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MARRIAGE, MORALITY AND THE SELF: A THEMATIC STUDY OF HENRY JAMES'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) provide a deep dive into human connections and moral conundrums via their complex webs of marital, ethical, and self-related issues. Isabel Archer's tragic marriage to Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* is a test bed for themes of independence, deceit, and the conflict between individual values and social norms; the play ends with Archer's moral determination to honor her vows despite Osmond's treachery. On the other side, *The Golden Bowl* depicts Maggie Verver's deft handling of her marriage to Prince Amerigo in the face of his adultery, shedding insight into the complicated dynamics of power, moral uncertainty, and self-transformation within such relationships. Both books highlight the tension between personal freedom and societal norms within marriage and how morality is ultimately a relational construction impacted by actions and their outcomes. The self, as shown by Maggie's pragmatic empowerment and Isabel's tragic perseverance, echoes James's psychological realism and his complex analysis of how one defines oneself. Through this theme analysis, the complex literary vision of James is revealed, including his ever-changing views on the relationship between individual liberty, moral obligation, and societal norms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James, a major figure in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literature, explored in his writings the intricacies of the human mind, society, and moral quandaries. At different points in his career, he wrote two massive novels that delve deeply into marriage, ethics, and the self: *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Over two decades, James went from being



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a realist writer interested in personal agency under social norms to a master of modernism who delves into the emotional complexities of interpersonal dynamics and moral quandaries in his works. James introduces us to Isabel Archer, a young American lady whose desire for independence propels her into a tragic marriage that challenges her values and changes who she is in *The Portrait of a Lady*. An intricate web of power, ethics, and identity is unfurled in *The Golden Bowl*, his most intricate story revolving around Maggie Verver, who deftly maneuvers through her marriage in the face of treachery. Morality as a relational construction impacted by choice and consequence, the ego as a location of conflict and evolution, and the tension between personal aspirations and societal expectations are all explored in these books via the lens of marriage. Through an examination of the topics and their interconnections, this thematic study aims to shed light on the human condition and the moral and psychological dilemmas that James's characters encounter in their social environments.

In James's work, marriage is shown as more than just a domestic or romantic institution; it is a social compact that captures the age's power structures, economic facts, and cultural standards. Marriage is both Isabel Archer's salvation and her downfall in *The Portrait of a Lady*. A unique ambition for a woman in the transatlantic society James portrayed in the 19th century, her first rejection of suitors like Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood demonstrates her wish to retain her independence. The delusion of her independence is exposed by her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, which Madame Merle arranged. As a result of Osmond's manipulation, Isabel sees marriage for what it is: a patriarchal institution that may limit autonomy and make her face the ethical consequences of her decisions. Throughout the story, Isabel tragically struggles to reconcile her beliefs with the reality of her commitment, providing a criticism of the traditional assumption that women must marry to complete their duties. *The Golden Bowl*, on the other hand, depicts marriage as an intricate network of interdependent ties in which faithfulness, love, and treachery all coexist. Charlotte Stant marries Adam Verver, Maggie's father after Prince Amerigo's infatuation with her complicates their marriage. James delves into the dynamics of personal attachments via these entangled marriages, highlighting Maggie's agency as she manipulates her surroundings to maintain her relationships. A more realistic perspective on human relationships emerges in James's later works; in contrast to Isabel, whose marriage limits her independence, Maggie uses her marriage to exert power. Both books highlight the moral and psychological complexities that arise when marital aspirations collide with cultural norms.

Both *The Golden Bowl* and *The Portrait of a Lady* demonstrate James's talent for expressing the complexity of human nature via their examinations of marriage, ethics, and identity. There is a close relationship between these themes: the characters' identities are shaped by the moral frameworks tested by marriage, the self-evolution is influenced by morality as it mediates the conflict between individual desires and social responsibilities, and the self, as the center of awareness and agency, overcomes the obstacles presented by marriage and ethical dilemmas. A larger literary goal of James's was to investigate the social and psychological factors that shape



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human conduct, and his handling of these issues is indicative of this. A sad image of the self's fight against social restraints is presented in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel's narrative serves as a warning tale about the limits of freedom. In *The Golden Bowl*, he presents a more nuanced and disturbing examination of agency, where the victory of Maggie is achieved at the expense of genuine feeling. Taken as a whole, these books show how James was captivated by the ethical grey areas in relationships and the power of the individual to overcome hardship.

Using textual evidence, critical scholarship, and historical context, this research seeks to provide a thorough understanding of James's use of marriage, morality, and the self in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Highlighting James's lasting significance as a recorder of the human condition, it aims to discover the ethical and psychological components of his vision by analyzing the characters' decisions, interactions, and changes. By contrasting Isabel and Maggie's paths, the next chapters will go deeply into each subject, illuminating James's thinking progression over his career. Looking at James's literary works through this thematic lens allows us to fully grasp the depth of his insights into the intricacies of love, responsibility, and identity in a world that is always evolving.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

In her conference report, Zhang (2021) examined the devastating effects of Isabel Archer's marriage on her mental health. The investigation provided detailed insights into the characters' inner conflicts and illuminated the basic factors that contributed to the horrible notion of her conjugal partnership. Zhang's study shed new light on the book's depth, highlighting how the characters' decisions impacted their deep prosperity and how the story probed the boundaries of human resilience and self-awareness. Topics covered in Saoudi's (2008) dissertation included the portrayal of women and marriage in works of late Victorian literature, such as "The Portrait of a Lady." By placing the story in its historical perspective, we may better understand the subjects explored and the cultural conventions and expectations that shaped the characters' actions and decisions. Saoudi's research illuminated the ways gender roles and cultural expectations influenced the characters' decisions while also shedding light on the complex and contradictory ways in which James portrayed women in the book.

The review drew attention to James' brilliant approach to handling and investigating the intricacies of love and marriage by comparing the two works' portrayals of romantic relationships. Sheppard's study illuminated the ways in which the two books' depictions of marriage and love differ, highlighting James' unique approach to exploring the complexities of character and relationship psychology. Henry James' works, notably "The Portrait of a Lady," explore themes of individuality in depth in Akshey's (2012) analysis. The review provided a detailed analysis of the novel's human psychology by breaking down the characters' battles with self-awareness and identity, which enhanced our understanding of their motivations within their relationships. By delving into the characters' motivations, pursuits, and development through the lens of identity, Akshey's study



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showed how James elevated the work from a lighthearted romance to a profound examination of the complexities of human nature and the process of coming into one's own.

3. JOAN RIVIERE'S THEORY OF FEMININITY AS A MASQUERADE

A person who "plainly display[s] strong features of the other sex" while being "mainly heterosexual" is what Riviere refers to as a masquerade (1929, p. 303). In her work *First Contributions to Psychoanalysis* (1994), Riviere cites Sandor Ferenczi to back up her definition. She goes on to say that "homosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a 'defense' against their homosexuality" (Riviere, 1929, p. 303). Moreover, according to Riviere, femininity is like a tool that allows women to "put on a mask of womanliness" (1929, p. 303), allowing them to conceal their more male qualities, such as a desire for power. "Submission to the dominant social code, when in actuality it is disruptive and resists patriarchal norms" is what this feminine mask seems to be, says Woodward (1989, p. 125). Patriarchy denies married women the right to pursue their ambitions and goals in life. Thus, women who conform to traditional gender norms may be destroying the power structure by behaving in a feminine fashion. In a patriarchal culture, males are the only ones who may freely pursue their goals. Leslie Bow argues that according to Riviere's theory of masquerade, women's "phallic desires"—"from a woman's desire to placate masculine authority for the affront of her own intellectual display"—are concealed by their extremely feminine behavior (2001, p. 53). Given this, it is not enough to view typical feminine behavior as an act of strength; rather, it is a declaration from a woman who, despite living in a patriarchal society, is determined to pursue her dreams and desires and act accordingly, much like any patriarchal man would, even if she wears an excused mask to hide her true subjectivity. Looking more closely at Riviere's concept of womanliness might help us comprehend her notion of masquerade and womanliness. She contends that

as a thief would pull out his pockets and demand to be examined to show he does not have the stolen items, she would assume and wear a mask to disguise her possession of masculinity and to avoid the reprisals that would be anticipated if it was discovered. Now, the reader may wonder what I mean when I say "womanliness" or where I define the boundary between "masquerade" and "genuine" womanliness. However, my point is not that there is a difference; in fact, I think that radical and superficial differences are equivalent. There was a womanly quality about the woman. (1929, p. 38)

Consequently, she equates femininity with acting: women still need to fill the void in their subjectivity, and being a woman is really a deficit in and of itself. "Masquerade... doubles representation; it is an excess of femininity subverting the masculine structure of the gaze, the law and the word" (2003, p. 66), writes Mary Ann Doane in a recent paper. It was published in 2003. By maintaining her mask, a woman is able to escape the objectification of the patriarchal world's gender prejudice and, in doing so, undermine the whole system of gaze that men use. So, being a woman is like being a subject and an object—you cannot really be either or both at the same time.



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4. LOVE, DESIRE, AND COMPLEXITY OF MARRIAGE

"The Portrait of a Lady" by Henry James explores the complexities of love, desire, and marriage, weaving together a complex web of connections that sheds light on the universal need for meaning and fulfillment. James gives a complex examination of love connections and their significant impact on the lives of his characters via his stunning narrative and perceptive realism. The work revolves around its heroine, Isabel Archer, whose journey is defined by her desire for love and independence. Isabel embodies the complexity of a young lady seeking both true close-to-home connection and personal independence. Her secret obsession with the mysterious Gilbert Osmond serves as a moving example of the lovely concept of desire. Isabel finds herself captivated by Osmond, who has an air of mystery and pure charisma, and she finds herself drawn to the idea of becoming something of his reality. However, James deftly depicts the paradox of such urges, showing how they may lead to both intimacy and isolation. Isabel's decision to marry Osmond, initially motivated by a desire to assert her independence, ends up having significant personal repercussions as she struggles to cope with her husband's domineering and manipulative behavior. Ralph Touchett, Isabel's trusted friend and confidant, is another symbol of love and longing throughout the story. As a counterpoint to Osmond, the empathetic and welcoming Ralph steps in. He backs Isabel in her pursuit of meaning in life and embodies a more progressive view of women's autonomy. They show how important it is to have deep connections and how important it is to have emotionally distant relationships in order to be fulfilled.

The conflict between individual wishes and societal standards is one of the main issues addressed via these interactions. Many Victorians believed that marriage was a social institution that served to perpetuate social stratification and family wealth. Isabel, a young lady from a wealthy family, is under intense pressure to marry sensibly so that she may fit in with her peers and adhere to certain social standards. This viewpoint is shown by Isabel's cousin, the mild-mannered but traditional Mrs. Touchett, who tries to guide Isabel's decisions based on traditional traits. In any case, the multi-faceted and relatable Madame Merle serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of caving into peer pressure. Her own experience with a chilly marriage illustrates the devastating effects of putting one's happiness last in order to fit in with one's community. James emphasizes the internal turmoil his characters experience in their pursuit of love and self-fulfillment via the use of vivid language and unique symbolism throughout the book. "The most effective way to realize ourselves is to know our desires, and the most effective way to realize we desire is to analyze the idea of our misfortunes and frustrations" (Chapter XXIV), Isabel writes while reflecting on her inner conflict, which is perhaps the most crucial passage illustrating this. In this passage, James deftly shows how being in tune with one's needs and wants is crucial to achieving domestic happiness and following through on major commitments in love and marriage. Hence, "The Portrait of a Lady" is a timeless masterpiece that deftly probes love, desire, and matrimony. Henry James, writing from a realist point of view, depicts love relationships with all their complexity and delicacy, highlighting the real-life repercussions of favoring one route over another. Readers are encouraged to reflect on the deep



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intricacies of love, independence, and self-discovery via the novel's depiction of individuals navigating the tension between societal norms and individual aspirations.

5. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF VICTORIAN MARRIAGE COEXISTING WITH FEMALE INDEPENDENCE

The protagonist, Isabel Archer, challenges social assumptions and emerges as a fiercely independent young lady in "The Portrait of a Lady," a book written by Henry James. Refusing to conform to the stereotypical view of women as submissive and dependent on men, she sets her sights on seeing Europe rather than the United States. While on her journey, Isabel receives marriage offers from several suitors, many of whom are wealthy and of great social status. Nevertheless, Isabel's narrative takes a different turn than the typical Victorian novels, which often concentrate on happy relationships. Gilbert Osmond, Isabel's prospective spouse, turns out to be a manipulative and dominating guy who has little regard for women's autonomy and personal potential despite Isabel's desires for both. Like other negative memories Isabel has throughout the book, this marriage becomes a symbol of ensnarement for her. These depictions give the impression that true female independence is impossible under the constraints of Victorian marriages. "The Portrait of a Lady" captures the nuances of Victorian-era social mores and interpersonal dynamics within the framework of realist philosophy. By focusing on Isabel's need for independence and her subsequent disappointment with marriage, the story invites readers to connect with the common experiences of people attempting to navigate cultural norms while being true to themselves. With her depiction of Isabel's character and her journey, James reflects the struggles that many women of that time endured, particularly the tension that existed between individual needs and the expectations of society as they pertained to marriage and lovers. Throughout "The Portrait of a Lady," Isabel Archer is motivated to make a statement—to herself and society—by her actions. Her need for independence is on full display as she shocks her friends by turning down marriage offers from Ruler Warburton and Caspar Goodwood. Some other lady of Isabel's day may have joyfully accepted these two men's overtures since they were such good social mates. Whatever the situation may be, Isabel's personality deviates significantly from the typical. Marriage was a socially and economically sanctioned need for women in Victorian England, and many unions were formed for financial and social gain rather than love. Society often recognised and accepted such relationships due to rational grounds. However, these norms will not sway Isabel in the slightest. She rejects marriage offers with firmness, seeing her single status as a symbol of female independence in a society where men's wants are paramount. Henry James, in keeping with realist philosophy, depicts Isabel's inner turmoil in great detail. She shows her will to not be confined by the societal expectations placed on women during her period by turning down the lucrative propositions. James does a good job of depicting Isabel's inner conflict, which shows how complicated her desire is for independence and personal opportunity against society's restrictions. When Isabel turns down Ruler Warburton's offer, it is a crucial moment that encapsulates her declaration of independence.



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6. THE GOLDEN BOWL IS A SYMBOL OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is more than just a meaningful term. It has immense value in life. A holy moment is shown to be a means of gaining people. Most people see a marriage as an unadulterated union of the sexes. Because when two individuals get married, their ownership of each other's possessions becomes unified. They own all of the tales. Therefore, there is no secret to it. People hope their marriage will provide them eternal joy for that reason. Henry James aims to portray marriage as The Golden Bowl in his book *The Golden Bowl*. Moreover, why is The Golden Bowl a symbol that he employs? The fact that a bowl is often concave is known to it. All of the items on it are placed on it. It might be something wonderful, something unpleasant, or even a combination of the two in one bowl. The 'bowl' here symbolizes Maggie and Amerigo's marriage. So why does it need to be gold? The bright, precious metal known as gold is often worn as a symbol of majesty. It is also a sign of prosperity. In order to be prosperous, almost everyone wants to have some golden. Unfortunately, not everyone can find happiness in the presence of riches. Even if it is expensive, the cost sometimes spells doom for them.

—...Among the couple's younger friends, there was a story that was almost too old for historical criticism: the couple's marriage, which was the happiest of its time, had begun in the distant past when things were not as developed as they are now. This meant that the happy couple had been brave and original, marking the end of an era with an honorable risk,... (James, 21).

Maggie assumes that her marriage is blissful. Her father's marriage to Charlotte is something else she is pleased about. However, there is something terrible that Maggie is unaware of. Even though her marriage is extremely important to her, she is blissfully unaware that it is not perfect. This is analogous to the cracked golden bowl. Until Maggie discovers The Golden Bowl has a flaw in its design or has cracked it, no one knows about the hidden love in her marriage.

7. THE GOLDEN BOWL AND THE FAILURE OF LOVE

The transition from the conventional to the innovative is crucial to *The Golden Bowl* for reasons that go much beyond James's stylistic change. Throughout the book, he toy with the idea of old and new, which is particularly relevant to the continuous shift towards a society that is increasingly concerned with economics. Not due to their immense riches but rather their complete focus on business-related economics, the Ververs conform to the new social patterns and become symbols of that lifestyle. The prince knows that the traditional ways of life, based on hereditary social positions, are dying out. In a society going through such a transformation, he knows that his illustrious lineage and noble reputation will not get him far without money. He now considers the old and the new to be two separate aspects of himself. He says that he is "some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, stamped with glorious arms, medieval, wonderful." This coin is no longer useful as a currency but as a collectible; it has outlived its usefulness and is adorned with symbols that are unreadable in this new society. A large portion of *The Golden Bowl* is devoted to discussing the change from the old to the new, how the new utilizes the old, and whether or not the old has become a corrupted version of itself as a result. The patriarchal ideology of the distinct realms was a source



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of conflict that contributed to the shift to this capitalist economic system. The earlier animosity is still there, and James is still very interested in the male-female dynamic; in fact, the tension between the sexes in *The Golden Bowl* is at an explosive level. Boone points out this tension and contends that "in each relationship" in James's novel, "the keynote most often sounded" refers to "the uneasy and unnatural division between the sexes, a division italicized by constantly shifting plays for power and possession of each other" he says "speaks to the extent of James's critical ambivalence towards the foundations underlying the marital institution." The 'plays for power and possession' have become more economically charged, which Boone overlooks. This was absent from James's earlier works. While the fight for gender equality is far from over, women now have financial resources at their disposal. Despite having far more money than Osmond, Isabel Archer was unable to use it to put herself on an equal footing with her husband.

In contrast, Maggie's wealth is directly related to her male connection; she may engage in "a battle for mastery and possession" with her husband, but she has a better chance of winning if she controls the marital purse strings. Though Boone makes a valid point in saying that "all these relationships throw into question aspects of the age's marital ethos," he fails to see that Maggie has transformed into the new "new woman" in many respects.

In contrast to Maggie, who lives in the burgeoning capitalist society where money buys both power and equality, Armstrong notes that the early "new women" were more concerned with receiving respect for their "qualities of mind" than being economically free. She does not need to worry about Amerigo's opinions on her intelligence (though she enjoys showing him that she is not as "dumb" as he thinks). Being a member of the less privileged sex and financially disadvantaged only adds insult to injury for Charlotte, who is utterly helpless.

It should come as no surprise that this nuanced understanding of love is the factor that disrupts the financial harmony that has been built up in the Verver family and the two marriages specifically. According to Boone, James transforms "the popular myth of complementary opposition as the basis of romantic attraction of the verities of the wedlock ideal" into something "an object of grim parody." They are "based on utility rather than on the love supposedly central to an ideal marriage." Therefore, none of these marriages is ideal. The marital institution, which prompted these new social shifts, could not endure marriages formed on the basis of unequal gender concerns and within unequal parameters, as James has previously shown in his novels. Now, he is interested in studying whether marriages formed within greater economic and gender equality can endure. A resounding "no" is the obvious response. James thinks a stable marriage requires more than just a level playing field. He informs his readers of this outcome, yet his characters continue to behave as if "their equilibrium was everything, and that it was practically precarious." The protagonists let their desire for power supplant their emotional relationships because they think this balance is crucial. While each of the four protagonists has strong feelings for their wives, none of them have those of the other two characters. As a result, the widely held belief—so widely held that it appears on the Penguin edition's book jacket—that *The Golden Bowl* is James's work in which the protagonists finally have



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it made must be disproven. The cheerful conclusion, typical of James's writings, swiftly becomes irrelevant once readers grasp the concept that love as power has supplanted emotional love. People still seek affectionate love and put the receiver of that love higher than their spouse, whom they engage in a power struggle with rather than a relationship of reciprocal affection, as James demonstrates in *The Golden Bowl*, which means that the marital institution is in just as fragile a state after it has been transformed into a more economic transaction. Even though the four protagonists give up their "real" loves for the sake of marriage and the economy, they end up far less happy than they had anticipated due to the profound loneliness they feel.

8. CONCLUSION

Each book has a unique viewpoint on marriage, ethics, and the self, yet both *The Golden Bowl* and *The Portrait of a Lady* provide deep insights into these topics. Both Isabel Archer's and Maggie Verver's stories deal with heavy themes: the terrible fallout of broken trust, the strength to persevere after being betrayed, and the moral dilemmas inherent in maintaining relationships. Taken as a whole, these works showcase James's talent for describing the complex interaction between individual and societal factors, prompting readers to consider the pros and cons of being genuine in a fallen world.

9. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

10. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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