The Jamesian Material Self: Show Me Your House and I Will Tell You Who You Are!

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Abstract

The major purpose of this study is to analyse the aspects and the role of the Material Self present in the novel The Portrait of a Lady *by Henry James. The Material Self is a constituent of the Empirical Self which William James (Henry James's brother) defines in his theoretical work* The Principles of Psychology. *Therefore, the representation of the Material Self in Henry James's works is much more interesting when compared with the representation of the Self in William James's theory. According to William James, one of the core elements of the Material Self is the 'house'. The 'house' is carefully selected by Henry James as a tool for creating the images of his characters from* The Portrait of a Lady*; the analogical relation between setting and character helps Henry James build indirect characterisation. The houses he drafts represent in detail the appearance and character of their masters. Moreover, the hierarchy of the constituent parts of the Material Self suggested by William James in his theory is somehow reshaped by the major character in* The Portrait of a Lady *by Henry James.*

Key words: *Consciousness of Self, Material Self, choice of words, indirect characterization*

Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,
And did thy wealth on earth abide?
Didst fix thy hope on mould'ring dust?
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
(A. Bradstreet, *Upon the Burning of Our House*)

William James's volumes *The Principles of Psychology* were published in 1890, roughly ten years after Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1881), the novel in which he discusses and reflects on the concept of the Consciousness of Self. Henry James focused his attention on the nature of

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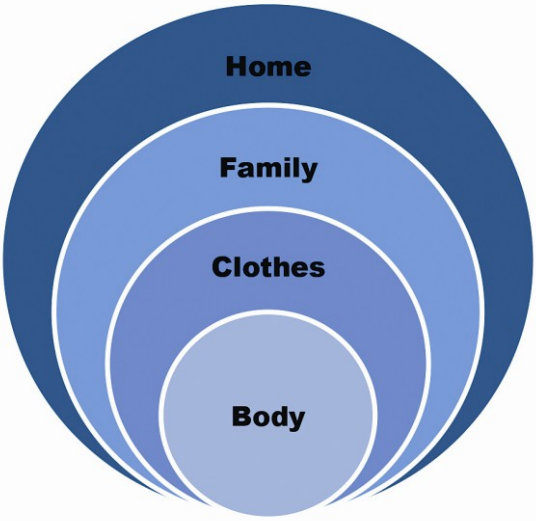
selfhood and successfully portrayed the extraordinary complexity of the Self of his characters. The novel introduces the life and experience of a young American woman, Isabel Archer, after her travelling in Europe. The setting of the novel is vast, involving various parts of England and Italy, places where she draws her experience from. The novel generously presents the aspects of the Material Self (very well portrayed by means of mimesis).

This paper argues that the representation and the importance of the Material Self in the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James is very similar to the theoretical description of the same concept in *The Principles of Psychology* by William James; besides, the representation of the Material Self was successfully used by Henry James to build the indirect characterisation of the heroes through the analogical relation between setting and character.

The Puritan belief that one should not care for material possessions, but for spiritual ones only, is not the belief advocated in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. In the age of consumerism, it comes as no surprise that the two brothers gave special attention to material possessions. In order to have a clearer picture of the Material Self, the graph that attempts to show William James's representation of the Material Self would be of great help:



This graph explains that "the body is the innermost" and most personal piece of the Material Self. Our garments and possessions are also part of who we are, along with the members of our family, who are likewise important, as they are "flesh of our flesh" (2006: 291). Last, but not least, comes housing, as a sort of shell for the body, possessions and family. It represents our castle, our shelter, our home; it takes care of us, and we, in turn, take care of it.

The Material Self plays an important role in James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. The issue of property and belongings is constantly discussed by Henry James through his characters; Isabel Archer and Madame Merle, for instance. The former insists on the idea that clothes and things which surround us do not define our nature, while the latter is convinced that they do. Madame Merle has life experience and considerable intelligence; she understands that people are not separated cells but are each "made up of some cluster of appurtenance" and that "every human being has his shell and that [one] must take the shell into account" (1995: 222-223). William James's interpretation of the Material Self is strikingly similar to that of Madame Merle:

> The body is the innermost part of the Material Self in each of us [...] The clothes come next. [...] We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them [...] Next, our immediate family is a part of ourselves. Our father and mother, our wife and babes, are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. [...] Our home comes next. Its scenes are part of our life; [...] We all have a blind impulse to watch over our body, to deck it with clothing of an ornamental sort, to cherish parents, wife and babes, and to find for ourselves a home of our own which we may live in and improve (2006: 292).

It appears, according to William James, that almost all of us care for our body, clothes and dwellings because they are the real expression of ourselves. The psychologist argues that one's Material Self characterises his/her state of mind, which means that it defines his/her actions, reactions, emotions, attitude and choices. The character of Madame Merle seems to have almost the same understanding of the Material 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 (1995: 223).

There is nothing wrong with this declaration of an experienced, worldly woman, and it evidently does not make Madame Merle a materialist person; it merely represents her Material Self. Isabel, on the other hand, still young and unworldly, believes that she has a different opinion on this issue. She vehemently protests, believing that her clothes and environment do not express her personality: "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 upon me by society" (1995: 223). Still, when it comes to attire, she is critical of Mr. Goodwood, one of her gallants, exactly because of his dressing habits:

> [S]he viewed with reserve a habit he had of dressing always in the same manner; it was not apparently that he wore the same clothes continually, for, on the contrary, his garments had a way of looking rather too new. But they all seemed of the same piece; the figure, the stuff, was so drearily usual (1995: 137).

Her protest to Madame Merle, in this case, indicates a particular characteristic of her personality: self-adulation. It is obvious that the author makes fun of Isabel, for when she made the most important choice of her life she was certainly attracted to her partner by these very aspects: his appearance ("His dense, delicate hair, his overdrawn, retouched features, his clear complexion, ripe without being coarse, the very evenness of the growth of his beard) and possessions (his pictures and cabinets all looked like treasures […] His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting" (1995: 284- 285)). Perhaps they did not indicate too great a wealth, but they certainly spoke of his character. Besides, when receiving a great fortune from her uncle, she was not squeamish about keeping the money. Afterwards, being unhappy in her marriage, she did not leave her husband. This unwillingness to leave her husband may imply that she did care for money because in case of a divorce she would gain nothing according to the 1870 Married Women's Property Act. Finally, the title of the novel is not *The Portrait of a Woman*, or *The Portrait of a Young Girl*, not

even *The Portrait of Isabel*. The title refers to the portrait of a 'lady', a woman from high society.

A further point to be considered as an element of the Material Self is the 'house'. The house is carefully selected by Henry James as a tool to outline the images of the characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*. The houses he drafts represent in detail the appearance and character of their masters. Recent studies show that the relation between the setting and the character was of great significance for the Victorian novelists. For instance, Michael Toolan mentions the analogical relation of setting and character in such novels as: *Mansfield Park* by J. Austen, *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* by C. Dickens, and *Jane Eyre* by C. Bronte (2001: 91-94). For the modernist and post-modernist writers, on the contrary, this relation, in his opinion, seems to be rarely important.

A novelist at the threshold of centuries, Henry James, seems to pay assiduous attention to the setting-character analogical relation. The first residence to be introduced in detail to the reader is the old English country-house of, accordingly, an old gentleman, who had come to England thirty years before from America – Mr Touchett. The old gentleman is evidently satisfied with his achievements and his life, just as he is very content and pleased with his house. The fact that he is described from the very beginning "with his face turned to the house" and peacefully "rest[ing] his eyes upon the rich red front of his dwelling," (1995: 20) shows the reader just how fond he is of his property The image of the house is gracious and respectful, as is the image of its owner.

The Image of the House	**Mr Touchett's Image**	**Qualities**
It stood upon a low hill, above the river – the river being the Thames at some forty miles from London (1995: 20).	He had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure (1995: 21).	Authenticity Maturity Success
A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of	He had a narrow, clean-shaven face, with features evenly	Experience

which time and the weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers (1995: 20).	distributed and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of representation was not large, so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit (1995: 21).	Wisdom Tradition Composure Adaptability
The house had a name and a history. […] it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker (1995: 20).	He had brought with him, at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he had kept it in the best order (1995: 21).	Majesty Nobility Greatness Heritage
Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior (1995: 20).	At present, obviously, nevertheless, he was not likely to displace himself; his journeys were over and he was taking the rest that precedes the great rest (1995: 21).	Knowledge Prosperity Privacy
The great still <u>oaks</u> and beeches flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains (1995: 21).	He had certainly had a great <u>experience</u> of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye (1995: 21).	Naturalness Wisdom Experience Dignity Authority
[…] and the place was	He was neatly dressed, in well-	Education

furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with the books and papers that lay upon the grass (1995: 21).	brushed black; but a shawl was folded upon his knees, and his feet were encased in thick, embroidered slippers (1995: 21).	Sense Frailty

What stands out in the table is that the portrait of Mr Touchett, cautiously portrayed by Henry James, is one of a very experienced, wise, respectful gentleman. The concomitant description of the house helps to make the picture of the "old gentleman" more vivid and clear. The careful choice of words like, "oak" and "ivy", for instance, directs the readers' thoughts to such concepts as strength, authority, dignity, steadiness and adaptability. These are the traits which the reader can associate with Mr Touchett's image and the description of the house he possesses.

The character of Gilbert Osmond is also presented in parallel with the description of his house. The representation of the house is rounded up in the Jamesian manner, described from top to bottom, in carefully chosen words.

The Image of the House	**Mr Osmond**	**Qualities**
The villa was a long, rather blank -looking structure, with the far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves and which, on the hills that encircle Florence, when considered from a distance, makes so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise in groups of three or four beside it (1995: 249).	He was a man of forty, with a high but well-shaped head, on which the hair, still dense, but prematurely grizzled, had been cropped close. He had a fine, narrow, extremely modelled and composed face, of which the only fault was just this effect of its running a trifle too much to points (1995: 251).	Emptiness Sadness Simplicity

[…] this antique, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character (1995: 249).	[…] narrow, extremely modelled and composed face […] beard, cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century and surmounted by a fair moustache, of which the ends had a romantic upward flourish, gave its wearer a foreign, traditionary look and suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style (1995: 251).	Coolness Calmness Affectation
[the] imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way—looked off behind, into splendid openness and the range of the afternoon light (1995: 249).	His conscious, curious eyes, however, eyes at once vague and penetrating, intelligent and hard, expressive of the observer as well as of the dreamer, would have assured you that he studied it only within well-chosen limits, and that in so far as he sought it he found it. You would have been much at a loss to determine his original clime and country (1995: 251).	Inscrutability Deceitfulness Unsociability Mysteriousness

It is apparent from this table that Gilbert Osmond's character is difficult to interpret from the beginning of James's descriptions; his image is enigmatic and ambiguous. Yet, after several readings, words like "composed", "fault", "vague", "penetrating", and "hard" might indicate the contradictory nature of the man. Taking into consideration that the exterior description of the house is slightly different from the interior one, described in terms of "angular specimens of pictorial art in frames as pedantically primitive, those perverse-looking relics of medieval brass and pottery, of

which Italy has long been the not quite exhausted storehouse" (1995: 250), it may be concluded that these details pinpoint the cheapness of his soul. Later on, the description of his house in chapter 22 seems to have more meaning, finally disclosing its owner's real nature to Isabel in chapter 42:

> The windows of the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-barred, and placed at such a height that curiosity, even on tiptoe, expired before it reached them (1995: 249-250).
>
> Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her (1995: 461).

Henry James, a real aesthete, uses art to underline the difference between the moral and ethical features of the two characters; for instance, among the paintings mentioned as hanging in Mr Touchett's residence are artworks of renown European painters, while in Gilbert Osmond's house, the paintings are "small, odd, elaborate pictures, chiefly in water-colour" (1995: 250). The choice of the tree by Gilbert Osmond's house also seems to be purposeful – a cypress – a conifer which is commonly associated with mourning.

These two characters are not the only ones to be described side by side with their dwellings. Lord Warburton's house is also carefully outlined, as well as Mrs Touchett's exceptional residence in the city of Florence. The "high, cool rooms where the cavern rafters and pompous frescoes of the sixteenth century looked down on the familiar commodities of the age of advertisement", along with the "monumental court of the great house" (1995: 270) announce the respectability and nobleness of its mistress.

Lord Warburton's house, on the other hand, announces the interesting nature of its master, being introduced as "a very curious old place" (James 1995: 87) at the beginning of Chapter 8. The house is described in a delicate manner while Lord Warburton is showing it to Isabel Archer. James is trying to create a "noble picture" of the mansion, as noble as a real English lord should be. The image of the house had a great impact on the heroine of the novel; she saw it as if it were "a castle in a legend". Then again, to increase the reader's interest in the character of

Lord Warburton, James repeats the word 'curious' once again: "the house, which had a very curious history" (1995: 97). His efforts, however, are not enough, as Isabel is not attracted to the young Englishman. He is too perfect, so not interesting for her. The fact that he has "a hundred thousand a year, […] owns fifty thousand acres of the soil of this little island, […] has half a dozen houses, […] a seat in Parliament […] elegant tastes" does not help him in influencing her opinion, as she believes that to be so impeccable is "a very poor position" (1995: 93). It can be assumed that in this case Isabel is rejecting his candidate because he is too perfect and there is no challenge for her in marrying him. A totally different situation is foregrounded when it comes to Gilbert Osmond: "he has no money; he has no name; he has no importance". This very situation is what catches Isabel's attention: "I care very much for money, and that's why I wish Gilbert Osmond to have a little" (1995: 361). The reader, on the contrary, rises to the bait and seems to like the character of Lord Warburton. Eventually, this 'little' flaw, consisting of pride and vain glory, intended to show the whole world that she does not care for material possessions, leads to her failure.

Finally, Isabel's house in Rome, where she resides as Gilbert Osmond's wife, offers a totally different view from what was once the house of Gilbert Osmond in Florence, before his marriage to Isabel. The interesting oil paintings are now replaced by "frescoes by Caravaggio" (an Italian painter, who activated during the 16th century, known for his exceeding violence), yet the gallery is full of "mutilated statues and dusty urns" (James 1995: 393). The image of the house is presented from Mr Rosier's perspective, the gentleman who was in love with Gilbert Osmond's daughter. There is one aspect, however, which strikes one's attention: it is Isabel's radically changed portrait. Nothing of the previous Isabel has remained, and the house is the evidence of her new image: "dark and massive structure", "a palace", "a dungeon", "a domestic fortress", "a pile which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence", "visited on a vague survey, disappointed and depressed" (1995: 392-393). Despite its sad and disheartened appearance, the residence is located in the centre of the city of Rome and has an impressive aura. The interior is sumptuously furnished, the second floor reception-rooms richly decorated, "walls covered with old red damask" and almost everywhere the "odour of

flowers" is poignant (1995: 393-395). The hostess makes her appearance after the detailed description of her house:

> She was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, […] and yet oh so radiantly gentle! […] The years had touched her only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem. She 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 as the picture of a gracious lady (1995: 396).

Thus, the young lady who considered money, possessions and wealth to be of no importance, and to express nothing of one's personality, is now decorating her house and her life with rich and luxurious things. Besides, she is allowing her husband to make a museum of their house simply for his own pleasure. These facts speak against Isabel's statements; it is obvious that she cares for possessions and goods, and that all she surrounds herself with definitely expresses her nature.

It appears that the major character, Isabel Archer, does not 'share' the assumption promoted by W. James in his theory – according to which a person is represented by its Material Self. On the contrary, she claims that the Material Self is not expressive at all. The character that is constructed to support W. James's opinion is the antagonist of the novel, Madame Merle. Furthermore, the selected instances from the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* show the skilful use of the analogical relation between setting and characters. Taken together, these results indicate Henry James's philosophy of life and art, as well as the inner workings of his literary portraiture via emphasis on the Material Self.

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