will come and see you, though, as you probably know, he's on no sort of terms with Osmond. He's very fond of going to see pretty women, but I'm not afraid of you. In the first place I don't care what he does. In the second, you won't care a straw for him; he won't be a bit, at any time, your affair, and, stupid as he is, he'll see you're not his. Someday, if you can stand it, I'll tell you all about him. Do you think my niece ought to go out of the room? "

Now

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Professor: what sort of introduction is this? Osmond has only two relatives. Only Pansy who is very docile, meek, we have already been introduced to her, fleetingly and then this sister of his. What, what picture of Osmond is painted before us? You see, Osmond is never talked highly by anyone. Did you notice that? Nobody speaks well of Osmond except Madame Merle, yeah? Even his own sister tells Isabel Archer on the eve of her wedding that I should have warned you. Ok, but anyway I was enchanted by you nevertheless so I thought Ok, let it go, let's see what comes out. So for everyone, don't you think it's a spectacle now? Ok, what is this marriage going to offer to people like us who are going to be mute spectators? Ok and in the short clipping that we just witnessed, we know what sort of marriage was this? Alright, Ok and what sort of person is Countess Gemini now?

Student: (())

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Professor: Ok

Student: As she says, I know we will be intimate because even though I may prefer it, you won't. So as silly as she is, she realizes what, how the other people perceive

Professor: She also says that one day we will become close.

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Professor: Ok, that means she has already anticipated that when that, and if you have read the novel and it is just a spoiler, we know that finally it is Countess Gemini who reveals the dreadful secret that?

Student: Pansy's

Professor: Madame Merle is Pansy's real mother, biological mother and Gilbert Osmond happens to the father, Ok, so it is that kind of a relationship and this is revealed to us, to

Isabel Archer through Countess Gemini, Ok. What we are looking at is you know at the motley of women, and characters all around, kind of diversity that Henry James presents to us. Diverse characters, all kinds of women, you have all kinds of men also here, Ok different kinds but, you look at the characterization of women here and you feel how, how did he probe in the psyche of women so well, so minutely, after all he is a man. How did he know women so well? Interestingly his mentee, Edith Wharton, when you read *The Age of Innocence*, you will be amazed

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Professor: how well he understands the male psychology, Ok and this, people generally say this is a feminist writer and therefore she writes, understands women so well. But here you are seeing something other, something else happening.

Ok, now chapter 36.

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Professor: One afternoon of the autumn of 1876, during, toward dusk, a young man of pleasing appearance rang at the door of a small apartment on the third floor of an old Roman house. On its being opened he enquired for Madame Merle; whereupon the servant, a neat, plain woman, with a French face and a lady's maid's manner, ushered him into a diminutive drawing-room and requested the favor of his name. "Mr. Edward Rosier," said the young man, who sat down to wait till his hostess should appear.

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Professor: Now who is this new character?

Student: (())

Professor: Yes, but not like this. Now he is given to us through a different, in a different setting. Three years have lapsed, yeah and this is what I was telling you, this is an instance of

prolepsis, flash forward. We are not going to learn about the details of this marriage, whatever happened in these 3 years. Later on, someone will tell us, oh she had a baby. I think Madame Merle tells Edward Rosier that there was a child. It is a pity that she could never have a child, although there was a child, a baby boy who died, who lived only for 6 months. Ok, all those details are given to us in the passing. Why? Henry James is not really concerned with the nitty gritty of the plot, these things. Ok, he is now only going to present to us how these characters respond to these tragic happenings. The Edward Rosier character, again look at this point of view technique, Henry James and now Henry James is talking to you.

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Professor: The reader will perhaps not have forgotten, so he is again drawing his, our attention that see I had already told you something about this character before so the reader will perhaps not have forgotten that Mr. Rosier was an ornament of the American circle in Paris, but it may also be remembered that he sometimes vanished from its horizon. He had spent a portion of several winters at Pau, and as he was a gentleman of constituted habits he might have continued for years to pay his annual visit to his, to this charming resort. In the summer of 1876, however, an incident befell him; which changed the current not only of his thoughts, but of his customary sequences. He passed a month in the Upper Engadine and encountered at Saint Moritz a charming young girl. To this little person he began to pay, on the spot, particular attention.

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Professor: Who is this girl?

Student: Pansy

Professor: Pansy, Ok so now why are we being told all these things in this way? And reader may recall, well, this was quite a revolutionary literary style. Today you may come up every second novelist uses this device. Now when this was, so occasionally he is taking an omnipotent point of view and here, what is this technique called, when the author is directly, yes?

Student: (())

Professor: Yes, when the author is, so there is a, Breaking the Fourth Wall, yes, we are still in the cinema mood, Ok in the intrusive authorship, yeah, the intrusive author. It's one of the features of narratology, intrusive author. The author is, because I am interested in why he is talking to you, reader you know that we have been introduced to, what is he, he is directly addressing the reader because he is telling us, that don't forget, I am the author. I am the author, you are the reader, reader you must, yeah. So these were, are the literary characteristics of Henry James, experimenting with point of view.

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Student: As in (()) this intrusive author

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Professor: Very, it wasn't there always. Ok, you know, you get such examples only in Henry James where he experiments with all sorts of points of view in a single novel. So he can, he can give you multiple perspectives, so we have been talking about the beginning of modernism, remember? Yeah.

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Student: It was there in Chaucer be considered to be intrusive author.

Student: first person

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Professor: It is first person also, and we are talking about novel.

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Professor: It is more or less, yeah verse

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Professor: but in novels, Henry James is foremost because he is the one who started. You also have example of someone like Laurence Sterne, are you familiar with, I am sure you are, Laurence Sterne and his?

Student: Tristram Shandy

Professor: Good, Tristram Shandy yes, and this is also Isabel's first appearance after three years. So we last saw her in conversation with Countess Gemini, we see her now. And she is a changed person now. At this point again, if you apply the theory of New Criticism here, Ok so you know R P, Blackmur of course, and he wrote this essay, he was one of the foremost New critics along with Eliot and other people, and he observed that James work constitutes a

great single anarchic rebellion against society, against the laws of society in the combined names of decency, innocence, candor, goodwill and the passionate heroism of true vocation. By the standards of those times, he was considered a revolutionary, because, and also an anarchist and therefore I, presented to you this example of Countess Gemini, Ok who is so bold in total denunciation of the institution of marriage. We are already familiar with the features of new criticism; we have been doing it for quite some time. You know what is the signifier and signified. So I am not going to get too much into it.

But then here again, as I started with the introduction, then let me take back you to his original point of inspiration which was George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Also Daniel Deronda to some extent but *Middlemarch* to a large extent, and that's what, when we talk, when we look at Isabel's predicament after marriage, so I am not going to get deep into it, I am just assuming that you have finished reading the novel or you are going to finish reading it soon, Ok, so but what sort of a person does she emerge in spite of being warned by everyone including Osmond's own sister about the marriage, the pitfalls and the dangers into getting into an alliance like that? Why does she still get into it? Because Henry James wants to look at a particular sort of woman, not every woman but a particular, so she is not a genre, she is not a generic woman. Please understand that, therefore she is called an original woman, an original kind of character. She is not like every woman who is just waiting for a man; otherwise Lord Warburton would have been the ideal choice, no? Ok, so why are we interested in her at all? We are interested in her because we before our eyes, we see shattering of certain kinds of ideals that a certain kind of woman upholds and cherishes. This is the idea; the original germ of this idea came from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Are you aware of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to some extent? Ok and how this woman who thinks she is a very idealist kind of girl marries this elderly dilettantish professor thinking, hoping that you know she is going to make a difference to his life. Ok but she can't. What happens eventually is that how she is crushed by his coldness and by his indifference and that's what happens to Isabel Archer also, so she is exploited financially as well as emotionally and that's what she is, we understand.

Ok, alright. So, coming to the end of the novel, you can refer to *Middlemarch* also for the character of Sir James Chettam, and Henry James' base is the character of Lord Warburton and the radical Ladislaw in *Middlemarch* comes to us as the good hearted man, Caspar

Goodwood who is very prosaic, absolutely unimaginative, unromantic and believe it or not, I mean, at the end of the novel, yeah he comes back and he offers Isabel an out and that you have seen in the clipping also but she refuses and she runs away, why?

Student: (())

Professor: Does she?

Student: (())

Professor: Is it so emotional; is it so banal an explanation that she cannot break away from a marriage? Looking at the kind of person, she is, she could have easily called it off and she has someone, completely respectable and decent person waiting for him, for her.

Student: She goes for Pansy.

Professor: Necessarily she goes back because of Pansy?

Student: She wants to face.

Professor: She wants to face, yes, social conventions yes, love for Pansy yes but she could have provided for Pansy. She has enormous wealth. Yeah, so she is not someone that if she leaves her husband, she will be penniless. It is not that kind. But if she, what she wants

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Professor: to do is now; she wants to bear the consequence of her actions. She knows that she

he die conveniently? So James, however James decides that she should stay back in whatever choices she has made. Ok, that's the kind.

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Professor: Alright, so I don't want to, although, quite a bit of novel still remains, remaining to be done but I think we have spent enough time on this here and you do get a rough idea what this work is all about. We, you should also approach the novel through the prism of realism, psychological realism, what else, point of view narratology, Ok, so narratology especially through point of view. Ok so these are the features that you should be concerned with, and of course you also know Henry James and his literary criticism as embodied in *The Art of Fiction*. Please take a look at that also

(Professor – student conversation ends)