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The “poisoned cup of experience” or narcissistic disorder in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*

„Zatruty kielich doświadczenia” lub narcystyczne zaburzenia
w *Portrecie damy* Henry’ego Jamesa

SUMMARY

Isabel Archer, the heroine of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, can be seen as a clinical example of narcissistic disorder. She feels superior to other characters and is treated by them as if she indeed was so; she is also obsessed with remaining independent without really knowing how to realize it. That is because, as all narcissists, she lives in the world of abstractions and ideas more than in the real, tangible world. This results in her running away from sexual passion into an unhappy marriage with Gilbert Osmond, combined with a homoerotic fascination with their mutual friend Madame Merle. However, it is possible to claim that by the end of the novel Isabel changes and finally escapes the narcissistic bonds of the past.

Keywords: narcissistic disorder, Isabel Archer, sexuality, independence

Isabel Archer from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* can be seen as a clinical example of narcissistic disorder. Her relations to other characters, the way she perceives the world and herself make for her very realistic portrait, all the while yielding to the interpretive key of clinical psychology. The purpose of the present article is not, of course, to prove that Henry James was aware of Isabel being a narcissist, or that he intended to make her a case study; rather, the fact that she falls easily into a category taken from clinical psychology shows how close her portrayal is to a real person’s psyche. I use Rushi Ledermann’s essay “Pathological Sexuality and Paucity of Symbolisation in Narcissistic Disorder” in order to trace Isabel’s “symptoms” of narcissism and to show how they influence the construction of the plot of the novel.

The most common association with narcissism is of a person who feels better than the others, and Isabel Archer certainly betrays very high self-esteem. It is even projected on her surroundings, as the other characters see her as exceptional, wondering only what her special talent might be:

She had no talent for expression, and had none of the consciousness of genius; she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior. Whether or no she were superior, people were right in admiring her if they thought her so; for it seemed to her often that her mind moved more quickly than theirs, and this encouraged an impatience that might easily be confounded with superiority. (James, p. 47)

Even Lord Warburton, Isabel's rich and noble suitor, believes that Miss Archer looks down on them all, and when she rejects his offer of marriage – even though she has rather complex reasons for it – she believes that she can do better than marry an English lord and statesman (James, p. 95). Instead, she decides to marry Gilbert Osmond – a widowed American living in Italy, recommended to her by her friend Madame Merle – not only because of Isabel's idealizing him as all-knowing and exceptional, but also because he is poor and of no social status; thus, Isabel can demonstrate that she is better than the others, as she appreciates Osmond despite the prejudice of their surroundings.

Clinically speaking, narcissism is not however only a feeling of superiority. According to Ledermann there are a few traits characteristic of people with narcissistic disorder. One of them (perhaps the most strongly signalled in case of Isabel) is their striving for "pseudo-independence" (Lederman, p. 26), that is for what they perceive as full control over their own lives. This reminds one very much of Isabel's obsession with remaining independent, combined with her misconception of what it means. Her idea of autonomy is absolutely empty and abstract, not filled with any concrete content, disconnected from the practical level (unlike her friend Henrietta's, who, as a lady journalist, exercises to some extent one of possible forms of female independence). Isabel never articulates how this independence should be realized, what sort of life would be the one of independence for a woman in her circumstances. Her cousin Ralph believes that Isabel simply wants not to get married, but to see as much of the world as possible; that is why he arranges for Isabel to inherit a large sum of money after Mr Touchett's death. However, Isabel soon proves that remaining unmarried was not what she meant, as she decides to become the wife of Gilbert Osmond. Even though Annette Niemtzow believes that "Isabel Archer marries Osmond because she finds no options other than marriage" (Niemtzow, p. 386), this seems not to contradict Isabel's idea of independence, which remains as vague as it was before. The actual, socially acceptable possibilities of realizing freedom might be for her too narrow; thus, she escapes pragmatic choices and remains attached to the very notion of inde-

pendence, unable to use it for dealing with actual experience¹. In her discussion with Ralph Touchett she openly admits: "I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself," at which her cousin comments: "You want to see, but not to feel" (James, p. 139).

Isabel remains at the level of abstraction because of her very particular mental construction. She lacks real-life experience and instead she constructs her ideas about reality on the basis of the books she has read. Her approach towards the world and other characters is thus very theoretical and ideological, which has a great influence upon her decisions. Lord Warburton notices in her this trait when he says, perhaps with a tone of admiration: "Do you know I'm very much afraid of it – of that remarkable mind of yours?", to which Isabel replies: "So am I, my lord!" (James, p. 102). Henrietta Stackpole is slightly more down to earth as she tells her friend:

The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams – you are not enough in contact with reality – with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You are too fastidious; you have too many graceful illusions. Your newly acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people, who will be interested in keeping up those illusions. (James, pp. 200–201)

It is characteristic of narcissists to develop a "pseudo-ego, or head-ego, a kind of emergency construct" instead of a "healthy body-ego," that is to "experience the core of [their] personality as situated in [their] heads." They suffer from "an over-growth of the mental function, a lack of integration of mind and psychesoma, at times even an opposition between them" (Ledermann, p. 24). On the one hand, this results in Isabel's over-intellectualism and her seeing herself as rather a book character than a real person (McMaster, pp. 55–56). In this sense Isabel is a kind of an American Madame Bovary, formed by her bad romantic readings and ill-prepared to life². On the other hand, this over-development of the intellectual side is a major reason of Isabel's complicated sexuality.

¹ Interestingly, if Henry James takes the idea of insisting on independence from Emersonian self-reliance, then at first sight there seems to be a correspondence between the two. Emerson's self-reliance is also quite disconnected from the social reality, it lacks a physical realization in everyday practice (the best proof for that being that Emerson imagines a society of self-reliant individuals, as "isolation precedes true society," and he does not see the tension or contradiction there should be between true independence and social responsibilities). However, Emerson does mean something more than just an idea: he speaks of intellectual self-reliance; of the ability not to be influenced by other minds and of the capacity of moral self-determination. Isabel Archer lacks even this intellectual and moral substantiation when considering her independence.

² At one point she has a discussion with her uncle about politics. When he asks her whether she is a liberal or a conservative, Isabel replies: "I am both. I think I am a little of everything. In a revolution – after it was well begun – I think I should be a conservative. One sympathizes more with them, as they have a chance to behave so picturesquely" (James, p. 68).

Kurt Hochenauer attributes Isabel's rejection of Caspar Goodwood, a handsome young American she is clearly attracted to, to her wish of remaining independent and in control of her situation, seeking in her de-sexualized marriage with Osmond a kind of feminist empowerment against the instincts of her body which make her weak and subject to men (Hochenauer, pp. 22, 24). However, it is far more plausible that Isabel's relation to Goodwood is not simply a Foucauldian power struggle but a complex and rather more sophisticated psychological problem. Being a narcissist (or betraying traits of one), Isabel has trouble with connecting to her own body. Goodwood's presence is to her a trauma she cannot accommodate within her ordered and theoretical worldview, because it confronts her with feelings unknown to her and beyond her control. There also seems to be one more problem with falling in love with Goodwood: he is too much of an incarnated manhood to be a real option to Isabel. According to Ledermann narcissistic women often have a very strong animus (their male element) with which they tend to identify; hence they look for men who are at some level effeminate. That is why Osmond is to Isabel more attractive than both Goodwood and Warburton, the former being too masculine physically, the latter too rich and socially respected, both features being seen as markers of manliness. Osmond on the other hand is effeminate on four levels: he is an artist, he is poor, he does not enjoy high social status, and in Isabel's eyes he is an extension of her close friend Madame Merle.

The relationship between Isabel and Madame Merle is very interesting, because when read from the queer perspective, it becomes the first serious relationship in Isabel's life, and it has great influence upon the development of the novel's plot. It also agrees with what Ledermann writes about narcissistic patients often having homoerotic fascinations (Lederman, p. 30). Isabel is clearly fascinated by the older woman and finds in her the sort of dominance she has been looking for, without being forced to compromise her independence. What is also attractive for Isabel about Madame Merle is her aura of suffering, of a person who has lived through much (James, p. 178). Isabel finds it very romantic and even magnetic, as she believes suffering to be something noble and oftentimes wishes it for herself, picturing herself as a martyr who "can't escape [her] fate ... can't escape unhappiness" (James, p. 122). That is also why she cannot accept Goodwood's nor Warburton's proposals (the narrator declares that Isabel rejected Warburton as "she liked him too much to marry him, that was the point" – James, p. 103), as both are potentially perfect husbands but can easily deprive her of what she perceives as the essence of human experience by making her happy. Julie McMaster explains it partially as "the Protestant sanctification of suffering" going "hand in hand with its sense of guilt in pleasure and luxury" (McMaster, p. 50). In this sense Isabel would be a very American type of a narcissist, joining the psychological complex with the Puritan burden. That is also how McMaster sees Isabel's decision to re-

turn to Osmond after she learns of her husband's affair with Madame Merle – as "not losing sight of the ghost of Gardencourt" (McMaster, p. 65) whom one may see only after having suffered.

However, it is not only Isabel who is infatuated with Madame Merle; the feeling seems to be reciprocated. Serena Merle might see in Isabel a younger version of herself, a woman who still has all her life before her and who has not made the choices that defined Merle's life. When she tries to persuade Osmond to accept her marriage plan, she presents Isabel as better than herself:

Miss Archer is not dingy; she's as bright as the morning. She corresponds to your description; it is for that I wish you to know her. She fills all your requirements.... She is beautiful, accomplished, generous and, for an American, well-born. She is also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune.... Isabel Archer is better than I. (James, pp. 222–223)

Madame Merle wants Isabel to replace her in the relationship with Osmond in a similar way to Ralph, who provides Isabel with a large sum of money for her to be able to do everything that he cannot and in this way to be his extension. It is interesting that both women seem to identify with each other and base their fascination on a mutual projection. That could be connected with Isabel's narcissism, as Ledermann writes that narcissistic patients often form a "special kind of homosexual relationships ... a merging rather than a loving, and sometimes not very stable" (Lederman, p. 30). That is also why, when Isabel asks Madame Merle what she has to do with her, Merle replies: "everything." Isabel loves in some sense both Osmond and Madame Merle, and it is all the more painful to her to see that they both betray her with each other. The triangle is as much locked as possible, and Isabel gets as much suffering as she might have wished for.

Isabel's attraction to suffering constitutes another trait of her narcissistic personality. Her decision to marry Gilbert Osmond in the first place, and to reject Goodwood and Warburton, seems motivated by a subconscious need to find a man who would make her unhappy. Masochism is often identified with narcissistic disorder (Ledermann, p. 31), and this might be where her "appetite for renunciation" (McMaster, p. 66) stems from. That is one of the reasons why she rejects the option of divorce, suggested by Henrietta:

I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I would much rather die.... I don't know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. (James, p. 450)

She prefers seeing herself as a martyr to admitting that she made a mistake. It is probably her smallest concern what society will think on the ethical level – her reasons for not divorcing Osmond are more connected to her personal convic-

tions than to a bourgeois notion of traditional morality. But divorcing her husband would be denying the freedom she fancied to have while taking the decision to marry him.

However, to see Isabel's decision to go back to Rome and to Osmond by the very end of the novel only as a result of her delight in unhappiness is only one possibility, undermined by the sudden impression of freedom she gets after Goodwood's kiss. The other possibility is to read the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* as a signal of an upcoming change, if we decide to believe the statement about being finally free. Overcoming narcissism happens usually as a result of a traumatic or very strong experience, and it might be that Isabel has just started the process of recovering from her narcissistic disorder. The passion that she experiences with Goodwood is the final stage of her development that pushes her back into her body, not allowing her any more to experience herself as "two-dimensional and disembodied" (Ledermann, p. 29). She passes from the world of books and intellect into the real and physical one. The knowledge about the nature of Osmond and Madame Merle's relationship paradoxically makes her strong, as she is not the victim of the situation any more, but she can make conscious choices. In this light it is not really important whether she decides to go back to Osmond or to divorce him, and it might be why James leaves the novel open-ended. What matters is that from this moment on Isabel's choices are not illusionary, not based on appearances any more. They can be unintelligible to the reader but they are her own, not conditioned by deception, and thus good in her own eyes. The fact of her remaining in an unhappy marriage seems to be irrelevant, since she has gained a much more important kind of freedom, the one that gives her control over her own life, and even if physically nothing might change, Osmond cannot hurt her any more.

It is worth noting that for Quentin Anderson what has been said above about Isabel Archer is to a large extent true of all of Henry James's characters. Perhaps most of them could be seen as narcissistic because they are "just as real as they can talk" (Anderson, p. 210). In Anderson's view this is a tendency Henry James inherited from Emerson: "»Let us treat the men and women well; treat them as if they were real,« said Emerson, »perhaps they are.« But of course they aren't" (Anderson, p. 214). This nearly solipsistic point of view is typical of narcissists, but in case of Isabel Archer James's character seems to overcome the limitation she used to share with his other protagonists.

STRESZCZENIE

Isabel Archer, tytułowa bohaterka powieści *Portret damy* Henry'ego Jamesa, może być postrzegana jako przypadek narcyzmu w rozumieniu klinicznym. Czuje się lepsza niż inne postacie i często jest przez nie traktowana tak, jakby rzeczywiście tak było; ma też obsesję niezależności, choć nie do końca zdaje się rozumieć, co miałyby ona oznaczać. Spowodowane jest to faktem, że Isabel żyje w świecie abstrakcji i idei bardziej niż w świecie rzeczywistym i namacalnym. Dlatego też szuka ucieczki przed własną seksualnością w nieszczęśliwym małżeństwie z Gilbertem Osmondem i homoerotycznej fascynacji ich wspólną przyjaciółką Madame Merle. Jednak zakończenie powieści może wskazywać na to, że Isabel przechodzi przemianę i że udaje jej się przezwyciężyć narcyzm.

Słowa kluczowe: narcyzm, Isabel Archer, seksualność, niezależność

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