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The Portrait of a Lady

Henry James · *1881 · original English text (New York Edition)*

Isabel Archer, a young American brought to England by her aunt, is left a fortune so that she may live freely. The freedom becomes a trial. She refuses two honest suitors, marries the wrong man in Italy, and must decide, at the end, whether a costly vow still binds her. The hosted text is now complete: Volume I (Chapters I–XXVII) and Volume II through Chapter LV.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it cost a young woman to choose her own life, and can a freely chosen vow still bind her when the marriage that followed it has proved a trap?

"But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do." "So as to do them?" asked her aunt. "So as to choose," said Isabel."

Isabel Archer and Mrs. Touchett · Chapter VI

Isabel wants knowledge in order to choose, not in order to rebel for its own sake. Ralph Touchett procures her a fortune so that she may be free; Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle use that freedom against her. The close does not dissolve her marriage into a rescue. She tells Caspar Goodwood to wait, and she turns back toward the life she has already vowed.

KEY CHARACTERS

Isabel Archer
The American heroine who wants to choose, and who must live with a chosen vow

Ralph Touchett
Her invalid cousin, who loves her imaginatively and gives her the fortune that was meant as freedom

Gilbert Osmond
The collector in Rome who marries her for the fortune and for the portrait she will make in his house

Madame Merle
The finished woman of the world who arranges the marriage and is Pansy's mother

Caspar Goodwood
The persistent American suitor who offers escape at the end

Lord Warburton
The English nobleman whose honest offer Isabel refuses, and whom Osmond later wants for Pansy

Pansy Osmond
Osmond's daughter, whom Isabel will not use as a piece in the game

Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta Stackpole
The sharp aunt who brings Isabel to Europe, and the American friend who watches her independence

SO AS TO CHOOSE

"But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do." "So as to do them?" asked her aunt. "So as to choose," said Isabel."

Isabel Archer and Mrs. Touchett · Chapter VI

"Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"

Isabel Archer · Chapter LV

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Afternoon Tea at Gardencourt

VOLUME I, CHAPTERS I–VI

An American girl arrives at an English house, is liked for her candor, and already wants to know what she should not do, so that she may choose.

- The novel opens, after James's preface, on the lawn at Gardencourt with the ceremony of afternoon tea
- Isabel, newly arrived from Albany with Mrs. Touchett, meets her uncle, her invalid cousin Ralph, and Lord Warburton
- She tells her aunt that she wants to know the things one shouldn't do, so as to choose
- Henrietta Stackpole, the American journalist, already watches over Isabel's independence

> *"Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea."*
> **Narrator** · Chapter I

02 Two Offers, and a Fortune

VOLUME I, CHAPTERS VII–XXVII

Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood both propose. Isabel refuses both, and Ralph persuades his dying father to leave her money enough to live as she likes.

- Warburton's offer of an English great house is a real good, and she still says no
- Goodwood crosses the sea to press his suit and is likewise refused
- Ralph, who loves her imaginatively and cannot offer marriage, arranges the bequest that is meant to set her free
- Volume I ends with Isabel rich, courted, and still untried by the use she will make of that freedom

03 Rome, Osmond, and Madame Merle

VOLUME II, EARLY CHAPTERS

In Italy she meets Gilbert Osmond, a collector of fine things and of people, and Madame Merle, who seems a finished woman of the world.

- Osmond lives with his daughter Pansy in a carefully arranged Roman life
- Madame Merle presents him as a man of taste whom Isabel might choose freely
- Ralph sees the danger and cannot prevent the marriage
- The fortune that was meant as freedom becomes the bait of a trap

04 The Portrait, and the Price

VOLUME II, MIDDLE CHAPTERS

Marriage to Osmond teaches Isabel what a collected wife is for. She learns the secret between Osmond and Madame Merle, and she will not use Pansy as a piece in their game.

- The house in Rome is beautiful and airless; Osmond wants Isabel as a portrait in his collection
- She discovers that Pansy is Madame Merle's daughter, and that the marriage was arranged
- She will not sell Pansy to Lord Warburton to please Osmond
- The knowledge is bitter, and it does not yet dissolve the vow

05 Just You Wait

VOLUME II, CHAPTERS LIV–LV

Called back to England by Ralph's dying, Isabel is offered a last escape by Caspar Goodwood. She tells him to wait, and she returns.

- She goes to Gardencourt for Ralph's last days; he has loved her truly
- Goodwood finds her there and urges her to break the life that has bound her
- She takes his arm and says, "just you wait," and he sees only that she means he is young
- The hosted text is complete through this close; it is the New York Edition of the 1881 novel, Project Gutenberg #2833 and #2834 joined

> *"Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"*
> **Isabel Archer** · Chapter LV

Freedom and Choice · Marriage as a Vow · Money and Motives · Friendship and Betrayal · American Innocence Abroad · Loyalty under Cost

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Isabel's line about knowing what one shouldn't do is not a shrug at duty. She wants knowledge in order to choose. Watch how that freedom is used against her.
2. Ralph's bequest is an act of love, and it is also the fortune Osmond marries. The book will not let you treat money as morally neutral.
3. The close is not a rescue. "Just you wait" is spoken to Goodwood; Isabel turns back toward the marriage she has already made. Do not invent a last chapter James did not write.
4. The hosted text is now complete: Volume I (Chapters I–XXVII, PG #2833) and Volume II through Chapter LV (PG #2834), the New York Edition of the 1881 novel. An earlier incomplete file stopped at Volume I.
5. For older students (grade band 11–12). The moral pressure of a bad marriage is the point; do not treat the book as a travel romance.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text (New York Edition), Project Gutenberg #2833 and #2834 (joined), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-portrait-of-a-lady/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.