

The Portrait of a Lady

Henry James

Why do Madame Merle and Isabel disagree about whether possessions and surroundings express the self?

TOTAL TIME

PASSAGE

30 minutes	The self and its shell
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FIND THE ANCHOR TEXT

Use the Anchor Text Table of Contents in the Enhanced Reader to open the START anchor. Then use the dropdown to select the END anchor.

SECTION / LOCATION	Volume I · Madame Merle
START	“When you’ve lived as long as I you’ll see that every human being has his shell”
END	“My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don’t express me.”
PASSAGE ID	sec-pol-02

THE MOVE

Compare two theories of identity in direct conversation

WHY THIS PASSAGE

Madame Merle argues that possessions, rooms, clothes, and social surroundings form a visible shell expressing the self. Isabel resists, insisting identity exists more independently. The conversation gives students two coherent theories rather than a simple right answer.

MARK

Underline Merle’s examples of external things that express identity. Circle Isabel’s counterexamples or objections. Create two margin labels: SELF THROUGH SURROUNDINGS and SELF APART FROM SURROUNDINGS.

NOTICE

- What kinds of external evidence does Merle think reveal a person?
- What does Isabel believe those objects can misrepresent?
- Where might each theory explain something the other misses?

THINK

Answer provisionally: Why do Madame Merle and Isabel disagree about whether possessions and surroundings express the self? Choose the strongest interpretation you can defend from this passage alone.

WRITE

Write a short evidence-based response to: Why do Madame Merle and Isabel disagree about whether possessions and surroundings express the self? Use at least two details from the assigned passage and explain how they support your interpretation.

CLOSE

Name the single detail that most changed or sharpened your interpretation, and explain why.

STRONG ANSWER	Madame Merle sees identity as expressed through possessions, rooms, clothes, and social surroundings; Isabel insists the self has an inner independence those externals may not capture. They disagree about how much the visible world counts as evidence of who someone is.
EVIDENCE	Use concrete examples Merle treats as parts of the self and Isabel's objections or alternative view.
WATCH FOR	Do not force one theory as obviously correct. Compare what each theory explains and what it risks missing.
SOLO	Read the exact passage independently.
SUPPORTED	Use narration and sentence highlighting while reading the same passage.
LISTENING	Listen to the exact passage; visual following is optional. Same question and evidence demand.

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Why do Madame Merle and Isabel disagree about whether possessions and surroundings express the self?

START ANCHOR	“When you’ve lived as long as I you’ll see that every human being has his shell”
END ANCHOR	“My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don’t express me.”

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OPEN THE MARKED PASSAGE IN TUMBLELIT

SOLO: read independently. SUPPORTED: use narration + highlighting. LISTENING: listen to the exact passage. The question and evidence task stay the same.

1. MARK - Underline Merle’s examples of external things that express identity. Circle Isabel’s counterexamples or objections.

Create two margin labels: SELF THROUGH SURROUNDINGS and SELF APART FROM SURROUNDINGS.

2. NOTICE - What kinds of external evidence does Merle think reveal a person? What does Isabel believe those objects can misrepresent? Where might each theory explain something the other misses?
3. THINK - Answer provisionally: Why do Madame Merle and Isabel disagree about whether possessions and surroundings express the self?
4. WRITE - Write a short response using at least two pieces of evidence from this passage.

Use evidence from the assigned passage. Show what you noticed and how the text supports your interpretation.