

The Narrative Techniques in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the narrative techniques in Henry James' masterpiece *The Portrait of a Lady*. James is both a novelist and a literary critic. The narrative techniques that James puts forward are mixed well like milk and water with the theme of *The Portrait of a Lady*. James regards human heart as a closed book and is very interested in the obscurity in human relations. Isabel is eager to learn about the world, yet she is always haunted with the feeling of helplessness due to the isolation and estrangement with others. James' three narrative techniques, i.e., the "central consciousness"; the "limited point of view" and the "organic form" are employed to effectively represent the theme in this novel.

Keywords: Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel, central consciousness, limited point of view, organic form

1. Introduction

Henry James is a famous novelist, stylist, critic and a master of psychological novel. James is regarded as one of the key figures of 19th-century literary realism. He conceives fiction as the most magnificent form of art for literary creation. *The Portrait of a Lady* is considered by many critics as James' best novel. The critics have explored this novel from many aspects. Early critics, for example, W. D. Howells, thought highly of James' ingenious and innovative techniques employed in his novels which were believed to be influenced by French writers such as Flaubert, Maupassant and Zola (qtd. in Grad 31-2). From 1920s to 1960s critics began to interpret the works with the writer's own theory and found that an astonishing unity existed between James' literary theory and practice. Percy Lubbock codified James' use of Strether's point of view in *The Ambassadors* as the most artistic way of "showing" a story (61-2). Such a point of view means the authorial detachment and it sets the stage for the initiation of James as a literary master who introduces the dramatic elements into the art of fiction. Van Wyck Brooks argued that the characters in James' works were very close to life though they exposed James' poor knowledge about his homeland and in Brook's eyes, James was actually "the historian of manners" (92). From 1970s, a band of critical theories rose to prominence one after another. Critics began to interpret James' works from Marxist, feminist and archetypal perspectives. In 1984, Virginia Fowler, by combining Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminism, asserted in her *Henry James' American Girl* that the typical feminine woman in James' fictional world was always depicted as a person confined within her subjective self. John Carlos Rowe used the discussion of the writer's homosexuality as a starting point to explore the mysteries and the dark side of his later works. The international themes are also widely explored by critics.

Although some critics are concerned with the application of James' fictional theories to the interpretation of his own works, they do not give a detailed analysis on the narrative techniques and their effect to convey the theme of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Narrative techniques are the methods that authors use to tell their stories. When analyzing a novel, it is important to identify these techniques in order to shed light on the ways in which they function in the story. James is especially interested in exploiting new narrative techniques in his novels, such as point of view, time elements, spatialization and so on. This paper will focus on the relationship between the theme and the form of *The Portrait of a Lady* and explore how James' narrative techniques convey the theme of the novel.

Generally speaking, James is famous for his "international subject". Many of his novels focus on the theme that innocent Americans will be deceived by sophisticated Europeans. *The Portrait of a Lady* is no exception in terms

of the plot. However, this paper wants to discuss another theme which is not that obvious as the “international subject”, i.e., the isolation and estrangement with others. James poignantly acknowledges that “any human heart is, in the final analysis, a closed book” (Anna 6). Anna Despotopoulou pointed out that “Throughout his [James’] career, he turned again and again to the supernatural, especially the ghostly, as a way of figuring the conflict between what can be known and what must remain mysterious in human relations” (6). James is very interested in the obscurity in human relations. In James’ novels, especially in *The Portrait of a Lady*, James’ characters are eager to learn about the world and others, yet they are always haunted with the feeling of helplessness when dealing with the relations with others. This theme is closely related to James’ theory of fiction. I will illustrate this point from three aspects, which come from James’ three narrative techniques, i.e., the “central consciousness”; the “limited point of view” and the “organic form”.

2. Discussion

James views a novel as “a personal, a direct impression of life” (James, *Muse* 192). In other words, fiction is the direct impression of persons upon the real life; therefore, nothing should enter the narrative but the perception or consciousness of this character. James makes a series of experiments in representing the perception of the characters. In James’s novelistic career, consciousness is always the major focus in his novels and James increasingly emphasizes the importance of consciousness. Traditional realistic writers pay more attention to the external relations and social reality than on the psychological movements of characters. Let’s take Charles Dickens for an example. As one of the greatest critical realistic writers of the Victorian Age, Dickens sets a full map of a large-scale criticism of the 19th-century England, particularly London. Most of his novels present a sharper criticism of social evils and morals of the Victorian England, such as *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, to name just a few. It is his serious intention to expose and criticize in his novels all the poverty, injustice, hypocrisy and corruptness he saw all around him. The psychological movements of the characters are not Dickens’ strengths. Similarly, for many readers, James’ works may have such an impression that the the story of a one-hundred-thousand-words novel of James’ may be simpler than the plot of a short fiction of Jack London’s. James puts emphasis on the subjective spirit and inner world rather than the objective outside world. For James, the conflicts of a fiction are no longer in the outside world but in the inner world. His target is not the narration of a series of incidents but the consciousness of characters. James usually attempts to tell the story from the point of view of a character in the work, either a main character or someone not much involved in the story. In a Jamesian novel, there is always the “central consciousness”, that is, a mind and person through whom the story is being presented to the reader.

2.1 Central Conscious

In his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James tells how he sets about to construct the whole novel. James does not want to focus on the heroine’s “relation to those surrounding her” (James, *Portrait* (Note 1) 10) because it’s an easier way of characterization. James’ main interest is in the consciousness of the heroine, just as he states in the preface:

“Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness,” I said to myself, “and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to that—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into that scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself, and this relation needn’t fear to be too limited. Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight (which is usually the one that tips the balance of interest): press least hard, in short, on the consciousness of your heroine’s satellites, especially the male; make it an interesting contributive only to the greater one. (11)

The Portrait of a Lady tells Isabel’s impression of life. It is a good example for us to understand the mind, perception and reaction of the central character Isabel Archer. The external world was fully reflected through her activities of psychology, and the plot unfolded naturally in her consciousness. From Isabel’s different angles of narration, we can understand her perception of the environment and the characters around her and her psychological changes. For example, Madame Merle plays an important part in Isabel’s life. Isabel’s first impression of Merle is very good. For Isabel, Merle is the most agreeable and refined woman. Madame Merle “had great merits—she was charming, sympathetic, intelligent, cultivated. More than this, she was rare, superior and preeminent” (163). Madame Merle “knew how to think—an accomplishment rare in women;...she knew how to feel. This was indeed Madame Merle’s great talent, her most perfect gift” (James 164). The gates of Isabel’s confidence are open wider to Madame Merle than to others. At that time Isabel would have given up anything for lessons in this art. However, after marriage, Isabel’s needs and inclinations had considerably changed. Isabel had lost the desire to know Merle’s clever trick. If she had troubles she must keep them to

herself, and if life was difficult it would not make it easier to confess herself beaten. In chapter 40, James describes a picture of Osmond and Merle in absorbed mutual gaze which startled Isabel. Isabel perceived that Osmond and Merle had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. For Isabel, “the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light” (343). After that, Isabel began to doubt about Merle’s relationship with Osmond. When Isabel learned that Merle was her husband’s mistress, she at last knew what was pain in life. Likewise, the events, scenes, speeches and acts of other characters become hints and suggestions, which make her gradually recognize herself and the world around her. From Isabel’s consciousness the readers can trace the process of her growth from an innocent, naïve young girl to a mature, disillusioned lady. On the other hand, there are certainly “the gaps and limitations of consciousness which Henry James not only noticed but also highlighted in his fictions” (James, *The Art* 67). James does not describe the others’ consciousness except the heroine’s. Actually James intentionally ignores the consciousness of other characters’. The readers, as well as Isabel, can only gain a limited understanding of other characters in the story. For example, James never shows Goodwood’s consciousness to the readers. Instead, James portrays Goodwood from the perspective of different characters in chapter 13. The impression of Goodwood is different in the eyes of Isabel, Henrietta and Ralph. Isabel regards Goodwood as an aggressive man. Energy, or power, is his nature. The presence of Goodwood seems to deprive her of the sense of freedom since “His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life” (106). Isabel found that Goodwood had a habit of “dressing always in the same manner” (106). His garments were so drearily usual. He seemed too serious. He was far from a delightful person. However, for Henrietta, Goodwood was “a splendid man and a perfect gentleman” (110) who had “splendid manners—in the American style” (111). For Ralph, Goodwood was a man to depend on. Ralph asked Goodwood to save Isabel from her painful marriage. The narrator and Goodwood’s friends also participates in the description of Goodwood. Moreover, Osmond’s impression of Goodwood is given in chapter 47. Readers can only get an ambiguous impression of Goodwood from the combination of the perspectives of different characters in the novel. Likewise, Isabel’s understanding of Madame Merle comes from the conversation with Ralph, Mrs. Touchett, Henrietta, and finally, from Countess Gemini. What Merle thinks about the world is never shown in her consciousness. The narrator does not give any clear opinion of the true character of Madame Merle. What the narrator gives are only some hints of Merle’s ambition: “I am far from wishing to picture her as one of the hungry mouths or envious hearts of the general herd, but we have already learned of her having desires that had never been satisfied” (178). James’ focusing on the “central consciousness” while withholding from others’ consciousness is a special device in this novel. For one thing, the “central consciousness” tactic provides “the gaps and limitations of consciousness” which are necessary for the heroine’s growth, leaving room for the process how Isabel gets to know the true nature of Merle. For another, it is also very useful in conveying the theme of incommunicability with others. Focusing on only one character’s consciousness means that James traps both Isabel and the readers in a limited scope. There is no way to learn about others’ intention for Isabel as well as for the readers. It’s so difficult to cross the boundaries between the knowable and the unknowable because of the limited point of view of Isabel. It’s worth noting that James has very consciously chosen to leave out even Isabel’s consciousness at the critical moment of her life. For example, Isabel’s decision to marry Osmond is deliberately omitted; meanwhile, other characters’ guessing at Isabel’s motive is delineated. Such a trick can cause suspense and arouse readers’ interests. Actually, James’ technique of the “central consciousness” and the “limited point of view” cannot be separated from each other. Due to the two techniques, the reader sees the world only through Isabel’s eyes; consequently, the reader grows with Isabel and understands the world through Isabel’s experiences. If the omniscient point of view is employed instead, Isabel’s painful process of growth will not have struck a responsive chord in the hearts of its readers. As a result, the gradual and painful process of growth will be ignored and the heroine’s anxiety will not be sympathized by the reader. The suspense that James has carefully built will collapse.

2.2 Limited Point of View

The “limited point of view”, a new narrative technique, is frequently used in James’ novels. This technique caters to James’ concept of fiction. In the opinion of James, faithfulness is the most important factor in fiction. James believes that the reality only existed in the impression that life gives to its observers, not in the instances not really known to these people. And he thinks realists should reflect life from what they have seen rather than tell readers what life really is. James experimented constantly with “viewpoints” (or angle of narration). And he regards the limited point of view as the best way for conveying the direct impression of the characters on life. For example, the center of the whole story of *The Portrait of a Lady* is the consciousness of Isabel the lady. She is the center of the opinions and views of different people in the novel. Other characters’ actions and words are

for her to observe so that she gradually gains better understanding of herself and the world, while, other people's impression and ideas upon her make us understand her character and the complex situations better.

Before James, the third-person omniscient perspective has been the most commonly used in fiction in which the tale is told from the point of view of a narrator who plays no part in the story but knows all the facts, including the characters' thoughts. One advantage of the omniscient mode is that it promotes the sense of objective reliability of the plot like truthfulness. For readers, the third-person omniscient narrator plays the part of a reliable narrator, upon whom our perception of characters and plot depend. "The disadvantage of third-person omniscient is that it can create more distance between the audience and the story, and that characterization is more limited, which can reduce the reader's identification with or attachment to the characters when it is used in conjunction with a sweeping, epic 'cast of thousands' story. And too much interference makes the novels far from the readers." (Zhang 9) Henry James thinks that the omniscient voice tends to make the structure of the story not tight and lead to a lack of the stylistic beauty of the story. For that reason, James develops the famous limited point of view and uses a lot in his works. He stays away from the omniscient narrator except for occasional comments. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the story develops mainly from Isabel's point of view. James tells the reason for his preference of the limited point of view in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeming more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on. (7)

James compares the perspectives of the characters in the fiction as the windows of a house. Looking from different windows, different characters will get an impression distinct from each other. According to James, "Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive" (James, *Muse* 200). James was very careful in selecting the point of view in his novel. The center of the whole story of *The Portrait of a Lady* is the consciousness of Isabel. Let's take an example from James' description of Pansy. James never portrays Pansy's consciousness. The image of Pansy was shown from the perspective of Isabel. In Isabel's eyes, Pansy was like a bland page, innocent and obedient. Pansy's thoughts were unknown to the readers. She did not reveal her true feelings toward her lover Rosier. We can only gain a glimpse of Pansy's inner world through the observation of Isabel. For example, in chapter 43, Pansy held her bouquet very tight and counted over the flowers for the twentieth time at the ball. When she went to dance with her partners, she gave the bouquet to Isabel to hold. Then Rosier came and took one flower away. Pansy had seen Rosier and she counted her flowers again. She must have noticed that Rosier had taken one of the flowers. But Pansy said nothing to Isabel. Isabel had a feeling that "there were deeper forces at play than she had recognized" (366). Isabel thought that Pansy had her own opinions of the world, but the readers are kept in the dark because of Isabel's limited point of view.

Another example comes from the reason for Isabel's refusal to Warburton's proposal. First James focuses on Isabel's consciousness to seek for the reason. For Isabel, Lord Warburton is a "personage" (94), a territorial magnate, who has a system and orbit different from hers. Her usual standard of judging a person, i.e., on the basis of character and wit, does not fit Warburton. Warburton possesses "a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule, but which demanded a different sort of appreciation—an appreciation that the girl, with her habit of judging quickly and freely, felt she lacked patience to bestow" (95). She thinks that Warburton's system contains "something stiff and stupid which would make it a burden" (95). Warburton represents a life of aristocracy which "might have discomforts, might contain oppressive, might contain narrowing elements, might prove really but a stupefying anodyne" (101). The marriage with Warburton would inhibit her from "the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining" (101). After focusing on Isabel's consciousness, the narrator's voice appears. The narrator asks readers not to smile at Isabel who debated whether she should accept Warburton's propose before Warburton had offered himself and who was disposed to believe that on the whole she could do better. The narrator admits to the readers that Isabel has "a great deal of folly in her wisdom" for the present, but later she will become wise at the cost of an amount of folly. The narrator even foretells Isabel's miserable future in order to arouse readers'

sympathy toward Isabel.

However, in Warburton's opinion, Isabel did not understand him at all. Just as Warburton had declared to Isabel that "Do you know I'm very much afraid of it—of that remarkable mind of yours?" (100) and Isabel exclaimed that "So am I, my lord!" (101), the mind, or the consciousness of another person is always the most difficult thing to decipher. Later, in chapter 28, Warburton expressed his perplex at Isabel's unusual behaviors. Warburton could not understand Isabel. He wondered why Isabel should "mark so one of his values—quite the wrong one—when she would have nothing to do with another, which was quite the right" (255). Warburton's puzzle showed Isabel's ignorance of the world. Isabel's stubbornness, inexperience and innocence were completely shown through the technique of the limited point of view. Isabel, as well as the readers, experienced the helplessness when other characters' consciousness is hidden from her like a closed book.

2.3 Organic Form

James also attaches great importance to the form of his novels. In his famous theory of "organic form" (James, *The Art* 84), James describes writer as the architect and the ability to compose fiction as "the Architectural competence" (11). James regards a novel as an "organic form". He emphasizes more than once that the fiction is "a living thing" which is organic with each part related to the whole (James, *Muse* 196). In the theory of organic form, James describes the writer as the "architect" and the ability to compose fiction as "the Architectural competence" (11). In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James declares that:

On one thing I was determined; that, though I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick for the creation of an interest, I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. (11)

According to James, the structure of fiction should be an ordered, harmonious whole. To achieve the effect, the plot of a fiction must be designed exquisitely with effective narrative techniques being used. Each element of the system has its function in connecting and continuing the theme, therefore, each part of the novel should be necessary to convey the theme. Let's take Isabel's refusal of Warburton's proposal for another example. James never gives a direct description of Warburton's life. In the previous chapters Isabel anticipates a life of inconvenience with Warburton. In chapter 14, James describes a scene that can prove Isabel's suspicion which has the same resonance for the readers as for Isabel: "Warburton's sister addressed him with a certain timidity and reminded him she ought to return home in time for tea, as she was expecting company to partake of it. He made no answer—apparently not having heard her; he was preoccupied, and with good reason. Miss Molyneux—as if he had been Royalty—stood like a lady-in-waiting." (119-120) Before this scene, Isabel has anticipated that the marriage with Warburton "might have discomforts, might contain oppressive, might contain narrowing elements, might prove really but a stupefying anodyne" (101). From the relationship between Warburton and his sister, the readers can gain a glimpse of aristocratic life in Britain. This kind of life goes against Isabel's pursuit of freedom. We can see James' literary theory from even such a small detail. That is to say, every brick should serve the whole house and should not be "out of line, scale or perspective" (11). James confirmed this point in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: "I piled brick upon brick. The bricks, for the whole counting-over—putting for bricks little touches and inventions and enhancements by the way—affect me in truth as well-nigh innumerable and as ever so scrupulously fitted together and packed-in. It is an effect of detail, of the minutest." (14) For James, every detail is an indispensable part for the theme of the fiction.

It seems that James is very interested in the analogy of houses and characters. The residence can be a symbol for the character of the person who locates in it. For example, Osmond's residence was located in an ancient villa. The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure, whose far-projecting roof made "so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise in groups of three or four beside it" (195). Here the rectangle reminds the readers of the coffin, which signifies Isabel's unhappy marriage. Also the "antique, solid, weather-born, yet imposing front" (195) of the house "had a somewhat incommunicative character" (195). The front of the house had no eyes and was just like "the mask" (195). The windows of the ground-floor "seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in" (196). Osmond's house implied his character who hid his true nature under an elegant mask. The incommunicative feature of the house also symbolizes Osmond's refusal to communicate with Isabel. Likewise, Isabel showed the same taste in choosing her favorite room when she was at Albany. The room she preferred in her grandma's house was "the most depressed of its scenes" (33). The room had an atmosphere of "mysterious melancholy" (33) that came from the condemned door secured by bolts which a particularly slender little girl found it impossible to slide. The fastened

door gave Isabel a sense of security because it blocked the sight of the outside world which in her imagination was “a region of delight or of terror” (33). Isabel “had never opened the bolted door nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its side-lights; she had never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond.” (33) From Isabel’s favorite room we can see that Isabel was a loner in her nature. Like Osmond, Isabel had a tendency of refusing to communicate with others. The room was like Isabel’s heart. She did not want to open the door of her heart to others. Similarly, the palace where Pansy lived with her father and step-mother was like a dungeon in Rosier’s eyes. Rosier was haunted by the conviction that at picturesque periods young girls had been shut up there to keep them from their true lovers, and then, under the threat of being thrown into convents, had been forced into unholy marriages. All these houses serve as a tool to convey the characters’ feelings of incommunicability and estrangement with each other. Every detail is an inseparable part of the organic form to convey the theme of the novel.

3. Conclusion

Isabel possesses a conflicting character which is very difficult to define and decipher for the readers. James was fascinated by human heart, trying to disclose the secret of it. The feelings of estrangement and isolation arising from mysterious human hearts recur in James’ works. James explored different narrative techniques to convey the theme. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a great success due to James’ constant innovation in narrative techniques. The three narrative techniques put forward by James, i.e., the “central consciousness”, the “limited point of view” and the “organic form”, convey the theme very well. According to James, everybody sees the world from one’s own limited point of view. Consequently, we can never get to know some secrets. As a result, the sense of estrangement and isolation arises. Henry James belongs to one of the rare writers who employ their own theories on the art of fiction in their own works. This paper shows the perfect combination of James’ narrative techniques and the theme in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

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Notes

Note 1. Unless otherwise indicated, in the following citations I will give pages only if the quotations are from *The Portrait of a Lady*.

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