



NAXOS
AudioBooks

CLASSIC
FICTION



*The
Portrait
of a Lady*

Henry James

Read by **Elizabeth McGovern**

CD 1

1	Afternoon tea at Gardencourt	16:31
2	Mrs Touchett's niece	11:27
3	'An interesting woman'	9:06
4	Isabel's new friends	10:25
5	Lord Warburton	5:58
6	An invitation to Lockleigh	5:24
7	Henrietta glimpses England	7:10
8	A letter from Caspar Goodwood	3:20
9	Lord Warburton declares himself	10:06

Total time on CD 1: 79:32

CD 2

1	Isabel's answer	12:10
2	Isabel and Henrietta in London	7:48
3	Caspar Goodwood dismissed	6:10
4	Madame Merle introduces herself; Ralph reveals his plan	15:03
5	Isabel's bequest	7:44
6	'I want you, of course, to marry her'	6:31
7	Madame Merle's friend	13:08
8	A visit to Rome	7:48

Total time on CD 2: 76:27

CD 3

1	A visit to Rome (cont.)	7:45
2	'You're going to marry that man'	15:36
3	Mr Rosier's proposal	12:04
4	A second suitor for Pansy	21:01
5	Gilbert Osmond disappointed	23:06

Total time on CD 3: 79:37

CD 4

1	Gilbert Osmond disappointed (cont.)	9:09
2	Caspar, Ralph and Henrietta go home; Madame Merle's interest	19:41
3	The Contessa speaks out	19:59
4	Madame Merle makes a guess; Isabel loses a brother	19:26
5	'A very straight path'	10:26

Total time on CD 4: 77:18

Total time on CD 1-4: 5:12:54

Henry James

The Portrait of a Lady

The Portrait of a Lady, arguably Henry James's finest novel (F.R. Leavis said that it was 'one of the two most brilliant novels in the language'), was first published in 1881, and thus belongs to the early middle period of the author's output.

Some years later James wrote a fascinating preface to the novel in which he attempted to analyse both its strengths and its weaknesses (amongst the latter he placed what he saw as his 'overtreatment' of Henrietta Stackpole). Modern readers may be amused to notice that the later James is already writing in a style that is complex to the point of wilful obscurity, whereas the novel is in fact beautifully simple in much of its expression and (contrary to a popular view of James)

remarkably direct and powerful in its treatment of passionate human feeling.

Passionate emotion – including ardent idealism – is actually one of the dominant themes of the book: James shows us what happens to a young American woman, intelligent, beautiful and idealistic, when her ambitions and sensibility are exposed to the sophistications of Europe. James wrote much of the novel while staying first in Florence and then Venice; his home at that time was in London. It is no accident therefore that England and Italy are the chief settings for his story of innocence exploited and ultimately destroyed.

James begins by establishing a setting which is 'typically' English – a fine old country house – but one which is owned

by a rich and generous-minded American, Mr Touchett. Already, then, the Old and the New Worlds are seen in combination. Into this friendly and civilized atmosphere comes Isabel Archer, an American cousin on her first real trip to Europe. Thus the mechanism of the novel is set in motion. This 'particularly engaging young woman' (James's words) attracts, in succession, the attentions of Caspar Goodwood (in her home country), Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton and Gilbert Osmond. Isabel makes the terrible error of mistaking exquisite aesthetic sensibility for love and virtue, and the second half of the novel is devoted to the outworking of a tragedy of lost potential in which the heroine must make choices between 'duty' and instinct.

Characteristic Jamesian themes come to the fore as the novel unfolds. He is fascinated by the question of materialism – in particular, the way in which people can be treated as objects, as works of art ('bibelots') – but what makes the treatment of this theme especially sinister is the subtlety and grace with which this may be accomplished, almost imperceptibly. Readers of *The Turn of the Screw* will

be familiar with James's obsession with the idea of evil – its mysterious source, its capacity to work invisibly, as it were, until it is too late: and it is difficult not to see Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond as two agents of evil, though not in any crudely supernatural way – their milieux, their backgrounds and characters are much too fully drawn for that.

Finally, it may be of interest to note two evident influences on James's novel: Jane Austen's *Emma* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. In both novels we find strong-minded, even impetuous, heroines, women who must learn a greater degree of self-knowledge and humility before they can achieve true happiness. Only James is unwilling to allow his heroine an ultimate escape from the consequences of her errors.

Henry James (1843–1916) was born in New York and settled in London in 1875. He moved to Lamb House, Rye, in 1898; became a British subject in 1915; and was awarded the Order of Merit in the year of his death. His fiction is of a highly refined and intelligent subtlety, analysing thought, motive and feeling with brilliant

psychological insight and (at times) some obscurity of style. Much of his earlier fiction (*The Portrait of a Lady*) deals with the impact of the old world upon the new, and this transatlantic theme recurs in later works like *The Ambassadors* (1903). In between, he studies English life and character in such works as *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). He is generally regarded as one of the great founders of the modern novel.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside



Elizabeth McGovern's film, TV and theatre career has spanned both sides of the Atlantic. Her film credits include *She's Having a Baby*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *Ordinary People*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Wings of a Dove*. On UK TV she has been seen in *The Changeling* and *Broken Glass*, and her theatre credits include *The Misanthrope*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*.

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