



Henry James's Portrait of Evil: A Study in Narcissistic Rage

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Abstract

Identifying Gilbert Osmond as the embodiment of evil is a commonplace observation in the voluminous commentary on Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. However, critics of the novel have been remiss in providing a comprehensive examination of Osmond's nefarious actions and the depraved personality behind them. This essay deciphers evidence previously overlooked to reveal that Osmond is even more unscrupulous and evil than has been conventionally observed. In addition, the essay demonstrates why James's depiction of Osmond endures as a compelling and insightful psychological portrait. Enabling one to fathom this enigmatic character, Heinz Kohut's psychoanalytic profile of "narcissistic rage" illuminates Osmond's pathological condition and provides a motive for his malignancy.

Keywords

Narcissism, Evil, Henry James, Heinz Kohut, Gilbert Osmond

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While the ardent and innocent Isabel Archer is the principal subject of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James depicts her wicked and repulsive husband Gilbert Osmond in a contrasting portrait of evil. Within the novel, Osmond is variously described as "sinister," "a villain," "a serpent," one possessing "a demonic imagination," and "the deadliest of fiends" (in the 1881 edition, "a devil"). The text provides numerous, overt examples of Osmond's iniquity; he is egocentric, slothful, devious, avaricious, heartless, and cruel. Identifying Osmond as the embodiment of evil is a commonplace observation in the voluminous critical commentary on *The Portrait*. For example, Lyall H.

Powers describes him as "James's most completely evil character"; possessing a "towering egotism," Osmond "is surely the chief of that tribe of emotional cannibals who stalk through James's fiction" ("Eternal Mystery" 146). Joel Porte announces, "Gilbert Osmond alone wins the prize as James's most magnificent villain" (25). Robert Weisbuch writes, "To say that Osmond is James's personification of aspects of Evil is to put it with too much cold logic; Osmond is the name for what James hates" (113-14). J. Hillis Miller ranks him among literature's "greatest" villains and asserts, "Osmond is a more or less 'motiveless malignity.' He matches even Iago in villainy" (63). Despite the abundance of such denunciations, critical discussions typically brush Osmond aside, stereotyping him as an inscrutable, "motiveless" character who serves primarily to contrast European sophistication and decadence with Isabel's American ingenuousness and earnestness.¹ However, Osmond remains a character to be reckoned with, a chilling and enigmatic figure who resists being revealed for what he is.

In addition to the conspicuous manifestations of Osmond's wickedness, there are subtle, yet direful, indications of his perversity—which include sadism, misogyny, and probable criminality. This essay deciphers evidence previously overlooked to reveal that he is even more evil and unscrupulous than has been conventionally observed. Moreover, critical commentary has not adequately explained *why* Isabel's villainous husband is such a loathsome yet compelling figure. Accordingly, this essay also investigates what makes Osmond "tick" by diagnosing his pathological condition and drawing on psychoanalytical theory to identify the likely causes of his disordered personality—for the novel does, in fact, suggest a motive for his malignancy.

Gilbert Osmond's behavioral characteristics display a striking congruence with the profile that Henry A. Murray sets forth in his classic essay "The Personality and Career of Satan." Here Murray offers a "theoretical formulation" of the components of "the Satanic personality" drawn from myth, literature, and clinical observation. He identifies "malignant narcissism [sic]" as the distinguishing trait of such a type (Murray 529-30). Consistent with Murray's criteria, Osmond possesses the "tacit assumption that *his own supreme worth entitles* him to . . . the lion's share . . . of whatever goods, services, attention, adulation, honors, privileges, power, and prestige are to be had in his environment." He harbors a "secret feeling" that he has been "unjustly" and "ignominiously deprived of his deservedly large share" of such benefits and honors. He attempts to manipulate and to corrupt other persons, employing strategies that are "sly" and "subversive" as well as "openly destructive." Afflicted with the "resentment" fundamental to the Satanic

¹ William Veeder's learned discussion of Osmond's unsavory, literary lineage is a notable exception. Veeder connects the character with "traditional villains," such as the satanic figure, melodramatic villain, Byronic hero, and "subversive Dandy"; he describes Osmond as a "violent" but "nonhistrionic villain" (119-150).

personality, Osmond harbors "a hidden envy coupled with expressed contempt" for those whom he perceives as more fortunate than himself. In his relationships with others, he exhibits "the absence of any capacity to experience or express authentic selfless love, gratitude, admiration, or compassion" (Murray 529-33).

Osmond also exhibits several distinctive characteristics delineated in Otto Kernberg's clinical description of the narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Osmond's "pathological self-love" is manifest in a "grandiosity" that includes "a sense of superiority" and "ambitions that are inordinate in view of what [one] can actually achieve." His "pathological object love" is manifest in excessive envy, "excessive greed," and "a sense of entitlement." Osmond's "pathological superego" is manifest in "childish" values that are "aimed at protecting self-esteem and pride" and in an inability to engage in "self-critique." According to Kernberg, patients with NPD "characteristically feel bored when their need for admiration and success is not being gratified," and they "have a remarkable incapacity for empathy and emotional investment in others." Such persons may "feel secure and triumphant only when they have destroyed everyone else and particularly when they have frustrated the efforts of those who love them" (Kernberg *Aggressivity*, 49-51).

As evidenced below, Osmond conforms to Murray's archetype of tormented malignity, and he exhibits the typical symptoms of the narcissistic personality disorder specified by Kernberg. Yet these diagnostic descriptions do not disclose the psychic essence of James's most notorious villain. Identifying the factors shaping the narcissistic personality, Heinz Kohut's analysis provides keys to unlocking the enigma that is Gilbert Osmond and explains why he behaves as he does. Osmond is a textbook example of what Kohut terms "narcissistic rage," and he manifests the types of "aggressive responses" characteristic of this condition ("Narcissistic Rage" 379).² Using Kohut's psychoanalytical model to analyze Osmond's behavior and personality reveals him to be more than a one-dimensional, "motiveless" stock villain; he is a psychologically convincing, realistic character. Identifying the key dimensions of Osmond's pathology provides a frame for fresh readings of several overlooked and problematical elements in the narrative. In addition, because James depicts him in such a compelling manner, Osmond dramatically reifies the essence and effects of evil.

Kohut's outline of the etiology of narcissistic rage explains how the circumstances of Osmond's youth likely contributed to his pathological disorder. As the novel indicates, Osmond's childhood was certainly irregular and probably unhappy. His parents evidently failed to provide him with adequate "confirming and approving 'mirroring' responses" (Kohut,

² Although other studies consider various aspects of narcissism in James's fiction (see Ash, Claggett, and Luciano), I am not aware of any study that examines Gilbert Osmond (or other Jamesian character) in the context of Kohut's model of narcissistic rage.

"Narcissistic Rage" 373) and to instill in him "the idealized parent imago" necessary for normal development (Kohut, "Narcissism as a Resistance" 95). The death of Osmond's reputedly "rich and wild" father in "the grey American dawn of the situation" must have engendered a sense of loss and abandonment in the small boy. His mother, who subsequently brought her son and daughter to Italy, "bristled with pretensions to elegant learning" and fancied herself "the American Corinne" (239-40); the 1881 edition describes her as "a heartless feather-head" (534).³ Her typical, flamboyant attire consisted of "a Roman scarf thrown over a pair of shoulders timorously bared of their tight black velvet . . . and a gold laurel wreath set upon a multitude of glossy ringlets"; her melodramatic deportment included speaking "softly and vaguely, in the manner of her Creole ancestors"; "she sighed a great deal and was not at all enterprising" (376). Lydia Touchett considered the American widow "a horrible snob," and Serena Merle maintained that the affected poetess was hardly "a sensible woman" (240). Although brief, this account of Osmond's early years suggests that he experienced feelings of rejection and loneliness during his fatherless childhood and that he was embarrassed by the behavior of the pretentious and theatrical mother who must have neglected him. He lacked the "*primary empathy* with the mother" that Kohut argues is critical for both a realistic self-concept and the development of empathetic relationships with other persons ("Forms and Transformations" 261).⁴ The young Osmond experienced what Kohut identifies as a worst-case scenario involving a "gross" traumatic event (the untimely death of his father) and a mother who was herself beset by a "narcissistic fixation" (*Analysis of the Self* 65). Preoccupied with her public image and literary reputation, Osmond's "heartless" mother was likely "unresponsive to the moods and tensions expressed by the child"; consequently, he never developed the empathy that would have enabled "the gradual withdrawal of narcissistic cathexes"; as an adult, he remains "fixated on the whole early narcissistic milieu" (*Analysis of the Self* 65-66).

Wounded by these traumatic relationships with his parents, Osmond constructed "a grandiose-exhibitionistic self and an omnipotent self-object" to maintain his self-esteem and to prevent a fragmentation of the ego ("Narcissistic Rage" 368). Unable to relinquish his "narcissistic delusions" as he passed from adolescence to adulthood, he failed to establish a secure "reality

³ All citations from *The Portrait of a Lady* are from the Norton Critical Edition, which reprints the New York Edition of 1908 and includes a convenient list of the changes from the First Edition of 1881.

⁴ Kathleen Lawrence also suggests that Osmond's mother inflicted a psychic wound that had far-reaching consequences for her son. She argues that Osmond held a "deep antipathy" for her "liberal ideas and politics." Since he had "to survive alone in a meretricious society where he can adopt only the forms of a religion and aristocracy to which he can never belong, Osmond defends himself with desperation and control." He possesses an "unfulfilled ego" manifest in "his desperation to belong to a ruling class from which he is excluded." Rejecting his mother's liberal, progressive views, Osmond becomes a reactionary archconservative, "anti-feminist and anti-liberal" (56-57).

ego" and to develop "realistic ambitions" ("Narcissistic Rage" 388-89). In such a case, according to Kohut, "aggression [is] mobilized in the service of an archaic grandiose self," and this "shame-prone" person engages in "sadistic attacks" on any "offender" who contradicts his "conviction" that he is "unique and perfect" ("Narcissistic Rage" 385). Correspondingly, Osmond directs vengeful anger against anyone who threatens the inflated and chimerical self-image he created in childhood and seeks to preserve as an adult—in the words of his sister Amy, the belief that "he's descended from the gods" (233).

Despite his extraordinarily good fortune in marrying the wealthy, attractive, and adoring Isabel, Osmond remains a tormented, envious, and cruel person in the thrall of his "anachronistic narcissistic expectations" ("Narcissistic Rage" 393). Still haunted by the loss, neglect, and humiliation he suffered in childhood, Osmond assumes a posture of imperious superiority, and he directs his irrational and aggressive hatred against anyone who threatens this precarious self-image. Finding himself unable to annex Isabel's mind and to dictate her behavior after their marriage, he becomes even more angry and resentful. Driven by his narcissistic rage, Osmond routinely subjects his acquaintances and intimates to "sadistic attacks," whether their opposition is real or imagined. A "seemingly minor irritant" provokes in him "an attack of narcissistic rage" of "disproportionate severity" ("Narcissistic Rage" 387). Railing against Isabel's friends, he denounces Ralph Touchett as a "donkey" and "jackanapes" (209) and callously remarks to Isabel that her beloved cousin should prove the severity of his illness by dying (408); he is "rude" to Edward Rosier "on purpose" and declares that the young man should be "horse-whipped" because he is in love with Osmond's daughter, Pansy (314-15). Devoid of gratitude, he turns against his copartner in vice, Serena Merle, dismissing her with cold and caustic sarcasm. Dictatorial and cruel, he subjects his daughter to emotional torture and physical confinement; he verbally abuses his wife and heartlessly forbids her to visit her dying cousin. Osmond thus exemplifies how "those who are in the grip of narcissistic rage show total lack of empathy" for anyone who offends them and display an "unforgiving fury" when they perceive a threat to "the omnipotent self-object" ("Narcissistic Rage" 386). Since his concerns and pleasures are completely egocentric, Osmond cannot possess contentment or happiness. Aloof and emotionally frigid, he is incapable of establishing loving, intimate relationships with other persons, and he does not appear to maintain any genuine friendships. As the Countess Gemini tells Henrietta Stackpole, "He can't love anyone" (380).

Sensing that his rival is a slippery character, an aggrieved and skeptical Caspar Goodwood confronts Isabel after receiving word of her engagement and demands an answer to the pertinent question: "Who and what then is Mr. Gilbert Osmond?" (279). Her response—that he is "a very good and very honourable man . . . very quiet and very simple" (278-79)—reveals the magnitude of her deception. Like the "imposing front" of his villa outside Florence, Osmond projects "a somewhat incommunicative character"; it takes

several years for Isabel to perceive and to acknowledge how her husband has concealed his thoroughly heinous nature beneath an artfully constructed façade, merely "a mask, not the face" (195).

Many clues and warnings, both subtle and overt, should have provided Isabel with misgivings about the man who beguiles her. She recognizes that he is "certainly fastidious and critical" and "probably irritable" (244), but these questionable attributes do not appear to perturb her. Both Ralph and Lydia Touchett reiterate Merle's initial representation of Osmond as an utter nonentity who possesses "[n]o name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" (172); to her own questions, "Who is he, if you please? What has he ever done?" the Countess Gemini answers, "there's nothing, nothing, nothing" (233). Attempting to convince Isabel of her fiancé's egotism and potential malevolence, Ralph Touchett delivers the harshest censure of Osmond. He tells Isabel that she will be "put in a cage" after she marries the man and that he does not trust Osmond (288-89). Although Ralph confesses that he cannot adduce the "facts and items to prove him a villain," he warns Isabel that marrying the man poses "a grave risk" for her (290). As he endeavors to "express Gilbert Osmond's sinister attributes," the best he can muster is to assert, "[Y]ou were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante!" (292).⁵

Ralph's characterization of Osmond as a "sterile dilettante" reflects how Osmond uses objects and people to reflect and to magnify his narcissistic arrogation of sublime grandeur. When Isabel compliments Osmond on the "beautiful and precious" items in his apartment, he replies, "I've not what I should have liked." Madame Merle's response, not altogether facetious, hints at his insatiable rapacity for rare and valuable objects: "You'd have like a few things from the Uffizi and the Pitti—that's what you'd have liked" (219). Osmond's obsession with collecting, his fixation on surrounding himself with things that signify his discriminating taste and cultivation, illustrates what Kernberg terms "the libidinal investment of the self" in "an object that stands for the self"; this sort of attachment is typical of "the more severe type of narcissistic disturbance" (*Borderline Conditions* 324). Such acquisitiveness is also consistent with Kohut's model. Because of his traumatic separation from the idealized, parental "object imago" as a child, Osmond exemplifies the narcissistic personality that remains "dependent on certain objects in what seems to be an intense form of object hunger." This dependency occurs because

⁵ Osmond holds a reputation among his Florentine acquaintances as a fastidious collector, a prissy gentleman, and—like his mother—"a horrible snob" (240). However, because of scant evidence in the text, the reader can only speculate what convinced Ralph of Osmond's villainy. Like his mother, he may have heard rumors of Osmond's "cold-blooded love affairs" (236), but he does not seem to be aware of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the death of Osmond's first wife and Pansy's birth. In the 1881 edition, the narrator states, "Ralph Touchett, for reasons best known to himself, had seen fit to say that Gilbert Osmond was not a good fellow" when Lord Warburton inquired about him (540).

these items "are needed in order to replace the functions of a segment of the mental apparatus which had not been established in childhood" ("Treatment" 89). Isabel is oblivious to Ralph's warning that Osmond intends to use her—as he does his daughter Pansy—to gratify his "object hunger" and to display her in his "collection" as a representation of his affinity with "the superior and the exquisite" (258).

Despite Osmond's professed indifference to distinction, status, and wealth, other pompous and megalomaniacal comments reveal that he is actually a conceited egotist who harbors grandiose fantasies. He tells Isabel of his resignation "[t]o be content with little" and his "willful renunciation" of the world's worries, strivings, and struggles (227); yet he only pretends to renounce what he is incapable of possessing but, in fact, yearns for. The narcissistic Osmond lacks a mature "reality ego" and has not developed "realistic ambitions." Although he possessed little, he believed that he was entitled to much and that his rewards should come without effort: "There were two or three people in the world I envied—the emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome—for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn't be I didn't care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honours" (227). Osmond also admits to envying the "detestably fortunate" Lord Warburton (256). Although Osmond claims that his "envy's not dangerous," his seemingly insouciant expressions of resentment betray his deeply gnawing sense of deprivation and insult: "He had never forgiven his star for not appointing him to an English dukedom" (258). As Kohut observes, "After suffering defeats in pursuit of their ambitious and exhibitionistic aims, [narcissists] experience at first searing shame and then often, comparing themselves with a successful rival, intense envy" (*Analysis of the Self* 181). Accordingly, Osmond "perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand" as that of Lord Warburton because possessing her would represent his triumph over the rival he so intensely envied (258).

Lacking the wealth and distinction he craves, Osmond is a discontented, perpetually unhappy person. Even as they are experiencing the splendors of Rome in May, Isabel recognizes that "he was too often . . . too sorely aware of something wrong, something ugly; the fertilizing dew of a conceivable felicity too seldom descended on his spirit" (259). Osmond confesses that before meeting Isabel, "I used to have morbid, sterile, hateful fits of hunger, of desire" (297); this is hardly the condition of the man who, as she attempts to convince Ralph, "has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference" (293). Osmond's envy, discontentment, and "morbid" outlook are typical of the aggrieved narcissist who experiences "depression and dejection" because he is unable to gratify "his need for the mirroring of his grandiosity" (Kohut, "Narcissism as a Resistance" 560-61). Winning Isabel's hand and, especially,

her money provides the recompense he feels that he deserves for so stoically enduring his previous, "detestably" unfortunate circumstances; in Osmond's calculus of merit, his "covertly aching" for a "boon" means that he has earned it (260).

Calling on the Osmonds at their Roman palazzo two years after their marriage, Ralph observes the dreadful confirmation of his apprehensions and warnings. Caught in Osmond's pernicious ambit, Isabel has metamorphosed into a splendid yet unnatural creature on display in a virtual cage. Ralph asks himself, "Poor human-hearted Isabel, what perversity had bitten her?" (331). Of course, this corrupting, transmutative venom had been injected through her husband's fangs. Ralph is aware how successfully her husband "adjusted, regulated, animated" the "manner of life" of everything and everyone around him, and he is horrified to perceive that Isabel herself has been reduced to the "function" of "representing" Gilbert Osmond, advertising his claims of exquisite taste and aristocratic elevation (331). In Ralph's analysis, Osmond surrounds himself "with a sort of invidious sanctity" and presents a face of "cold originality"; "his effects were deeply calculated," and he cultivates a "*pose*" that is "subtly considered." However, "the motive was as vulgar as the art was great." Ralph thus fathoms the great irony of this sham persona: "under the guise of caring only for intrinsic values Osmond lived exclusively for the world . . . and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success." This is the "vulgar" motive behind his calculated efforts to produce superficial effects. He designedly contrives all aspects of his life to reflect "so many features of a mental image constantly present to him as a model of impertinence and mystification. His ambition was not to please the world, but to please himself by exciting the world's curiosity and then declining to satisfy it. It had made him feel great, ever, to play the world a trick" (330-31). Ralph's insight is a brilliant one: Osmond's hypocritical posturing is outwardly fraudulent as well as self-deceptive; paradoxically, the man who pretends to be the world's superior is actually the world's servant; the one who has made a career of denouncing the world's vulgarity is himself driven by a vulgar, utterly selfish motive. Obsessed with his grandiose delusion, Gilbert Osmond is incapable of developing a "reality ego," and Ralph discerns Osmond's narcissistic self-regard in his elaborate efforts to project an image of enviable yet unapproachable superiority.

When he visits the Palazzo Roccanera, Caspar Goodwood penetrates Osmond's smarmy overtures of amiability and senses the sarcasm in his host's condescending treatment of him. Since one would expect him to detest yet another of Isabel's friends, Osmond—who "had a great dislike to being counted on"—perversely found "entertainment" in "taking a fancy to the perpendicular Bostonian" (412). However, his professed esteem is sheer dissimulation and mockery. Goodwood has "a vague sense" that Osmond is "laying it on somehow" and that his host derives "some private entertainment" from their conversation; Osmond's effusive attentions confirm Goodwood's "general

impression that his triumphant rival had in his composition a streak of perversity" (421). Intuiting that Isabel is miserable and that her husband is to blame, he recognizes a "demonic imagination" behind Osmond's confidential representations of domestic harmony and "perfect intimacy" with Isabel (423). As Isabel accurately observes, Osmond's "sense of fun . . . his sense of humor" is "defective" (328). This characteristic is consistent with Kohut's analysis of the person possessed by narcissistic rage: he typically lacks "a genuine sense of humor," particularly one that reflects a realistic "sense of proportion" by recognizing the inflated "aspirations of the infantile grandiose self"; "genuine humor" is a crucial component of the wisdom one must acquire to relinquish his narcissistic fantasies. Instead, the pathological personality employs insult and sarcasm as a defensive strategy to protect his "rigidly held" delusions of selfhood (*Analysis of the Self* 324-25). Osmond thus exemplifies the narcissist who is incapable of humor and self-criticism and who adapts a policy of "social sadism" ("Narcissistic Rage" 381).

Osmond's perverse narcissism also shapes his creepy and cruel treatment of his daughter Pansy. During Isabel's first visit to Osmond's Florentine villa, he holds the hand of the fifteen-year-old girl as he shows Isabel precious objects in the various rooms (225); while conversing with Isabel, he draws Pansy from her chair "making her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm round her slimness" (221). Such outré gestures are suggestively incestuous, if not downright perverse, and indicate how Osmond dominates and exploits his daughter. When Pansy joins the betrothed couple for their strolls in the Cascine, her father declares that "she would always be a child," and he "held her by the hand when she was in her sixteenth year and told her to go and play while he sat down a little with the pretty lady" (298). Although Osmond and Isabel have been seeing each other frequently, he bizarrely avers that he would have been "disgusted" if Pansy had "guessed" that the two were to be married. He proudly boasts, "I've brought up my child, as I wished, in the old way" (298). Yet his high-sounding appeal to "the old way" is merely a distorted justification for keeping his daughter in a perpetual childhood of innocence, ignorance, and subjection. What he really desires is to fashion her as an ornamental projection of his own narcissism, as another exquisite item in his collection, and as a sort of marionette or automaton whom he can control and manipulate for his own purposes and self-enhancement. Despite the "enchantly innocent" finish Osmond desires for Pansy (298), her manners and conversation are excruciatingly affected. When Isabel visits her in Florence after returning from Rome, Pansy's prolonged and superficial chatter confirms Mrs. Touchett's characterization of the girl as an "insipid little chit" (236). Henrietta Stackpole describes the nineteen year-old Pansy as "unnatural and even uncanny" (408). In training her to follow his bidding in all things, even marrying the man he chooses rather than the one she loves, Osmond succeeds, but of course he makes the girl "unnatural" and wretched in the process. After Osmond sends Pansy to the convent to discipline her and to

prevent any communication with Ned Rosier, she pathetically entreats Isabel, "Don't leave me here" (461). The "vanquished" young woman (now at age nineteen) pleads that she will "do anything" her brutal and remorseless "papa" demands to be released from her imprisonment (462).

Osmond's capacity for insult, cruelty, and perversion of the truth are abundantly manifest in several exchanges with Isabel. A particularly vicious exhibition of his psychological sadism occurs during their final conversation before Isabel departs to visit the dying Ralph at Gardencourt. Osmond spitefully baits Isabel in an "ingenious endeavour to draw her out." He denigrates her loving desire to visit her stricken cousin by describing her intention as "a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated, opposition," and he falsely accuses Isabel of liking Ralph "because he hates me." Osmond characterizes their marriage as a "disagreeable proximity"; however, he insists that their union must be maintained in all appearances because, as he hypocritically says, "what I value most in life is the honour of a thing" (445-46). Osmond is cold, sarcastic, and brutal; in his treatment of Isabel, he exhibits what she perceives as a "morbid passion" (402).

Osmond sends Pansy to the convent and forbids Isabel's visiting the dying Ralph because he cannot tolerate any threat to his arbitrary authority. These actions are manifestations of what Kohut terms "the vindictive re-establishment of his narcissistic control" ("Narcissistic Rage" 394). Osmond exploits Pansy and Isabel as extensions and reflections of his own grandeur, and he expects them to exhibit the same unqualified adoration for father and husband that he holds for himself. Osmond professes to have "an immense esteem for tradition," and he avers that tradition is "the best thing in the world" (361). However, his view of "tradition" and the ways he employs it to justify his abuses correspond to the type of deliberate, insidious cruelty symptomatic of narcissistic rage: "the most gruesome human destructiveness is encountered not in the form of wild, regressive, and primitive behavior, but in the form of orderly and organized activities in which the perpetrator's destructiveness is alloyed with absolutarian convictions about their greatness and with their devotion to archaic omnipotent figures" (Kohut, "Narcissistic Rage" 378).

As Isabel contemplates Osmond's cruelty and malignity in Chapter 42, she acknowledges his perverse narcissism. Isabel finds the manner in which he "took himself so seriously" to be "appalling," and she recognizes the lurking, satanic menace beneath his urbane, engaging persona: "Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers." Osmond held "a sovereign contempt for every one but three or four exalted people whom he envied, and for everything but half a dozen ideas of his own." The narcissistic egomaniac insisted that she "think of him as he thought of himself—as the first gentleman in Europe"; and so she viewed him initially, naively believing that Osmond "was better than anyone else" and that he possessed the finest mind and "the best taste in the world." Before marriage,

Isabel assumed "the earnestness of his affection," yet Osmond's seeming "affection" was not motivated by love or admiration of her personal qualities. He had concealed his intentions to obliterate her "many ideas," to deny her freedom and individuality, and to remake her as an objet d'art reflecting his tastes and prejudices. She realizes that "he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (358-60). Osmond attempts to transform Isabel into a simulacrum of himself in mien and opinions; as Ralph Touchett recognizes, he coerces Isabel to display her beauty with his trademark "touch of insolence" (331) and to parrot his ideas and preferences as the centerpiece in "his collection of choice objects."

During her fireside vigil, Isabel also acknowledges Osmond's vile misogyny. She contemplates how his "assumptions" concerning female virtue and marital fidelity, compared with her standards of integrity, "were hideously unclean." Isabel finds his cynical view of female behavior and morality abhorrent: "she believed in such a thing as chastity and even as decency. It would appear that Osmond was far from doing anything of the sort; some of his traditions made her push back her skirts. Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four that didn't deceive their husbands?" Isabel's principled "scorn of his assumptions" and her audacity "to turn the hot light of her disdain upon his own conception of things" gave him no option "but to hate her." Perversely, "this feeling of hatred, which at first had been a refuge and a refreshment, had become the occupation and comfort of his life" (362-63).

The most demeaning implication of Osmond's obscene assumptions is that Isabel herself, like "all women," would lie, deceive him, and take a lover. Since he holds this view and hates her as well, he could hardly be disillusioned or injured if she committed adultery. In fact, given Osmond's perverse nature, Isabel's sexual infidelity would likely prove gratifying since it would provide more fuel for his comforting hatred and confirm his misogynistic view of female deficiency (originating in his traumatic relationship with his mother). Moreover, if she must inevitably behave as "all women," Osmond might as well employ such infidelity to his own advantage. Both Osmond and Merle intuit what Isabel admits to herself during her fireside vigil: the "link" between herself and Lord Warburton "had yet a palpable existence" (354); the English noble obviously retains "an uneradicated predilection for her society" (355). Ralph also discerns his friend's abiding affection for Isabel, he expresses his concern to Warburton about its dangerous implications (335-36), and he tells Isabel that Warburton cares only for her, not Pansy (387). Isabel recognizes that Lord Warburton's seeming interest in Pansy, to whom he typically and dismissingly refers as "the little maid," is exceedingly "strange" for "a man of his mettle" and constitutes "a great incongruity" (367). Manifestly, his exclusive, passionate, and unwavering interest is, and has always been, the little maid's stepmother.

Madame Merle tells Isabel that Warburton will marry Pansy "if you make him. . . . It's quite in your power. You've great influence with him" (347). Osmond's demand that Isabel exploit Warburton's abiding affection to secure him as a husband for Pansy is more forceful: "You must have a great deal of influence with him. . . . The moment you really wish it you can bring him to the point. . . . I hold that it lies in your hands. . . . With a little good-will you may manage it. . . . [R]emember how much I count on you" (354). Isabel's "influence" with Warburton, which both Merle and Osmond recognize and encourage, involves the deliberate and devious exercise of her charms upon the former suitor who still loves her. Isabel considers Osmond's assumption that Warburton was not "shy" when he "made love" to her to be "disagreeable," yet she finds his demand that she "bring him to the point" of proposing to Pansy "more offensive" not merely because he expects her to employ duplicity and manipulation but also because of his tacit sexual insinuation (353-54). Osmond's reiterated insistence that Isabel employ whatever expedient form of "influence" she possesses to secure Warburton as Pansy's husband signals that he is perfectly willing for his wife to become sexually involved with the admirable Englishman to induce him to marry her stepdaughter. In fact, Osmond's request conveys an implicit injunction for Isabel to commit adultery, if necessary, to achieve his great ambition for Pansy—an ambition that his daughter, who loves another man, does not share.

Isabel is reluctant to acknowledge the reality of Osmond's abhorrent demand. She asks herself, "Was [Lord Warburton] in love with Gilbert Osmond's wife[?] . . . Was she to cultivate the advantage she possessed in order to make him commit himself to Pansy, knowing he would do so for her sake and not for the small creature's own—was this the service her husband had asked of her?" Yet she immediately admits that this is "the duty with which she found herself confronted," and she considers the assignment to be "a repulsive one." Contemplating both her designated role in this sordid business and whether or not Warburton is "pretending to be in love with Pansy in order to cultivate another satisfaction and what might be called other chances" leads Isabel into a "labyrinth" of "ugly possibilities" (355). Although unspecified, such "ugly possibilities" include her proffering the opportunity for a sexual relationship and, if he is acceptant, becoming Warburton's lover to induce him to marry Pansy (because the marriage is what Osmond so intensely wants) as well as providing Warburton with "other chances" for sexual intimacy with Isabel after his marriage to her stepdaughter (because Osmond would not care and, indeed, would expect such behavior). Isabel ineffectually attempts to convince herself that Lord Warburton is "disinterested" and that "she was not more to him than she need wish"; however, his subsequent behavior at the German ball (neglecting opportunities to dance with Pansy but imploring Isabel to dance with him) validates both Osmond's "cynical intimation" concerning Isabel's ability to exert a sexual "influence" on Warburton and

Isabel's suspicion that he was only "pretending to be in love with Pansy" to "cultivate" his real interest (355).

This reading of Osmond's demand that Isabel employ her sexual charms to secure Lord Warburton as Pansy's husband is more definite than previous interpretations. On the question of whether Osmond expresses "an expectation that she enter a liaison with Warburton as part of her exercising her 'influence' on Pansy's behalf," Lyall H. Powers concludes that "the implications here are somewhat ambiguous" (*Maiden, Woman and Heroine* 51). However, the "implications" are quite clear given Osmond's character and "traditions," not to mention his "offensive" exhortation to Isabel. The projected scenario anticipates the resumption of the affair, after their marriages, between Charlotte Stant and her stepson-in-law Prince Amerigo in James's late novel *The Golden Bowl*. John Auchard comes a bit closer to my reading, seeing Osmond's suggestion as an unspoken one: "If Gilbert Osmond's intention is to suggest to his wife that she offer herself to Warburton in exchange for a promise of marriage with Pansy, Osmond barely breathes the suggestion. Its force would seem palpable nonetheless. . . . He counts on his wife's imagination . . . to bridge the half-silence he has provided" (69). Again, however, there is nothing conjectural about what Osmond wants Isabel to do; no imagination is required to discern Osmond's wicked and unmistakably "palpable" suggestion.⁶

Manifesting the narcissist's "archaic grandiosity," Osmond will do anything and exploit anyone to achieve his megalomaniacal ambition of securing the marriage of his lowly daughter to a great English lord. He is as indifferent to Pansy's happiness as he is to Isabel's sexual fidelity. Therefore, when Osmond invokes their being "indissolubly united" and "the honour of a thing" in demanding that Isabel not journey to attend Ralph on his deathbed, she recognizes that his appeal to "something sacred and precious—the observance of a magnificent form" is merely a "blasphemous sophistry" (446); she justifiably terms his opposition "malignant" (445). Decidedly, her husband is nothing less than a sanctimonious pimp: Osmond enjoins Isabel to give herself sexually to Warburton to insure the Lord's betrothal to Pansy, yet he hypocritically demands an outward demonstration of marital harmony by insisting that Isabel remain in Rome rather than visit her moribund cousin in England.

Osmond's offenses include egomania, envy, fraud, greed, hatred, and psychological sadism. He was unfaithful throughout his first marriage, and he pressures Isabel to commit adultery to achieve his grandiose ambition of marrying his "insipid little chit" of a daughter to the magnificent Lord

⁶ In his book on *The Portrait*, Michael Gorra concurs; he states that Osmond wants Isabel to "use what sexual hold she has over Warburton" to secure the marriage: "He's pimping her, and she knows it" (230). Yet Gorra does not elaborate on the nasty implications of "the service her husband had asked of her," the coercion involved, or what the demand reveals about Osmond.

Warburton. Moreover, the text provides evidence for another atrocity, unremarked in previous studies of the novel, another manifestation of his narcissistic rage. The curious, unexplained circumstances surrounding the death of Osmond's first wife imply that Osmond murdered the woman. When she discloses the truth of Pansy's parentage to Isabel, the Countess Gemini provides intriguing circumstantial evidence for such a crime. The first Mrs. Osmond did not, of course, die in childbirth nor did she definitely succumb to a natural illness. Perhaps afflicted with tuberculosis (like Ralph Touchett), she went to the Piedmontese mountains, as the Countess explains, "because her health appeared to require the air, but where she was suddenly taken worse—fatally ill" (450). This is a surprising outcome to befall a person upon her removal to more salubrious environs, and the Countess's phrasing hints at her suspicions ("suddenly . . . fatally ill"). One can infer that a subtle, quiet form of murder (such as poisoning) was a more probable cause of the first Mrs. Osmond's unexpected death than her sudden turn for the worse in a healthier climate. In addition, the illness itself may have been another of Osmond's fabrications—as the Countess's use of the word "appeared" to describe the physical condition of the first Mrs. Osmond implies. The Countess tells Isabel that Osmond "had to fit on afterwards the whole rigmorole of his own wife's having died in childbirth" (450). Since the sanatorium was likely located in a remote mountain location, Osmond could perpetrate the crime in relative secrecy, beyond scrutiny by family, acquaintances, and legal authorities.

As a concealed and familial crime, the posited murder of the first Mrs. Osmond recalls the death of the Marquis de Bellegarde at the hands of his wife and elder son in *The American* (they withheld the medicine the seriously ill man needed). Such an act would be consistent with Osmond's character and interests. During her first visit to Osmond's residence, Isabel learns from the Countess Gemini that one of his "favourite subjects" is Machiavelli, who advocated the practice of duplicity and ruthlessness to achieve one's ends and whose name became a byword for theatrical villainy; another favorite is Metastasio, the opera librettist, in whose works such as *Themistocle* and *Artaserse* the poisoned cup is an important motif (222). Moreover, he possessed the motives to perpetrate such a homicide. First of all, Osmond and Merle needed to disguise their child's parentage so that Osmond could recognize and legitimize Pansy since, as they must have expected, Merle's husband disavowed her. The chronology in the Countess Gemini's history of the sleazy affair is unclear; she does not specify how long before or after the first Mrs. Osmond died that Pansy was born or Pansy's age when Osmond took "her home from the nurse." Yet the sequence of events occurred in close enough proximity that the story could be "covered by appearances" (450). Osmond's assuming responsibility for the child freed Madame Merle to pursue her ambition to marry "a great man" (453) and thus indebted her to him—a debt she repaid by arranging his marriage to Isabel. Second, Osmond's first wife, whom he never mentions, does not appear to hold a high place in his

memory. She is a vague, unnamed nonentity to whom the Countess Gemini refers as a "poor little woman" (450). Osmond never desired "a dull wife" (296), but he does express interest in someone who is "beautiful, clever, rich, splendid," and "universally intelligent" (206); accordingly, he must have detested his first wife as a "dull" and impecunious encumbrance whose meager dowry proved inadequate to his ambitions. Thus he needed little additional incentive to dispatch one who merited such small worth in his eyes and to whom he had been unfaithful since the early days of his marriage. In addition to these probable motives, there are abundant indications of Osmond's pathological condition and capacity to commit such a crime. Possessed by narcissistic rage, he would have had no scruples about eliminating the "poor little woman" who was a reproach to his inflated fantasies of superiority.

The Countess's hints concerning the murder of the first Mrs. Osmond demystify certain cryptically sinister statements earlier in the novel that turn out to be dreadfully indicative. When Isabel initially visits Osmond's villa outside of Florence, the Countess Gemini discerns the nefarious "little plan" Madame Merle and Osmond have concocted and expresses her alarm: "You're capable of anything, you and Osmond. . . . [T]ogether you're dangerous—like some chemical combination" (230). Later in the novel, one has grounds to suspect that such capability includes murder. In addition, when Merle refers to herself and Osmond as "bad" people who had collaborated in "*common* crimes," she is likely alluding to murderous actions and a cover-up more heinous than their previous adulterous relationship or their deception and exploitation of Isabel (434).

Isabel does not appear to surmise the possibility of murder from the Countess Gemini's suggestions—at least not consciously—for, as the Countess points out, Isabel's "innocent ignorance" and "bestly pure mind" prevent her from inferring the truth signified by "the things" all around her (450-451). Although she fails to comprehend the scope and horror of the wickedness in which she is enmeshed, the menace of evil grows increasingly palpable. Isabel becomes aware of a dangerous potential in Osmond's hatred and malevolence, a capacity to inflict harm physically as well as psychologically. In her fireside vigil, she admits the reality of his mocking, hostile, and cruel disposition. Her recurring visions of Osmond and Merle "familiarily associated" hauntingly intimate the truth of their previous sexual relationship (364); moreover, she also senses in their ongoing collusion an eerie, chilling, and evil secret that is more horrifying and perverse than concealed adultery. Beneath her husband's overt words and attitude, Isabel intuits a violent, murderous capacity, and that is the source of her fear. As Madame Merle says to Osmond, "You've made your wife afraid of you" (435).

James implicates Osmond in the death of his first wife both to enhance his aura of menace and to show how unscrupulous and savage he can be in his efforts to realize his grandiose fantasies. The posited murder underscores the connection between Osmond's malevolence and his misogyny; it is another

indication of how little James's supremely wicked character values women. He is a psychological sadist and a ruthless manipulator of others, he is indifferent to the happiness and welfare of the three women closest to him, and he is a murderous brute despite his affectations of taste and connoisseurship. Consistent with the subtlety and obliquity of the novel, James indicates Osmond's most egregious transgressions by suggestion and implication rather than overt specification.

Before Isabel inherits her fortune and meets Osmond, Serena Merle describes him as the "worst case" of those numerous, unremarkable, and unattached American "parasites, crawling over the surface" of Europe (171). However, Osmond proves himself much worse than an effete snob, a man of cultivated tastes but no real accomplishments; he turns out to be, as Caspar Goodwood eventually perceives (in succinct answer to his earlier question), "the deadliest of fiends" (487). The depiction of Osmond's latent malice and the manner in which he inflicts psychological suffering on others conveys horrors more refined than the Gothic tones of *The American* and more realistic than the supernatural frissons of *The Turn of the Screw*. Osmond conceals his "vulgar" motives as well as his "common crimes" behind his mask of "invidious sanctity." He desperately and ruthlessly attempts to maintain his "archaic grandiose self"—the self-protective, narcissistic fantasy constructed during his childhood that never matured into a morally responsible "reality ego." Consistent with Kohut's analysis, in Osmond's case "[n]arcissistic rage enslaves the ego and allows it to function only as its tool and rationalizer" ("Narcissistic Rage" 387). Osmond repeatedly exhibits the "inability to mobilize even a modicum of empathy for the person who is the target of his anger," he has a "total and abiding lack of compassion" for any perceived offender, and he displays an "arrogant and rigid refusal even to try to consider the other's position or motivations" (Kohut, "Narcissistic Rage" 394).

Granted, employing psychoanalytic concepts to explain the behavior of a fictional character inevitably involves conjecture and indeterminacy. As Christopher Lane argues, psychoanalytic interpretations tied to James's supposed "repression of his homosexuality" cannot fully account for the "enigma of motivation" and the pervasive "nebulosity" in his fiction (244, 249). Lane contends that in James's fiction (as in Freudian theory) "nothingness and trauma," rather than sexuality, make up "the kernel of our being"; consequently, childhood memories do much more to shape and define the self than the "performative" identification associated with sexuality (246-47).

Concordant with Lane's position, one might object that attributing Osmond's megalomania and sadism to narcissistic rage is just as reductive as insisting that other facets of "inscrutability" in James's fiction necessarily reflect the author's shrouded and repressed homosexuality. However, examining Osmond within the framework of Kohut's paradigm uncloaks the mind and motives of this enigmatic villain. Although *The Portrait* predates psychoanalytic theories of pathological narcissism by several decades,

Osmond indisputably exhibits the salient characteristics of the personality dominated by narcissistic rage; one cannot dismiss the correspondence as merely contrived or coincidental. Kohut cites Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas and Herman Melville's Captain Ahab as compelling illustrations of persons "in the grip of interminable narcissistic rage" ("Narcissistic Rage" 362), and James's portrait of Gilbert Osmond supplies another literary example of the type. Kohut's theory substantiates the psychological realism of James's villain and offers a plausible account of how his pathological condition originated. Conversely, insofar as fictitious characters can epitomize attributes of "real" persons, James's depiction of Osmond anticipates and corroborates Kohut's profile of the person possessed by narcissistic rage. Moreover, Kohut's theory as exemplified in James's villain also incorporates one of Christopher Lane's central points. Consistent with the model of narcissistic rage, Osmond's psychopathological condition originated with the "nothingness and trauma" he experienced as an unloved, neglected child in an alien environment who lacked an "empathetic" relationship with his parents; as an adult, he continues to succumb to rage whenever the grandiose self-image he constructed to compensate for his condition of loss and emptiness is threatened.

Kohut identifies "*chronic narcissistic rage*" as "one of the most pernicious afflictions of the human psyche" ("Narcissistic Rage" 396). The condition is not an anomalous, "bestial" regression "toward animal behavior"; instead, Kohut asserts that the forms of violent aggression symptomatic of such pathology are "decidedly human" and "an intrinsic part of the human condition" ("Narcissistic Rage" 376-77). Although James's "most completely evil character" manifests the symptoms of this personality disorder, he still bears moral culpability. James, like Henry A. Murray, explicitly links this psychopathology with moral evil. The novel does not invite us to exculpate Osmond on the grounds of severe psychosis nor, of course, does it suggest that he is in the grip of an illness that might be alleviated through psychotherapy. Instead, James associates the characteristics of narcissistic rage with thoroughgoing and unmitigated turpitude. The egregiously immoral actions Osmond undertakes deliberately and without compunction in pursuit of his egotistical ambitions, which include (most likely) murdering his first wife and (most definitely) pimping his second, reveal his narcissistic condition to be depraved, malignant, and irredeemably evil. Osmond's wickedness is all the more insidious because of his feigned devotion to fatherhood and his pretensions to aristocratic refinement and aesthetic sensitivity.

Commentators such as Charles R. Anderson have asserted Osmond's complexity, "the basic ambiguity of his character and the subtlety with which he disguises his true nature," and have even described him as "the most interesting character in the novel" (99). Osmond may be complex and "interesting" as a psychological study, but his repellent "true nature" belies any "ambiguity" and "subtlety" ascribed to him. Despite James's masterful rendering of this detestable egomaniac, there is nothing ambiguous in

Osmond's conceit, hypocrisy, and cruelty. His affectations of taste and nobility cannot conceal his infantile narcissism, grasping acquisitiveness, and sadistic viciousness; he is devoid of emotional feeling, moral conscience, and spiritual depth. He epitomizes Simone Weil's observation that "real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring" (70). This is the primary thematic function of James's portrait of evil, a portrait of remarkable psychological verisimilitude.

Osmond demonstrates how envy and malice may lurk behind a captivating facade, and this role fulfills his main narratological function within James's larger portrait of "a certain young woman affronting her destiny" (8). Although he attempts to project an image of exquisite sensitivity and aristocratic cultivation, there are abundant, ominous indications of Osmond's turpitude before the full extent of his villainy is disclosed. Nonetheless, his pose thoroughly beguiles Isabel, who is extraordinarily ingenuous and idealistic. Initially, she believes that "it would be very interesting to learn" about this seemingly complex man "of so fine a grain" and to understand the "standards and touchstones" that shape his beautiful existence (225). However, like Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, Isabel Archer ultimately experiences "the horror of finding evil seated all at its ease where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously *behind*, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness" (489). In *The Portrait*, the hideous evil concealed by such pretensions is Isabel's husband, the man whom she initially declared to possess "the kindest, gentlest, highest spirit" (293). Isabel becomes aware of Osmond's real nature through a gradual process of recognition and, finally, thanks to the Countess Gemini's dramatic revelation. When she perceives what is actually behind the façade, his overweening pretensions collapse, his powers of intimidation and domination become impotent, and he ceases to be worthy of attention. Osmond vanishes from the novel as if returning to the realm of solipsistic nothingness from which he emerged.

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