



Novels 1881–1886: Washington Square / The Portrait of a Lady / The Bostonians

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Written in London and Italy between 1879 and 1885, the novels in this *Library of America* volume portray American women confronting crises of independence and possession. Studies in the exercise of power that marks relations between sexes, classes, and cultures, they show James's special solicitude for the young heroines who occupy the center of his fictional world.

Washington Square (1880) examines the life of Catherine Sloper, a plain, sweet, young woman who lives imprisoned by the selfishness of those close to her: her lover, who cares only for her fortune; her aunt, who meddles for the sake of romantic intrigue; and her protective father, who repays her adoration with irony and wit. Set in the New York of the 1840s, *Washington Square* evokes the still-intimate city of James's childhood while presenting a frightening moral lesson in the human consequences of manipulation and indifference.

The Portrait of a Lady (1881) is the story of Isabel Archer, a beautiful, idealistic, and inexperienced American woman who is made wealthy by her uncle at the instigation of her dying cousin. Surrounded by the seductive pleasures of nineteenth-century Europe, she preserves her idealism despite involvement with some who would divert her life to uses of their own—Caspar Goodwood, virile American captain of industry; Lord Warburton, scion of British aristocracy; Gilbert Osmond, connoisseur and collector of beautiful objects; Madame Merle, subtle and charming expatriate of unknown connections, and indomitable Henrietta Stackpole, roving journalist and steadfast friend. James's many-layered masterpiece concerns the perilous American pursuit of individual freedom.

The Bostonians (1886) presents an unusual contest for the affections of Verena Tarrant, the lovely, naïve, and pliant daughter of a mesmerist lecturer. She is courted by two cousins: Basil Ransom, an impractical Mississippi landowner now pursuing a meager New York legal practice, and Olive Chancellor, a rich young Boston feminist. Against the richly textured backdrop of Boston and New York society, they enact a drama of confused identity and willful calculation that demonstrates the power and the perils engendered by the refusal of self-knowledge.

Novels 1881–1886: Washington Square / The Portrait of a Lady / The Bostonians Details

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P.S. Winn says

This book is actually three classic stories written by an author I enjoy. I also like the fact that the writer looks into the lives of women back in time when women were not allowed many rights.

Sandy says

I found this book interesting, albeit long. The psychology of Isabella, Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond and many of the other characters was certainly complex. I am much more matter of fact and straight forward than any of them, and it was interesting to read about their complex motivations and behaviors.

When my book club read and discussed this book there were some very different opinions, which turned out to be a result of the fact that there are two versions of the book--the first published in October 1881 by Houghton, Mifflin and Company in Boston; the second was published 27 years later when James extensively revised the book for the New York Edition (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908)..."making this final version a very different book from the one that first appeared in 1881." (pg. 1239) This made for considerable confusion until we figured out that we had read different editions. (I just finished the 1881 edition. I'd like to at least read the ending of the other. I'm not sure if the changes are just in the ending or throughout the book.)

A couple of quotes I found interesting follow...

"Isabel sat there for half-an-hour, and Pansy entertained her like a little lady--not chattering, but conversing, and showing the same courteous interest in Isabel's affairs that Isabel was so good as to take in hers."(pg. 515) I liked the "not chattering, but conversing" and hope I can try and do that myself.

Referring to Isabel visiting "old Rome"..."she rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective..." (pg. 723) I especially liked how she "dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places."

Again referring to Isabel, "she reflected that things change but little, while people change so much". (pg. 777)

Later as Isabel considered her aunt, "Isabel saw that her aunt was not so dry as she appeared, and her old pity for the poor woman's inexpressiveness, her want of regret, of disappointment, came back to her. It seemed to her she would find it a blessing to-day to be able to indulge a regret. She wondered whether Mrs. Touchett were not trying, whether she had not a desire for the recreation of grief". (pg. 779) The phrase "want of regret" struck me, as did "the recreation of grief".

ADDITIONAL NOTES ADDED MARCH 2013--My book club just reread this book last month (Feb 2013) and once again there was disagreement about the ending. I had a niggling feeling that this was the book we'd read a few years back that had two endings, but it wasn't until after our meeting that I looked this up on my notes in Goodreads and discovered that we were repeating what we had done 3 1/2 years ago--aah, do we

ever learn?

Amelia says

I enjoyed "Washington Square" and "The Portrait of a Lady" but thought "The Bostonians" really boring and hard to get through. However, it was a good 'before bed' read as it instantly made me fall asleep! They all demonstrate varying degrees to which the female characters are susceptible and influenced by the other characters (both male/female) out of sense of responsibility and duty to their roles of being a woman at that time. It was well represented in female characters from various classes but the main characters all seemed to be wealthy women in society. Ultimately it manifests the effects of individual freedom or the lack thereof for women of that time in very perspective and often cruel way which is interesting having been written by a male author of the time after all. I also recommend the movie versions of "Washington Square" starring Jennifer Jason Leigh & Albet Finney "The Portrait of a Lady" starring Nicole Kidman as Isabel, John Malkovich as Osmond, and Barbara Hershey as Madame Merle. I watched them both after reading the books and found them to be really good adaptations.

Henry Sturcke says

Washington Square is famously the novel beloved of those who don't like Henry James. The author, in turn, thought so little of it that he omitted it from the New York edition that canonized his works for posterity. So there is a certain correspondence between the author's relation to this text and the feelings of Dr. Sloper toward his daughter Catherine. It is a charming tale, well-worth a read.

Portrait of a Lady is considered the masterpiece of James's middle period, and I would not dispute that. The lady whose portrait is here presented is one of the most fully realized characters I've run across in fiction, ranking with those in War and Peace and Crime and Punishment. This is a particular achievement since James depicts Isabel Archer as a young woman highly eligible men fall in love with at first sight. Yet the portrait is so rounded that the reader is inclined to find her as irresistibly charming, faults and all, as the author intended. At any rate, I feel as if I've known at least one young lady a lot like her.

The inciting incident in the plot is that she has the misfortune to be made an heiress and to be thrust into the stratum of society whose members run into each other unexpectedly in Rome simply because May is the best month to be there.

Yet Portrait is peopled with a host of other characters, such as Madame Merle. One of the most enjoyable chapters to me was 19, when Isabel and Madame Merle have their first in-depth conversation. The opening of another chapter, 22, a depiction of the Florentine villa in which Gilbert Osmond has his apartment, is a masterly example of James's virtuosity.

Masterly as well is the comic intrigue in Chapter 26. James is often witty, but in this set piece of exchanges between and about the various characters, the effect is hilarious, albeit in his ornate, latinate way. I laughed even louder over the opening of Chapter 44, his portrait of Isabel's sister-in-law, Countess Gemini.

Like the other two novels, The Bostonians has a female protagonist at the center, Verena Tarrant, said to be so vivaciously beautiful that at least two characters, one male and one female, fall in love with her at first sight. Unlike Catherine Sloper and Isabel Archer, however, there is less of a center in her character. The daughter of a mesmerist, her appeal hovers on hypnosis as well, while she seems to exist as a surface for the projections of others. Coupled with her seemingly passive malleability whenever exposed to the conflicting

ideals of Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom, she never comes alive for this reader in the way the others did. This book contains fine Jamesian writing, with a plot that unfolds slowly and dialectically. I particularly enjoyed the way that the attempts of Olive and Basil to sway Verena often had an effect opposite from that intended. Still, if I were to rate each of these novels individually, I would give the first two five stars, and the final novel four.

One limitation of this Library of America edition is that it settles on one text, which in its opinion is authoritative. In the case of *Portrait*, this is very close to that published in the first edition, 1881. James, however, revised many of his books for the New York edition, not always improving them, but in the case of this book for the better. Readers wanting to compare for themselves can find the text of the NY edition online.

Harry says

Early on it struck me how James writing was similar to David Foster Wallace - long sentences, incredible vocabulary - well written. However it required somehow more concentration to stay with James. This may be the difference of time period and the more serious nature of the earlier writing. The characters in the *Bostonians* are all extremely flawed. It is hard to identify with anyone except the lady doctor who plays such a small part and adds little to the story. (Come to think of it all the characters in *Infinite Jest* are flawed as well). It was hard to identify with many of the character actions. They seemed stereotypical, almost portraits of classes of people James disliked. Reading the introduction finally it was interesting that the book was championed at different times both by chauvinists and women's lib. It points out just how ambiguous the writing was. You couldn't really tell which side James was trying to support. That has to be intentional and is an example of James' skill as a writer. This was mostly accomplished by showing the ugliness, failure, sadness of each character and their inability to do anything you could consider truly good and worthwhile. Most of the elaborate scene descriptions are dark and depressing. There is little in the book that is upbeat and all successes are tainted.

Christopher Sutch says

See my reviews of the individual works in this volume.

Paul Jellinek says

Talk about a literary triple crown! Three stone masterpieces between two covers, including some of the most exquisite descriptive writing in American literature (eg, the opening lawn scene in "Portrait of a Lady," the Cape Cod scenes at the end of "Bostonians"). And the characters! The one thing that these three novels do have in common (besides the quality of the writing) is that each involves a young woman whom others seek to dominate or exploit for their own purposes. But how those struggles play out varies dramatically across the three novels--a reminder that while James was a master of form, he was never, ever formulaic.

Ben says

The train for Marmion left Boston at four o'clock in the afternoon, and rambled fitfully toward the southern cape, while the shadows grew long in the stony pastures and the slanting light gilded the straggling, shabby woods, and painted the ponds and marshes with yellow gleams. The ripeness of summer lay upon the land, and yet there was nothing in the country Basil Ransom traversed that seemed susceptible of maturity; nothing but the apples in the little tough, dense orchards, which gave a suggestion of sour fruition here and there, and the tall, bright golden-rod at the bottom of the bare stone dykes. There were no fields of yellow grain; only here and there a crop of brown hay. But there was a kind of soft scrubiness in the landscape, and a sweetness begotten of low horizons, of mild air, with a possibility of summer haze, of unregarded inlets where on August mornings the water must be brightly blue. Ransom had heard that the Cape was the Italy, so to speak, of Massachusetts; it had been described to him as the drowsy Cape, the languid Cape, the Cape not of storms, but of eternal peace. He knew that the Bostonians had been drawn thither, for the hot weeks, by its sedative influence, by the conviction that its toneless air would minister to perfect rest. In a career in which there was so much nervous excitement as in their they had no wish to be wound up when they went out of town; they were sufficiently wound up at all times by the sense of all their sex had been through.

James Violand says

These three works are his best. Washington Square, The Portrait of a Lady and The Bostonians. I've read nine of his novels and a book of his short stories. It appears as though his earlier works were better written. By the time I got to "The Wings of the Dove" (1902) I had grown tired of him. By the end of his career, there wasn't a simple action or thought that he couldn't convey in an unending stream of words. His mantra seemed to be, "I could be succinct, but why? I enjoy writing. I couldn't give a damn whether I burden the reader with my verbal diarrhea." A highly overrated writer, maybe because he was an ex-patriot.

Allen says

I determined that I would read all of James' oeuvre. haven't done it yet but I read all of these. his fiction has a carriage pace but there is something wonderful about how he holds time back, so that he can muse. there is more indirection in him than in Proust, but the intention to hold on, moment by moment, is shared. and James had the odd idea of being popular (in the sense of being marketable). I do not know if Proust thought a market existed for the involved observations that he made. Capote thought he could fake up a Proustian vortex, but it was a hack job. anyway, following James' patiently involved divagations is a worthwhile effort.

Seema Rajpal says

It's starts off slow but the pace of the second half more than make up for it. Also the chapter 43 is the most moving chapter ever. The first classic novel I took my time and read through. Now I know how to read a classic....

Shelby says

actually, Washington Sq. I'd give four stars, Lady three and Bostonians two. Bostonians was bizarre.
