



## Isabel Archer: A Romantic Idealist An Analysis on Her Tragedy From the Perspective of Hamatia

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### Abstract

*The Portrait of a Lady* is one of Henry James' masterpieces. Isabel Archer, its heroin, is frequently labeled as a lady in pursuit of freedom. But at the end of this novel, she chooses to go back to Osmond after knowing the truth of her marriage, which surprises many readers. Why Archer, a lady in pursuit of her own way of living, is willing to endure a marriage without love. This thesis probes into Isabel Archer's living environment and education background to analyze her character hamatia, which results in her special view of the world, a romantic idealist living in her imaginary world. In another way, her ideal notion results in her tragic life, which leads her to continues to live in her own imaginary world.

**Key words:** *The Portrait of a Lady*; Romantic idealism; Imaginary world; Hamatia

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Portrait of a Lady* is the representative work by Henry James, which is popular with readers and critics after its publication. It tells the story of the American girl, Isabel

Archer, who goes to England with the hope of pursuing her ideal life. In order to pursue her ideal life, she declines the proposals from Lord Warburton and Mr. Goodwood, the ideal life partners in others' eyes. Finally, she chooses to marry penniless widower Mr. Osmond against all her friends' wills. However, Archer finds her marriage is based on a lie, and Mr. Osmond is attracted by her wealth. Brokenhearted, Archer goes back to England to visit her dying cousin. At that moment, Mr. Goodwood proposes to her again. However, she declines his proposal again, and chooses to go back to her husband. Her final decision puzzles readers a lot, and they are wondering why Archer, a lady brave enough to pursue her ideal life, is willing to endure a marriage based on lies. This thesis probes into for living environment and education background to analyze her character hamatia which results in her tragedy.

### 1. LIVING ENVIRONMENT AND EDUCATION BACKGROUND OF ISABEL ARCHER

America is the nation advocating individualism which came to represent the positive qualities of freedom and self-assertion (Joyce, pp.4-6). Archer is a symbol of individualism. Because of the emphasis on individualism in America, the individual is apt to imagine that his whole destiny is in his own hands. And this emphasis also lead Americans to "a presumptuous confidence in their own strength" (Rusk, p.88). It is also this individualism that forms the foundation for the romantic conception of Archer.

Archer lost her mother when she was very young, and her father brought her up in such a haphazard way, "A few very harsh critics went so far as to say that he had not even brought up his daughters. They had had no regular education and no permanent home; they had been at once spoiled and neglected (James, p.26). She spent all

of her time in her Grandmother's home, where there was a library with many books. As a child, Archer thought her Grandmother's home romantic, where she could enjoy the freedom. She didn't go to school to receive formal education and spent all her time reading the books in the library. The knowledge she gained from the library constituted her conception of the whole world. When we first find her in the library in the house in Albany with Mrs. Touchetts, her aunt, she is in the small room, imagining the outer world which is full of delight and excitement. She is exercising her imagination in her mind, and for so many years she thinks about the world from her own perspective. Meanwhile, she is curious about the outer world and is eager to feel it by her own, "She had a great desire for knowledge, but she really preferred almost any source of information to be printed on page; she had an immense curiosity about life, and was constantly staring and wondering. (pp.27-28). That is why when Mrs. Touchetts offers her an opportunity to go to Europe, she is so happy, "to go to Florence" says Isabel, "I'd promise almost anything (p.22)!" she sees this offer a change to experience others' lives that she knew from the books in the library. "I mean full of experience--of people's feelings and sorrows. And not of their sorrow only, for I've been happy here as a child (p.27)." Isabel has been accustomed to read and daydream in a room known as "the office" that lay beyond the library (James, p.34). All of her knowledge comes from books and she deeply believes it, like she has no idea of money, which means she has little understanding of the real world. She is just a girl in her own imagination; and she is self-confident in her imaginary world which makes her an idealized romancer. At that time, Archer firmly believes that she is entitled with the right to choose the life she wants, together with the duty to be responsible for her choice. Her unique perspective of life influences her choices when it comes to choosing her life partner.

## 2. THE HAMATIA OF ISABEL ARCHER'S CHARACTER

Hamatia is a Greek word used to refer to the "tragic flaw" of the hero of Greek tragedy and can be interpreted either a flaw in character or an error in judgment, which results in the hero's descent into misfortune (Aristotle, p.34). Then it is not hard to see that being imaginative is the Archer's character Hamatia that lead to her decision in her marriage.

Archer is different from the girls around her for her special living environment and education background. She is brave, independent, and persevering. Meanwhile, Archer is obsessed with her imaginary world without the understanding of the real world. Deeply absorbed in her imaginary world, Archer firmly believes that the world is full of sunshine and beautiful things, and she can choose her life at her own will.

Archer has a complex character. On one hand, she affronts her destiny like a hero, never cursing destiny for taking away her mother when she was still a child; she refuses to accept the financial help from her aunt and cousin, for in her mind one can be really independent only when he is financially independent. Only when achieving this, one can enjoy the freedom to choose whatever one wants. However, on the other hand, she refuses to see the real world, and uses her own perspective to see the world, which is responsible for her particular destiny. Archer always says that true love has nothing to do with material. In order to prove her moral quality to others, she declines the proposal from Lord Warburton and Mr. Goodwood, in spite of feeling the sincere feeling from him. In Archer's eyes, the marriage with Lord Warburton will deprive her of testing her moral quality, "Archer is so confident on her and wants to suffer the demands and difficulties of life to testify the integrity of her moral quality. Sometimes she goes so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she can have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded (p.42).

## 3 THE UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE FOR HER CHARACTER HAMATIA

When Archer comes to England, all things seem to be romantic: the park of an English country, with a nobleman in the act of making love to a young lady which appears like in the novels (James, p.89). She feels that everything in England is romantic, just like the things in her imaginary world. All those things in England make her so excited, and she thinks it is a good opportunity for her to feel the world personally. Her determination to feel the world influences her choice for life partner.

When she is in America, she got the proposal from Mr. Goodwood. He is a typical American, hard-working, practical. He expresses his sincere feeling towards her many times. In fact he should be a good choice for Archer, but Archer declines his proposal because she doesn't think that Mr. Goodwood belongs to her world, "Furthermore there was a young man lately come from America who had no system at all, but who had system that the impression on her mind had been light" (p.87). After a short time in Gartercourt, she receives the proposal from Lord Warburton, but she also declines it. She thinks that marrying Lord Warburton would be to escape her fate and separate herself from real life, from the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer. Lord Warburton is shocked that Archer decides everything from her imaginary theory and exclaims, "I did not offer you any chance which made you escape life or from any chances or dangers whatever, I never saw a person judging things on such theoretic ground" (James, p.88). Her rejection to his proposal of marriage throws a good deal of light upon her relations with another

suitor, Gilbert Osmand. The defect of imagination is mainly expressed in her relations with Lord Warburton, "To Isabel, Lord Warburton appeared as a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule, and she felt that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved" (p.87). Lord Warburton represents the challenges of a whole world of facts beyond both her experience and her dreams. When he proposes to her, he is inviting her to come out of her imaginary world. What he offers is a real world in place of her ideal one. Her refusal of him is a rejection of a real world and an expression of determination to pursue her ideal one. In Archer's mind, he seems to be a representative of the upper class rather than a person who represents something fixed and definite. All of those are different from her life. Though she likes Lord Warburton, she thinks the proposal will affect her free exploration of life that she has entertained or is now capable of entertaining (p.95). But clearly the freedom she seeks is an escape from the real world to live in her imaginary world; she doesn't want to explore the real life that Warburton would give her, which can be sensed from the conversation between Archer and her cousin, Ralph.

"You want to drain the cup of experience."  
"No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It is a poisoned drink!  
I only want to see for myself."  
"You want to see, but not to feel." Ralph remarked (p.524).

The refusal of Lord Warburton's proposal shows her determination to live in her imaginary world. She said if there's a thing in the world she is fond of, that's her personal independence (p.129).

The further proving experience for Isabel Archer's imagination comes from her relationship with Gilbert Osmand. He has no money, no fame, no social status, which is his great advantage over Lord Warburton. Thus he offers no threat to her preoccupations with an ideal one; on the contrary, he seems to offer a mirror in which she may find herself reflected in her own finest image. To Archer, her cousin, Mr. Osmand, and Lord Warburton belong to the types already present to her mind, but Mr. Osmand--he is a specimen apart, which attracts her deeply (p.228). And she likes Mr. Osmand's talk, his company; she has what always gives her a very private thrill, the consciousness of a new relation (p.227). Osmand can offer nothing whatever, nothing but the assurance that she could choose to live just as she wants.

There is a fine logic in this fate that her imagination brings upon her. She falls in love with the projected image of Osmand in her imaginary world. In addition, She has chosen Osmand for he won't limit her in any ways. After getting married, Archer gradually knows the true character of her husband, yet she persists in being a good wife to him. She refuses to acknowledge any dishonor in her marriage, and she chooses to believe her marriage is still in her ideal world, "I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I'd much rather die (p.560)." Archer is too proud to admit that the ideal world that she has keeping on exploring is wrong, and she always wants to suffer some difficulty in her life to show the integrity of her moral quality like the hero. So even though she has the chance to end her relationship with Osmand, she declines it and chooses to stay with him. She is attempting, still, in the terms Osmand dictates, to live by her theory of the ideal. In such a way, Archer keeps her claim to a certain ideal dignity.

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## CONCLUSION

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It is not difficult to see that Archer living an imaginary world under the influence of her living environment and educational background, and she becomes a romantic idealist living in her own imaginary world. Living in her imaginary world, she uses her special perspective to see the world and make the judgement. So in some degree, Archer is the victim of her own character hamatia, being imaginative all the time, and not simply a victim of Osmond.

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