

# Visual Figures in Three Novels by Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady, The Aspern Papers, The Wings of the Dove

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## DIPLOMSKI RAD

**Visual figures in three novels by Henry James:**

*The Portrait of a Lady, The Aspern Papers, The Wings of the Dove*

(Smjer: Britanska književnost i kultura)

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## 1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter of his collection of critical essays, Leon Edel highlights Yates's quote "I seek an image, not a book." (Edel, p.1) I find this specific quote relevant to the main theme of this thesis, of visual figures and the aspects of visuality in two pivot novels written by Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, with an addition of *The Aspern Papers*. Henry James, as an American writer, grew quite fond of his own European experience, which is precisely why he reflected impressions from his own life into the lives of his characters, finding Europe and its culture more suitable for the character's spiritual development. The presence of ancient cultures, beautiful art and architecture, an almost exotic nature of its inhabitants and the expatriates, is the main driving force that brings his characters to settle in the European environment - with these particular Jamesian characters opting to settle in the Italian cities of Rome and Venice. The cultural significance of these cities is largely felt in the novels, and the visuality of the cityscapes, alleys, streets and canals, courtyards and palazzi helps to bring the overall visuality of the novels, as well as their characters, to life. Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley notes that the Italian scenery is the one that calls to James - the art "which built massive cathedrals or painted beautiful frescos had its moral, its lesson for those who would be artists." (Kelley, p.135) James wrote a lot of critical essays on other authors' works, with a particular dislike for Balzac, mentioning how Balzac downgraded art. However, he did find "one thing to praise in Balzac - his ability to describe, to picture his settings and his characters." (Kelley, p.212) And this acknowledgement of the richness of setting is precisely what his critical experience brings forth in his works.

As one of the means to enliven his works, James brings in the images of the spectral, of demise and abyss, which permeate the narrative of the three works explored, looming over the lives of the characters, reflecting their psyche and making the theme of death ever present. Julia Kristeva writes about melancholic imaginary and brings forth de Nerval's concept of the 'black sun' of melancholy, noting that "the metaphor of the 'black sun' for melancholy admirably evokes the blinding intensity of an affect eluding conscious elaboration (...) the narcissistic ambivalence of the melancholic affect

alone finds, in order to represent itself, the image of death as the ultimate site of desire.”(Kristeva, p.110) This is precisely what happens as the ghost at Gardencourt transforms from an otherworldly presence into Isabel’s cousin Ralph. For Milly Theale, the abyss is her constant companion, one she must ultimately accept in order to make the shift, a sacrifice of sorts, from the realm of the living to that of the spiritual. In the case of *The Aspern Papers*, it is death which serves as a catalyst needed for certain events to take place. Joseph Conrad writes: “One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James’s novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final.”(Conrad, p.17) As F.W. Dupee notes from various sources, Henry James developed his characters in a complex manner, making them into “personalities of transcendent value.”(Dupee, p.97) Transcendence is a key concept which enables the characters to go beyond the struggles of this life and connect with, observe or dive into the otherworldly, the spectral. Even though his characters are prone to great complexities, his style of writing is, as Albert Mordell notes, “always easy, without being trivial, and it is often stately, without being stiff; it gives a charm to everything he writes.”(Mordell, p.121) This is particularly accurate of his early works, while the works from his late phase often give out the sense of “a tremendous lot going on,”(Mordell, p.198) as is the case in *The Wings of the Dove*.

The three works discussed in this thesis share several key features - they were created in different phases of James’s work; however, they all deal with death and the spectral imagery associated with death. The protagonists all make their permanent residence in Italy - specifically, in Italian cities of Rome and Venice. The novels synthesize together in order to create a composite of James’s transatlantic journey, the hardships and death he encountered as well as the picturesque cities that left a lasting impression. Henry James writes his novels mainly by being a great connoisseur of life, “a great psychologist, who has the imagination of a poet, the wit of a keen humorist, the conscience of an impeccable moralist, the temperament of a philosopher, and the wisdom of a rarely experienced witness of the world.”(Mordell, p.206) His travels and keen eye made it possible for him

to immerse himself into the European setting, and write so beautifully of all the artworks he encountered and all the architecture and landscapes he profoundly admired.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is the earliest of the three works - a 'big' novel, as opposed to all of his previous works, as James himself noted to his brother.(Cargill, p.78) As the first one being discussed, *The Portrait of a Lady* presents an enticing array of visual imagery. The visuality presented in the novel stems from within the characters' minds, the most prominent mind being that of Isabel, who is, after all, the main character. Whereas the visuality of architecture and open spaces rests in Isabel's domain, her husband, Gilbert Osmond, is the one who dominates in the artistic arena, collecting both marvelous works of art as well as female characters such as Isabel, Pansy and Madame Merle, which he sees as subordinate to him and his superior aesthetic sense.

## **2. Visual figures in *The Portrait of a Lady***

Published in 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady* brings forth a myriad of themes and is inherently a strikingly visual novel. William T. Stafford states that the "language, the characterization, the setting, the plot, and the form of this novel, as they do with any, collectively constitute its vision."(Stafford, p.10) As the visuality sprouts from within the narrative and grows with it, the narrative must also be taken into consideration when discussing the visual. Matthew Guillen writes that the "tension between visual impressions and what is 'seen' occurs both on the level of immediate sense impression and on the derivative level of comprehension throughout the novel (...) (Isabel) is a static object distributed across James' canvas in varying postures so as to give other characters form."(Guillen, p.123) In other words, Isabel is presented as the vehicle by which all other characters are to be brought into the realm of visuality. Throughout Isabel's European experience, she associates with both the European elite and American expatriates, who have fully immersed themselves into the European elite. One such character is Gilbert Osmond, the man Isabel decides to marry. It is through his artistic worldview that Isabel transforms her own. Though in jeopardy of succumbing to his influence, Isabel is not to be

tamed, as she possesses the restless spirit of a Jamesian heroine. However, it is Pansy, Osmond's daughter that ultimately takes over in this respect, as she is brought up into becoming the very image of a proper lady, and the very reason why Isabel comes back to Rome.

## 2.1. Setting the scene - the visuality of open spaces and closed interiors

This section deals with the visuality of what having money and social status provides for the characters. From the American setting, the England interlude with Gardencourt, all the way to Italian cities of Florence and Rome, each setting is characteristic of that specific point in the novel, serving as a grounding vehicle for the overall visuality of the novel. The initial setting in the Albany house, owned by Isabel's grandmother, comes into play as a strong visual theme against which all others are perceived. The striking visuality of the large double house, with its two entrances, white doors, numerous rooms, all painted yellowish white, marked a type of decay that was happening to the American high class at the time of writing the novel.

In stark contrast to the Albany house is the house at Gardencourt, which seemed "a picture made real (...) the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world and gratified a need. The large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on the dark, polished panels, the deep greenness outside that seemed always peeping in."(81) The instant connection with the open space is the one key factor which allows Gardencourt the privilege of Isabel's admiration and preference, with "the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. The great still oaks and beeches flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains; and the place was furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with the books and papers that lay upon the grass."(23) At Gardencourt, the interior coexists with the exterior and vice versa, in a way, inviting in new experiences and connections. It is also the physical representation of Isabel's mind and nature.

Mrs Touchett's Florentine palace is closely related to their Gardencourt home in terms of visuality, with its tall windows and "green shutters (...) the garden, in which stillness and privacy always reigned."(398) In contrast, Osmond's Florentine home is pictured as a "blank-looking structure" (287) placed on top of a hill, with "beautiful empty, dusky rooms."(394) Therefore, as the Touchett's palace is in full contact with nature, colourful and lively, Osmond's home is a hollow place, craving for attention.

Palazzo Roccanera is at the far end of the visual spectrum, it is like no other architectural structure mentioned in the novel: "a high house in the very heart of Rome; a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny piazzetta; a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon to poor Rosier's apprehensive mind."(454) The visuality of Palazzo Roccanera is quite striking, with *rocca* actually meaning fortress in Italian. When imagining poor Pansy in the palazzo, Rosier thinks of it as a "domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence (...) which had frescoes by Caravaggio in the piano nobile and a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche."(454) Every single adjective used in Rosier's impression is carefully selected in order to enhance the ominous feeling and each adjective implies the image of Osmond as the gatekeeper for all the artworks that he collected. The echoing of a criminal history, alongside mutilated statues and dusty urns, goes hand in hand with the mentioning of Caravaggio and his artworks, as he was best known for his realistic *chiaroscuro* paintings, with only one light source encompassing the subjects in an almost claustrophobic way, as if imprisoning them. The palazzo as a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny piazzetta also reminds of Caravaggio's specific visuality, with the palazzo performing as the isolating darkness which separates its inhabitants from others, while the damp court and mossy niche bring to mind the desolation of a deserted place devoid of love and nurture.



## 2.2. The dazzling effect of the aristocratic situation

Just as the architecture symbolizes the social standing and, more importantly, the mind of its owner, the aristocratic situation in *The Portrait of a Lady* is a key factor in establishing contrasts between the characters. It is presented mainly by Madame Merle as she is the one who embodies the image of a well-off woman. The term aristocratic situation is used in this context and presented as leading a prosperous and rich life, not solely in terms of a monarchical system. It is important to note that the aristocracy of the time is not the same in the UK as it is in the rest of Europe, purely due to the long-standing tradition of the monarchy within the UK. The American 'aristocracy' or the upper class moves at a fast pace, and the rise of the working class, much like the rising skyscrapers, shifts the scene into a whole new form of society. Even though the aristocratic situation discussed here is not strictly extracted from within the realm of the visual, its visuality is one of its key representatives. The aristocrats, and those who aspire to be aristocrats, are great connoisseurs of art and culture, while the seemingly idle lives they lead serve to embellish the visuality from within the narrative.

At Gardencourt, the reader is introduced to the way in which wealth is distributed within the novel, and the way in which it interacts with the characters. For the Touchetts, this type of lifestyle is common, as they own a number of estates across Europe, and are not shy about being privileged. Regarding their friends, apart from their neighbor, Lord Warburton, a wealthy English lord, they keep company of the exquisite Madame Merle, who is noted as being the vision of perfection, even though it isn't precisely mentioned that she actually belongs to the same circle as the Touchetts.

The dazzling effect takes on multiple layers within the novel, from the financial realm to a purely cognitive one. The aristocratic situation in terms of *The Portrait of a Lady* can be divided into several types. The first is of course the European, inherited aristocracy, with Lord Warburton as its key proponent. The second is the aristocratic situation of the wealthy Americans living in Europe, such as the Touchetts, with Ralph and Mr. Touchett showing no intention to either "assimilate European values nor reject them, for they are destined to inactivity." (Ward, p.49) Then there is the

American society that Isabel is taken out of. Her surroundings seem quite ruinous, as the once grand mansion is now a dark and hollow place. The last aspect is perhaps the most interesting and can be seen as an illusion of the aristocratic situation, something which both Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond enact. They are fully immersed into the European culture and live off of it, accepting and living by every European norm and rule of conduct. The very word dazzling refers to something radiant, something so bright, to the point of being overpowering. In terms of Gilbert Osmond, who at times looked like a “demoralised prince in exile,”(308) dazzling is represented by means of “cleverness and his distinction (...) he had his perversities (...) and didn’t cause his light to shine equally for all persons (...) one shouldn’t attempt to live in Italy without making a friend of Gilbert Osmond.”(309) His physical appearance is visually connected to that of a drawing: “he was not handsome, but he was fine, as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi.”(312) By placing him high up on a pedestal, literally in a gallery, Madame Merle makes it impossible for Isabel not to be intrigued by this almost mythical creature who performs for select audiences. It is precisely a staged play which dazzles Isabel the most, a play performed by both Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond: “They talked of the Florentine, the Roman, the cosmopolite world (...) it all had the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal.”(311)

When refusing Lord Warburton’s proposal, Isabel puts herself quite clearly in the limelight in terms of the international theme. As Wegelin points out, this refusal is not a refusal of the aristocracy that Lord Warburton promises, “it is rather that her notions of it differ from Warburton’s. She thinks of it as ‘simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty,’ and it is for her liberty that she fears (...) she regards his proposal somehow as the design of ‘a territorial, a political, a social magnate’ to draw her into a ‘system,’ the system of which his sisters are such charming but such ominously pale products.”(Wegelin, p.75) The European aristocracy is to be perceived as though painted on a beautiful big canvas, where everything appears flawless. This picture, appealing as it may be, is something that Isabel admires, but cannot envision herself as being a part of. Its rigidity and respect of rules and customs renders it an impossible life for Isabel. Her sisters are considered to be pale

products of the system, which is in a state of decay. The very notion of women as pale products bears a striking visual marker of women as statuesque figures of proper ladies of the society. But what is perhaps even more ominous is that the notion of being pale might in fact invoke the spectral into play, promising a future life of admiration for the ladies, if they would only give up their innocence and free spirit - to put it in other words, in order to achieve their desired status, their individuality must perish.

The very embodiment of individuality, from the very beginning of the novel, is Isabel. Her free-spirited life choices, however, lead her to reject a couple of highly eligible and suitable men, finally marrying Gilbert Osmond, a man who promises a life of great intellectual wealth, but who is in fact the very pitfall that Isabel needs in order to fulfil her destiny.

### 2.3. The visuality of Isabel in relation to Pansy and Mme Merle

Even before Isabel is introduced into the novel, a discussion between her sister Lilian and her husband evokes the originality of Isabel, her nature, which is unlike any other: "Isabel's written in a foreign tongue. I can't make her out (...) her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas." (80) The garden-like quality that is attributed to Isabel is symptomatic in the very name of the Touchett's place, Gardencourt. Perhaps the similarity of Gardencourt and her garden-like mind is why she felt so at ease.

Isabel is presented to the Touchett men at Gardencourt almost as an apparition. She is a tall, unexpectedly pretty pale girl in a black dress. A pale girl, but not a pale product of the society, as her sisters are described. Isabel meets the men while being bareheaded – this very image in the 19<sup>th</sup> century connotes independence and confidence - a free American, a restless spirit. When talking to Mr Touchett, she folds her white hands over her black dress. Isabel placing her hands in her lap over her black dress is quite similar to most 19<sup>th</sup> century portraits, where a lady is presented in a seated position in a semi portrait, with hands folded gently over her lap. Also, the emphasis of her paleness

and white hands in contrast to her black dress evokes the spectral sphere into play. Later on in the novel, Isabel stands in her Roman home talking to Rosier, “framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady.”(458) As is evident from this scene, Isabel already had the shift from being a free spirit to becoming a gracious lady, under the influence of Osmond. One could say that it is through Osmond’s artistic expression and worldview that ladies are “created” for the purpose of society and fulfilment of societal norms, which is what Juliet McMaster writes when she notes that Isabel, as much as Mme Merle and Pansy “must be reduced to a role, an appearance, a delicate form,” (McMaster, p.61) and all the attention of the novel itself is on “life straining towards the condition of art.”(McMaster, p.63) According to Quentin Anderson, “the portrait theme provides a moral sanction for an aesthetic principle (...) The artist must employ appearances, pictorial values, but if he is truly an artist, he will invariably subordinate them to realities, to dramatic values.”(Anderson, p.142) Anderson examines the visual through the narrative itself, while McMaster points to the very visuality of the ladies within the novel, noting that Ralph and Rosier view women as superior to art, while Osmond always subjugates them, reducing them to becoming artworks of his own making. (McMaster, p.62/63)

Isabel’s charm is a topic that many authors looked into, Marjorie Perloff being one of them. Perloff notes that “despite her faults, Isabel does ‘awaken a tender impulse on the reader’s part’ because she is almost always seen through her own eyes or through the eyes of the men who are under her charm.”(Perloff, p.417) According to Perloff, it is Leon Edel’s pondering of her subtle egotism that requires deeper observation. In this respect, Isabel’s innocent nature appears to originate from within her own vision of herself, as she often times considered herself as superior and special. Perloff addresses Isabel’s view of the aristocratic situation: “*To be in a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you* - Isabel’s motto is nothing but a polite way of expressing her desire to dominate, to control others. She has, from the first, a latent tendency to be a manipulator, a tendency which comes to the fore when she inherits her uncle’s fortune.”(Perloff, p.418) Perloff’s interpretation sheds light as to why Isabel would even choose Gilbert Osmond as her husband, a man

who is so inherently egocentric and dominant. Moreover, enhancing Isabel's own perspective of herself, Osmond's view of Isabel relates to the visuality of cornucopia, of immense wealth and abundance. Isabel was at first "a present of incalculable value (...) this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one - a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert."(436/437) Isabel is seen as a silver plate, almost a prized possession. One of the characteristics of silver plates, not earthen ones, is the fact that they mirror one's reflection. In this respect, Osmond's intention was to imprint into Isabel's mind the thoughts that are his own. Osmond's relationship with the women in his life can be examined through Barbara Johnson's view of psychoanalysis, stating that it "is of course to represent sexual difference as a recursive figure, a figure in which both figure and ground, male and female, are recognizable, complimentary forms."(Johnson, p.19.) In evaluating the connection between Isabel and Osmond from within psychoanalysis, it becomes evident that Isabel and Gilbert Osmond don't quite fall into the psychoanalytical approach to sexuality and male-female relationships. In their initial courtship Isabel revels in Osmond's specific approach to aesthetics and life, and Osmond believes he might be able to imprint on Isabel's mind. Later on in their marriage, they are anything but complimentary, which results in hate and misery. Furthermore, Marjorie Perloff highlights Leon Edel's observations of the Isabel-Osmond relationship: "Isabel and Osmond are 'mirror images of power. Their marriage is that of two persons who see each other as objects they wish to subjugate and possess.' (...) (Isabel) refuses to be humbled by Osmond; instinctively, she tries to find a substitute, a person more docile and submissive (...) That person, of course, is Pansy."(Perloff, p.420) Isabel pulls back, not allowing Osmond to make an impact on her, relinquishing all the passivity over to Pansy.

Isabel's characterization in the film adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* differs from the novel itself, in terms of the very visuality Isabel possesses, and the way she is portrayed. Rebecca Gordon notes that Campion, the director of the film adaptation positions Isabel within the movie "as a portrait rather than as a complete subject, the film traces her social development and its effects on her outer

person through costume and hair changes (...) Campion uses lighting, mobile framing, and swift changes of point of view to trace as closely as possible both the internal drama of Isabel's mind and the reactions other characters have to her."(Gordon, p.17) Being that the novel had to be adapted to fit the cinematic frame, Isabel's character also had to undergo changes in order to adapt to the medium. In this respect, Isabel is quite literally framed within the narrative of the cinematic experience. Gordon notes: "Campion tells her melodramatic stories through an unorthodox cinematic style in order to show us *our psychological selves now* (...) Campion seems especially drawn to William Gass's response to the novel: '*The portrait of a Lady* is James's first fully exposed case of human manipulation; of what it means to be a consumer of persons, and of what it means to be a person consumed.'"(Gordon, p.15) The very emphasis of the consumption takes us back to Perloff's view of Isabel as an inherent manipulator.

Isabel's marriage to Osmond renders her unable to manipulate, as Osmond is the one taking up all the space for manipulation. For this reason, Isabel must change her approach and find another way, a more subtle way of manipulation. Gordon notes that in the film adaptation of the novel, Isabel's situation is clearly referenced with an omen, a "portent - a cloud of black birds darkening the sky (...) Isabel has visibly become a younger version of Madame Merle: her clothes are richer, her hair is darker, tightly wound, and jeweled."(Gordon, p.19) This visual representation of Isabel clearly shows that the only way she can cope being married to Osmond is by way of becoming like Madame Merle. Ralph is the one who notices all the change in Isabel during her marriage to Osmond and notes that "if she wore a mask it completely covered her face."(488) Losing a child made Isabel detach from any expectations Osmond might have from her, her visuality greatly impacted by her experience: "Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something (...) she represented Gilbert Osmond."(489) What is evident here is that Isabel settled herself in not being quite the canvas Osmond desired her to be but instead became a resonating shell of his thoughts and outlook on life, which is emphasized by the mass of

drapery she wore alongside precious ornaments, all of which serve to weigh her down. Instead of walking that pathway for the rest of her life, after Ralph's death she encounters Caspar Goodwood, one of her earlier suitors, who invites her to leave Osmond and share a life with him. This exchange serves as a clear marker of her psychological detachment from Osmond, where the world seemed to open "all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters (...) here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent (...) she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying (...) a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink."(721) Caspar Goodwood's proposal is seen as the very act of salvation that Isabel might need in order to get away from her life, and this experience of the proposal alone is enough to give Isabel enough courage and strength to go back to Rome and face her husband. Dorothea Krook highlights the sea-image as quite an important sexual theme, as Isabel is being swept away, "'floating' upon a sea in an ecstasy of incipient surrender."(Krook, p.102) However, once the sinking starts, she is enveloped again in the "darkness" of her own making.

Where Isabel fails in the psychoanalytic arena, Pansy comes to fill in for her. Presented as a "small, serious damsel, in her stiff little dress (...) her anxious eyes, her charming lips, her slip of a figure, were as touching as a childish prayer (...) she was such a perfect jeune fille."(460) Johnson writes, the "literary equivalent of the visual image of woman as ground has been richly evoked by Susan Gubar in the form of the blank page, the raw material on which the pen-penis of male creativity inscribes its figures, the negative space surrounding what is presented as truly interesting."(Johnson, p.20) So, as opposed to the free spirited and spontaneous person that is Isabel, Pansy falls into the category of a "generally mute, passive or inert, an idealised object of male desire."(Johnson, p.20)

The image of a blank page resonates deeply as this is precisely how Pansy is presented within the novel: "Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent."(394) The blank page can be seen as a blank canvas with Osmond being the one holding the brush and painting onto the blank canvas that is Pansy, who is an

original piece of art created by Osmond. He reveled in the fact that she was so subordinate to him, and pushed her even further in order to make her circle back into the mindset of what would please her father. "Pansy wore a short dress and a long coat; her hat always seems too big for her"(439/440) - this precise image is what Osmond always sees when he looks at Pansy - a child - even though she is sixteen years old - that has to be guided through each decision as she is incapable or voiceless. Moreover, she is presented as a "small, winged fairy in the pantomime soars by the aid of the dissimulated wire."(393)

Pansy and Isabel's visuality are in opposition to Madame Merle's. It is revealed later on in the novel that Madame Merle is in fact Pansy's mother, so it's important to analyze their respective visualities and meaning in terms of their relationship with Osmond as well as Isabel. The very introduction to Madame Merle is quite grandiose and filled with visuality, as Isabel gets lured into the saloon at Gardencourt by Madame Merle playing Schubert on the piano. Isabel doesn't get to see her directly, as Madame Merle has her back to the door where Isabel comes through, so Isabel is only left to analyze her figure while seated at the piano. Knowing the role that Madame Merle plays in the narrative and her relationship with Osmond and Pansy, this image bears a striking resemblance to that of mythological sirens luring sailors to their demise by use of music. This is an important aspect to consider as Madame Merle does in fact seem at times as being rather mysterious and extravagant, while at the same time remaining flawless. In terms of her musical interlude, Laura Hodges calls forth the writing of musicologist Marshall Brown, who wrote that Schubert's music can be "'characterized by an absence of clear tonal focus' and by a progression from 'dark confusion to clarity and reason'."(Hodges, p.4) Hodges draws a parallel here, and compares the tonality and mood of the music to Madame Merle's characterization, noting that "her identity and motives are initially obscure but ultimately revealed clearly to Isabel and the reader."(Hodges, p.4) Schubert was most praised for his private performances, and a private performance is exactly what Isabel receives upon her first encounter with Madame Merle. Hodges states that Madame Merle "specializes in private



performances and in a manner that makes her association with Schubert and his playing ‘among friends’ take on new and ironic meaning.”(Hodges, p.4/5)

Madame Merle is “forty years old and not pretty, though her expression charmed.”(223) Her eyes are characterized as being “incapable of stupidity,”(226) and Ralph promotes her to Isabel as being the cleverest woman. She has small, grey eyes (...) a “liberal, full-rimmed mouth (...) thick, fair hair, arranged somehow ‘classically’ and as if she were a Bust (...) a Juno or Niobe.”(226) The placement of Madame Merle in the realm of the arts by comparing her to a bust implies the connection to her past with Osmond, as if she was, too, one of his artworks. Possibly the most important indicator of their relationship is the fact that she, as a bust, is quite literally “decapitated” in the visual realm. This insight makes her appear as being less important as the novel progresses. It is also something which Mme Merle herself foreshadows when she compares herself to porcelain. J. T. Laird writes: “Madame Merle is employing an apt figure in describing herself as porcelain, whilst complacently identifying the bulk of the population with ‘iron pots.’ (...) it is both the earlier and the later consequences of her association with Osmond that she now habitually conceals from the world (...) and it is only by careful cultivation of the social and aesthetic modes of existence that she has been able to so reconstruct her life.”(Laird, p.645) The visuality of the cupboard which Madame Merle claims she inhabits, renders her more and more incapable of stepping out into the world and showing herself, as the “exposure to the ‘strong light’ of ‘truth’ and understanding would reveal her as ‘a horror.’”(Laird, p.645)

In a scene of pure vulnerability, Osmond enters Madame Merle’s Roman salon, and while observing a porcelain coffee-cup, he notes that it has a tiny crack in it. Unlike the earlier notion of remaining in the cupboard so as not to expose oneself to the light, this coffee-cup is displayed in the light. Madame Merle’s angst is shown here as she urges Osmond to be careful with the cup, as it is a precious object. According to Laird: “Although it is Osmond who spots the tiny aesthetic flaw in the ‘precious’ cup itself, it is Madame Merle who comes to see the human and moral flaws under the

purely aesthetic approach to life and who, by recalling her own earlier suffering, goes on to display, during the scene, the human and moral virtues of sincerity, compassion and conscience.”(Laird, p.646) The significance of Madame Merle leaving Italy and moving back to America has been foreshadowed in Gordon’s interpretation of Campion’s film adaptation through Isabel’s visual appearance. When she appears to be more and more like Madame Merle, occupying not only her own space, but also Madame Merle’s, there ceases to be any space for the original Madame Merle, and she has to remove herself completely in order to bring closure to Isabel’s life.

#### 2.4. The ghost at Gardencourt - a reflection of the mental state of a character

Initially, Isabel is presented as a ghost-like slim pale figure in a black dress, evoking the thought of the spectral sphere into play. However, in a pivotal scene of the novel, Isabel and Ralph have a conversation about a “real” ghost at Gardencourt, a castle-spectre, which surely must exist, as Isabel points out. At this point, Ralph prophetically notes: “I might show it to you, but you’d never see it. The privilege isn’t given to every one; it’s not enviable. 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. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago.”(73) The very mention of the spectral takes the visuality of the novel to a higher sphere, where it is to be seen only after great suffering. The spectral is only to be perceived through the inner workings of a suffering mind. This marks a profound insight into what Isabel makes of her life, ultimately rendering her capable of being aware of the ghost.

The ghost scene is revised upon Ralph’s death, when Isabel “started up from her pillow as abruptly as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there – a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room (...) she saw his white face – his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing. She was not afraid; she was only sure.”(708) There is no fear in her encounter with the ghost, as this is the familiar and kind face of her cousin. It will serve as a constant

companion for the rest of her days, a companion that Ralph was never capable of being when he was alive. Isabel follows her instincts and goes into Ralph's room, which she opens "as gentle as if she were lifting a veil from the face of the dead" (708) in order to find that he is finally at peace. Ralph's funeral is presented as a contrast to his life. He had been dying, with everything seeming so bleak and grey, but the weather turned "to fair; the day (...) was warm and windless, and the air had the brightness of the hawthorn and the blackbird." (709) The mentions of hawthorn and blackbird are quite symbolic here, as the hawthorn tree signifies love and protection, while the blackbird traditionally represents intelligence and knowledge. Both of these are what Ralph represented in life, and are needed by Isabel even more now that he's passed.

## 2.5. The portrait theme

The portrait theme wraps itself around the whole novel, being one of the key words that the reader is introduced to from the very cover. However, the other key word is that of a lady. So the emphasis is on the aspect of being a lady, and how a lady should behave and look in society. Within this theme two overlapping theories emerge, one is of Isabel being portrayed as a lady, while the other one is of Pansy becoming a lady with all the manners that society would approve of.

The novel does indeed follow Isabel on her journeys, both from America to Europe and then throughout Europe, honing in, centering and ending around Osmond, more precisely, around Pansy. Isabel's visual appearance at Gardencourt is in a manner of a portrait, as she appears as framed by "the ample doorway." (33) Isabel started off with a "great desire for knowledge (...) an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering. She carried within herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world." (57) This very proposition of Isabel being a curious young woman is enough to present a problem in terms of having lady-like manners within a society, as being free-spirited is not something that is considered desirable. She is agreeable enough, and as Madame Merle notes early on in the novel: "You're young and fresh and of to-day; you've the great

thing - you've actuality."(250) But it is only when she inherits her uncle's money that she becomes more than mere actuality, she becomes a person of interest to Madame Merle and her ulterior motives.

Isabel is inherently filled with wonder and awe, while Pansy, her stepdaughter, doesn't have much to say in the world, nor is she permitted to. She is a literal creation of Osmond's, modelled throughout her youth into just the image that Osmond's mind would admire. Pansy is modelled into becoming and behaving like a proper lady, "unique," with a "style of a little princess."(459) Therefore, even though Isabel is the obvious choice, Pansy is the one being portrayed, as well.

As opposed to the American ladies in *The Portrait of a Lady*, who are taught to adhere to the social requirements of their European counterparts, the American ladies presented in *The Aspern Papers* have lived on European soil for so long that they have not only assimilated the culture, but also the very visuality of the architecture and their surroundings.

### **3. Visual figures in *The Aspern Papers***

The visuality in *The Aspern Papers*, as is the case with the other two novels presented in this thesis, relies on the space the characters occupy. In this respect, the visuality of the narrative is constructed from within the narrative itself, with a great emphasis on the setting. However, this novel brings out strong contrasts between the indoor setting of the Venetian palazzo that Misses Bordereau occupy and the outside, open spaces of the canals, piazzas, but mostly the garden attached to the palazzo itself. The story is written in first person with the narrator being the one experiencing it. He travels to Venice to obtain the papers written by the late poet Jeffrey Aspern, which are now in the hands of an elderly woman - his former mistress - Juliana Bordereau and her niece, Miss Tita. In order to gain their trust and make them give him the papers, the narrator moves into their palazzo, promising to tend to their garden, while he searches for ways to take possession of the papers. It is precisely the open spaces that give out the feeling of freedom for the characters, but mainly for Miss Tita, contrasting with the interior setting of the palazzo and its great cold halls, which serve as a

prison for her mind. She's never fully able to express her desires from within the palazzo, resorting to the occasional venture outside, until Juliana Bordereau dies, when Miss Tita becomes empowered and is able to finally decide what she wants, standing firmly behind her decision.

### 3.1. The visuality of Juliana Bordereau

Juliana Bordereau is presented in the novel as a ghostly figure. Her very presence is almost miraculous - her age is never revealed, but all signs point to a very old woman at the brink of death. She is the main keeper of Aspern's papers, and once she dies, the papers are handed down to Miss Tita. The first encounter with Juliana Bordereau occurs upon the narrator's return to the palazzo, a day after he speaks to Miss Tita, where he proposes to tend to their beautiful garden if they should have him as a lodger. Coming face to face with Juliana, the narrator notes: "I grew used to her afterward, though never completely; but as she sat there before me my heart beat as fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place for my benefit. Her presence seemed somehow to contain his, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since."(13) Juliana is considered to be the very embodiment of the late Aspern. The mention of a resurrection taking place almost gives the reader a biblical perspective of observing the narrator's relationship to the late poet's work. He worships Aspern as well as his writing, which means that Juliana, by solely having been involved in Aspern's life, is rendered equal to the late poet himself, from the narrator's point of view. Juliana possesses some kind of esoteric knowledge just by having known Aspern. And in a mimetic sense, twice removed from the poet he finds Miss Tita, who, even though she lacks any real knowledge, also ends up being the representation of this esoteria.

But, looking at Juliana, the narrator notices that she "had over her eyes a horrible green shade which, for her, served almost as a mask (...) it increased the presumption that there was a ghostly death's-head lurking behind it."(13) The visuality of Juliana is at first perceived through the narrator's view of her primarily as a resurrected Aspern, and then as a ghost-like figure, almost death itself,

covering her eyes with a green shade. The color green itself is one of the key symbols in this scene, as it is associated with nature, harmony and rebirth. Green is also considered to symbolize envy, which in turn would connote Juliana's envy of the youth that the narrator brings into the palazzo, the life he projects, as opposed to "the divine Juliana as a grinning skull." (13) William Stein writes that "the mask of Juliana and the mask of Aspern's poetry conceal 'the harmless hocus-pocus' of his life in Venice. And so we glimpse an aspect of the story's tone of amusement, a flavor of narration (...) as an 'addict(ion) to seeing 'through' - one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through *that*'." (Stein, p.174) Even though the narrator sees the mask, he can also see what hides behind the mask, death personified in the decaying body of Juliana Bordereau. Juliana is presented as a small old woman, "shrunk, bent forward, with her hands in her lap (...) dressed in black, and her head was wrapped in a piece of old black lace which showed no hair." (13) As is the case in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the scene places the female character in a position of a 19<sup>th</sup> century portrait. But, where Isabel's youth and free spirit protruded with her hair showing, Juliana wraps her head in lace, showing no hair, bringing forth the sense of structure, tradition and proper etiquette. Her physical appearance very much astounded the narrator, with her "bleached and shrivelled face (...) it had a delicacy which once must have been great. She had been very fair, she had had a wonderful complexion." (14) By making such remarks, the narrator almost confirms to himself and the readers that she must have been beautiful at some point, having the likes of Jeffrey Aspern swoon over her.

This feeling is only heightened when they make a deal for his lodging, and he wishes to shake her hand: "I felt an irresistible desire to hold in my own for a moment the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed." (16) This particular request is not met by the old woman; she transfers it to Miss Tita. The transfer of the handshake is symptomatic and directly connected to the transfer of the papers, which is presented as an interesting segment in the storyline - initially passed down from Aspern to Juliana, the papers end up with Miss Tita. The importance of the papers as an heirloom raises a question over the specific relationship between the two women, discussed in many research papers. It is highlighted as being quite peculiar, resembling a mother-daughter relationship. Joseph Church

reviews the writing of John Carlos Rowe on this particular topic: “Juliana *is* a mother: as Rowe points out, without the inept critic and biographer’s once having considered the possibility, ‘niece’ Tina is evidently one of the ‘accidents’ produced by Aspern’s having ‘served’ Juliana in his ‘masterful way.’ When we consider all the hints, including Juliana’s pressing concern about Tina’s future and the silence about this latter woman’s origins (...) we can easily infer their relation as mother and daughter.”(Church, p.34) This is a relationship being hinted at throughout the novel, with Miss Tita looking after Juliana, always being there for her, but also Juliana’s need to secure a financially safe future for Miss Tita. Also, in terms of Miss Tita finally finding her voice in the matter – she is only able to do so once she has been left alone, abandoned, stranded in the garden in the middle of the water, after her implied mother dies.

After the narrator mentions his knowledge of Aspern’s writing to Miss Tita, as well as his desire to obtain any material the two women might provide, Juliana asks for his presence. The narrator believes that this encounter is triggered by the revelation of his intentions to Miss Tita, but later on, through Juliana’s comments, he realizes that this is all because he stopped sending the beautiful flowers up to their quarters, after previously enveloping their rooms in floral arrangements. Entering the room, the narrator notices that “her welcome was to turn her almost invisible face to me and show me that while she sat silent she saw me clearly.”(37) Juliana’s almost invisible face coincides with her later statement that if she moves out of the palazzo into the shade of the garden, “it will be a very dark shade indeed,” (39) thus foreshadowing her impending demise.

### 3.2. Constructing the visuality of Miss Tita

The very initial point of contact between the narrator and Miss Tita is also the first point of contact between the narrator and the palazzo. Upon meeting the narrator, Miss Tita negates any and all possessions, stating that the grand palazzo and nothing on its grounds is hers. At first, her name is not disclosed and the reader is left to capture her visual appearance through the eyes of the narrator,

where she is presented as a “long, lean, pale person, habited apparently in a dull-coloured dressing gown, and she spoke with a kind of mild literalness (...) Her face was not young, but it was simple; it was not fresh, but it was mild. She had large eyes which were not bright, and a great deal of hair which was not ‘dressed,’ and long fine hands which were – possibly – not clean.”(9/10) She doesn’t dress up for entertaining house guests, which in turn raises a number of questions, including the one of despair, neglect and death, as it seems that she is in fact decaying alongside the palazzo itself. Miss Tita is also in stark contrast to Juliana, who is presented almost dead, but full of character. Where Miss Tita is dull to the point of being monochrome, Juliana carries a presence and paints it a shade of green, as is the shade on her eyes.

The narrator introduces his idea of wanting to write in a lodging that has a garden attached to it. But, being that gardens are a rare commodity in Venice, he makes it seem that this particular palazzo is the only one he wishes to stay in. In this way, he immediately draws her attention to the need of being desired and taken care of, as if a garden herself, thus awakening her from her deep melancholy slumber. While presenting his case, the narrator walks across the room and stops occasionally, giving Miss Tita time to decide to follow him. The game that the narrator plays immediately draws the attention to Miss Tita’s inability to firmly stand her ground. She is presented as an insecure woman whose eyes wander over the visitor, repeating his words, uncertain of his intentions or her possible actions, ultimately stating “we are nothing.”(11) This statement directly contradicts the point the narrator makes where he notes: “It was the study of the two ladies to live so that the world should not touch them, and yet they had never altogether accepted the idea that it never heard of them.”(11) Their palazzo served as a fortress in which they locked themselves in, shying away from the world, but at the same time, they saw themselves as being the pinnacle of society. So, it is their egos, Juliana’s in particular, that the narrator must impress, if he’s ever to get in on their good graces.



When Juliana talks to the narrator about Miss Tita, it is almost like she has a mission to confuse the readers of their relationship, noting: “She has very good manners; I bred her up myself!”(15) But this doesn’t seem like a motherly type of affection, or any type of affection really, as it resembles more a woman selling her prized possession. She wouldn’t allow it if her possession was bought by someone who was unable to appreciate it. It is also very important to her that Miss Tita’s good manners don’t go unnoticed, as well as the fact that Juliana herself, the vehicle of the dead poet, is responsible for them. In terms of their life at the palazzo, the setting of the palazzo could be seen in relation to their social lives, where they admit to being “terribly quiet. I don’t know how the days pass. We have no life.”(20) The palazzo, as well as the two women, is awakened from its slumber once the narrator steps in to disrupt the ordinary. He promises a garden full of blooming life which would, in turn, set the women into motion as well.

After Juliana’s request that he should take ‘the girl,’ Miss Tita, with his gondola to show her around, the narrator ventures with Miss Tita into the beautiful canals of Venice. Even though she was to be his ‘cicerone,’ as Juliana proposed she should be, upon entering the Grand Canal, she was as ecstatic as a tourist: “She had forgotten how splendid the great waterway looked on a clear, hot summer evening, and how the sense of floating between marble palaces and reflected lights disposed the mind to sympathetic talk (...) she was more than pleased, she was transported; the whole thing was an immense liberation. The gondola moved with slow strokes, to give her time to enjoy it, and she listened to the splash of the oars, which grew louder and more musically liquid as we passed into narrow canals, as if it were a revelation of Venice.”(41) The revelation of Venice was almost an out-of-body, heavenly experience, something Miss Tita needed in order to be able to open up about Juliana and the papers. The voyage from the palazzo to the Piazza marks a transition of Miss Tita from a spinster under Juliana’s fading wings to the narrator’s confidante. He mentions that his main concern is that Juliana should burn the papers, even though she has no control over her body, meaning that she could only destroy the papers if someone was to provide her with fire. To this Miss Tita states

that it is Juliana in fact that has all the controls, thus controlling her as well as the servants of the palazzo. But Miss Tita assured him that she would try to help him.

Juliana holds all the cards, and the fates of the characters in her hands, almost like an omniscient presence. Moreover, there are various instances throughout the novel which call upon the otherworldly, the spectral. The spirit of the late poet keeps the narrator company, while the mentioning of a devil, the sacrilege of burning the papers (the Misses Bordereau have a reputation of being witches), as well as the heavenly visuality of the Venetian canals merges heaven and hell and give it a place right here on Earth. Even the garden at the Bordereau palazzo evokes the opposition of heaven and hell, with the narrator and Miss Tita at the very center of it all.

Diane Scholl writes about Miss Tita's 'coming of age' and questions if Aspern could have been her father, thus turning the papers into a legacy, an heirloom. With regard to the narrator and his involvement with Miss Tita, Scholl writes: "the narrator's approach to sexuality is halting and contradictory at best (...) Jeanne Campbell Reesman has demonstrated the narrator's consistent regard for the word rather than the flesh, his avoidance of the physical reality (...) in favor of the elusive but imaginatively captivating presence of Aspern in his letters."(Scholl, p.82) As shown here, the narrator evades any possibility of contact with Miss Tita, preferring to chase after the letters he may never get to possess. In the end, Miss Tita steps up for herself and, by destroying the papers, reclaims her destiny. Scholl writes that by "escaping both the domination of Juliana and the patriarchal assignment of her ambiguous role (...) she earns her freedom from the past. He (the narrator) remains enslaved, as ever, by the papers he fails to possess."(Scholl, p.87)

### 3.3. Indoors versus the outdoors

Approaching the palazzo of the Misses Bordereau resembles a movie-style panning shot with the palazzo being its main character, followed by its surroundings, while the ominous shift from the

palazzo setting to mentioning how Misses Bordereau have a reputation of witches serves as a foreshadowing which leads the reader to expect nothing short of witchcraft from them. A later remark states that the palazzo holds no pleasure, and is initially presented as a desert, all dusty and beat up, left to cope on its own, because the two Misses will not or are unable to provide the upkeep needed. There is a grim sense of “domestic desolation” (Putt, p.221):

“The old palace was there; it was a house of the class which in Venice carries even in extreme dilapidation the dignified name (...) gray and pink (...) It was not particularly old, only two or three centuries; and it had an air not so much of decay as of quiet discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career. But its wide front, with a stone balcony from end to end of the piano nobile or most important floor, was architectural enough, with the aid of various pilasters and arches; and the stucco with which in the intervals it had long ago been endued was rosy in the April afternoon. It overlooked a clean, melancholy, unfrequented canal, which had a narrow riva or convenient footway on either side... ‘It’s perversely clean, for reasons of its own; and though you can pass on foot scarcely anyone ever thinks of doing so. It has the air of a Protestant Sunday. Perhaps the people are afraid of the Misses Bordereau. I daresay they have the reputation of witches.’”(5)

The narrator’s stay at the Bordereau’s palazzo is focused around the garden. As opposed to the gardens of Gardencourt in *The Portrait of a Lady*, which are considered to be an extension of the interior, the garden of this grand Venetian palazzo is presented as an overgrown jungle almost, with its “repaired breaches, crumbings of plaster, extrusions of brick that had turned pink with time; and a few thin trees, with the poles of certain rickety trellises.”(6) Mrs Prest, the narrator’s guide and friend, adds that “They live on nothing, for they have nothing to live on.”(6) The woman summarizes the life of the two women to the narrator, making him aware that their motive for any type of commitment will exclusively have to deal with money.

“I waited, upstairs, in the long, dusky sala, where the bare scagliola floor gleamed vaguely in a chink of the closed shutters. The place was impressive but it looked cold and cautious.”(8) The

transition from the dusky sala with the closed shutters into a lighter space denotes the changing of the air in the palazzo and around the Misses themselves.

Juliana asks the narrator why he chooses Venice. Why not the terra firma? The narrator quickly remarks that it is precisely the combination that appeals to him: “It’s the idea of a garden in the middle of the sea (...) Why, dear madam, I can come up to the very gate in my boat.”(14) The evocation of the garden in the middle of the sea, as much as all of the focus on the garden itself, provokes an interesting thought that the garden could perhaps be seen as the Garden of Eden, the biblical sanctuary. The narrator might be alluding to the Garden of Eden when discussing his lodging with the Misses. The garden of the Bordereau’s palazzo is really the one thing that is used as a key focus point and is presented as an oasis. The narrator arranged his lodging in the palazzo only by using the garden as a decoy and promising the Misses Bordereau that he would make it flourish again. And indeed, his intention was to “smother the house in flowers. Moreover I formed this graceful project that by flowers I would make my way – I would succeed by big nosegays. I would batter the old women with lilies – I would bombard their citadel with roses. Their door would have to yield to the pressure when a mountain of carnations should be piled up against it.”(24) His idea was to make it seem as if he was a horticultural aficionado, with the care of the garden as his sole purpose and little by little make his way into their good graces, where they will feel comfortable and vulnerable enough to let the narrator into their world and trust him enough to open up about the papers and their relationship with Aspern. Joseph Waldmeir notes that the narrator presented himself as a devil-like figure, and by means of the garden, he can come closer to the object of his desire. However, throughout the novel, the narrator falls prey to Juliana’s and ultimately to Miss Tita’s will. Waldmeir writes: “through the Edenic metaphor, the avowed minister-devil is identified as mere mortal, and the mortal women as devil.”(Waldmeir, p.262) Regardless of his initial intentions, the narrator is the one who becomes the real victim in *The Aspern Papers*. According to Waldmeir, the narrator becomes “reliable only because of his innocence (...) he is unwittingly at the mercy of the unholy alliance of the truly unscrupulous, calculating females, Juliana and Tina — two of James’ most notable fallen

Americans, a sort of Satan and Eve who successfully devour the narrator's substance."(Waldmeir, p.266/267)

The notion of the poet as a spectre, a ghost looming over the narrative, is presented by the narrator himself: "That spirit kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face – in which all his genius shone – of the great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to tell me that he regarded the affair as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, cheerfully to a conclusion."(23) It's quite interesting to note the use of the word 'fraternally' in this respect, because the narrator has found himself in an environment that is fully maternal, if anything. And the thought of him evoking the ghost of Aspern in order to impose his dominance over the Misses Bordereau only makes it that much easier for the women to dominate him rather than fulfilling his desire to be the one who dominates. The two women are present at all times, even though they are not interacting with the narrator, but their presence is well known and felt: "Their motionless shutters became as expressive as eyes consciously closed, and I took comfort in thinking that at all events through invisible themselves they saw me between the lashes."(24) Again, the narrator is placing the Misses Bordereau into relation with the architectural elements of the palazzo when he feels their presence and their uninterrupted gaze following his every move.

The canals, palazzi and campi of Venice are called into play again in *The Wings of the Dove*, where Venice provides an all too important of a backdrop for the tragic fate of Milly Theale.

#### **4. Visual figures in *The Wings of the Dove***

Unlike the previous two novels, *The Wings of the Dove* is a representation of a new era in James' writing, his late phase. A complex read, *The Wings of the Dove* is a dramatic novel, where

Milly Theale faces heartbreak caused by the two people she trusts the most, Kate Croy and Merton Densher, which leads to Milly's tragic demise and a complete turnaround for the two remaining characters. Henry James wrote about one of his later works, *The Ambassadors*, in a letter to the Duchess of Sutherland, advising her to "take it very easily and gently: read five pages a day - be even as deliberate as that - but *don't break the thread.*"(James, p.392) *The Wings of the Dove* might also fall into this category, as a novel that requires focus and deeper contemplation in order to reach an understanding of what is being played out.

#### 4.1. The visuality of Milly Theale

Milly Theale, though being the main character, is presented in the novel after Kate Croy and Merton Densher have already set the stage for her. Or perhaps set the stage for their own romance, which Milly's presence disrupts. Milly comes into the storyline in the third book, chapter five, as a "striking apparition, then unheralded and unexplained: the slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably angular young person, of not more than two-and-twenty (...) whose hair was somehow exceptionally red even for the real thing (...) whose clothes were remarkably black even for robes of mourning."(78) The very notion that Milly is first and foremost presented as a striking apparition almost seems as an omen for the remainder of her time with the storyline. The description of her stature also evokes such thoughts, as she seems a pale and fragile figure. But it is the contrast posed by her pale skin, red hair and wearing remarkably black clothes that the reader takes away as being her defining features. The combination of the three colors, red, white and black, is not at all an atypical one. In the visual arts, red and black are often placed together as red connotes blood and sacrifice, while black connotes darkness and death. The paleness of her skin is a clear connotation and connection to the spectral imagery. The blackness of Milly's clothes is referenced again later on in the novel, wearing a "big black hat, (...) her fine black garments throughout, the swathing of her throat, (...) heavy rows of pearls, hung down to her feet like the stole of a priestess."(245) The

visuality of Milly as a priestess goes hand in hand with the visuality of her doctor Sir Luke Strett as a bishop, both connecting the two realms, the reality and the spiritual realm.

“The girl with the crown of old gold” (80) is how Susan Stringham describes Milly, meaning that Milly comes from a wealthy family, whose history spans well into the past. Mentioning a crown of gold evokes a regal status, not in the sense that her family was royal, rather in terms of the amount of wealth they accumulated. As an addition to this imagery, the narrator brings forth James’ notion of a “potential heiress of all the ages,” (81) which just beautifully rounds up Milly’s place in the upper-class society. However, she was dressed in black clothes of mourning, as she was the only one left of her family’s bloodline. Heiress indeed, but an heiress with no blood relatives to pass the wealth to. Going back a bit, the author’s preface gives the image of Milly being “the last fine flower - blooming alone, for the fullest attestation of her freedom - of an ‘old’ New York stem.”(6)

Other than being the heiress of all the ages, Milly was also considered by Susan Stringham to be a princess, but a “princess in a conventional tragedy.”(87) The key point within this novel is that Milly, along with all her wealth, represents something else to each of the characters, so for Susan Stringham, she is a princess with divine characteristics, as “all the Kate Croys in Christendom were but dust for the feet of her Milly;”(215) for Maud Lowder, Milly “constituted the trophy producible by poor Susan.”(99) Lord Mark compared Milly to a “wonderful Bronzino” (141) portrait. This scene is deemed as “one of the psychological climaxes of the novel,” (Allott, p. 23) and in it Milly looked at “her slightly Michelangelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds (...) and she was dead, dead, dead (...) Of course her complexion’s green (...) but mine’s several shades greener.”(143) The color green, even though it essentially represents nature and growth, as seen in the case of *The Aspern Papers*, used here it doesn’t have quite the same connotation. The color green might also revolve around money, greed or jealousy, which is again structured and positioned in the novel as a foreshadowing of the events about to take place. While standing in front of the Bronzino portrait, Kate Croy brings guests in to join them and

look at the painting, emphasizing the likeness of Milly to that of the portrayed woman, stating that she is superb. Lady Aldershaw, one of the guests “looked at Milly quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly.”(144) Standing in front of the portrait suggests the framing of Milly, as if she was the portrait herself, while a few pages on, the narrator notes that Milly’s eyes were “on her painted sister’s - almost as if under their suggestion,”(147) clearly noting the family connection that Milly lacked but found in Kate. The Bronzino portrait is not a fictitious one. The portrait refers to one that James had seen in Florence, in the Uffizi Gallery, one of “Lucrezia Panciatichi, painted between 1532 and 1540 (...) the expressive stillness of the pose suggests self-control allied to a capacity for intense feeling.”(Allott, p.24) As is stated in the quote, self-control and intense feeling are what characterize Milly, and set her apart from other characters.

Regardless of the previous imagery, the main representation of Milly is the one that Kate bestows upon her, which is evident from the very title of the novel - and that is the visuality of Milly being a dove. While Milly is pleased to have a good friend, Kate’s ominous remark shows that she hasn’t shown all of her cards: “you may very well loathe me yet! (...) you’re a dove.”(178) The visuality of Milly as a symbol of peace and love further presents itself later on in the novel, where she houses a party in her Palazzo. Among all the people there, Milly stands out, “let loose among them in a wonderful white dress (...) she was different, younger, fairer.”(313) Her visuality is further emphasized when Merton and Kate observe her and the beautiful pearls she’s wearing, which “wound twice round the neck, hung, heavy and pure”(315) - this whole image was for Merton “embodied poetry.”(315) Kate goes on to state: “She’s a dove (...) and one somehow doesn’t think of doves as bejewelled. Yet they suit her down to the ground.”(315) The very mentioning of ground in this context gives birth to the insinuation of Milly’s death.

Milly, being a symbol of goodness and peace, a dove, is represented in contrast to Kate, her friend, and is at first oblivious to Kate’s plan. However, over the course of the novel, she develops a keener sense for the inner-workings of Kate’s mind. This occurs with experience, as Ward writes:



“The maturing of the moral consciousness through experience enables James’s heroes and heroines to triumph over evil spiritually (...) Though the exposure of the innocent to evil involves loss and suffering, the result - the expanded consciousness - represents an ultimate victory.”(Ward, p.15)

Throughout all that life brings to her, the good and the bad, Milly ends up being victorious in death, wrapping her beautiful wings around all the people she’s ever touched. There is something very positive about this notion, and according to Quentin Anderson, the spontaneous American girl - of which Milly is most definitely a representative - is one of the voices of “affirmation and celebration.”(Anderson, p.128)

#### 4.2. Kate Croy - the predator from the blackness

Kate Croy’s appearance is known to the reader from the very first chapter. She’s presented wearing a “black, closely feathered hat (...) dusky hair (...) dressed altogether in black.”(20) The blackness of her clothes is in contrast with the paleness of her face “and made her hair more harmoniously dark. Outside, on the balcony, her eyes showed as blue; within, at the mirror, they showed almost as black.”(20) The fact that Kate’s eyes appear to change color is quite symptomatic of the role she takes on in the novel, where she almost toys with other characters, never really letting them in on her plan. Also, her eyes changing color from blue to black resemble Maud Lowder’s eyes, and the way they change color, only Maud’s eyes are represented as minerals, while Kate’s have no such luxury added to them. This is quite interesting as it may be one of the foreshadowing signs of their future, as Kate again inhabits her father’s house at the end of the novel.

Kate is a “contemporary London female, highly modern, inevitably battered, honorably free,” (50) presented as having “stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass. Slender and simple, frequently soundless, she was somehow always in the line of the eye.”(20) The enveloping blackness of Kate’s clothes and the emphasis on her eyes and slender figure, as well as the notion of soundlessness actually brings to mind the image of a predator lurking from the dark and

waiting to snatch its prey. Kate poses somewhat of a threat, willing her plan into execution, stating further on to Merton Densher “my cleverness, I assure you, has grown infernal.”(197)

However, Kate is not inherently evil. She rather has misguided morals and ideas of what life should be for her and she acts upon them. Upon Milly’s first encounter with Kate, Kate is presented as an artwork coming to life, “as a figure in a picture stepping by magic out of its frame.”(116) That is precisely what Kate was, a piece of art, an actress that played the role one had to play in order to get into higher society - Kate had to “dress the part, to walk, look, to speak, in every way to express, the part.”(209) Millicent Bell writes: “Kate is not really the passive victim of the naturalist novel. Hers is a new sort of personality (...) She does what she must do, having made a difficulty for herself by falling in love with a poor man. But rather than accepting the fatality of either marriage in penury or marriage to Aunt Maud’s titled candidate, she thinks she can manage to seize opportunity by being opportunistic.”(Bell, p.95) Being opportunistic is something that Kate had to maintain in order to fulfil her heart’s desire, that of financial security and wealth. Of course, there is love, as well, but her desire for wealth almost negates all else, rendering her capable of ‘loaning’ Densher out to Milly.

#### 4.3. Maud Lowder as “the lioness”

Maud Lowder’s visuality is presented through the prism of Kate and her outlook on life. Maud has a “looming ‘personality,’” (35) quite like a lioness, her room as a cage, “a battlefield.”(34) This notion is further emphasized when Merton Densher comes to introduce himself, feeling as though “he was in the cage of the lioness without his whip.”(62) Going further into the imagery of the predator, the narrator states that she would have been “a wonderful lioness for a show (...) majestic, magnificent, high-coloured, all brilliant gloss, perpetual satin, twinkling bugles and flashing gems, with a lustre of agate eyes, a sheen of raven hair, a polish of complexion that was like that of well-kept china.”(34) The description of her eyes is quite staggering since here they are presented as a lustre of agate eyes, while later on in the novel, they are as “fine onyx.”(169) Agate, as a mineral rock

has a complex visuality in itself, with layers upon layers of sediments, which give it its specific beauty. Maud Lowder's eyes being imagined as agate might symbolically suggest maturity, while the blackness of the onyx is symbolically suggestive of protection from harm. This is an interesting representation of the specific scenes that are occurring in the novel, as the latter scene revolves around Maud's inquiry that Milly should find out whether Kate and Merton are in a relationship, which, if proven positive, might be quite harmful for both Kate and Maud.

At a certain point in the novel, Kate also calls Maud "an eagle," (60) but not just any eagle, rather one "with a gilded beak (...) and with wings for great flights."(60/61) Both lioness and eagle are predatory animals. However, by characterizing Maud as an eagle, Kate actually brings forth the notion of wings, which are symptomatic of the novel as a whole. The capacity of great flight is precisely that which enables the eagle to spot its prey and strike without the prey being aware of any immediate danger. For Dorothea Krook, Mrs Lowder is not only presented as a predator, but rather as "the presiding daemon (...) deadly and dangerous (...) supported in her role of presiding daemon by a large anonymous cast of minor daemons, who circle in and out of the big house at Lancaster Gate."(Krook, p.202) All these "supporting" characters are there to help bring to the foreground the main storyline of Kate, Merton and Milly. But more importantly, the daemons mentioned loom large over the narrative as an invocation of the spectral realm. The daemons directly correspond to the spectral instances of the ghost at Gardencourt from *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as the spectre of the dead poet from *The Aspern Papers*. Mrs Lowder is presented as a predator and a daemon, but only because Kate perceives her as such, due to the fact that she opposes Kate's relationship with Merton Densher.

#### 4.4. Merton Densher

Merton Densher makes his way into the novel by wandering the streets of London, somewhat aimlessly, with a lot on his mind. This image has its pair later on in the novel when Milly wanders

through possibly the same streets and alleyways of the “grey immensity of London.”(158) Merton was a “longish, leanish, fairish young Englishman (...) one of the educated (...) generally sound and generally pleasant.”(45) His visuality is that of a tall young man, capable of whatever he puts his mind to, open to all experiences: “looking vague without looking weak - idle without looking empty (...) long legs (...) straight hair and his well-shaped head (...) supported behind by his uplifted arms and interlocked hands (...) in communication with the ceiling, the tree-tops, the sky.”(46) The gradation of the last part of the quote really calls upon the role Merton plays in the novel and the significance that he has for Milly in her own journey.

Coming full circle, Merton again wanders the streets of grey London and the narrator notices how he “reached, like Milly Regent’s Park (...) he finally sat down, like Milly, from the force of thought.”(196) The force of thought for Merton at this point in the novel is not that much about Kate, but rather about Milly, which is evident by the emphasis on the similarities of their aimless walks of contemplation. Merton, being a writer, is here visualized as being “but a sentence, of a sort, in the general text, the text that, from his momentary street-corner, showed as a great grey page of print that somehow managed to be crowded without being ‘fine.’”(196)

#### 4.5. Indoors versus the outdoors

The initial setting within the novel is that of an uncomfortable life that Kate leads with her father, with its furniture overused and worn down: “moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once - she had tried it - the sense of the slippery and of the sticky (...) sallow prints on the walls (...) lonely magazine, a year old (...) a knitted white centre-piece wanting in freshness.”(19) The striking visual appearance of her father’s house makes Kate utterly miserable, leaving her in want and need of a better, grander life. Then, after her aunt Maud, much wealthier than her father, takes her under her wing, Kate moves to “the tall, rich, heavy house at Lancaster Gate,”(32) which happened to be just the cure for Kate’s desire to lead a wealthy life -

the “small silk-covered sofa”(34) certainly offers her a brighter view of life, rather than the shabby one.

After Milly found out that she hasn't got much left to live, she stumbles about, feeling that “her only field must be, then and there, the grey immensity of London. Grey immensity had somehow of a sudden become her element; grey immensity was what her distinguished friend had, for the moment, furnished her world with.”(158) The loss of color, the emphasis of grey, is symptomatic of Milly's ultimate fate, but for the time being, she walked “along unknown streets, over dusty litter ways, between long rows of fronts not enhanced by the August light.”(159) This walk is somewhat cathartic for Milly, as she enjoyed not having to think about anything but which direction to choose. Finding solace in the streets, Milly doesn't experience fear but rather the feeling of freedom from all that troubles her.

Settling in Venice, with its “labyrinthine alleys and empty *campi*, overhung with mouldering palaces,”(296) Milly finds comfort in Palazzo Leporelli, in its “high, florid rooms” and “palatial chambers,”(266) which housed incredible artistry on their ceilings, “medallions of purple and brown, of brave old melancholy colour, medals as of old reddened gold, embossed and beribboned, all toned with time.”(266) The melancholic setting of her Venetian palazzo resembles closely that of the palazzo inhabited by the Misses Bordereau in *The Aspern Papers*. But the resemblance doesn't stop here - in both of the works, the Donna of the palazzo ends up dying, leaving her wealth behind. In the case of *The Aspern Papers*, the wealth is represented as the papers themselves. Also, both works show the writer as being the one chasing the fortune. Lord Mark raved on the visuality of Palazzo Leporelli, stating “what a temple to taste and an expression of the pride of life, yet, with all that, what a jolly *home!*”(275) Palazzo Leporelli presented as a temple goes hand in hand with Milly as a priestess, almost as a sacrificial space for Milly to exit the world. In reference to the proposed theory, and the “great gilded shell”(278) that Palazzo Leporelli is for her, Milly says to Lord Mark: “I think I should like (...) to die here.”(277) The specific desire to die is in direct connection to the spectral

imagery in *The Portrait of a Lady* and the comfort it provides for Isabel. It also closely resembles Juliana Bordereau's life and death in a Venetian palazzo. The palazzo in both cases provides a comfort which no other location can provide, and it is that cocoon which lets both women transcend into the spiritual realm.

#### 4.6. The imagery of the spectral, the abyss and demise

The imagery of the spectral arises from the very title of the novel, where the images of both wings and dove are presented. If separated, the two offer up space for quite interesting interpretations. The title focuses on Milly Theale, the "striking apparition" (78) herself. The wings obviously call upon the imagery of angelic figures, whereas Milly could be identified as an angel on Earth, or one could go even further and pose a theory that the wings might refer to the angel that Milly will be transformed into once her time comes. When referencing the imagery of the dove, the immediate thought presents itself as the reflection of the Christian connotation of the Holy Spirit. But going beyond this interpretation, a dove is simply a symbol of light and peace. This is exactly what Milly brings to the rest of the characters, even though some of them might not be ready to embrace it. For instance, Milly is seen as the carrier of great wealth that Kate needs to obtain at all costs, all the while considering her a great friend. But what ultimately happens to Kate and her destiny should serve her as justice, and with that justice, bring her peace.

The notion of abyss is in close relation to the spectral, as the abyss represents a vast space that cannot be measured. Its immensity is so far from comprehension that one must simply give up trying to understand or make sense of it and simply adapt. When discussing Kate and Merton's possible romance, Susan states that they have entered a labyrinth, to which Milly replies: "Don't tell me that - in this for instance - there are not abysses. I want abysses." (125) What she then realizes is that an abyss is precisely what she got from Merton while he was in New York, in the form of silence when Milly asked him about his English friends. Furthermore, Merton's silence is a part of this labyrinth,

possibly the most crucial part. The imagery of the abyss can also be applied to the tear that Merton and Kate face, once Milly is no longer in the realm of the physical. Krook writes: “this first hint of the abyss that has opened between Kate and Densher as a result of his last interview with Milly.”(Krook, p.226) Sheila Teahan draws this notion closer and pin points the very instance in which the ultimate abyss occurs. The way in which Kate throws Milly’s letter into the fire, the jerking motion with which she throws it, swings the gates of the abyss wide open, “a loss of basis so radical as to imply not just the fall into the abyss, but death itself. Densher's loss of footing is explicitly aligned with Milly's death: in a reminiscence of her act of turning her face to the wall, he is said to be ‘driven ... to the wall’ by Lord Mark's disclosure of the engagement. Densher finally ends up in the oxymoronic dilemma of finding his basis or foot-hold in the abyss itself.”(Teahan, p.211) Milly finding out about Kate and Densher’s relationship renders Densher unable to process, and literally drives him “to the wall” (353), in the same manner in which Milly herself “turned her face to the wall,” (345) sealing their individual falls into the abyss.

There are plenty of references in the novel to sea, ships and shipwreck, which is all very symptomatic, as the place where Milly decides to ultimately settle resides literally on water. Referencing a biblical sea monster is how Susan Stringham visualizes Milly and her spirit: “odd though it might seem that a lonely girl, who was not robust and who hated sound and show, should stir the stream like a leviathan.”(83) While in Sir Luke Strett’s office, Milly refers to herself as being “a survivor of a general wreck.”(155) Interestingly enough, Kate describes her in such a manner as well, but with a slight twist, where Milly is imagined as being a “creature saved from a shipwreck,”(220) which is interesting when placed into context with Merton Densher’s image of Kate being “as strong as the sea.”(221) If her life created - “all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business”(7) - her death is perceived as the actual shipwreck of the social circle she created around her, looming large in the minds of other characters.

James himself stated in the preface of the novel that “the poet essentially *can't* be concerned with the act of dying. Let him deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him (...) The process of life gives way fighting, and often may so shine out on the lost ground as in no other connection.”(4) James calls upon a celebration of life, and particularly a celebration of the spirit and soul which inhabit the dying body. Milly references life and death and notes that she has “lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive.”(132) This notion is especially enhanced in a biblical reference to living life to the fullest: “they would eat and drink because of what might happen tomorrow,” (95) while the actual reference is to Isaiah 22:13: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”(New International Version, Isaiah 22:13) Even though this quote calls for the finiteness of the human experience, of death being the end to all, a more in-depth exploration, from within the narratives of the three works analyzed, proposes that all is interconnected - that death and the spectral realm are merely an extension of “real” life. Visually, they both come into play as striking opposites of each other, death being represented by dark colors of mourning, with the spectral always having a supernatural quality to it, bringing peace, light, circling back and merging with the “real” life.



## 5. Conclusion

The main object of this thesis was to present the visual figures and various aspects of visuality within *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Aspern Papers*. As noted, Italian cities of Rome and Venice serve as the needed picturesque, historical background to enhance the visuality of the characters. The canals, alleys and squares of Venice serve as a gateway to escape the interiors of the palaces. Venetian palaces may have been grandiose at some point in history, but now just serve as hosts to the dying. This is also what Palazzo Roccanera in Rome represents, a fortress filled with objects of Osmond's artistic presence, who eventually die a spiritual death. Death, being the prevalent theme in all three works, is the one that propels other characters into action. In the case of Isabel Archer, all the deaths she dealt with made it possible for her to be liberated from within, making her able to go back to her loveless marriage in Rome. For Milly Theale, death is a looming presence she lives with, and once she dies, Milly is set free, while the issue of her enormous wealth tears Kate and Merton apart. The death of the author in *The Aspern Papers* pushes the spectral from within the narrative into the old Miss Bordereau, and it is her death which brings life to Miss Tita.

In conclusion, the three works discussed in this thesis display a great deal of connoisseurship and psychological know-how that James possessed and transferred in a brilliant manner, becoming more and more complex as his production matured. The knowledge James possessed stemmed from his life experiences as well as his abundant work as a literary critic and spectator of all the fine, as well as ordinary, things in life.

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