

“Thing” Narrative in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract *The Portrait of a Lady* is Henry James’s early best work with the exquisite and graceful form of Jamesian “upper-class parlor.” For a long time, “thing” narrative in the novel has been overshadowed by the abundant discussion of its characterization, plot and themes of love, moral, culture and etc. The neglect of things leads to the disconnection between the thing narrative as a set of discourse system and the meaning of the work. In fact, the novel is flooded with “things,” such as clothes, houses and artworks. These things work together to weave consciousness of gender, class, and culture into the meaning web of the masterpiece by constructing the characters’ identity in their invasion of humans with their “material power.”

Keywords Henry James; *The Portrait of a Lady*; things

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Introduction

First published in 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady* has sparked a lot of criticism. In addition to stylistic appreciation and interdisciplinary researches, most of the reviews focus on the major characters of the novel, Isabel Archer, Ralph Touchett, and Madame Merle, exploring the personalities and fates of these characters and the cultural connotations behind them. Besides, while some researchers have probed into the space and its implications in James’s novels (Kestner, Fu, Whiteley), some other scholars have investigated the value of pains, knowledge and responsibilities

expressed in Isabel’s final choice (Jones, Dai, Copland). The above studies highlight the novel’s importance through different lenses, but a closer reading reveals a seriously overlooked fact: James invested a lot of ink in various material things including clothing, residences, decorative paintings, sculptures, etc. The minute details and visual texture in daily life constitute the living organism of the novel and overlap and interconnect each other to form a “living life” by functioning as a vehicle for the production of metonymic meanings of physical things.

As a matter of fact, in striking contrast to modernists like Pilippo Tommaso Marinetti and Willa Catha who disdained the object culture of the Victorian world, James, in *The American Scene* (1907), granted “voice to the inanimate object world, from New York Trinity Church to the Pullman train” (Boehm 222). To some extent, in his concern with things, James foresaw the coming of the “thing” era in humanities and social sciences. In the past decades, the shift to things has become a major hotspot in academic world under the trend of “de-anthropocentrism.” The speculative realism movement in philosophy and new materialism celebrated by Bill Brown and other theorists have pushed “things” under the spotlight. They are “rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency” (Coole and Forest 9). As a result, things insinuate into and play a key role in literary criticism, just as Fu Xiuyan contends, “In many cases, the narrative of things establishes another discourse system in addition to languages, and if the meaning implanted in the story by the author fails to attract attention, it cannot be deciphered” (4). In response to the rise of material turn and thing theories, literary scholars begin to rethink the socio-political significance of things and their interaction with human beings to promote the development of narrating and narrated things themselves. But, what on earth can we do with “things” in literature? Fu Xiuyan’s answer seems thought-provoking: “The so-called material turn in literary criticism is to concentrate the spotlight on the things that used to be a foil, so that they become the main objects of literary research in humans”(5).

Among the surfeit of topics generated by “material turn” stands out the characters’ consciousness and identities expressed by the things they make, purchase, use and discard. Therefore, this article centers on the narrative of things in Henry James’s *PL* to excavate their function as a cultural medium and narrative tool to externalize Victorian consciousness of gender, class and culture and their great role in the construction of the characters’ identity.

Clothes

The clothes in *PL* are depicted in typical Jamesian style: simple but vague. However, according to the description of the text and Victorian costume culture, the donning of the characters can be roughly visualized. As the uniquely human action, clothing our physical bodies literally manifests the material culture of our lives. The cultural progress of costume in Victorian period coexisted with prevailing conservatism, asceticism and the pursuit for elegance. Gentlemen's clothing is generally formal and rigid with three styles: high top hats, tops and pants; Ladies' attire is elaborately made or even over-completed, standard with bound corsets and intricate petticoats. There are different degrees of morbidity in the chest, waist and hips to emphasize ladies' delicacy and sexual charms, and consequently, ladies became walking ornaments. Though highly congruous with the Victorian cultural code, the costume narrative in *PL* is unique with an emphasis on its thingness and material power over the characters.

In the novel, Madame Merle is typically characterized as one who is "armed at all points" (James 541)¹. In Carlyle's terminology, Merle is one of those "creatures that live, move and have their being in Cloth" (305). When she first appeared, she was "fastening a bracelet, dressed in dark blue satin, which exposed a white bosom that was ineffectually covered by a curious silver necklace" (252). Madame Merle was the representative of the typical Victorian women, for whom the clothes were a symbol of status and morality. She was always dressed up in jewels and overwhelmed as a subject and enslaved to clothing. Madam Merle's style of clothing arose from the Victorian social system and customs. First of all, she had natural male-pleasing qualities, which was a default fact behind Victorian women's clothing culture. Secondly, in order to realize her ulterior motives, she befriended Mrs. Touchett and Isabel from the very beginning by assuming the image of an upper-class woman with the disguise of costumes. Finally, she was also deeply poisoned by European materialism which was caused by the lavish consumption desire out of the public's aesthetic consciousness and was subsequently led to the worship of things. Merle believed that "there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman" and "we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances" (283). Then, what is self? Merle firmly claimed, it "overflows into everything that belongs to us— and then it flows back again" (283). Therefore, she defines her own self as what is "the clothes I choose to wear". She even cried out that "I've a great respect

1 The original texts of the novel quoted in this article are from Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, London: Collector's Library, 2004 and hereafter only a page number appears.

for *things*!” (189) Indubitably, Madam Merle firmly believed that selfhood and self-expression emanated from attire. Consequently, she got bound by clothes or “things” and degraded into the object of “thing tyranny.” In this case, the main body that originally enjoyed democracy and the human being were invaded and abused by the majority of things, allowing things to exercise tyranny (Ning 134). Madame Merle’s dress invited to her “tyranny” from male scrutiny, social institutional constraints and her own aesthetic pleasure.

Unlike Madame Merle and Victorian mature women’s costumes, her daughter Pansy’s vestment showed Victorian girls’ innocence, simplicity and purity, rejecting any pre-marriage sexual awakening. Until Pansy officially entered the society, that is, when it came to marriage, she “wore her hat—an ornament of extreme simplicity and not at variance with her plain muslin gown, too short for her years”(318), and gray gloves that she did not like, revealing asceticism from the inside out. In Victorian families, young women were treated like babies, imposing physical restrictions on their bodies through clothing, denying their own right to full physical and subjective maturity. Osmond, both male and father, “infantized” and domesticated Pansy through clothing. Even though Pansy had been sixteen years old, he would still hold her hand and even had her daughter sit on his lap or between his legs, without the slightest sense of gender divide, as if Pansy were a baby who had no gender consciousness. Growing up in a convent, Pansy perfectly lived up to Osmond’s expectations of her upbringing: pure, innocent, and childlike with strong morality.

In contrast to Madame Merle’s and Pansy’s identities constructed by the thing of clothes, Isabel was strongly against Merle’s assertion of the expressive function of costume and would never allow it to identify herself. She uttered her disagreement with Madame Merle: “I don’t know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me...a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (284). Isabel’s denial on sartorial function finds its best expression in her own costume. Throughout the text, we can see that her dress style does not change much. She wore black in two starkly parallel scenes in the story. The first scene shows Isabel’s first appearance in Chapter 2. There, she was “in a black dress” (45) and Ralph saw her standing “in the doorway” of Gardencourt (45). The spacious portal leads out of the house and into the garden. In the second scene, Rosier came to visit the Osmonds. He “meets Mrs. Osmond coming out of the deep doorway” (497-498). Here, a gilded inside door replaces the previous spacious portal. This deep door renders heaviness and confinement which leads to another room within the Osmond’s “black fortress.”

In both scenes, Isabel was dressed black and remained standing in the doorway for some time, long enough to form a portrait in a door frame. While the first frame presents a girl with vitality and vivacity, the second one demonstrates a somehow remote and subdued woman in spite of the fact that the “framed” heroine in black velvet “struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady”(498). Being trapped in the marriage scam and stubbornly helpless, Isabel pretended to be strong by hiding herself in gorgeous costumes from self-expression. Different from Madam Merle’s and Pansy’s garb which changed with the owner’s mentality, personality and circumstances, Isabel’s dress style remained much the same. Conspicuously, Isabel’s unchanged black dress in these two similar scenes implies her changed identity from a free girl to a suppressed woman. The unchanged dress style projects the changed identities of its wearer. Isabel was no longer an unbound girl with a free spirit. Instead, she turned into a wife and stepmother in bondage.

Whether Isabel accepted conventional dress code or not, she could not escape the fate of being subdued by various forces. In the end, like Madame Merle and Pansy, she was degraded into an ornament and objectified to varying degrees by the object and even the subject themselves. While Madame Merle was bound by her own desires for things, and Pansy was made objectified by her father, Isabel was produced by Ralph. As an “author,” Ralph was contradictory, and his attitude towards Isabel had been swinging between two extremes. Sometimes he appeared as a proud “Creator” to put pressure on Isabel’s marriage choices; sometimes he existed as a “reasonable guest,” hoping that Isabel would be a natural product of the law. But after Isabel got married to Osmond, she no longer belonged to Ralph, because he “recognizes Osmond”(532) and he sees that Osmond “kept all things within limits...he adjusted, regulated, animated their manner of life” (532). Thus, “her mind was to be his— attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park”(582), voluntarily domesticating herself. Clothing registers palpably on the body and cognitively in the mind in a symbiotic connection (Cook 1). The three women in the novel wrapped themselves up in different ways under the costumes and the moral order behind, and their femininity and sense of subjectivity were threatened and invaded by social morality, and finally constructed into a unique Victorian female identity.

Houses

Compared with indicative attire, houses are much more pervasive in *PL*. As a special kind of thing, the possession, maintenance, sharing, consumption, protection and destruction of these architects necessitates close textual scrutiny. Moreover,

for architects, artists, politicians and writers alike, landscapes including houses are the most frequently invoked vehicle in framing arguments about personal, national and social identity. Henry James is of no exception. As a writer and world traveler, James seems to be extremely possessed with architecture or houses. The ubiquitous houses in James’s fiction, particularly in *PL* makes Coulson believe that the novel “is possessed by an estate agent’s imagination” (169). The textual and architectural works conflate spaces of meaning on personal, social, and symbolic levels. However, the Anglo-American interpretation of the manor imagery in the novel focuses more on its personal symbolism, especially on the formation of Isabel’s moral consciousness. In fact, the manor has a broader association with the socio-cultural context, especially as a symbol of Englishness and class distinction.

The opening scene is typical of Englishness that has been well displayed in English country house literature since its very origin (Kelsall 170). James decides it as “peculiarly English picture” (32). “Afternoon tea” is a rather ordinary daily ceremony in English life, but under James’s pen, “the hour dedicated to the afternoon tea” is “more agreeable” (30) than anything else. Further reading makes clear why a daily activity turns out to be so impressive and enjoyable. The reader can see a few people enjoying the afternoon tea on the lawn of an old English country house. Sitting in a chair or strolling aimlessly on the lawn and immersed under the flood of “its finest and rarest” light on a splendid summer afternoon, the people could feel “the eternity of pleasure” (31). In this way, “the little feast” is mingled with a sense of leisure, relaxation and privacy. Such a scene best demonstrates the exquisitely cultural ethos of the English country house.

The most charming part of the scene perhaps lies in the country house itself. Its location receives much attention from eyes that are seeking wisdom. “It stood upon a low hill, above the river—the river being the Thames at some forty miles from London” (32). Water is the symbol of wisdom and ingenuity. Therefore, the owner of a house situated by waters is believed to be extremely wise and intelligent. What’s more, its appearance must attract the eyes looking for beauty. “A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which, time and the weather has played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimney, its windows smothered in creepers” (32). The house appears to be a scenic picture. The name of the mansion, Gardencourt, brings about a distinct association of elegant and refined English culture unified with both the beauty and innocence of the nature. The history of the house well bends with the refined landscape. In its growth, the house contains the historical memories of England: the house, where the great Elizabeth slept,

“had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell’s wars, and then under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged” (32). As a perfect combination with time and nature, the house and its garden form a flawless setting for the exquisite ceremony of afternoon tea. The fully-grown oaks and beeches “flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains”; the “wide carpet” of turf seems like “the extension of a luxurious interior”; the lawn is “furnished like a room, with cushioned seats with rich-colored rugs, and with books and papers that lay upon the grass” (33). The century-old beauty of the house is seized and frozen in the moment of “little eternity” while innocent pastime, organic nature and human culture are brought together in this “peculiarly English picture” (32).

According to Sun Yanping and Wang Fengyu, the word “country” not only refers to rural areas but also means “nation,” and thus, “rural England” has become a national myth pursued in various periods” (31). Actually, possession of Gardencourt, the old country house that symbolizes the English culture and history, has switched and is now taken over by Mr. Touchett. The wealthy American banker who “had bought it originally because it was offered at a great bargain: bought it with much grumbling at its ugliness, its antiquity, its incommodity” (33) has now developed “a real aesthetic passion” for the house whose pure aestheticization parallels to the substitution of modern global capitalistic economy for the English feudal order and to the substitution of a foreign plutocracy for the old English aristocracy. As Raymond Williams notes, compared with the earlier country houses, the country houses under James’s pen are “not of land but of capital.” He asserts, “the country-houses of Henry James, which have become the house-parties of a metropolitan and international social round, the stage-settings of a more general social drama...” (249). Capital at the moment becomes a “stage-setting” for an aestheticized Englishness that has been reduced to memories and abstractions (Williams 248). Due to the social and economic changes, Gardencourt, in the possession of the old American banker who still has the distinctive “American tone” after 30 years in England, has now turned into a place of pure aesthetic pleasure.

While Gardencourt stands for the rise of new plutocracy, another country house in the novel, Lockleigh, emblems the fall of English feudalism. This is a “curious old place” (113). Having inherited the house from his ancestor, Lord Warburton is the present owner of Lockleigh whose family is a typical English aristocracy and has their social status and power sustained on the traditional feudal system. Its long history made Isabel believe that it is “a noble picture.” However, rising from “a broad, still moat” with its stout grey pile tinted in “the softest, deepest, most weather-fretted hue” (125), the old country house affected the young visitor

Isabel from the New World, as “a castle in a legend.” In her impression, the place is more mysterious and suppressing than noble because “within, it had been a good deal modernized—some of its best points has lost their purity” (125). Thus, in comparison with Gardencourt, Lockleigh is far less refined and enchanting and seems to be relating her prime past and lamenting her plunging present like all the other country houses in the late 19th century. In other words, the house fades as its owner, the aristocrat’s vitality wanes.

Clearly, Lockleigh differed strikingly from Gardencourt. They represented two kinds of upper class. One was the upstart and the other was the hereditary nobility. Gardencourt was the product of the rise of commercial capital, while Lockleigh Manor was an outcome of the traditional architectural system, which was inherited from the ancestors of Lord Warburton. The real English manor arose in the 12th century and peaked during the Elizabethan period to the mid-18th century. Originally derived from the castle, the mansion was actually more of a form of economic organization, and in English law, the manor was stipulated to be the property that organized the attendant rights of the baron’s court, which was a kind of tenure unit under the feudal system. The manor generally included the division of land such as commons, self-camps and freeholds. So, Lord Warburton “owns fifty thousand acres of the soil of this little island and ever so many other things besides. He has half a dozen houses to live in” (120). However, the Gardencourt was varied under the circulation of capital and did not include the surrounding land. The traditional aristocrats represented by hereditary manors were the guardians of feudal civilization and order, while the manors under the flow of capital were the forces of the new upstarts. In the great Industrial Revolution, cities and commodities developed rapidly and estates were gradually commodified and traditional hereditary aristocrats went bankrupt and were eliminated by emerging economic forms. More estates were turned into commodities to be bought by the upstarts. Even so, the traditional nobility initially looked down on the emerging aristocracy. And the new nobility’s efforts to learn from the traditional aristocracy in terms of food, clothing, and housing were considered to be a farce that would end up in nonsense. But the capitalist economy was booming anyway, and the upstarts rising from strong capital forces were slowly accepted. The upstarts had a strong predilection for manors especially British manors with a casual style. Undoubtedly, the two houses in the novel serves as an agent to highlight the class distinction in Victorian era and thus bring ample meanings to the text. Put it in another way, the houses are the carrier of their owners’ needs and desires and thus obtained thingness in their connection with human beings.

Artworks

In *PL*, what is closely related to the mansions is a variety of decorative artworks, such as paintings and sculptures and so on. The artworks to the minds of their owners are what the costume to the bodies of the characters. A careful examination of these cultural artifacts will illustrate the fact that they are essentially emblematic of masculine domination over women and betrays James's cultural consciousness and his heroines' construction of national identities.

Gardencourt had a special oak gallery with many famous paintings personally collected by Ralph. Most of these paintings were purchased at high prices from the declining nobility who, like Lord Warburton, could not afford such works of art. The artistic ornaments betray the social status of their owners. Compared with wealthy Ralph with a large collection of authentic artworks, Osmond was rather impoverished and could only afford copied antiques. However, it does not hinder him from winning Isabel's heart and inheritance. Although every other character except his daughter Pansy and Isabel initially sees through his stratagem, Osmond managed to promote himself socially. His trick lied in his deficiency in every regard, i.e., "no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort" (472). Isabel was so enchanted by such scantiness that she informed Ralph, "It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me" (472). To be precise, Isabel was lured not by Osmond's deficiency but his taste for art or his cultural capital. "He's the incarnation of taste," ... "He judges and measures, approves and condemns, altogether by that" (469). Firmly believing that a good person should be marked with a good taste, Isabel uttered "It's a happy thing then that his taste should be exquisite" (469). Thus, it's quite natural that the naïve girl was greatly attracted by Osmond's house fraught with paintings, books, magazines and newspapers, all of which told the landlord's cultural taste. She would never know that it was exactly Osmond's cultural taste or the so-called cultural capital that threw her into the marital nightmare.

Isabel's tragedy, in my opinion, is partly rooted in the dominative cultural capital represented by various artworks or collectibles. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the seemingly autonomous field of art and cultural production was actually closely connected with power and social authority. Cultural capital can be transformed into other species of capitals, leading to the increase of autonomy, authority and other symbolic power. The capital transformation, however, works differently between men and women with a gender-specific rigidity. Bourdieu asserts that cultural production "occupies a dominated position... in this field... It

is thus the site of a double hierarchy” (38). On one hand, it is entangled with the field of power and on the other, with masculine domination. Jamesian women, to a great extent, verify the practice. In James’s novels, a majority of women are generally underprivileged in obtaining all kinds of capital. As Schniedermann points out, “women are subject to a different ‘exchange rate’ than men when it comes to transforming one species of capital into another” (130), and, “possession of and control over cultural capital thus turn into means of power beyond the mere display of economic wealth” (131). Isabel tried arduously to turn the inherited money into cultural capital with a great appreciation for high-cultured Osmand and all of the artworks in various mansions and museums. However, Isabel failed to realize that the villain was one of the masters of these cultural products. Her pursuit for cultural capital was, in essence, an invitation for passive mastery and bondage because, the more skilled hunter of the capital, i.e., the hypocritical Osmond, had been waiting patiently for his prey to fall into his trap. In Osmond’s eyes, Isabel was nothing more than an object, a piece of antique or an artwork. Isabel could do nothing but be controlled and dominated by her husband. In this sense, the artworks decorating the houses prompt and witness the heroine’s misfortune.

Besides the ornamental artworks in various mansions, James also depicted numerous exhibits in copious museums which were as much a physical space for storing historical artifacts as a memorial space for the past. The exhibits in the museums are “given meaning within discourses of memory and relics, as opposed to discourses of science and types (Feldman 259). Namely, they are the accumulation and condensation of the memory of a national group, or a material carrier of cultural memory and construct a new cultural memory of the present with a different linguistic order in a new historical context. Isabel was fascinated by different museums. She paid visits to the Natural History Museum in the western suburbs of London, the British Museum, Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London, etc. She enjoyed the famous works of Turner’s landscape paintings and Assyrian bulls and greatly admired the memorial statue of Nelson, the British Admiral and the national hero who resisted Napoleon’s invasion, in Trafalgar Square. In the gallery of fine arts in the Temple of Jupiter in Rome, she “sat down in the centre of the circle of these presences, regarding them vaguely, resting her eyes on their beautiful blank faces; listening, as it were, to their eternal silence” (414). She was reveling in it, trying to hear something from the sculptures. These paintings and sculptures had become material carriers of European history and culture, not only visualizing abstract European historical memory into Isabel’s personal memory, but also evoking and reshaping Isabel’s historical and cultural consciousness through

their intuitive visual images. In this way, Isabel, who was not a part of the collective memories, was plunged into pious worship of these artworks and unconscious identification with the embedded culture.

In contrast to Isabel, her best friend, journalist Henrietta Stackpole, always refused to appreciate these works in a positive way. With sharp criticism and shrewd derogation, she tried consciously to evade being influenced and infected by the collective memory embedded in these works of art. Instead, she constantly emphasized the collective memory of her country's history to consolidate her American identity. Here, we see strikingly different attitudes towards European and American culture. Scholarship has come to the consensus that James had a particular propensity for European high culture, often muttered about the barren culture of his motherland and dreamt of the cultural fusion of these two continents. As the outstanding images of James's cross-cultural heroines, Isabel and Henrietta bespoke his thinking about the cultural differences between Europe and America and the construction of national identity. Obviously, as a "cosmopolitan American," James did not expect an American with either a blind worship for Europe or a stubborn belief in flawless United States. One's national identity cannot be established with Isabel's blind exaltation for a foreign country nor with Miss Stackpole's visionless over-confidence in one's own motherland and only with tolerance, objectivity and confidence can one's national identity be built in a balanced way.

Conclusion

Reading *PL*, especially reading the things particularly scattered in the text, initiates creative process of detecting and understanding the hidden implication behind the daily stuff and minutiae. As Stephanie N. Saunders claims, "...*things* are not merely *things*, but rather there are living, breathing people behind each item" (25). In this work, things, including clothes, houses and artworks, mediate each other and interact with people to showcase their inter-subjectivity and even obtain "material power." As powerful agents, these things not only map the source power of the figurative character's desire and deeds, but also help to construct the subject's identity in various ways. As a new discourse system, the "thing" narrative deviates from the traditional human focuses, marks a departure from the existing James criticism and provides a new perspective for the interpretation of his works.

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