

“The Portrait of a Lady” by Henry James [B2]

In questo romanzo ambientato fra l’Inghilterra e l’Italia, il celebre scrittore americano narra un’elegante vicenda, in un intreccio di amori, tradimenti e giochi di potere nelle relazioni romantiche.



Born in New York in 1843, Henry James was a [renowned](#) author and a [forerunner](#) of literary modernism, a prominent movement [intent on](#) reinventing literature to reflect a rapidly-changing world. He lived in England for many years and travelled across Europe, producing fiction and travel journalism about Americans in Europe and Europeans in America. In 1878 James published the novel *Daisy Miller* to great [acclaim](#). In 1881 he produced the novel considered to be his [masterpiece](#), *The Portrait of a Lady*. Set mostly in England and in Italy — one of James’ favourite locations — *The Portrait of a Lady* is a story about love, hidden motives and [betrayal](#), and an exploration of [shifting](#) power dynamics in relationships.

INDEPENDENCE

Isabel Archer is a young, beautiful and intelligent American. She travels to England with her [aunt](#), determined to find her own way in life. Expected to

marry, Isabel **rejects** two **suitors**. She values her independence and **is at her happiest** with her cousin, Ralph. He cares deeply for Isabel, **despite** her doubts. **“I don’t know what you care for; I don’t think you care for anything. You don’t really care for England when you praise it; you don’t care for America even when you pretend to abuse it. ‘I care for nothing but you, dear cousin,’ said Ralph. ‘If I could believe even that, I should be very glad.”**

- Non capisco di che cosa v’importi; credo che non v’importi niente di niente. Non v’importa niente dell’Inghilterra quando ne **fate** le lodi; non v’importa dell’America anche quando **fate** finta di insultarla.
- Non m’importa che di voi, cara cugina - disse Ralph.
- Se potessi crederci, ne sarei molto lieta.

INHERITANCE

Ralph, ill with pulmonary disease, makes plans to give half of his **inheritance** to Isabel. Although his father would have liked Ralph to marry Isabel, Ralph hopes that the money will help her stay independent and **ensure** that she is not forced to marry for money: **“Ralph leaned back in his chair with folded arms; his eyes were fixed for some time in meditation. At last, with the air of a man fairly mustering courage, “I take a great interest in my cousin,’ he said, ‘but not the sort of interest you desire. I shall not live many years; but I hope I shall live long enough to see what she does with herself [...] I should like to do something for her.”** Ralph si appoggiò allo schienale a braccia conserte; gli occhi gli rimasero fissi per un poco in meditazione. Infine, con l’aria di chi chiama a raccolta tutto quanto il suo coraggio: - Ho molto interesse per mia cugina - disse; - ma non il genere di interesse che vorresti tu. Non vivrò molti anni; ma spero di poter vivere abbastanza a lungo per vedere che cosa farà di se stessa [...] vorrei fare qualcosa per lei.

MAKING PLANS

Ralph, however, is not the only person making plans for Isabel. Madame Merle, a [socialite](#) and friend of Ralph's mother, visits Mr. Osmond, an American [ex-pat](#) living near Florence. Whilst hiding secrets of her own, Madame Merle makes her goals [abundantly](#) clear: **"She's beautiful, accomplished, generous and, for an American, well-born. She's also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune." Mr. Osmond listened to this in silence, appearing to turn it over in his mind with his eyes on his informant. 'What do you want to do with her?' he asked at last. 'What you see. Put her in your way.'"**

- È bella, bene educata, generosa, e, per essere americana, di buona famiglia. E poi è molto intelligente e molto amabile, e possiede un buon patrimonio. Il signor Osmond ascoltava in silenzio queste parole, e, con gli occhi fissi sulla sua informatrice, sembrava rimuginarle nella mente.
- Che cosa volete fare di lei? - chiese infine.
- Quel che vedete. Metterla sulla vostra strada.

MATCH-MAKING**

[Unaware](#) of this secret [match-making](#), Isabel travels to Italy, where she meets Madame Merle, Osmond and his young daughter. She trusts them, but could she really be happy as Osmond's wife? Before long, Isabel finds herself feeling manipulated. **"Madame Merle had done what she wanted; she had brought about the union of her two friends [...] There were people who had [match-making](#) passion, like the votaries of art for art; but Madame Merle, great artist as she was, was scarcely one of these. She thought too ill of marriage, too ill even of life; she had desired that particular marriage but had not desired others. She therefore had a conception of gain, and Isabel asked herself where she had found her profit."** Madame Merle aveva fatto ciò che voleva: aveva portato a compimento l'unione dei suoi due amici [...] Ci sono persone, simili ai seguaci dell'arte per l'arte, che hanno la passione di combinare matrimoni; ma Madame Merle, da quella grande artista che era, non si poteva dire una di queste. Pensava troppo male del matrimonio, troppo male persino della vita;

aveva desiderato quel matrimonio particolare, ma non ne aveva desiderati altri. Era stata guidata dunque da un'idea di profitto, e Isabel si chiedeva dove avesse trovato il suo tornaconto.

DESTINY

According to the author, *The Portrait of a Lady* began with the concept of a young American woman "affronting her destiny." He reveals Isabel's dilemma as she wrestles with the forces of fate and the idea of entering a relationship while still preserving her identity. In 1996, Jane Campion directed a film adaptation of the novel, starring Nicole Kidman as Isabel Archer.

Glossary

- **suitors** = pretendenti, spasimanti
- **despite** = malgrado
- **Unaware** = inconsapevole
- **shifting** = cambiare, spostare
- **aunt** = zia
- **rejects** = rifiutare
- **ensure** = assicurare
- **socialite** = persona socialmente importante
- **abundantly** = ampiamente
- **fate** = destino
- **renowned** = rinomato
- **forerunner** = anticipatore
- **intent on** = intenzionato a
- **acclaim** = acclamazione, gradimento
- **wrestles** = lottare
- **masterpiece** = capolavoro
- **betrayal** = tradimento
- **is at her happiest** = essere più felice che mai
- **inheritance** = eredità
- **ex-pat** = espatriato
- **match-making** = combinare relazioni di coppia