

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
GRADUATION PROJECT 2021

指導教授：墨樵老師

Dr. Joseph Murphy

真善美聖

**Recognizing Theobald's Reality From the Canvas in
*The Madonna of The Future***

學生：張巧薇撰

Vivi, Chiao-Wei Chang

Vivi Chang 406110774

Dr. Murphy

American Literature & Visual Art

18 January 2021

Recognizing Theobald's Reality From the Canvas in *The Madonna of The Future*

In Henry James's *The Madonna of The Future*, the readers have witnessed the fall of an artist, Theobald, who is an enthusiast of arts who craves the glory of artworks from the galleries and praises the great artist from the past. He favors Raphael's *The Madonna of the Chair* (*Madonna della seggiola*) as "a fine picture" that "you can only love and admire" (James 25). He idolizes Raphael as a master but also a seer. To echo himself with the legendary artist, Theobald later claims that he too is an idealist. From the narrator's perspective, Theobald is valid to be an idealist since he is eloquent on the subject of art. However, after Theobald reveals his "ideal" model of the Madonna of the Future, the narrator breaks the silence and makes Theobald understand his blindness and deception. It turns out that Theobald lived in his delusion of the glories past and believed he can accomplish great works like Raphael. When he shows the narrator the finished work – a blank canvas that reflects the reality of his situation – an artist who is drained by his delusion and lack of self-consciousness. There are several factors including the name of the unpainted picture, Theobald's persistence in art, the blindness, and the blank canvas that help Theobald to recognize the reality of completing his artwork.

The title "the Madonna of the Future" has already embedded the outcomes of his artwork. When Theobald and the narrator standing in front of Raphael's *The Madonna of the Chair*, that narrator comes out a name for Theobald's unfinished work which takes Theobald by surprise since he doesn't name his picture by name and consider naming pictures as a modern custom of premature publicity. For him, "a great work needs silence, privacy,

mystery” (James 28). Theobald admits people would criticize the artists who wish to paint the Madonna these days. However, when the narrator gives Theobald his work a name, it seems to Theobald himself that he must finish the paint on the behalf of the narrator’s companion. The name “the Madonna of the Future” defines the painting, as if its presence is to surpass the previous masterpiece by Raphael, which can be referred to that “a word is an image of an idea, and an idea is an image of a thing, ... when well chosen, have so great force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves” (Mitchell 514). The name of the painting has provoked Theobald to aim his ambition higher, higher than his capability.

Theobald is a passionate enthusiast of art and considers himself an idealist. His attitude toward art is very sacred and has his principles even though he “project himself, to be a *maitre d’autre fois* in the living present, would be as deluded as Don Quixote” (Danto 114). However, his persistence draws a line from him to other Florentine artists and critics, and his only trusty friend is an American young man who is new in the city that merely attracted by Theobald’s eloquence rather than his art piece. Theobald’s anti-social character has influenced the way he projects the arts. He does not think art should be merchandized and considers the act of selling pictures as a “superficial feverish mercenary work” (James 22). Perhaps that is the reason he merely wandering among the galleries and doing his critics rather than conducting an artwork, since launching a piece of work, either as a merchandised one or not, requires feedback from others. On the contrary, the cat-and-monkey artist is not only an artist but also a merchant. He introduces his works to the narrator aggressively and claims that they are popular in both America and Europe. His sculptures portray men and women’s nature cleverly and expressively with satirical connotations. His creation turns out to be popular art and his works are favored by the public. The cat-and-monkey artist feeds the demand for popular art instead of classical art. Theobald admits that “there’s no demand”

(27) in the Blessed Virgin now, however, only the Church has the demand for the classic art pieces of Madonna. The artists' "manifesto for an art that will critically confront the opposites of idealization and commodification ... [stage] the dilemmas of modernity" (Izzo 16). This may suggest that even if Theobald does complete an actual production of the Madonna of the Future, he may still not get the attention of the public.

Theobald's fall is a direct result of his delusion and blindness, which serve as the climax of the story. The description of days, nights, and lights can be served as an observation of Theobald's behavior. The narrator meets Theobald under the moonlight, which makes Theobald look "romantic, fantastic, [and] slightly unreal" (James 19). Their first acquaintance, on a level, idealize Theobald and portray him as a mysterious and knowledgeable old gentleman who speaks eloquently under the disguise of moonlight. When they meet on the second day, according to the narrator, Theobald looks a lot more haggard, older, poor, and has less bravery of costume and attitude (23). The darkness at the night that covers his appearance echoes Serafina, the aged model's circumstance. There are two explanations for Theobald's unnoticed Serafina's faded youth. Either Theobald turns blind before she gets old or he meets her at night since Serafina is his muse and lover. The dark apartment where Theobald visits Serafina only has a lamp lit on, which takes the narrator a while to realize Serafina's physical appearance. The narrator's realization of finding out Theobald is deceived by his eyes is a delusion of the narrator's expectation for Theobald.

From the narrators' perspective, only the narrator and the readers understand the entire circumstance. They are the only ones who penetrate the whole story and realize why Theobald produced the empty canvas and failed in the end. The blank canvas can be considered as a legacy that Theobald had left from a different point of view, a reminder for himself and the later artist that it is neither a failure nor the highest achievement in his lifetime. The fact that Theobald did not complete the painting is seen as a failure for

individual artists, in which their common goal is to achieve the single masterpiece once in their lives that touch the high level of perfection (James 18). However, from another perspective, the blank canvas can be seen as the final, or to say the least, the finest achievement for Theobald. In an essay written by Arthur C. Danto, the author uses John Ruskin's idea of "force and example", which the "heroes [artists with achievement], if they do not make masterpieces, devote themselves to acquiring them, not for personal consumption, but for the benefit of those unable to put themselves in their presence" (Danto 115). Theobald eventually finished his masterpiece, which of course, is still blank. However, the exact canvas is "cracked and discolored by the time" (James 47). The tarnish on the canvas can be regarded as the real depiction of Theobald's life, which remain an emptiness, cracked stain, just like how the other characters describe Theobald that "he is one of the blessed saints ... the blessed saints were all a little cracked!" (44). Thus, Theobald has probably recognized his ideal is unreachable and realized he is "the half of a genius" (48).

Theobald's failure is caused by his delusion and unawareness of reality, which can be analyzed through several features. Firstly, the naming of Theobald's Madonna foreshadows the outcome of the artwork, redefining the picture's value and standard. Secondly, Theobald's persistence and attitude to art are very different from the cat-and-monkey artist, in which they individually gain different outcomes and results from their artworks. Whether to pursue profits from customers' preference or to save the brush from damaging the portraits of fine objects. Thirdly, the lights in the story also demonstrate how Theobald deceived his eyes. Theobald himself also deceived the narrator for thinking of him as a great artist. Lastly, the empty canvas can be seen as either a failure or an achievement for Theobald based on different viewpoints. Through realizing his delusion, Theobald presents his final work without reaching the achievement he longs for.

Words count: 1371

Works Cited

Danto, Arthur C. "The Future of the Madonna." *The Henry James Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1998, pp.113-25.

Izzo, Donatella. "Women, Portraits, and Painters: *The Madonna of the Future* and *The Sweetheart of M. Briseux*." 1994, pp. 5-28.

James, Henry. "The Madonna of The Future." *Stories of Writers and Artists*, edited by F. O. Matthiessen, Kessinger Publishing, 2007, pp. 18-51.

Mitchell, William John Thomas. "What Is an Image?" *New Literary History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1984, pp. 503-37.