

Christine Froula: On "Portrait d'une Femme"

The title recalls Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), much admired by Pound. Pound later spoke of *Mauberry* (1920) as "an attempt to condense the James novel," and this poem is an early exercise in that vein, a character sketch recalling the descriptive vignettes of the Jamesian novel of manners. Pound first met "the Master" in a London drawing room in February 1912, and after James's death he composed a lengthy essay honoring him for "book after early book against oppression, against all the sordid petty personal crushing oppression, the domination of modern life."

Pound uses a prosaic and flexible blank verse and portrays the "lady" by means of the extended metaphor of the "Sargasso Sea," a relatively static area of the North Atlantic stretching between the West Indies and the Azores, where the currents deposit masses of seaweed (or "sargasso"). As the Sargasso collects seaweed, so this woman has, after twenty years of backwash from London's social currents, accumulated the flotsam and jetsam which makes her, paradoxically, both a "richly paying" institution in the eyes of the young and an impoverished self whose only interest is as repository of this "sea-hoard."

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