
In this lesson we discuss Henry James's novel "The Portrait of a Lady." After a brief discussion of the plot, the characters, and several of the novel's main themes, we end with a short quiz to test our knowledge.

Introduction to the Novel & The Author

The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James was first published as a complete work in 1881. It was originally published as a serial that ran from 1880 to '81. Despite being an American writer, **Henry James** frequently traveled to and wrote about Europe. James is known for being part of the **literary realism** movement, which means he sought to capture life as realistically as possible in his writing rather than romanticizing or exaggerating it. *The Portrait of a Lady* follows a young woman who journeys to Europe. Henry James wrote the novel when he was only 37, but it is considered by scholars to be one of his best.

Plot Summary

At the start of the novel, Isabel Archer, an American, is visiting extended family in England. During her visit, she rejects two marriage proposals, including one from Lord Warburton, who is a decent person, but toward whom Isabel does not feel romantically inclined. The other proposal, from Caspar Goodwood, tempts Isabel, but she worries that marriage will impede her personal freedom. When her ill uncle dies, he leaves Isabel a small fortune, which Isabel then uses to travel to Italy.

While in Florence, Italy, Isabel falls subject to a scam. Madame Merle, a woman she met at her uncle's house back in England, and a man named Gilbert Osmond have conspired to trick Isabel into marrying Osmond so they can steal her fortune.

Tragically, Isabel falls for Osmond and, together, they move to Rome. Osmond does not like Isabel, and the two quickly become unhappy. While they are married, Isabel develops a friendship with Osmond's daughter, Pansy. She does not know that the

girl's true mother is Madame Merle. Pansy is in love with an art collector, but her father wants her to marry Lord Warburton.

Isabel finds out that her cousin, Ralph, the son of the uncle who left her the fortune and her dear friend, is dying. She wants to travel to England to see her cousin before he dies. Osmond tries to stop her, but Isabel does not listen to him. After saying goodbye to Pansy, who she has recently learned is actually Madame Merle's daughter and not the product of Osmond's first marriage, Isabel travels to England.

After Ralph dies, Isabel has a chance encounter with Caspar, the other man who proposed to her at the beginning of the novel. Caspar tries to convince Isabel to stay with him, but Isabel insists she has to return to Rome. The ending does not make it clear whether Isabel is returning to Rome because she is afraid her husband will force Pansy to marry Warburton against her will or if Isabel is only going back to take Pansy away from her father.