

Isabel's Final "Freedom" Choice in The Portrait of a Lady

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Abstract: In At the end of the novel, The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel, the heroine, chooses to return to her unhappy marriage. Many readers feel puzzled at Isabel' choice. Scholars have different opinions on this issue, among which, from the perspective of the heroine's own view of freedom, there is a pair of conflicting views, Isabel's return to the unhappy marriage means the destruction of her freedom and the sublimation of her freedom. This paper mainly discusses these two views in order to objectively comment on them.

Keywords: Isabel; Freedom; Destruction; Sublimation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Portrait of a Lady is one of Henry James' most famous novels and is regarded as one of the greatest novels in the English language. Amid much praise, the novel ends with the heroine, Isabel Archer, who decides to return to Rome and her unhappy marriage, leaving many readers confused and dissatisfied. Why does this heroine, who always valued freedom above everything else, return to her unhappy prison-like marriage? Scholars have different opinions on this issue, among which there is a pair of conflicting views discussed from the perspective of the heroine's own view of freedom, Isabel's return to the unhappy marriage means the destruction of her freedom and the sublimation of her freedom. Which is right? Read it together.

2. THE CONFLICTING VIEWS ON ISABEL'S FREEDOM

2.2.1 Freedom Destruction View

Gu Chaomei, in the article *A liberal Pursuer Destroyed by Freedom -- on the Creation Features of The Portrait of a Lady*, published in the *Journal of Northwest Normal University*, proposes "Isabel should have such courage if her pursuit of freedom and independence had not changed. What she did turned out that she is nothing more than a conventional traditionalist." She argues that Isabel's return to unhappy marriage means the destruction of her freedom. [1]

Although Europe experienced the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the 19th century, people got a certain degree of liberation in thought. However, due to the long history of Europe, especially the long-term ecclesiastical rule in the middle ages, men were the center of the society, and women were in the position of obedience, without voice and freedom. The disillusionment of Isabel's dream of freedom from the United States was apparently caused by Isabel's being too simple and falling into the trap of the Europeans, but it was actually caused by the patriarchal social environment in Europe

at that time. Although Isabel is a woman who pursues freedom and self, she has to obey her husband after marriage. She has to give her all, including her freedom. So far, we have known that Isabel's identity as a woman doomed her dream of freedom to be shattered in Europe, because in the European patriarchal society, women's freedom is helpless and women are not really free.

If Isabel before marriage was a vain, independent and fearless woman, marrying Osmond meant she gradually submitted to the patriarchal society. "Deep in Isabel's nature, she had a desire to please others", and her changes and choices were the result of this natural development. [2] Although she hated Osmond deeply, Isabel still decided not to disclose her misfortune, and even took it as her duty to take care of Parsee and influence her husband. As a result, she gradually changed from the originally uncompromising and unyielding one to a woman who was "corrected" by the patriarchal society and lost her self-consciousness in repression and anti-repression. From the analysis of Isabel's final choice, her image as an independent woman is defective and incomplete. Isabel's eventual return to unhappy marriage reflects the women oppression in 19th century European society and marks the destruction of her freedom.

2.2.2 Freedom Sublimation View

In an article titled Isabel's View of Freedom -- Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* published in *Foreign Literature Studies*, Chenli points out that "Isabel ostensibly returned to the dark life of marriage, but in fact she had a real freedom to take responsibility." Isabel's return to an unhappy marriage, she argued, is a sublimation of her freedom. [3]

Women in the 19th century were in a position of subservience, but some had begun to awaken and struggle to improve their situation. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the heroine, Isabel's struggle for freedom and independence explains the profound changes in the status of women in the transitional society in the 19th century. After experiencing the baptism of the unhappy marriage, Isabel's mind was improved in the continuous awakening, and she maintained her love of freedom and independence in her thinking and struggle.

Isabel's declaration of independence in an innocent age, "I love my freedom very much. If there's one thing I like in the world, it's my independence." [4] Isabel's strong aversion to Goldwood's individualism seems to show us two completely different heroines before and after marriage. She was no longer the headstrong girl who had put freedom above everything, but had become calm and rational. So instead of persuading Isabel to give up her husband, Goldwood's advice became the trigger for her decision to return. Isabel's firm refusal before her return to marriage was a farewell to the immature old self and the central idea of the past, and it was a moral sublimation. This choice itself is the perfect combination of freedom and responsibility, a strong sense of responsibility which is a clear sign of her mature character. Putting the "duty" of marriage above one's own freedom and happiness is one of the hallmarks of Isabel's maturity after suffering and her determination to care for Parsee can make her find true freedom. Though she lost the freedom of marriage, she did not lose her own freedom, and even sublimated the freedom, so that she gained a higher inner form of true freedom.

3. COMMENT ON THE CONFLICTING VIEWS

Does Isabel's choice to return to an unhappy marriage mean the destruction or sublimation of her freedom? The author is more inclined to the view of free sublimation.

First of all, we should regard Isabel's view of freedom objectively and then explore her free choice on the basis of it. Isabel tried to maintain an ideal of individual freedom as the foundation of women's social status. Isabel refused the marriage proposal as an act of her independence and freedom. However, Isabel was not very clear about the concept of freedom and independence. She only mechanically opposed marriage and freedom, and regarded the men around her and the marriage demands they represented as the shackles imposed by fate.[5] The so-called freedom that Isabel strived for was an instinctive and intuitive evasion and avoidance of any specific social role, a pure individual freedom without substance. Her view of freedom led to her unhappy marriage.

Through the baptism of an unhappy marriage, Isabel mused at night, constantly feeling, thinking about her past, and then understood and reflected on. She gave up the previous extreme idea of individual freedom and found the freedom that could exist and be realized only in specific ethical forms, a kind of individual freedom that "lies in the society". She began to realize her personal responsibility to herself, others and society. Based on the above knowledge, Isabel finally chose to return to her unhappy marriage, assume her real responsibility and realize her true spiritual freedom. Therefore, the choice to return to marriage is not Isabel's abandonment and destruction of personal freedom, on the contrary, it is Isabel's reconstruction and sublimation of personal freedom. Therefore, the author is inclined to the sublimation of freedom.

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