

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v4i3.464

**Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) or
Jane Campion's 1996 movie adaptation?¹**

Buse Eren²

Abstract

This paper aims at identifying both the similarities and differences between Henry James's novel "The Portrait of a Lady" (1881) and Jane Campion's 1996 movie version. We will try to answer the following questions: Is a Modernist literary piece still appealing to the 21st century readers? What is lost and what is gained from the screen adaptation of the book? Would a person reading the novel be interested in watching the movie and vice versa? Last but not least, we will compare the portrayal of the characters in the novel and their materialization in the movie through the parts of Nicole Kidman, John Malkovich, Barbara Hershey and Mary Lauise Parker.

Keywords: Modernity, Movie adaptation, Character description, Literary techniques.

¹ This paper was presented in the 2nd English Studies Conference which was held between 8-10 May 2015 in Karabuk University.

² Karabuk University, buse.eren1993@hotmail.com

Inspired by Turgenev, Henry James starts from the assumption that if a portrait is modeled on a real person, then “the novel is modeled on the portrait” and as a consequence “the portrait and not the person” is the principle of unity for the novel” (Izzo, 1990, p.43). From this perspective, he uses Isabel as a portrait and most of the thematic exploration of the novel occurs through her actions, thoughts and emotions. In essence, the reality of the novel comprises a self-governing and imaginary microcosm that is actually centered on a character and not a story.

Parting with tradition, *The Portrait of a Lady* reminds the critics of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in terms of “the self-referential nature, the autonomy of the novel” and the “thematic and technical affinity” (Izzo, 1990, p. 34). Isabel’s story is in fact a story of contradictions generated by her own contradictory nature. As a result, “Isabel’s quest for freedom and independence paradoxically leads her to lock herself up in a house-prison” (Izzo, 1990, p. 36). Isabel always behaves according to her mind and she is an isolated woman from the external events. For this reason, she refuses to marry Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood. She does not realize that by marrying Osmond, she is in danger of losing her independence and social life. She thinks herself “ground in the very mill of the conventional” (Izzo, 1990, p. 37).

In spite of the fact that the novel displays a number of typical features of the nineteenth century realistic novel, there are some changes, for example the lack of dramatic turning points such as Isabel’s departure from America, her wedding or the birth and death of her son. The readers can only imagine these events since the only reality is the inner one.

The female world of exorcism and relations between women is set against the background of the 19th century. Isabel’s marriage to Gilbert Osmond occurs because of the relationship between Isabel and Madame Merle and changes her behavior and mind toward people; she learns to dissimulate and disguise her emotions. Madame Merle’s betrayal causes Isabel’s misery. According to Sedgwick (1997) “love and ritual is an assumption about the goodness and kindness, the near utopic empathy, fixed as definitional to female same-sex affiliation by a dominant narrative unable to fathom why else or what else would be appealing about or, in addition, complicated by an equation without the phallus: mythmaking in this instance actually serving to make mythic what is, in fact, the status quo” (p. 461). In terms of

Isabel's possible lesbianism, she indeed asks Serena "Who am I?" and the latter memorably answers "I am you". Maybe not accidentally, she wants to become closer to Isabel for her own lesbian attachment. Isabel herself is attracted to Madame Merle from the very moment she hears her playing the piano and is fascinated by the presence of the mysterious and sophisticated woman who appears to be a foreigner. Later in the novel she will prove to be a decisive strategist and a perfect manipulator doing everything in her power to achieve her aims.

The novel becomes a panorama of art, sexuality and marriage presenting the condition of women in 19th century British Literature. Isabel visits art galleries in Rome, London and then she marries Gilbert Osmond who is an accomplished art collector of beautiful objects. In spite of her provincialism, she struggles for her identity as a woman and an artist. Unfortunately, Osmond despises and scolds his wife even if at first he hopes that she will augment his art collection. Isabel is accepted as an object of art because she is a beautiful young woman, but soon her independence and cleverness start bothering Osmond. The concept of "independence" leads Isabel's poor destiny up to the extent of becoming overwhelming and the most probable victim of Machiavellian scheming. Allen (1984) argues that Isabel's independence is an illusion in the novel: "Isabel is facing a choice of sign function rather than of exploration and action" (p. 68).

Whereas Gilbert Osmond is the primary "patriarchal figure in the novel, Ralph is accepted as the most sympathetic character". Taking this into consideration, Tanner (1968) explains that: "Osmond wants to turn Isabel into a work of art", unlike Ralph who "appreciates her living qualities artistically" and "has no thought of dominating or manipulating her"(p. 156). While Osmond is using Isabel as an object of his works, Ralph admires her and has no intention of owning her. What is more, Ralph wrongly assumes that by becoming a rich woman, Isabel will be able "to meet the requirements of her imagination" (Izzo, 1990, p. 35).

Each of the intimate cities in *The Portrait of a Lady* affects the character's mental life: He uses Venice to examine Isabel's feelings of independence, London to portray her fear of its dark and narrow streets and Rome to understand her sorrow and miserable fate. James explains that "the rather grim admonition that romantic and historic sites, such as the land of Italy abounds in, offer the artist a questionable aid to concentration when they themselves are not to be the subject of it" (p. 41).

James's narrative exploration is the consciousness of Isabel and describes in detail Isabel's emotions, feelings or reactions to her suitors. *The Portrait of A Lady* draws on the psychological analysis narrative technique. There are also the less thorough ideas and thoughts of the other characters like Ralph, Osmond, Warburton and so on and this narrative technique obviously reflects their actions in the novel.

In a comparing and contrasting the novel and the movie version, the aim of this article is to show how certain elements in the story are transferred to the movie version and the consequent changes in meaning and emphasis. Çelebi considers that Henry James is one of those writers who are representative for the "scenographic" trend in literature mainly because of his technique of "restricted consciousness": "he plays down obvious authorial mediation in favour of limiting the point of view from which actions and objects are observed" and by this way "he shows rather than tells." (2003, p. 12). The exploration of the plot or the scheme of the succession of events in both the novel and the movie will reveal the differences between the two. Even if it is evident that not everything the novel tells can be told in the movie, the two mediums can still be compared and the readers and viewers can find out what replaces the word and sentences of the novel in the movie.

In terms of the ordering of the events of the plot, there is only one difference in the ordering of the events. In the novel both the readers and Isabel learn about the intimacy of Madame Merle-Osmond and Pansy towards the very end; however, in the movie, the viewers watch a scene from which they could obviously interpret that Merle is Osmond's mistress. The scene takes place even before Isabel meets Osmond. If the readers will focus upon Isabel's feelings more objectively, the movie viewers will pity Isabel from the beginning and will naturally show her more compassion and sympathy and implicitly more anger towards Merle and Osmond. "While the novel motivates the readers to understand the mystery delayed until the end, the film motivates the viewers to wish Isabel to learn the truth and help herself to get rid of her delusion" (p. 39). In the novel, Isabel's doubts and feelings are rendered through words whereas in the movie the director can manipulate visual images to enhance her inner emotions with a greater impact upon the viewers.

The novel consists of 55 chapters and has 635 pages whereas the movie needs to condense everything in 142 minutes, so the director had to be selective in expressing the meaning and in keeping the audience alert. The opening of the film features shots of contemporary woman in a garden setting discussing what they felt like before being kissed

with the aim of proving that Isabel's emotions are every woman's emotions, no matter if they are living in the 19th century or in the new millennium. In spite of her desire to be independent, Isabel Archer "is thwarted in her efforts to forge her own subjectivity by male authority that tries to contain her. In the movie, just as in the novel, this authority is conveyed through economic, physical, and emotional abuse of the female consciousness, which is transformed by Osmond into currency" (Despotopoulou, 2006, p. 117).

The first six chapters of the novel are of great significance for the fact that they provide the readers with an insight into the personalities of the characters, Mr. Touchett, Lord Warburton and Ralph who will influence Isabel's life. However, the movie starts with Lord Warburton's marriage proposal to Isabel, which falls into chapter XII in the novel. When Isabel talks to Mr. Touchett and Ralph about the reasons why she does not want to get married to Lord Warburton, she says: "I don't see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do" (p. 163). Consequently, the viewers can perceive her as a woman ready to break the social constraints. This must have been Jane Campion's purpose since she is known as a feminist producer. Comparing Jane Campion's 1996 movie adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* and Patricia Rozema's 1999 movie adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, Despotopoulou considers that "they tackle matters that readers until now considered peripheral, extraneous, or even immaterial. These adaptations blend feminist concerns with postcolonial and cultural insights, sometimes changing the focus of the works in their original form" (2006, p. 116).

There is a considerable distinction in the way the readers and the viewers perceive Isabel. On the one hand, the readers are ready to blame Isabel for her bad choices and failures, on the other hand, the viewers are more likely to understand her and identify with her with respect to her desire to be independent and the others' manipulative power over her destiny: "Isabel's negative personal characteristics-naivety, impulsiveness and inconsistency- turn into positive characteristics- courage, eagerness and challenge for freedom." (p. 46).

Jane Campion's movie adaptation applies new moral and aesthetic standards to literature providing a non-canonical angle of interpretation. Under the circumstances, it becomes a challenge for the feminist movie theory which has been portraying women as silent, absent and marginal. From this perspective, the movie primarily addresses women viewers who are more likely to take sides with the protagonists. It is only when Isabel inherits a fortune that her list of accomplishments becomes complete and she is ready to get married.

In order to reflect the theme of female victimization Campion includes an inspired sequence of movie strips depicting Isabel's travels to Greece, Turkey and Egypt before her marriage. The constriction that Isabel encounters on her return is filmed in normal color, representing her current reality while the travels are shot in early twentieth century newsreel fashion, short and fragmented, stressing their temporariness and otherness. The message is that Isabel could not have possibly continued to lead such a life of traveling and enjoying different experiences as an independent woman. What is more, "Throughout her travels Isabel imagines Osmond's arm encircling her, as if taking possession of her, colonizing her body with his arms and voice, which echoes distinctly and loudly in her head: 'I'm absolutely in love with you.' The word 'absolutely implies his own totalitarian nature and foretells his authoritarian rule in their future household" (Despotopoulou, 2006, p. 118). The signs of Isabel's victimization are proliferated through excess, exaggeration and comedy challenging the assumptions of the cinema viewers and especially of the female spectators: "The comedy with which the travel scenes are also invested-Isabel imagines a plate of dancing beans-becomes a means of satirizing, again through exaggeration, patriarchal belief concerning women's thoughts and ideas" (Despotopoulou, 2006, p. 118).

The movie adaptation of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a modern adaptation of a classic text meant to address issues of womanhood which concern us today. As a consequence the movie is saved from "being mere anachronistic specimens of nostalgia" (p. 119). The ending of the movie denies us closure leaving Isabel on the doorstep unsure about her future, a representation of the uncertainty yet the beauty and the challenges of the status of women in contemporary society.

References

- Allen, E. (1984). *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*. London: Macmillan.
- Despotopoulou, A. (2006). Girls on film: postmodern renderings of Jane Austen and Henry James. *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36.1, 115-120.
- Elliott, E. (1990). *New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hibbert, C. (2000). *Queen Victoria: A personal History*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Izzo, D. (2006). *The Portrait of a Lady and Modern Narrative*. In J. Porte (Ed.), *New Essays on the Portrait of a Lady* (pp. 33-49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James, H. (2004). *The Portrait of a Lady*. George Stade, ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics)
- Tanner, T. (1968). *The Fearful Self: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady*. Henry James: Modern Judgements. London: Macmillan.