

## Evil is present at social level: James's novels

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### Abstract

*James has the logical interest in evil and has become a part of the christen consciousness and lexicon. The face of the evil at a certain social level is so smooth and difficult of definition. Evil has wormed its way into the citadels of civilization life has to pay a price for preserving the form of things. In social life, virtue turns in to emotional aggression and moral hysteria.*

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For Isabel, the true face of the evil is not revealed till the end. In that remarkable scene where Madam Merle bears down upon her in that final assault, she was an experience of evil bordering on terror. For some time past, the disturbing presence of Madam Merle in Osmond's house has been a weight upon her heart. The dark knowledge of her identity comes flooding into Isabel's wretched mind.

*“Isabel sat there looking up at her, without rising; her face was almost a prayer to be enlightened. But the light of this woman's eyes seemed only a darkness. ‘On misery!’ she murmured at last : and she fell back, covering her face with her hands. It had come over her like a high surging wave that Mrs. Touchett was right. Madam Merle had married her . Before she uncovered her face again that lady that life the room.”*

The knowledge of Madam Merle's duplicity agitates her beyond measure as Isabel sits brooding over the nature of evil. James has shown the working of a female heart when it beats in pain over the misery of all womankind. When a little later, Madam Merle confronts Osmond,

she means that she has been 'Vile' and 'horrid'...you have dried up my soul.' And the futility of the evil she has wrought, comes home to her with a shattering force.

*"After he had left her she went, the first thing, and  
lifted from the mantelshelf the attenuated coffee – cup  
in which he had mentioned the existence of a crack ;  
but she looked at it rather abstractedly. 'Have I been  
so vile all for nothing?' she vaguely wailed.*

The second evil character in *The Portrait of a lady*, Gilbert Osmond, is from the beginning presented as an image of aloofness and stiff exterior. His house on the hill- top in Florence is characteristic of his nature. As James puts it, its 'imposing front has a somewhat in communication character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It has heavy lids, but not eyes.' It symbolized Osmond's inhospitable and closed mind.

Madam Merle is the creation of Gilbert Osmond. He has used her abominably and violated her nature and life. To that extend, her evil is the direct consequences of the evil in the Osmond. And indeed when we find 'the cleverest woman in Europe' helpless before him, we have a measure of the dark power he exercises over woman in particular. There is something satanic about his conceit and pride. The name James has given him signifies his dehumanization. As we have seen elsewhere, Isabel's innocence and sincerity and spontaneity lose their character at the fatal touch of her husband. As James puts it, he could 'tap her imagination with his knuckles and make it ring.' Osmond has gradually worn out her inner defenses. The biblical imagery in relation to Osmond is significant. He is a serpent in the flower- bank; he has silently sneaked in to Isabel's Eden and laid it waste. James, it may be repeated, has not theological interest in evil; and has become a part of the christen consciousness and lexicon.

We see now the face of the evil at a certain social level is so smooth and difficult of definition. Both Madam Merle and Osmond exemplify this in their own ways. And since evil has wormed its way into the citadels of civilization, it may be argued that civilized life has to pay a price for preserving the form of things. We find an envelope of pity covering both the sinner and the victim. James has no doubt a horror of evil; but where virtue turns into emotional aggression and moral hysteria he feels equally disturbed.

Isabel wants a total knowledge, including knowledge of evil, but cannot recognize that an association with evil will require her to compromise her enormous goals. Knowledge,

especially a knowledge of evil, proves to be recompense for sorrow. The gravity of Osmond's evil is obvious from its contagious effect of Isabel and Pansy, and even on Madam Merle and Edward Roiser. Its grossness is also apparent, however, in his brutal control of Isabel:

*“She found herself confronted ..... with the conviction that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her a vulgar adventurer, for her money”.*

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