

## Isabel Archer at Gardencourt

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Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) begins and ends at Gardencourt. Gardencourt provides the scenes of opening and closing for the novel, as well as the place where Isabel Archer starts and reviews her European adventure. Gardencourt is "an old English country-house (17)" with "a history (18);" it has stood for more than three hundred years. Its stability provides an antithesis to the fluid or ephemeral state of human life, including Isabel Archer's. The house serves as far more than a simple backdrop against which the characters of the novel move. It is, as well, a major metaphor and one that runs throughout the fabric of the narrative. In this essay, I will analyze both the physical and metaphorical features of Gardencourt and discuss their significance in relation to the changes that Isabel undergoes in the novel and the understanding that she acquires about herself.

A number of critics have commented on the importance of houses in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Richard Chase remarks: "The idea of leaving and entering a house, the contrast of different kinds of houses, the question of whether a house is a prison or the scene of liberation and fulfillment — these are the substance of the metaphors in *The Portrait of a Lady* (121)." Tony Tanner writes that Isabel is "an uncommitted, undefined self which sets out to find the right house to live in and the right partner to live with," because "the undefined self needs a defining shape" — a house. Unfortunately, Isabel "chooses the wrong house and the wrong partner (91)." R. W. Stallman claims that houses are extremely important in this novel, because "all the crucial events in our heroine's career occur in houses (16)," and "in houses occur *all* the revelations (24)." Charles R. Anderson argues: "In a figurative sense this is the story of Isabel's leaving an American house for a European one, one way of life for another (94)." Anderson also stresses that understanding comes to Isabel through imagery and objects: "[T]he characters in James's fictions arrive at meaningful relations only when they come to understand the objects — places or things — which they think of as symbolizing each other. It is in keeping with the basic techniques of this novel that now at last understanding comes to Isabel also through imagery, much of it being inversions of the same images she had failed to grasp the meaning of earlier (90)." I will show how Isabel comes to understand herself through Gardencourt — when she returns there at the end of the novel she observes various aspects of the house by which she is made aware of her changes.

### "A Picture Made Real": Gardencourt, Summer 1871

In the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Gardencourt is presented as "the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture (17-8)" which forms the setting of the first parts of the novel. James first introduces the scene from a general, distanced viewpoint. Then the viewpoint is focused on the house, which is described in detail in the following way:

A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of 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. The house had a name and a history; the old gentleman taking his tea would have been delighted to tell you these things: how it had been built under Edward the Six, had offered a night's hospitality to the great Elizabeth [...], had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell's wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged; and how, finally, after having been remodelled and disfigured in the eighteenth century, it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd 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, and who now, at the end of twenty years, had become conscious of a real aesthetic passion for it [...]. (18)

The emphasis is on the age of the building. The house has been "improved" and "refined" by the changes made by the weather over a long period of time. The plants covering the house such as ivy and creepers are also a sign of the age of the building because they have taken that much time to grow. Its long "history" is a mirror, in part, of English history. The narrative refers to such grand figures as Edward the Six and Queen Elizabeth. The fabric of the building has been "bruised" and "defaced" during Cromwell's wars and "repaired" and "enlarged" under the Restoration. Mr. Touchett, the American banker who now owns the house, was at first dissatisfied with its "ugliness," "antiquity" and "incommodity," but now has grown extremely fond of it. Gardencourt's "ugliness" has a great deal to do with its "antiquity;" much has been damaged, repaired, added and changed over a long period of time, thus the house is a muddle of uneven parts. The various marks of history that have been added onto the house contribute to its being "most characteristically English." Mr. Touchett did not appreciate this Englishness when he purchased the house twenty years before, but now considers it aesthetic.

Isabel Archer on the other hand, freshly arrived from America, declares her love of this English house almost immediately. She tells Mr. Touchett and Ralph: "I've never seen anything so lovely as this place. I've been all over the house; it's too enchanting (26)." Isabel becomes enchanted by this house because she has never seen anything like it in America.<sup>2</sup> She also immediately gets along with her cousin Ralph, who shows her around the house. Isabel asks him to show her the pictures, of which "there were a great many in the house, most of them of his own choosing (49)." The best pictures are "arranged in an oaken gallery, of charming proportions, which had a sitting-room at either end of it and which in the evening was usually lighted (50)." This oaken gallery is the museum room of Gardencourt, which also intrigues Isabel. She insists on looking at the pictures although it is getting dark and "the light was insufficient to show the pictures to advantage (50)." When she has finished looking at all the pictures, she says: "Well, now I know more than I did when I began! (50)" This room is full of aesthetic and historical "knowledge" which she is very keen on acquiring.

Then Isabel and Ralph start their famous conversation about ghosts. Isabel asks him if there are ghosts at Gardencourt: "You ought to [see ghosts], in this romantic old house (50)." Ralph corrects his cousin: "It's not a romantic old house. [...] You'll be disappointed if you count on that. It's a dismally prosaic one; there's no romance here but what you may have brought with

you (50 – 1).” Ralph insists that Isabel herself is the romantic one, and warns her against projecting her romantic views on Gardencourt. Furthermore, he tells her that she will never see the ghost: “It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge (52).” At this stage in the novel Isabel is indeed a “young, happy, innocent person,” and “suffering” and “miserable knowledge” seem remote from her.

One cause of the “prosaic” state of Gardencourt is its lack of guests. Ralph calls it “the dullest house in England (60)” because his father “received very little company, and Mrs. Touchett, not having cultivated relations with her husband’s neighbours, was not warranted in expecting visits from them (60).” Ralph’s English friend, Mr. Bantling, tells Isabel that the house is dull because both Mr. Touchett and Ralph are chronic invalids: “I dare say you found it very quiet at Gardencourt. Naturally there’s not much going on there when there’s such a lot of illness about. Touchett’s very bad, you know [...]. The old man, I believe, has half a dozen things the matter with him. [...] Of course that sort of thing makes a dreadfully dull house [...] (127).” Mr. Bantling says that Gardencourt is dull and quiet because Mr. Touchett and Ralph are ill and they are the only chief inhabitants of the house. Mr. Bantling advises Isabel that if she “want[s] a house where there’s always something going on (127),” she should visit his sister, Lady Pensil, in Bedfordshire.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these comments, Isabel is attracted to the quietness of Gardencourt:

The large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on dark, polished panels, the deep greenness outside, that seemed always peeping in, the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a “property”— a place where sounds were felicitously accidental, where the tread was muffled by the earth itself and in the thick mild air all friction dropped out of contact and all shrillness out of talk — these things were much to the taste of our young lady [...]. (57)

The sense of a “private space” is deep-felt. The space is large, but covered and protected by “brown ceilings” and “dusky corners,” and “deep embrasures” and “curious casements.” Here, one is extremely sensitive to sound, because it stands out in this quiet space.

Isabel also respects her uncle’s wish to protect the peace of Gardencourt. When Henrietta Stackpole speaks enthusiastically about writing a piece called “Americans and Tudors — Glimpses of Gardencourt,” Isabel cautions her: “I don’t think you ought to describe the place. [...] It’s too lovely to be put in newspapers, and it’s not what my uncle wants (81).” Isabel wishes to keep the house to her uncle and cousin, and also to herself.

However, with the arrival of Madame Merle, the peace at Gardencourt is broken and Isabel’s European adventure takes a different turn. Isabel finds Madame Merle playing the piano in the drawing-room of Gardencourt after she and Ralph have returned from their trip to London, having heard of Mr. Touchett’s critical condition. Isabel hears “an unexpected sound — the sound of low music proceeding apparently from the saloon (150)” and searches the house for the source of the sound:

The drawing-room at Gardencourt was an apartment of great distances, and, as the piano was placed at the end of its furthest removed from the door at which she entered, her arrival

was not noticed by the person seated before the instrument. This person was neither Ralph nor his mother; it was a lady whom Isabel immediately saw to be a stranger to herself, though her back was presented to the door. This back — an ample and well-dressed one — Isabel viewed for some moments with surprise. The lady was of course a visitor who had arrived during her absence and who had not been mentioned by either of the servants [...]. (150-1)

The mysteriousness of Madame Merle is stressed when she first enters the novel. Her description is given in such a way as to emphasize the mystery of who she is. When Isabel finds her at last in the drawing-room, she is still far away at the other end of the room, and only her back is revealed. Moreover, she has suddenly appeared without having been mentioned by anyone. Isabel feels the strangeness of Madame Merle, even without looking at her face. However, Isabel accepts this strangeness as a reason to be attracted to her. She becomes charmed by Madame Merle's performance on the piano, as well as by her elegant speech. The two immediately start a conversation and soon become intimate friends. The sudden appearance of Madame Merle strikes the reader as odd. She is an irregular being — she is a guest at a house where there are usually no guests. Moreover, she is not even a guest because she has not been invited; she has voluntarily visited Gardencourt, as she says: "I've not chosen a good moment for my visit (152)." At Isabel's request Madame Merle plays another piece, and in the meantime the room grows dark: "The lady played in the same manner as before, softly and solemnly, and while she played the shadows deepened in the room. The autumn twilight gathered in, and from her place Isabel could see the rain, which had now begun in earnest, washing the cold-looking lawn and the wind shaking the trees (152)." The encroachment of darkness and the onset of such adverse weather foreshadow the plight that Isabel is to experience later in her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, a union she is guided into by Madame Merle. But Isabel is not aware of these ominous signs, nor is she critical of Madame Merle for playing the piano when Mr. Touchett is dying. Isabel's failure to notice Madame Merle's nature and intentions results in her unhappy marriage to Osmond. Because she wants her younger friend to marry Osmond, Madame Merle will work to get Isabel away from Gardencourt, where "[s]he is happiest (Tanner, 99)."

Ralph Touchett may call Gardencourt "prosaic," "dull," and "dismal," but it is he who has the strongest attachment to the house. He has spent half his life there, and he chooses to live there despite the doctor's warning that the English climate is not good for his health. Ralph does not let his cousin enter his room, and he keeps a phonograph before his room as if meant as a barrier:

"I keep a band of music in my ante-room," he said once to her. "It has orders to play without stopping; it renders me two excellent services. It keeps the sounds of the world from reaching the private apartments, and it makes the world think that dancing's going on within." It was dance-music indeed that you usually heard when you came within ear-shot of Ralph's band; the liveliest waltzes seemed to float upon the air. Isabel often found herself irritated by this perpetual fiddling; she would have liked to pass through the ante-room, as her cousin called it, and enter the private apartments. It mattered little that he had assured her they were a very dismal place; she would have been glad to undertake to sweep them and set them in order. It was but half-hospitality to let her remain outside; [...]. (61)

Ralph wants to keep his room private; that is why he plays music to "keep the sounds of the world from reaching the private apartments" and to "make the world think that dancing's going on within." He wants privacy because he has tuberculosis; he needs peace away from the world and he also wants to keep the state of his health unknown to the world, including his cousin. Isabel is "irritated" by this music and by the distance she is forced to keep from her cousin.<sup>4</sup> It will be six years later, at the time of Ralph's death, when she will enter his room for the first time; until then the narrator makes no reference to the inside of his room.

Ralph inherits Gardencourt after his father's death, and he lives there alone, keeping only a few servants. Soon afterwards, Isabel leaves it and gets married in Italy.

### **The House that Invites Repetition: Gardencourt, Spring 1877**

At Palazzo Roccanera in Rome, Isabel, now Mrs. Osmond, receives the news that Ralph is dying. After a long and violent quarrel with her husband, Isabel goes back to Gardencourt. She is a completely different person from who she was six years ago. If she was full of hope before, now she is full of despair. If she was innocent before, now she is more experienced. She has known the consequences of misjudging others. Her mistake has led her to her present house in Rome that is "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation (360)." Isabel calls Gardencourt her "much-embracing refuge (465)," and yearns to go back there, to see Ralph before he dies, and to return to the starting-place of her European adventure so as to review it:

Gardencourt had been her starting-point, and to those muffled chambers it was at least a temporary solution to return. She had gone forth in her strength; she would come back in her weakness, and if the place had been a rest to her before, it would be a sanctuary now. She envied Ralph his dying, for if one were thinking of rest that was the most perfect of all. (465)

Something worth noticing here is Isabel's death wish. She is overstressed from her life with Osmond, and her disillusion of Madame Merle. She wants to go back to Gardencourt because she needs rest. She also wants to go back there because it is her starting-point; by returning there she can look back at the way she has come, evaluate it, and put an end to her life so far, so as to start over again. That is, she wants the old Isabel to die and a new Isabel to be reborn.

Gardencourt is the ideal place to compare her present life with the one she had six years before, because it is a house that does not change in such a short time. Gardencourt stands for security and stability, and because it has not changed, it is easy for Isabel to feel her own changes. Such feeling is expressed in the following quotation, when Isabel has arrived at Gardencourt and waits for Mrs. Touchett for a long time in the drawing-room:

The day was dark and cold; the dusk was thick in the corners of the wide brown rooms. The house was perfectly still— with a stillness that Isabel remembered; it had filled all the place for days before the death of her uncle. She left the drawing-room and wandered about—

strolled into the library and along the gallery of pictures, where, in the deep silence, her footstep made an echo. Nothing was changed; she recognised everything she had seen years before; it might have been only yesterday she had stood there. She envied the security of valuable "pieces" which change by no hair's breadth, only grow in value, while their owners lose inch by inch youth, happiness, beauty [...]. (471)

Isabel feels that nothing is changed at Gardencourt, and the darkness and the stillness of the place remind her of the time of Mr. Touchett's death. She recognizes each object in each room as the same as before, as she walks around the house. Then she "envies" the objects for their unchanging "security" while she herself has changed so much; she has grown older and known the bitterness of life. Mrs. Touchett at last comes to receive Isabel and says: "I remembered you knew the house (472)." Isabel replies: "I find I know it better even than I thought; I've been walking everywhere (472)."

To make Isabel remember the house even better, Ralph has arranged for her to stay in the same room as the previous time. She enters the room and feels that it is indeed hers: "It was the same room, and something told Isabel it had not been slept in since she occupied it (472-3)."

On the third day after Isabel's arrival she is finally allowed to see Ralph in his room, and they have a final conversation before his death. Here, they both talk about their past mistakes — Ralph's arrangement to let Isabel receive his father's fortune, and Isabel's marriage to Osmond. Ralph assures her: "I don't believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little (479)." In tears, Isabel says: "Oh Ralph, I'm very happy now (479)." Talking to Ralph of her mistake in a way reconciles herself with it; she feels redeemed.

On that night, Isabel stays up in her room and once again remembers an occurrence from her first stay at Gardencourt. It is the conversation between herself and Ralph about ghosts at this house:

He had told her, the first evening she ever spent at Gardencourt, that if she should live to suffer enough she might some day see the ghost with which the house was duly provided. She apparently had fulfilled the necessary condition; for the next morning, in the cold, faint dawn, she knew that a spirit was standing by her bed. (479)

Again, Isabel is made aware of her change; she has suffered enough to see the ghost. However, having suffered is not necessarily tragic; for, human growth is always accompanied by suffering. Tony Tanner points out that the ability to see the ghost is a sign of acquisition of "truer vision": "By marrying Osmond she suffers in good earnest, but she thus earns the right to see the ghost of Gardencourt. Her consolation — and it is the supreme one for James — is truer vision (97)."

During the night Ralph dies, and Isabel realizes his death when she feels his spirit by her bed: "It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there — a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. She stared a moment; she saw his white face — his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing (479)." Isabel goes to Ralph's room and sees his face in death. She remembers her uncle's face in death: "It was fairer than Ralph had ever been in life, and there was a strange resemblance to the face of his father, which, six years before, she had seen lying on the same pillow (480)." Now death has been repeated.

Gardencourt is a house that exists without changing. It offers a contrast with the unstable

and ephemeral nature of human life. It watches the deaths of Mr. Touchett and Ralph, as well as the change of Isabel from a "young, happy, innocent" woman to a matured one who has experienced the miseries of life. Because it is a house that stays the same, Gardencourt invites repetition; it gives those who visit it for the second or third time a feeling that they know the house, and that they have experienced something similar in the house before. Isabel, when she returns to Gardencourt after six years, perceives that nothing has changed, including the quiet atmosphere of the house as well as the objects in each room. Furthermore, Isabel faces the same event— death. Because of this tendency toward repetition, those who return to Gardencourt easily remember their state of being at the previous time and compare it to their present state, and realize how much they themselves have changed. Isabel feels her change most acutely when she sees the ghost of Gardencourt which she was not experienced enough to see six years before.

The cycle of repetition at Gardencourt will eventually be broken after Ralph's death. He leaves his mother "the furniture of Gardencourt, exclusive of the pictures and books and the use of the place for a year; after which it was to be sold (482)." The sale of the house means that Isabel will no longer have her starting-point or the house to come back to. Therefore, she must decide what she should do next. By coming back to Gardencourt she has been able to review her European experience; she is also afforded the opportunity to redirect her life. It is in the final scene in the garden of Gardencourt that she makes a decision as to what she will do.

It is a week after Ralph's funeral, and Isabel takes a solitary walk under the trees, into the garden. Then she finds a bench and once again remembers an incident that occurred in this scene during her first stay at Gardencourt:

At the end of a few minutes she found herself near a rustic bench, which, a moment after she had looked at it, struck her as an object recognised. It was not simply that she had seen it before, nor even that she had sat upon it; it was that on this spot something important had happened to her— that the place had an air of association. Then she remembered that she had been sitting there, six years before, when a servant brought her from the house the letter in which Caspar Goodwood informed her that he had followed her to Europe; and that when she had read the letter she looked up to hear Lord Warburton announcing that he should like to marry her. It was indeed an historical, an interesting, bench; she stood and looked at it as if it might have something to say to her. (485)

It is the bench that is associated with two significant events from near the beginning of Isabel's time in Europe. Sitting on this bench, she had read Caspar Goodwood's letter announcing his arrival in England and his intention of proposing marriage to Isabel. When she had finished reading that letter, Lord Warburton appeared and proposed to her. Shortly afterwards, she had rejected both of them. These two incidents that occurred at this bench are significant because they resulted in Isabel's rejection of two other lives that she could have chosen. She had rejected living as Lady Warburton at Lockleigh, or as Mrs. Goodwood to support the family cotton business in America.<sup>5</sup> Isabel had believed that marrying either one of these men was not what she wanted to do; now that she had come to Europe there should be other options more special and less conventional. She was confident in her decisions, and she was also confident when she chose Osmond over Warburton and Goodwood. Isabel looks at this "historical," "interesting" bench and feels as if it wants to say something to her. What the bench asks Isabel is— "Are you

still satisfied with the decisions you made on that day? What have you made of your European adventure since then?"

Then she finds Caspar Goodwood standing in front of her, just as she had found Lord Warburton there six years ago. Goodwood has come once again to plead with her to marry him. He passionately and even violently declares his love for her and tries to convince her to go with him and leave her miserable life behind her. Hearing his torrent of words, Isabel finds she cannot think clearly and imagines herself sinking in water. Feeling weak, "she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying (489)." But she finds the strength to say, "As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone! (489)" When darkness comes, Goodwood leaves her. Isabel finds light from Gardencourt and runs back to the house: "There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time — for the distance was considerable — she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door (489–90)." Here, she discovers the answer as to what she should do now: "Here only she paused. She looked all about her; and listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path (490)." From the darkness of the garden, the lights in the windows lead Isabel back to the house, and when she has reached the door, she has found a "straight path" which she is going to follow. The path leads to Rome.

The lights from Gardencourt guide Isabel in this climactic decision. In the end, Isabel decides to go back to Rome, to a life with Osmond. Coming back to Gardencourt has provided Isabel a chance to remember how started her European adventure, and to review what she has made of it. She has been given a chance to start again, to set out on her second European adventure. Her problematic decision has not found many sympathizers; critics have not been able to find a convincing way to explain why she goes back to Rome. But if she is going back to Rome, to the same life of misery and hatred, at least she is going back as a new Isabel Archer, who has been reborn at Gardencourt.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stallman lists the revelations that occur in houses in the following way: "In Osmond's house his sister discloses to Isabel Osmond's past and the identity of Pansy ('My first sister-in-law had no children'); inside Gardencourt the marriage of Lord Warburton is announced; here also Madame Merle unmasks herself: 'I'm very ambitious.' Inside the convent Madame Merle discloses to Mrs. Osmond that it was Ralph Touchett who made her a rich woman (24)."

<sup>2</sup> Anderson suggests that "[b]y contrast the American landscape seemed bare of the picturesque, without history or art to relieve its monotony (93)" and that the house of Isabel's father in Albany, where she has just come from, is "particularly bleak (93)."

<sup>3</sup> The dullness of Gardencourt is also due to its darkness. However, as Stallman argues, "[a]ll the houses that Isabel inhabits or visits — including the hotels and the churches and the opera house — are dimly-lit interiors (11)," and the houses where darkness and coldness are most strongly emphasized are Palazzo Roccanera and Osmond's villa in Florence, not Gardencourt.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson indicates that Ralph is trying to conceal "not only his suffering and defeat but his hopeless love (114)" for Isabel.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson interestingly adds Ralph as another man who could have been Isabel's husband. He writes that at the scene of Ralph's death is evoked "a vision of the life they might have had together,

at least for a few years. As mistress of Gardencourt she would have enjoyed a freedom quite as untrammelled as at Lockleigh; and if her position would have been higher as Lady Warburton, her situation would have been happier as the wife of Ralph Touchett. Gardencourt could have been transformed from a house of death into a house of sweetness and light (119)." Out of these other three men who could have been Isabel's husband, only Goodwood remains at this stage in the novel, because Ralph has died and Lord Warburton is engaged to be married. That is why Goodwood is the one who comes to rescue Isabel in this final scene at the bench.

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