

5-1994

Gender and Reification: The Grotesque Mode in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady

Drew Dianne Lamonica

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

**Gender and Reification: The Grotesque
Mode in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady***

Drew Dianne Lamonica
Senior Honors Thesis
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
May 1994

I. Introduction

"The ladies will save us," said the old man; "that is the best of them will -- for I make a difference between them."

"You apparently have a great passion for knowledge," her cousin returned.

"I think I have; most girls are horridly ignorant."

"You strike me as different from most girls."

Henry James
The Portrait of a Lady

In his first undisputed masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James's female characters Isabel Archer, Madame Merle, Henrietta Stackpole, Mrs. Touchett, and Countess Gemini violate the Victorian ideal of womanhood in a variety of ways. Pansy Osmond, on the other hand, fulfills the Victorian ideal for its young unmarried women to an extreme degree. But whether they transgress conventional gender categories or conform to them, these women of James can be regarded as grotesques.

No critical study of James and his works has heretofore recognized his use of the grotesque as a literary mode or has examined its connection in *The Portrait of a Lady* with women characters who transgress their designated gender roles. By the grotesque, I mean an essentially disharmonious or unresolved clash, "the copresence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable" presented in a realistic framework (Thomson 2-3). The grotesque denotes the intermingling -- in an "oil and vinegar" manner -- of mirth at something which fails to conform to accepted standards or norms (in this case, James's women) with fear or anger when these norms are challenged or attacked.

The "fictional canvas" of *The Portrait of a Lady* graciously grants to the "ladies" its central position and its grandest strokes (Appignanesi 20). In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, published ten years before *The Portrait of a Lady*, Will Ladislaw asks his artist-friend Naumann: "'And what is a portrait of a woman?'" (Eliot 142) In his 1881 novel, James

contemplates Ladislav's question against the backdrop of nineteenth-century European society.

In the present essay, I aim to explore the relationship between James's "less than ideal" ladies and his use of the grotesque to describe and characterize them. To more fully clarify this connection, I will discuss the nature of the grotesque as an aesthetic and literary mode, and I will elucidate the widely-held Victorian ideal of womanhood and the concept of a "woman's sphere." Furthermore, I will show how the grotesque may be viewed as at once produced by and illuminative of the male characters' likening of their females to objects or pieces of artwork; the disruption of traditional Victorian marriage; and Isabel's conflicting roles as the free, idealistic modern woman of the dawning twentieth century and as the submissive, content wife of the Victorian paragon. Attention to the production of the grotesque in James's characterizations of female characters also has important implications for assessing such major recent evaluations of James's view of gender and sexual politics as Alfred Habegger's *Henry James and the "Woman Business"*.

II. The Nature of the Grotesque

You see the interest in all this lies in the figures that went before the eyes of the writer. They were all grotesques. All of the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques. . . . and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness.

"The Book of the Grotesque"
Winesburg, Ohio

In its original usage, the grotesque was a term applied to "a decorative art in sculpture, painting, and architecture, characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions of the natural to the point of comic absurdity, ridiculous ugliness, or ludicrous caricature" (Holman 206). In the twentieth century, the grotesque has come to have special literary meanings. Philip Thomson describes the literary grotesque as essentially disharmonious, "depending on conflict of some sort. . . either the expression of a profound sense of dislocation and alienation or employed as an aggressive device in service of satire and the like" (Thomson 18).

Named after the ancient paintings and decorations in the underground *grotte* of Roman ruins, "grotesque" in the eighteenth century signified something markedly different from its signification in the nineteenth century, and both applications differ from its present usage (Thomson 10). Despite some isolated attempts in the nineteenth century to define the nature of the grotesque, it did not become the object of considerable aesthetic analysis until the appearance in 1957 of the German critic Wolfgang Kayser's book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Thomson 11). The extension of the word "grotesque" to literature and other realms beyond the plastic arts occurred in France as early as the sixteenth century (Rabelais uses the terms in reference to parts of the body) but in England and Germany it was not until the eighteenth century that the term was introduced into literary discourse (Thomson 13).

The present tendency is to view the grotesque as "a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence" (Thomson 11). It is no accident, then, according to Thomson, that the grotesque in art and literature tends to be prevalent "in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change, or disorientation" (Thomson 11).

The unresolved nature of the conflict in the grotesque is essential, distinguishing it from other modes or categories of literary discourse (Thomson 21). Thus, the interest in and employment of the grotesque are generally considered outgrowths "of contemporary interest in the irrational, distrust of any cosmic order, and frustration at our lot in the universe" (Holman 206). Thomas Mann regards the grotesque as "the most genuine style" for the modern world and the "only guise in which the sublime may appear" (Holman 207). Flannery O'Connor acknowledges the unresolved nature of the grotesque, calling a grotesque character "man forced to meet the extremes of his own nature" (Holman 207).

More specifically, Philip Thomson defines the grotesque as "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response"; irreconcilable reactions, usually laughter on the one hand and horror or disgust on the other; "the ambivalently abnormal" (Thomson 2-3). The phenomenon of the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework. Thomson comments that "the intrusion of the comic element, totally out of place and inappropriate, serves to increase the reader's sense of the frightening nature. . . . We feel that this mixture of horror and comedy is 'impossible,' we cannot be reconciled to it, we may even feel it is indecent and indicative of a warped mind -- but we are unable to shake off the profoundly disturbing effect which it has on us" (Thomson 8).

Writing about Robert Browning, G. K. Chesterton observes "that the grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it" (Thomson 17). The "shock effect" of the grotesque may be used to bewilder or disorient the reader, to "jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (Thomson 58-59). Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange. Thus, amusement or delight with the unfamiliar or with something that fails to conform to accepted standards and norms can turn into fear or anger when such norms are found to be seriously threatened (Thomson 24-25). This effect of the grotesque best defined as alienation or dislocation depends on the fundamental conflict inherent in the mode and its mixture of incompatibles.

III. The Ideal of Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century

Woman. . . is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other.

Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* cannot be fully and rightly understood unless we examine the cultural and social contexts of the nineteenth century, "the vanquished world to which it addressed itself" (White 59). Many of the conflicts and discordances that James reveals as grotesque in his women characters result from his determination to present a realistic portrait of a nineteenth-century middle or upper-class woman, and such a realistic portrait was greatly determined by the dictates of society in which women lived.

The social and economic restraints encountered by an ordinary middle or upper-class woman of the Victorian period are necessarily encountered by Isabel Archer, by Pansy Osmond, and, to differing degrees, by Henrietta Stackpole, Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett, and Countess Gemini. Much of the grotesqueness depicted in these characters results from their varying responses to the typical social and economic restraints suffered by nineteenth-century women (as will be explored later). James skillfully manipulates his women characters, particularly his heroine Isabel, in order to explore the actual possibilities open to a woman of her day. Horace E. Scudder, reviewing *The Portrait of a Lady* for *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1882, wrote: "The fine purpose of her freedom, the resolution with which she seeks to be the maker of her destiny, the subtle weakness into which all this betrays her, the apparent helplessness of her ultimate position, and the conjectured escape only through patient forbearance -- what are all these, if not attributes of womanly life expended under current conditions?" (AM 27-28)

The Victorian ideal of middle and upper-class womanly life and femininity began to take shape in the first decades of the nineteenth century and served to fix relationships between the sexes (Burstyn 118). With the economic changes of industrialization and rising capitalism in Europe, the Victorians sought a refuge from such rapid changes in a new family structure which excluded the outside world. This "cult of domesticity," this idealized vision of home and family apart from the battle of the workplace, was a major recurring image in Victorian art, literature, and social commentary (Gorham 4). According to Deborah Gorham, the creation of a sharp division between the private world of the home and the public world of commerce and politics had a dramatic impact on the way in which women were perceived (Gorham 4). Throughout the nineteenth century, it was customary to designate public and private life as two "separate spheres" (Gorham 4). The public sphere of business, politics, and professional life was defined as the male sphere or exclusive domain, whereas the private sphere of the emotions, morality, and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women (Gorham 4).

Within the family, men were assigned the control of family finances, the enforcement of discipline, and the final say in all decisions affecting family members. The women, then, in their roles as wives and mothers, set and upheld the moral standard of the family, organized the household, and supervised the upbringing of children (Burstyn 118). Ideally, middle and upper-class women passed their days caring for the home, overseeing the care of their children, shopping for necessities, practicing philanthropy, and nurturing friendships, while their husbands left home each day to earn money for these activities (Burstyn 30). The private sphere of home and family came to be viewed as "presided over by females for the express purpose of providing a place of renewal for men, after their vigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere" (Gorham 4).

This crucial role for a woman was described by Hester Chapone in her *Letter to a New Married Lady*. According to Mrs. Chapone, a husband was certain to be aggravated by happenings in the public sphere, "but when he returns to his own house, let him find everything serene and peaceful, and let your cheerful complacency restore his good humour, and quiet every uneasy passion" (London 1828; Burstyn 108-9). Thus the concept of separate spheres located women in the home and men in the marketplace, and consequently "public and private space became more clearly defined" (Burstyn 19-20). This way of life, grounded in the belief in separate spheres and in the necessity of a "cult of domesticity," became the ideal for the whole of society.

The "cult of domesticity" assigned to middle and upper-class women both a separate sphere and a distinct set of roles which constituted the ideal of womanhood. Victorian conceptions of the idealized role of women, epitomized by Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House," ultimately served to protect the belief in and maintenance of the separateness of the home and the workplace, which was by the late nineteenth century being challenged by some women (such as James's Henrietta Stackpole) who entered the public sphere of business life.

The ideal woman was willing to be submissive to men and dependent on them; possessing no ambitious striving, she would have a "preference for a life restricted to the confines of the home" (Gorham 4-5). She would be morally pure, gentle, innocent, passionless, self-sacrificing, capable of self-renunciation, and free of any trace of anger or hostility. Well-acquainted with the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house," James imparts the desire for this type of mate in many of the male characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Pansy Osmond, trained and shaped in the ideal, strikes Mr. Rosier "as exactly the *household*

angel he had been looking for" (emphasis added) (*PL* 336). Objecting to Isabel's "originality," her brother-in-law Mr. Ludlow comments, "'I don't like originals; I like translations. . . .'" (*PL* 26). That the Victorian male desire for the "angel in the house," particularly evident in James's Gilbert Osmond, objectifies the women characters, rendering them grotesques, will be discussed at length.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, many felt that women should take the lead in regenerating industrial society (Burstyn 31). Women were seen as the standard-bearers of morality, and, by the cultivation of their particularly feminine characteristics -- self-denial, forbearance, fidelity -- women were to teach the world how to live in virtue (Burstyn 32). They were to accomplish this task not by writing books about moral values nor by publicly preaching about them "but by manifesting them hour by hour in each home by the magic of the voice, look, work, and all incommunicable graces of woman's tenderness" (Harrison 70).

The ideal woman was protected from such evils as dishonesty, cheating and profligacy since, unlike men, she did not have to take part in worldly transactions (Burstyn 32). From the notion of women's purity developed the idea that women were men's superior consciences -- "If a husband were tempted to place his profit above all else, his wife would dissuade him, or at least assuage his guilt by works of charity" (Burstyn 31). Thus, women were viewed as solely able to "preserve the traditional virtues of society in the face of the iron will of industrialism" (Burstyn 31). As John Burgon, an Oxford divinity professor, preached in 1884: "Woman's strength lies in her essential weakness. . . . Removed from the stifling atmosphere in which perforce the battle of life has to be fought out by the rougher sex -- she is, what she was intended to be, -- the one great solace of Man's life, his chiefest earthly joy" (Burgon 29-30).

As a feature of Victorian middle-class ideology, the idea of femininity and all it entailed reinforced the Victorian conception of masculinity and helped to maintain the system of separate spheres, "a system that was peculiarly well-suited to the needs of an emerging capitalist society" (Gorham 209). Images of feminine girlhood pervaded Victorian culture and shaped the beliefs of men and women alike. Specifically, the notion of femininity helped form Victorian beliefs about how daughters should be reared. Constance Maynard, an early student at Girton College and first Principal of Westfield College, London, observed: "Innocence was made an idol of among women of the upper classes. . . The simple and blooming girl with her smile and her curls, and her rosy cheeks was the ideal.. She stands before me even now with her white muslin dress, blue sash, white stockings, and pretty little thin cross, sandalled shoes, always sheltered, always content with her own little domain" (Maynard 331-33). James clearly embodies this ideal in the figure of Pansy Osmond, Isabel's "transparent little companion" who cares "so much -- so extraordinarily much -- to please" (*PL* 93, 382).

Schooling for girls during much of the Victorian period was therefore considered the means through which girls obtained social and moral rather than intellectual skills. The ideal woman had to undergo thorough training in household management as well as in moral principles to enable her to carry out her mission as moral preceptor to her family (Burstyn 39). Furthermore, the ideal woman was trained to accept the limitations of woman's sphere. In one book, a mother wrote to her daughter returning from a year at school: "You are returning *home*. It is a comprehensive word, my dear Laura: upon your right estimation of its value greatly depends your future happiness. It is chiefly *there* that the lustre of the female character is discernible; because *home* is its proper sphere" (Taylor 140). To guarantee that the ideal woman would be content to cultivate domestic virtues, she had to be taught "to

accept physical boundaries to her activities, and her bodily movements had to be constrained by the conventions of ladylike behavior" (Burstyn 36).

Those who supported the Victorian ideal of womanhood claimed that universities provided an education inappropriate for woman's role. Learning, they believed, interfered with a woman's natural intuitive judgment, her health, and even her reproductive functions because it trained women to reason. "A learned woman, therefore, lost the very essence of her femininity," and, as marriage was a woman's vocation, her training must enhance, not diminish, her femininity (Burstyn 37). While most people believed women incapable of sustained study in the first place, there also existed a general belief that study itself would leave a woman "discontented and ill-prepared for marriage and motherhood" (Burstyn 41). James illuminates this notion in his introduction of Isabel: "She saw the young men who came in large numbers to see her sister; but as a general thing they were afraid of her; they had a belief that some special preparation was required for talking with her. Her reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic. . ." (PL 29).

Men, it was held, were capable of long, earnest thought; women, who lacked depth, were not. These sentiments were expressed and maintained by women as well as men. Elizabeth Barrett confided to Robert Browning: "There *is* a natural inferiority of mind in women -- of the intellect. . . not by any means of the moral nature -- and that the history of Art and of genius testifies to this fact openly. . . I believe women. . . all of us in a mass. . . to have minds of quicker movement, but less power and depth. . . and that we are under your feet, because we can't stand upon our own" (Browning 116-17).

Despite the strict adherence to the concept of separate spheres, the late Victorian age marked changes in the roles of men and women. Women's legal rights increased as a result of individual challenges to the law. In education, despite previous objections, some women undertook courses in higher education "without suffering harmful effects, becoming desexed, or challenging the mores of society" (Burstyn 169). By the close of the nineteenth century, a growing number of women were challenging the accepted definition of a lady -- a definition dependent upon her isolation from the workforce and the amount of leisure afforded her -- by completing college educations and filling jobs outside the home. The assimilation into the workforce, however, was for a long time characterized by intentionally placing women in job categories designed to separate them from men as effectively as though they had remained within woman's sphere (Burstyn 20-21). As society's economic structure altered under the force of industrialization, female participation in the public sphere came to be regarded as both respectable and necessary. Even amid these changes, however, the idea of femininity was never abandoned but rather adapted to new circumstances. "The 'modern girl' of the 1890s might ride a bicycle, take competitive examinations, or work in an office, but she was still expected to be gentle, non-assertive, and subservient to men" (Gorham 209-10).

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, three conceptions of women existed, according to Walter E. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind*: "the submissive wife whose character and life were completely distinct from her husband's, the 'new woman' demanding equal rights with men, and those in the middle who wanted to remove legal disabilities and give 'more breadth of culture'" (Houghton 348-9). Nevertheless, the ideal of the virtuous woman reigning as the "angel of the house," running her household with skill, endowing it with tranquility and security, and rarely venturing (or desiring to venture) into the outside

world, remained to inspire the Victorians throughout the nineteenth century. Henry James was certainly well-attuned to the Victorian ideal of womanhood and the great reverence which was bestowed on it. We can therefore understand and examine in detail the cultural context in which the male characters and the male author of *The Portrait of a Lady* render the women who transgress conventional gender categories of the nineteenth century as grotesques.

IV. The Grotesque Objectifying of Women in *The Portrait of a Lady*

She was like a woman of Leonardo da Vinci's, whom we love not so much for herself as for the things that she will not tell us. The things are assuredly not of this life; no woman of Leonardo's could have anything so vulgar as a "story."

E.M. Forster
A Room With a View

One of the primary ways in which Henry James constructs his female characters as grotesques is by representing them through the eyes of male characters who behold them as objects, particularly as pieces in art collections. Elizabeth Allen gives a possible explanation for this objectifying of women: "The world of *The Portrait of a Lady* is very much a world of labels, categories, and theories. The language of society seeks to define people in terms of their quantifiable value" (Allen, *Place* 58). Furthermore, the process of designation operates in the masculine culture of the Victorian period, for "the appropriators are male and the signs of value to be acquired or disposed of are female" (Allen, *Place* 59).

A. Isabel Archer

The male construction of women as things or commodities may initially strike the reader of *The Portrait of a Lady* as amusing. When Ralph Touchett first discusses Isabel with his mother, he plainly asks, "'What do you mean to do with her?'" "'Do with her?'" Mrs. Touchett replies. "'You talk as if she were a yard of calico!'" (PL 39) Ralph goes on to study Isabel as if she were a quaint, tidy little house:

He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. What was she going to do with herself? (PL 56-57)

Teasing Isabel for her prideful profession that a woman can do many things other than marry, Ralph acknowledges her "originality": "'But you're of course so many sided. . . . You're the most charming of polygons!'" (PL 138)

In the latter half of the novel, however, this light-hearted objectifying of Isabel becomes more sinister and disturbing when it is carried out by Gilbert Osmond. A reader who was able to delight in Ralph's conceptions of Isabel more fully feels the grotesqueness -- the mixture of humor and horror or disgust -- when she falls under Osmond's gaze. James makes quite plain how Osmond understands Isabel:

His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife: this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one -- a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served desert. He found the silver quality in his perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring (*PL* 329-30).

Isabel the free spirit is increasingly likened to static objects on a shelf as *The Portrait of a Lady* progresses; through this grotesque rendering, the novel dramatizes how society limits and defines her and, in so doing, evokes from the reader feelings of humor and horror. Priscilla L. Walton also comments that regarding Isabel as an object "draws attention to her primary function within the text's nineteenth-century ideology, for as a woman Isabel is expected to be decorative; she exists only in and for the male gaze. Further, these images draw attention to her immobility and to her passivity; she does not act, but is acted upon by social forces" (Walton 59).

The shift in Isabel from one who acts to one who is acted upon is grotesquely presented in her changing role from artist to work of art. When she initially arrives at Gardencourt, Isabel is the surveyor -- she has an "eye that denoted clear perception;" her face is "intelligent and excited;" she has a "comprehensiveness of observation;" and her "perceptions were numerous." She sees herself as the artist or creator of her own image, believing that "Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was" (*PL* 45).

During their visit to the gallery at Gardencourt, Isabel first falls victim to the male gaze when Ralph sees her as a portrait "better worth looking at than most works of art. . . undeniably spare and ponderably light" (*PL* 40). He admires her as an entertainment of high order: "'A character like that,' he said to himself -- 'a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It's finer than the finest work of art -- than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian, than a Gothic cathedral'" (*PL* 56). Following her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, Ralph's view of the portrait of Isabel Archer has become grotesquely -- both humorously and horifically -- distorted. The once "free, keen" Isabel has become the costumed "fine lady" whose only function (as she hangs on the wall) is to "represent" Gilbert Osmond, who, like a sculptor with Isabel as his work of art, "was in his element; at last he had material to work with" (*PL* 371).

While Ralph objectifies Isabel in a seemingly benign manner, Osmond's objectifying of his wife as "material to work with" to satisfy his designs appears openly malignant. Ironically, however, the adoring Ralph has also regarded Isabel as "material to work with" -- in this case, to meet the "requirements" of his imagination. In persuading his dying father to leave Isabel a fortune, Ralph exclaims, "'I should like to put a little wind in her sails. . . . I should like to see her going before the breeze!'" (*PL* 170). Daniel Touchett warns his son that such an act may be immoral: "'You speak as if it were for your mere amusement'" (*PL* 171). "'So it is,'" Ralph answers, "'a good deal'" (*PL* 171). Thus, Ralph also uses and objectifies Isabel though his objectifying does not seem to be as sinister or calculated as Osmond's. Nevertheless, Isabel becomes an object to satisfy Ralph's imagination. His desire to make Isabel rich propels her into marriage with Osmond, thus making her as much Ralph's victim as Osmond's.

In his first meetings with Isabel, Osmond talks to her about his attempt to make life into a work of art. Isabel understands this aestheticization of life as a process which they will

create together but, as Allen comments, Osmond merely "takes her as a part of his pattern - she is to be certain things and not others, and he is quite prepared to sacrifice those of her ideas that he doesn't like" (Allen, "Objects" 89).

In the central scenes at the Uffizi, where Osmond determines to acquire Isabel for his collection, he is paired, by allusion, with the tyrannical Duke of Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess." The close relationship between Osmond and the Duke and between Isabel and the Duke's portrait of his last duchess is grippingly grotesque. The witty nonchalant manner by which the Duke and Osmond reduce (literally, in the Duke's case) their ladies to "pieces" and "objects" marks a fundamental characteristic of the grotesque -- the intrusion of an out-of-place or inappropriate comic element which serves to increase the reader's sense of its frightening or terrible nature and to frustrate attempts to reconcile the mixture of horror and comedy.

James reveals that Osmond "was fond of originals, of *rarities*, of the superior and the exquisite" (emphasis added) (PL 285). Thus, having seen Lord Warburton, Isabel's unsuccessful suitor, "whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice *objects* by declining so noble a hand" (emphasis added) (PL 285). As Sandra Djwa notices in her essay "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Making of a Lady," Osmond the connoisseur considers Isabel as fine an *objet d'art* as any pointed out by Browning's Duke: "'Notice Neptune, though,/Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity' -- a comparison that James emphasizes by the same term of possession, the 'rarity'" (Djwa 80). According to Djwa in her 1982 conversation with James biographer Leon Edel, the term "rarity" would have sprung easily to James's pen, for he admired "My Last Duchess" and knew the poem by heart (Djwa 80).

An even more unsettling connection than James's and Browning's parallel use of the term "rarity" is noted by Daniel Mark Fogel in the *double entendre* of the word "object" (Fogel, "Rome" 92). As Osmond himself relates, his object -- his goal -- is to add Isabel to "his collection of choice objects." Likewise, Browning's Duke acknowledges that the Count's "fair daughter's self, as I avowed/At starting, is my *object*" (emphasis added) (NA 802). She too may eventually figure in the Duke's collection, as Isabel does in Osmond's.

Although enchanted by Isabel's fineness, Osmond still does not consider Isabel a flawless piece. He finds "Miss Archer sometimes of too precipitate a readiness" (PL 286). This "fault," as Osmond views it, "does not become glaringly evident until he recognizes it as a manifestation of Isabel's independence" (Djwa 81). Isabel herself comes to understand Osmond's disturbingly grotesque image of her will:

The real offense as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his -- attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nosegay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching (PL 407).

Osmond's understanding of Isabel's mind as a garden with himself as its caretaker and cultivator can be viewed as both a humorous and horrific reduction of what Lord Warburton described as Isabel's "remarkable mind" once Osmond perceives her mind to be a threat to his notion of wifehood (PL 100).

Like the "spot of joy" in the cheek of Browning's last Duchess, Isabel's "joy" is supposed by Osmond to reside in his will alone (Wiesenfarth 19). When Osmond realizes that, intolerably, Isabel does have a mind of her own, like Browning's Duke he begins to exert his tyranny: "The shadows had begun to gather; it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one" (PL 400). The recognition that unleashes the

Duke's cruelty is that his Duchess also has a mind and spirit of her own: "she liked whate'er/She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. . . . Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt/Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without/Much the same smile" (VA 802). The Duke "gave commands,/Then all smiles stopped together" (VA 802). His commands lead to the destruction of the Duchess, leaving only the portrait of a lady: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,/Looking as if she were alive" (VA 801). Throughout much of the novel, Osmond similarly succeeds in confining Isabel's uninhibited nature and reducing his lady to a portrait, the "fine lady" that Ralph perceives.

As James reveals, Isabel "had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception -- she had more the air of being able to wait. Now, at all events, *framed* in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man [Ned Rosier] as the picture of a gracious lady" (emphasis added) (PL 346). Isabel, like the Duchess, has been reduced to "a motionless feature of the interior of her husband's impressive house" from which all vitality and life has been effaced (Habegger, *Gender* 68-69). With all her visions of autonomy and self-determination, Isabel's reduction by Osmond to a lifeless and thoughtless portrait is both an ironically humorous and horrific end to the girl's high ideals and hopeful future. Finally, at the end of the novel, Isabel recognizes her relationship with Osmond and Madame Merle in an even cruder image. She sees "the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron" (PL 522). No longer an exquisite piece of art to fashion and admire, Isabel is reduced to a common utilitarian object.

Thus, James constructs a grotesque objectifying of his heroine in order to reveal her degeneration from artist to work of art, from creator to created, from controller to controlled,

and finally from work of art to common tool. Such objectifying serves to illuminate the commonly-held Victorian male perception of women as "decorative pieces" to satisfy and be fashioned by male requirements. The reader contemplates Isabel as an object for the male gaze with an irreconcilable combination of humor and disgust or shock -- a mixture of incompatibles that comprises the grotesque.

B. Pansy Osmond

Henry James's portrayal of Pansy, Gilbert Osmond's obedient, porcelain-like daughter, can be regarded as grotesque from a number of perspectives. For a twentieth-century reader (or even a progressive nineteenth-century reader), Pansy, the product of the Victorian Catholic ideal of feminine girlhood, may appear at once charming and disturbing, humorous and horrific, like a china doll with painted-on eyes. James describes the girl as "really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent -- only two or three small exquisite instincts: for knowing a friend, for avoiding a mistake, for taking care of an old toy or a new frock" (*PL* 296). Indeed, Isabel is fascinated by Osmond's child -- "how prettily she had been directed and fashioned; and yet how simple, how natural, how innocent she had been kept!" (*PL* 296). The reader, like Isabel, may delight in Pansy's simplistic and unblemished description, yet the extent of her subjected subjectivity and her unmindful complacency is quite disturbing.

James presents Pansy's "blankness" to Isabel and to the reader in a shockingly grotesque scene when Isabel visits Osmond's apartments on Bellosguardo for the first time. Suddenly Osmond, the devoted father, has Pansy get "out of her chair. . . making her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm round her little waist. The

child fixed her eyes on Isabel with a still, disinterested gaze, which seemed void of an intention, but conscious of an attraction" (*PL* 240). Thus, Pansy, a fifteen-year-old physically mature young woman is made out to be a small child, and her mind, "void of an intention but conscious of an attraction," is likened to no more than the basest instincts of a faithful puppy.

In this scene, the grotesque is made evident through dislocation -- Pansy is *not* a child and yet willingly acts and is treated like one. The shock effect of this scene is heightened by the contrast of the contentedly submissive Pansy with the free-spirited, determined Isabel. By this time, the reader is well aware of Isabel's determination to think and do for herself. The juxtaposition of the china doll Pansy (only three years younger than Isabel) with Isabel's established image makes for a dramatic incongruity. The grotesqueness of this scene also affects Isabel, jolting her "out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confronting . . . [her] with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (Thomson 58-59).

Alfred Habegger in *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* notices that "the eyes of the child woman are wide open, but she does not seem to be fully aware, her mind emptied of all volition or interest and containing only a passive responsiveness" (151). The once charmed Isabel soon recognizes the disturbing reality of Pansy's situation:

[S]he was not clever enough for precocious coqueties. She was not clever; Isabel could see that; she had only nice feelings. There was something touching about her; Isabel had felt it before; she would be an easy victim of fate. She would have no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance; only an exquisite taste, and an appreciation, equally exquisite, of such affection as might be bestowed her. She would be easily mystified, easily crushed; her force would be solely in her power to cling (*PL* 399).

Another aspect of Pansy's grotesqueness is her likening by James's male characters to a work of art -- an act that evokes in the reader irreconcilable feelings of humor and disgust at this reification. Even Isabel, herself rendered as an *objet d'art*, notices that "Mr. Osmond's

diminutive daughter had a kind of finish that was not entirely artless" (*PL* 239). Ned Rosier, a collector of fine antiques and Pansy's suitor, regards his beloved as a lovely knick-knack to add to his collection: "He thought of her in amorous meditation a good deal as he might have thought of a Dresden-china shepherdess" (*PL* 336). In his admiration, he turns her over and over as would an art connoisseur in looking for a crack in a priceless vase; he finds her "admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece" (*PL* 336). Objecting to her "handling" by Mr. Rosier and wanting to "show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more careful about the finishing touches," Osmond returns Pansy to the Roman convent and ensures her complete subservience to his will (*PL* 503).

Thus, Pansy becomes an example of the blankness and passivity which Victorian society expected of and often admired in a young woman. Raised and educated in a convent, Pansy is molded by nineteenth-century cultural demands into a model girl-woman, "a passive spectator in the operation of her fate" and "impregnated with the idea of submission" (Allen, "Objects" 88). A true grotesque in her "blankness," evoking in the reader a conflict of humor and horror and the sense of dislocation, Isabel's "transparent little companion" can be seen as James's commentary on the Victorian educational ideal for young girls; Pansy acts as both a foil and a frightening potential for the strong-willed, independent-thinking Isabel Archer.

C. Henrietta Stackpole

Henrietta Stackpole can likewise be regarded as a potential for Isabel; she is James's only literary woman in the novel -- the uninhibited world traveler and undaunted reporter -- and his portrait of Henrietta as the "modern woman" is gently satirical and grotesque. "Henrietta,

for Isabel, was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (*PL* 46). Yet Henrietta's grotesqueness lies in her blatant violation of the Victorian image of the "angel in the house," in her transgression into the male-dominated public sphere of business and professional life, and in the conflicting reactions of humor and horror that her threat to the prescribed nineteenth-century standard for women's place evokes in both James's male characters and in the readers. As James remarks, "Henrietta was a literary woman, and the great advantage of being a literary woman was that you could go everywhere and do everything" (*PL* 115). Thus, the very essence of Henrietta's grotesqueness is the clash between the feminine ideal and the masculine reality. Miss Stackpole's own name is demonstrative of this unresolved conflict, being a feminized version of the masculine (and James's own) name Henry. "Stackpole" may be regarded as a sign of Henrietta's intrusion on male industrial society -- the world of factories and smokestacks -- and as a phallic symbol.

Furthermore, Henrietta is made grotesque by male characters who are uncomfortable with her assertive inquiries about English society and her self-sufficient nature. These men fulfill Thomson's description of the grotesque as entailing at once delight with something that fails to conform to accepted norms and fear or anger when the norms are threatened or attacked. As a novelty that fails to conform to accepted standards, Henrietta is first greeted with tolerant amusement. Caspar Goodwood comments that "Lady correspondents appeared to him a part of the natural scheme of things in a progressive country, and though he never read their letters he supposed that they ministered somehow to social prosperity" (*PL* 434). Yet this novelty proves to be disturbing and transgressive to Henrietta's male acquaintances - she is out of place (or better, out of her sphere). She unreservedly delves into the masculine sphere of politics, shocking Lord Warburton with her candid opinions:

"I don't approve of you, you know; I feel as if I ought to tell you that. . . . I don't suppose any one ever said such a thing to you before, did they? I don't approve of lords as an institution. I think the world has got beyond them -- far beyond" (*PL* 118).

Such frankness fuels Osmond's remarks to Isabel and are indicative of the male position. He comments:

"Miss Stackpole, however, is your most wonderful invention. She strikes me as a kind of monster. One hasn't a nerve in one's body that she doesn't set quivering. You know I never have admitted that she's a woman. Do you know what she reminds me of? Of a new steel pen -- the most odious thing in nature" (*PL* 463).

As a violator of the nineteenth-century standard of womanhood, Henrietta is reduced even below a decorative piece of artwork -- she is the odious steel pen that scratches and irritates the paper on which it writes. Henrietta quite openly refuses to be molded into a Pansy or remain "angelic" in the house, and she is thus regarded by Osmond and those like him -- perpetrators of the Victorian ideal -- as a hideous being, a grotesque in the shape of a creature in the early Roman *grotte*.

D. Madame Merle

Henry James forms Madame Merle into his most frequently and grotesquely objectified character in order to exaggerate her outward appearance as a paragon of polished social adeptness and, at the same time, to undercut this facade to reveal her true nature. Existing outside the confines of Victorian marriage, Madame Merle, "This roundest and smoothest bead of. . . [the] social rosary," as James describes her, can also be considered grotesque because she violates the ideal of feminine passivity and, in doing so, is described in metaphors that are at once humorous and disturbing. Indeed, she is the instigator of much of the action in *The Portrait of a Lady* and seems to Isabel to be the model of experienced womanhood, able to shape and control her own destiny. "Experience," James notes, "however, had not

quenched her youth; it had simply made her sympathetic and supple. She was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination" (*PL* 162-63). Isabel eventually concludes that "to be so cultivated and civilised, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it -- that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self" (*PL* 177).

Yet James skillfully undercuts Isabel's exalted portrait of Madame Merle with grotesque images which both objectify her and give insight into her true character:

If for Isabel she had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious, since from these vulgar vices no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness which we may assume to have belonged to even the most amiable persons in the ages before country-house life was the fashion [S]he existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals (*PL* 178).

In this description, Madame Merle is rendered grotesque through James's "formal distortion of the natural to the point of comic absurdity. . . or ludicrous caricature" (Holman 206).

Even Madame Merle describes herself to Isabel by using an extended metaphor of a well-used pot that seems quite charming but is pervasively disturbing:

"It's very true; there are many more iron pots certainly than porcelain. But you may depend on it that every one bears some mark; even the hardest iron pots have a little bruise, a little hole somewhere. I flatter myself that I'm rather stout, but if I must tell you the truth I've been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I've been cleverly mended; and I try to remain in the cupboard -- the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's an odour of stale spices -- as much as I can. But when I've to come out and into a strong light -- then, my dear, I'm a horror!" (*PL* 179)

Madame Merle explains her womanhood to Isabel in both a lighthearted evaluation and a horrible revelation -- despite her "stoutness" as a woman she is still a utilitarian object. More than once she reminds Isabel, "'I'm old and stale and faded. . . . I'm of no more interest than

last week's newspaper. You're young and fresh and of to-day; you've the great thing -- you've actuality'" (*PL* 182). By comparing herself to an old newspaper, Madame Merle both acknowledges and warns Isabel of the reductive power of reification. This reification, whether fashioned by James's male characters or by James himself, can be regarded as grotesque because it produces in the reader an unsettling conflict between humor and horror or disgust at its reduction of a living, energetic, thoughtful woman to a lifeless, static object.

James intensifies the effect of Madame Merle's grotesqueness through the extreme, abnormal flattery bestowed upon her by her acquaintances -- flattery that once again distorts the natural to the point of absurdity, abnormality, or caricature. Mrs. Touchett attests, "'She is incapable of a mistake. . . . Serena Merle hasn't a fault'" (*PL* 180). To this fawning, Isabel returns (as the reader might), "'If I didn't already like her very much that description might alarm me'" (*PL* 180). Ralph's exaggerated description of Madame Merle's merits also serves to render the woman grotesque and spurs Isabel to question her authenticity:

"When I say she exaggerates I don't mean it in the vulgar sense -- that she boasts, overstates, gives too fine an account of herself. I mean literally that she pushes the search for perfection too far -- that her merits are in themselves overstrained. She's too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete, in a word. I confess to you that she acts on my nerves and that I feel about her a good deal as the intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides the Just" (*PL* 235).

Ralph concludes his comments on Madame Merle in a humorous yet foreboding tone: "'She's a capital person for you to know. Since you wish to see the world you couldn't have a better guide. . . . [S]he's the great round world itself!'" (*PL* 235)

Isabel soon comes to recognize the presence of a conflict in Madame Merle -- underneath her apparent social grace and polish lies some ambivalent quality that produces a disharmony or unresolved effect and serves to make her a grotesque.

Into this freshness of Madame Merle's she obtained a considerable insight; she seemed to see it as professional, as slightly mechanical, carried about in its case like the fiddle of the virtuoso, or blanketed and bridled like the "favourite" of the jockey. She liked her as much as ever, but there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if she had remained after all something of a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character, and in costume. She had once said that she came from a distance, that she belonged to the "old, old" world, and Isabel never lost the impression that she was the product of a different moral or social clime from her own, that she had grown up under other stars (*PL* 304).

Following her marriage to Osmond, Isabel still admires Madame Merle but cannot resist describing her as a grotesque, a humorous and horrific caricature, sharply distinguished from the Victorian ideal of passive and contented femininity: "That personage was armed at all points; it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle. She carried her flag discreetly, but her weapons were polished steel, and she used them with a skill which struck Isabel as more and more that of a veteran" (*PL* 377-78).

Thus, through his use of caricature and framing images, James fashions Madame Merle into a work of art similar to the portraits of Isabel and Pansy. Yet James saves his "grand stroke" of the grotesque for the close of the novel when Isabel meets the uncovered Madame Merle at the Roman convent. Isabel has at last penetrated Madame Merle's engaging facade to confront the reality beneath, "her falsity, her audacity, her ability, her probable suffering" (*PL* 519). And when Madame Merle suddenly stands before her, "The effect was strange. . .[seeing her] in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move" (*PL* 519). Isabel finally reduces the model she once emulated to a grotesquely distorted work of art -- one that simultaneously appears charming and frightening.

E. Mrs. Touchett and Countess Gemini

The secondary characters of Mrs. Touchett and Countess Gemini act as comic grotesques in *The Portrait of a Lady* -- their likening to objects appears less threatening than Isabel's or Pansy's and displays James's ability to portray the playful side of the grotesque as well as its disturbing side. Mrs. Touchett, whose "dryness" of character makes light of her name, has edges of conduct "so very clear cut that for susceptible persons it sometimes had a knife-like effect. . ." and is deemed "as honest as a pair of compasses" (PL 16-17, 206).

In addition to such humorous yet mildly troubling images of Mrs. Touchett, James depicts her as a grotesque because, like Madame Merle, she violates the social norms of Victorian marriage and female passivity. As James notes, "She was virtually separated from her husband, but she appeared to perceive nothing irregular in the situation" (PL 16-17). In such a marital arrangement, Mrs. Touchett is a dislocated figure and clearly disregards the notion of woman as the "angel in the house." In Ralph's view, "His father, as he had often said to himself, was the more motherly; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial" (PL 31). Thus, James presents in the Touchett's marriage a clear gender reversal. Daniel Touchett, the invalid and lover of tea-time chats is feminized while Mrs. Touchett is masculinized. She travels across the ocean to claim Isabel, establishes her own residence in Florence, and commands with the authority of a patriarch. Ralph's observation recognizes that his mother and father's relationship is a humorous twist to the ideal Victorian roles of men and women in marriage, but his comments may also be seen as a disturbing upset in the accepted balance of power within marriage.

The Countess Gemini, throughout the novel, is grotesquely described with bird-like characteristics that render her a comic character but that also subtly yet shockingly reduce her to something beneath or outside of humanity -- an abnormality or an absurdity. James introduces her in this manner, even stressing the conflict of horror and joy in her appearance:

The Countess Gemini simply nodded without getting up: Isabel could see she was a woman of high fashion. She was thin and dark and not at all pretty, having features that suggested some tropical bird -- a long beak-like nose, small, quickly moving eyes and a mouth and chin that receded extremely. Her expression, however, thanks to various intensities of emphasis and wonder, *of horror and joy*, was not inhuman, and, as regards her appearance, it was plain that she understood herself and made the most of her points. Her attire, voluminous and delicate, bristling with elegance, had the look of a shimmering plumage, and her attitudes were as light and sudden as those of a creature who perched upon twigs (emphasis added) (PL 237).

To counterbalance Pansy's "blankness," James objectifies the Countess as a different sort of page: ". . . the Countess was quite another affair. She was by no means a blank sheet; she had been written over in a variety of hands, and Mrs. Touchett, who felt by no means honoured by her visit, pronounced that a number of unmistakeable blots were to be seen upon her surface" (PL 261).

Isabel, too, forms a grotesque image of the Countess, recognizing her underachievement in the social adeptness so brilliantly evident in Madame Merle. "Isabel had been made acquainted with the estimate prevailing under that roof: it represented Mr. Osmond's sister as a lady who had so mismanaged her improprieties that they had ceased to hang together at all -- which was at least what one asked of such matters -- and had become the mere floating fragments of a wrecked renown, incommoding social circulation" (PL 262-63). Again drawing on the characteristic of the grotesque that elicits both amusement and horror at a violation of an accepted social standard, James grotesquely portrays the Countess

as a violator of the notion that women serve as moral preceptors for the world. Isabel reflects that

The Countess seemed to her to have no soul; she was like a bright rare shell, with a polished surface and a remarkably pink lip, in which something would rattle when you shook it. This rattle was apparently the Countess's spiritual principle, a little loose nut that tumbled about inside her. She was too odd for disdain, too anomalous for comparisons.

He [Osmond] said at another time that she had no heart; and he added in a moment that she had given it all away -- in small pieces, like a frosted wedding cake (*PL* 423-24).

V. Marriage and the Grotesque

"There's room everywhere, my dear, if you'll pay for it. I sometimes think I've paid too much for this. Perhaps you also might have to pay too much."

"Perhaps I might," the girl replied.

"She has only one fault."

"What's that?"

"Too many ideas."

"I warned you she was clever."

"Fortunately, they're very bad ones," said Osmond.

"Why is that fortunate?"

"Dame, if they must be sacrificed!"

Henry James
The Portrait of a Lady

In Henry James's representation of marriage and of Isabel's decision to marry in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the grotesque operates as a literary mode because James combines humor with disturbing descriptions of the institution itself and because he highlights the incongruity of Isabel's irreconcilable desires for autonomy and submission, desires that are in fact irreconcilable. The grotesque mode operates, for example, in Osmond's comic yet disturbing description of himself and his wife "'as united as the candlestick and the snuffer'" (PL 476). Osmond's image, which at once objectifies the marriage partners and distorts the Victorian ideal of harmony in the home, encapsulates James's view of marriage in the nineteenth century. William Veeder maintains that "Without mounting a soapbox or waving a placard, Henry James makes us experience what honest Victorians knew -- that the ideal of Victorian marriage, the dream of reciprocal mastery [that is, she ruling his heart, he ruling her mind] was culpably remote from the social reality" (Veeder 171). Although James may not mount a soapbox, he successfully draws attention to the incompatibles he perceived in Victorian marriage and specifically in Isabel and Osmond's marriage through his use of the grotesque.

James renders the institution of marriage grotesque by describing it in terms one would likely see in a scientific journal, evoking from the reader feelings both of humor and shock. In Daniel and Lydia Touchett's unlikely union, James presents the portrait of a couple still linked but no longer intimate in their "experiment in matrimony" (*PL* 8). Furthermore, James deems marriage an "undertaking" and a "form," a term used by Caspar Goodwood when condemning Isabel's marriage as a "ghastly form" and also by Osmond who, urging Isabel not to travel to Gardencourt, speaks "in the name of something sacred and precious -- the observance of a magnificent form" (*PL* 507).

From the outset of the novel, James makes undeniably evident his heroine's distaste for confinement within a "form." Isabel, he writes, "had a collection of views on the subject of marriage. . . . She held that a woman ought to be able to make up her life in singleness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex" (*PL* 47). Even when Ralph asserts that the only true freedom for women exists in marriage, not outside of it, Isabel affirms, "'I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do'" (*PL* 138). Isabel concludes that the greater "social freedom" that marriage allows women involves the acceptance of precisely the sort of rigid roles entailed by the Victorian ideal that Isabel resists (Allen, *Place* 69). By declining Warburton's offer of marriage, for example, Isabel rejects what he, as a British lord, represents -- conventionalized society and all that it implies about women (Poirier 36).

Thus, Isabel's firmness of resolve on the question of marriage, manifested in the first half of the novel, renders her union to Gilbert Osmond a simultaneously humorous and frightening turn of events. The headstrong girl, secretly pleased with her ability to reject two worthy suitors, is taken in by the least worthy of them all, "'a faded rosebud,'" as Ralph calls

him, "' -- a missile that should never have touched you'" (PL 324). Alfred Habegger likens Isabel's marriage to the unnatural union of the orphaned girl and the father-lover (Habegger, *Business* 4). His unique thesis, though it does not specifically refer to the grotesque as a literary mode, maintains that there is something "funny" about this union. On the one hand, Isabel and Osmond's relationship as father and daughter within their marriage is humorous; on the other hand, this connection seems out of place, bizarre, even disturbing.

Early in the narrative, James describes the late Mr. Archer as an "indulgent and affectionate" father but "somewhat irresponsible"; Mr. Archer once left eleven-year-old Isabel in Switzerland "with a French *bonne* who had eloped with Russian nobleman. . ." (PL 28). Thus, Habegger asserts, inherent in the orphaned Isabel is a sense of restlessness (evident in her desire to possess the freedom to see, to do, to be what she chooses) which seeks to be quelled. Osmond attracts Isabel because he appears to embody her image of an ideal father with his daughter "-- the image of a quiet, clever, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d'Arno, and holding by the hand a little girl whose sympathetic docility gave a new aspect to childhood" (PL 260). This for Isabel becomes a very comforting picture, though it directly contradicts her previous desires of unbounded independence.

Despite her earlier argument that she is definitely not a candidate for adoption by Mrs. Touchett, Habegger believes that Isabel simultaneously desires to be a passive daughter in Pansy's image: "Mr. Osmond stood there. . . with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and his daughter, who had now locked her arm into one of his own, clinging to him and looking up, while her eyes moved from his own face to Isabel's. Isabel waited, with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed" (PL 243). Thus, Isabel's desire

for a father-daughter relationship within her marriage to Osmond is inherently grotesque -- a distortion of the natural to the point of frightening absurdity, shocking the reader "with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (Thomson 59). Furthermore, Isabel's vacillations between her desire for the autonomy to form her own destiny and her willingness to "have her movements directed" displays the fundamental conflict and mixture of incompatibles in the grotesque.

It is both humorous and horrible that James's "flame-like spirit" so easily submits herself to Osmond's snuffer. Only when she meets Osmond and forms her image of him does she begin to feel a "novel embarrassment about her undirected independence" (Habegger, *Business* 151). She tells Osmond, "'I am rather ashamed of my plans; I make a new one everyday'" (*PL* 247). Isabel's conflicting desires split her "into two disconnected halves -- a partly factitious determination to be her own master and a dark fascination with images of dominance and submission" (Habegger, *Business* 159). Thus, Isabel can be seen as a grotesque according to Flannery O'Connor's view of the mode. She is forced to confront the extremes of her nature, however irreconcilable they may be -- the extremes of Isabel Archer the woman and Mrs. Gilbert Osmond the wife. Habegger concludes that Isabel's sense of freedom weighs on her so heavily that she wishes to explore the other extreme of confinement and daughterly surrender (Habegger, *Business* 159).

Ralph and Isabel's exchange in Chapter Thirty-Four illustrates Isabel's wavering between the two extremes:

"You were the last person I expected to see caught."

"I don't know why you call it caught."

"Because you're going to be put into a cage."

"If I like my cage that needn't trouble you," she answered(*PL* 320).

Throughout the novel, Isabel has regarded marriage of any sort as a cage that would limit her personal freedom; in a complete turnaround she declares to Ralph that she might like such a confinement. Thus, James creates in Isabel an unresolved clash of incompatible reactions to the questions of marriage and freedom. A reader may be amused at the vacillations of the headstrong, foolish American girl but also be frightened or horrified at the ease with which Isabel's image of Osmond as fatherly protector and preceptor draws her into his cage.

VI. Isabel as a Grotesque

Then she wondered if it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it even been a guarantee to be valuable? Wasn't all history full of the destruction of precious things? Wasn't it much more probable that if one were fine one would suffer? It involved then perhaps an admission that one had a certain grossness. . . .

Henry James
The Portrait of a Lady

Isabel Archer, in her very nature, is a grotesque. She is a mixture of irreconcilable elements and an embodiment of unresolved conflict which evokes in the observers of her character and actions simultaneous feelings of humor and horror or disgust. David Lubin asserts that "Much of the tension that animates *The Portrait of a Lady* results from a set of conflicts experienced by Isabel, who yearns for reality unconstructed, uncropped and yet at the same time for reality that is delimited, structured, graspable" (Lubin 101).

Isabel is both the independent, spunky American girl and the reserved, submissive Victorian lady; the co-presence of such extremes in one character is at once humorous and disturbing. We are delighted at Isabel's "freshness," her refusal to conform with accepted standards, her desire to be her own person in a society that scarcely recognizes a woman's capacity or right to make choices. We laugh at her incongruity, as James describes her:

Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant (*PL* 45-46).

And yet Isabel's conflicting desires for both self-determination and submission, her nonchalant dismissal of convention, and her inflated view of herself and her power "to choose" are

disturbing and threatening. She is a dislocated figure -- she is alienated from the Victorian ideal of womanhood -- and thus she is a grotesque. James reveals that "A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist -- murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own" (*PL* 93). Isabel, too, is a realistic character in the realistic setting of nineteenth-century Europe, yet her ambivalence and her ability both to charm and disturb the reader (especially the nineteenth-century reader) are essential in James's portrayal of her as a grotesque who confronts us with a "radically different, disturbing perspective" on the portrait of a Victorian lady (Thomson 59).

As Alfred Habegger insists, Henry James fashions Isabel as both "object and agent" - a seemingly incompatible combination. She is not wholly "the perfect and powerful heroine of women's fiction," the free agent, nor is she wholly the helpless victim or product of Victorian society (Habegger, *Gender* 71). James clearly states this conflict in the March 16, 1879 entry of his notebooks: "The idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done as she believes, a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional" (*NB* 13).

The oppositions in Isabel which cause her to be both object and agent, both a humorous caricature and a dislocated figure of "a certain grossness," are many (*PL* 531). James reveals that "The depths of this young lady's nature were a very out-of-the-way place, between which and the surface communication was interrupted by a dozen capricious forces" (*PL* 29). Laurence Bedwell Holland gives a detailed description of Isabel's irreconcilable positions and characteristics:

[She is a] combination of caution and curiosity, inexperience and alertness, and the strength of will which leads her to confront life's options "'So as to choose.'" Her suspicion of the poisoned cup of experience and her fear of suffering are countered by her desire to join in what ordinary "'people know and suffer.'" Her desire "to leave the

past behind her" and encounter always fresh beginnings is balanced by her deepening response to the appeal of the past and tradition. Her acknowledged ignorance "about bills" or "'anything about money'" is countered by the definiteness of her aversion "'to being under pecuniary of obligations'" and the assurance of her delusion that in going to Europe she is literally "'travelling at her own expense.'" The "something cold and dry in her temperament" which notice is countered by the boldness of her "ridiculously active imagination" which renders her vulnerable to delusions, being so "wide-eyed" as to suffer from "seeing too many things at once" and incurring the "penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging." Her mind in sum is a "tangle of vague outlines at the start" (Holland 64).

Yet James reveals the most obvious unresolved conflict within Isabel Archer as her simultaneous desires for personal freedom outside of the restraints of nineteenth-century society and for protection within those same limits. "Isabel is scared of the burden of tremendous responsibility involved in complete, unquestionable freedom, but she is also exhilarated at the thought of her consciousness opening up, infinitely, towards the fulfillment of its own potentialities" (Santos 123). The fortune bestowed on her by Daniel Touchett illuminates her internal dilemma between autonomy and submission.

When Lord Warburton proposes to Isabel at Gardencourt, he informs her that the freedom she hopes to attain is necessarily limited by her status as a woman: "'An unmarried woman -- a girl of your age -- is not independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She is hampered at every step'" (*PL* 96). Upon receiving her fortune, however, Isabel is confident she can overcome these limitations; she is enchanted by "a maze of visions" of what a generous, independent, responsible girl could do with such resources (*PL* 209). Yet, in addition to offering her the means to achieve personal freedom, her fortune also constrains her. When Isabel reflects on her decision to marry Osmond, she recognizes that she never would have married him "but for her money" (*PL* 403). "Her money had been the contribution to the marriage that appealed to her 'maternal strain,' yet the indelicacy of having merely inherited it was also a 'burden' on her conscience which she longed to transfer to someone

else" (Holland 67). Thus, Isabel's fortune gives her the power to contribute to her marriage and, at the same time, weighs on her and leads to her dependence on Osmond -- a humorous and disturbing situation for the idealistic girl who believed her fortune would become "a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her imagination, a certain ideal beauty" (*PL* 209).

Daniel Touchett's bequest to Isabel intensifies her conflict between autonomy and submission. She tells Ralph "'a large fortune means freedom; and I'm afraid of that. It's such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn't one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it's a constant effort. I'm not sure it's not a greater happiness to be powerless'" (*PL* 208). As Virginia C. Fowler comments, "Isabel's discomfort seems to originate in the sense that her fortune has given her a kind of masculine power and that this is somehow wrong. . ." (Fowler 74). Isabel acknowledges her grotesqueness, her dislocation, the combination of humor and horror in her transgression of the woman's sphere. She confesses to Osmond, "'you see my ignorance, my blunders, the way I wander about as if the world belonged to me, simply because -- because it has been put into my power to do so. You don't think a woman ought to do that'" (*PL* 289). "Her wealth and the unnatural power she thinks it brings give her the kind of masculine opportunities that Osmond's relative poverty makes inaccessible to him. Thus, their socially defined sexual roles have been reversed, which produces both guilt and uncertainty in Isabel" and renders her grotesque (Fowler 75).

Through Isabel's professed desire for both freedom and protection, James also reveals the irreconcilable conflict between her role as the free-spirited "modern" American woman and the refined, obedient Victorian lady. It is both humorous and unsettling to witness Isabel's

vacillations as she is forced to confront the extremes of her nature. Isabel's early refusal to define herself in the way ordinarily open to women -- that is, through marriage -- has been one of her most distinguishing characteristics (Fowler 73). She assumes that neither Goodwood nor Warburton in their proposals will allow her to follow her own free will. "So she turns them down and in doing so refuses to accept the conditions of contemporary feminine life. But neither will she accept the only alternative, the one chosen by Henrietta Stackpole -- the masculinization of a male career" (Habegger, *Gender* 72). Thus, until her union with Osmond, Isabel is a dislocated figure, existing outside of the Victorian ideal of womanhood.

In the early part of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel contends that she is and can remain completely autonomous. Madame Merle, however, tries to convince Isabel that she is not autonomous in the famous passage where she argues that "things" represent and become a part of people (Walton 59).

"When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean that whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? . . . It overflows into everything that belongs to us -- and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self -- for other people -- is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps - these things are all expressive" (PL 187).

Yet Isabel at this point insists that individual liberty is possible:

". . . I don't agree with you. . . . I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself but I know that nothing else expresses me. . . . everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me. . . . My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed on me by society" (PL 188).

Isabel's tragedy results from precisely this blindness and pride -- "the blind presumptuous side of an Emersonianism that cannot conceive any limitation to the transcendental self, any more

than it can imagine genuine evil" (Fogel, "Introduction" 1). Thus, "she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action" (*PL* 45).

Embracing her belief in the ability to be free of the nineteenth-century gender restraints, Isabel can be regarded as a grotesque in the manner which Sherwood Anderson describes in "The Book of the Grotesque." Isabel's assertion that she can remain an autonomous woman in her society is the "truth" that she, like Anderson's grotesques, "snatches up." "It was the truths that made people grotesques. . . . the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (Anderson 24).

In the latter half of the novel, James shows the falsity in Isabel's assertions of personal autonomy, for "she ceases to express or reflect even herself and now represents something else" (Walton 60). After her marriage, James describes her in grotesque images that illuminate the ironic humor and shocking horror of her situation. She strikes Ned Rosier as "the picture of a gracious lady" and, when Ralph observes her portrait-like appearance, he reflects that "she wore a mask; it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted upon it; this was not an expression, Ralph said -- it was a representation" (*PL* 369). "The free keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. 'What did Isabel represent?' Ralph asked himself, and he could only answer by saying she represented Gilbert Osmond" (*PL* 370).

By challenging the definition and limits of conventional womanhood, Isabel has flattered herself that she is not as other women are. In detailing Isabel's resistance to

prescribed gender roles, James reveals his heroine to be a grotesque -- a dislocated figure who evokes in the reader and in the other characters both humor and shock in her transgressions. She wishes to explore the world, to remain single, and to see and judge for herself. Yet James also renders Isabel a grotesque by exploring her irreconcilable conflict in roles: she is at once a hopeful, unconventional American girl and a "tightly corseted" Victorian lady (Habegger, *Gender* 76). She comes to face the extremes of her nature in her midnight vigil and realizes that the world she set out to explore has shrunk, as it does in the climactic scene of the novel, to "a very straight path" -- a tragedy tinged with ironic humor and distress (*PL* 559). James closes *The Portrait of a Lady* with a picture of Isabel Archer in unresolved conflict -- torn between the desire to sink in Caspar Goodwood's "rushing torrent" of emotion which she believes "would be the next best thing to her dying" and to dart from the spot acknowledging the necessity, in "the observance of a magnificent form," of returning to Osmond (*PL* 558, 507). Just as Isabel's future remains unresolved, so do her internal conflicts between autonomy and submission. But Isabel -- the woman and the lady -- concludes "To judge wrong. . . is more honourable than not to judge at all" (*PL* 149).

VII. Conclusion

Henry James's use of the grotesque to describe his women characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* who transgress conventional gender categories illuminates both his work and his world. By 1881, Victorian middle class cultural values and social mores were facing clear and strident challenges. Late Victorian Europe was a society "marked by strife, radical change, [and] disorientation" -- a time and culture, according to Thomson, ripe for the grotesque. More and more Isabel Archers and Henrietta Stackpoles were emerging to challenge the early and mid-Victorian ideals of femininity and woman's role as the "angel in the house."

James's use of the grotesque as a literary mode in portraying his women characters may be examined in relation to James's own views of the women of his time. James reached his maturity and found his calling as an author during a time filled with theory and controversy about women. "Woman's mind, body, social and political condition are now the subject of constant debate," wrote E. L. Godkin in the *Nation* in 1867. James naturally incorporated his ideas, prejudices, and conflicts over women and the woman's role in his writing. He was a man of his time, with a collection of opinions about the difference between men and women and a firm viewpoint of the women's rights movement. Until his late middle age, Henry James was largely contemptuous of campaigns for women suffrage and women's entry into professional life (Habegger, *Business* 6).

Thus, *The Portrait of a Lady* and James's grotesque rendering of his women characters may be examined as his exploration of a woman's place in Victorian society and the possibilities open to her. The novel can be regarded as a reflection and consideration of James's social preoccupations, or his sensitivity to the changing role of women from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos maintains

that "Whether James actually wanted it so or not, by implicitly siding with many other nineteenth-century authors in their concern for the woman's place in society, James made of Isabel's consciousness not just the growing consciousness of a presumptuous girl, around whom an ado is organized, but the very arena upon which the structure of society is questioned through the young woman's 'searching [self-] criticism'" and her criticism of the system in which she must operate (Santos 120).

In recognizing in his female characters Isabel Archer, Madame Merle, Henrietta Stackpole, Mrs. Touchett, and Countess Gemini a violation of the Victorian ideal of womanhood, and in regarding Pansy as an extreme product of this ideal, James portrays these women as grotesques. Yet questions remain. Does James shape his women characters who violate the Victorian ideal of womanhood into grotesques because he sympathizes with their precarious position in the dawning twentieth century? Does he portray Pansy as a grotesque to challenge the widely accepted Victorian ideal of feminine girlhood? Does James render his "less than ideal" women grotesque because, as Habegger asserts, he incorporated much of his father's anti-feminism into his own views and writing? Or in rendering his female characters grotesque is James merely acting as a dispassionate but astute observer of the changing status of womanhood which was disorienting his society? Further examination of the grotesque as a literary mode in other works by James and in the works of other late Victorian writers may shed light on the late nineteenth-century perceptions of womanhood and a woman's place.

Key to Works

PL -- *The Portrait of a Lady*
NA -- *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*
NB -- *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*
AM -- *Atlantic Monthly*

Works Cited

- Allen, Elizabeth. "Objects of Value: Isabel and Her Inheritance."
Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
- Allen, Elizabeth. *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*. London: Macmillan Press, 1984.
- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1960.
- Appignanesi, Lisa. *Femininity and The Creative Imagination: A Study of Henry James, Robert Musel and Marcel Proust*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1973.
- Browning, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett. *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1969.
- Burgon, John. *Sermon*. 1884, pp. 29-30.
- Burstyn, Joan N. *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*. London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980.
- The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*. Eds. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1977.

- Djwa, Sandra. "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Making of a Lady." *Henry James Review*. Vol. 7. Nos. 2-3. Winter-Spring 1986. pp. 72-85.
- Fogel, Daniel Mark. "Framing James's *Portrait*: An Introduction." *Henry James Review*. Vol. 7. Nos. 2-3. Winter-Spring 1986. pp. 1-6.
- Fogel, Daniel Mark. "Henry James's American Girls in Darkest Rome." *The Sweetest Impression of Life: The James Family and Italy*. Eds. James W. Tuttleton and Agostino Lombardo. New York: New York University Press, 1990. pp. 89-106.
- Fowler, Virginia C. *Henry James's American Girl: The Embroidery on the Canvas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Gard, Roger. *Henry James The Portrait of a Lady: A Critical Study*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1986.
- Gorham, Deborah. *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982.
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963.
- Habegger, Alfred. *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Habegger, Alfred. *Henry James and the "Woman Business"*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Holland, Laurence Bedwell. "Organizing an Ado." *Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
- Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. Fourth Edition. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980.
- Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Lubin, David M. "Act of Portrayal." *Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

Maynard, Constance. "Autobiography." MS Westfield College, London, 1915.
pp. 331-333.

Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. 2. Ed. M.H. Abrams et al.
New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962.

Poirier, Richard. "Setting the Scene: The Drama and Comedy of Judgment." *Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady.* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

Scudder, Horace E. "Review." *The Atlantic Monthly.* January 1882. pp. 27-28.

Sabiston, Elizabeth Jean. *The Prison of Womanhood: Four Provisional Heroines in Nineteenth-Century Fiction.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Santo, Mario Irene Ramalho de Sousa. "Isabel's Freedom: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Modern Critical Interpretations Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady.* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

Springer, Mary Doyle. *A Rhetoric of Literary Character: Some Women of Henry James.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Taylor, Mrs. Ann and Jane. *Correspondence Between a Mother and Her Daughter at School.* London 1817. p. 140.

Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque.* London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1972.

Veeder, William. *Henry James -- The Lessons of the Master: Popular Fiction and Personal Style.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Walton, Priscilla L. *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

White, Robert. "Love, Marriage and Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Henry James Review.* Vol. 7. Nos. 2-3. Winter-Spring 1986. pp. 59-71.

Wiesenfarth, Joseph. "A Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Henry James Review.* Vol. 7. Nos. 2-3. Winter-Spring 1986. pp. 18-28.