



Washington Square

Henry James , Michael Cunningham (Afterword)

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The plot of *Washington Square* has the simplicity of old-fashioned melodrama: a plain-looking, good-hearted young woman, the only child of a rich widower, is pursued by a charming but unscrupulous man who seeks the wealth she will presumably inherit. On this premise, Henry James constructed one of his most memorable novels, a story in which love is answered with betrayal and loyalty leads inexorably to despair."

-- from the Introduction by Peter Conn

In *Washington Square* (1880), Henry James reminisces about the New York he had known thirty years before as he tells the story of Catherine Sloper and her fortune-seeking suitor Morris Townsend. This perceptively drawn human drama is James' most accessible work and an enduring literary triumph.

Washington Square Press' Enriched Classics present the great works of world literature enhanced for the contemporary reader. This edition of *Washington Square* has been prepared by Peter Conn, Andrea Mitchell Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. It includes his introduction, notes, selection of critical excerpts, and suggestions for further reading as well as a unique visual essay of period illustrations and photographs.

Washington Square Details

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Fionnuala says

If I close my eyes and ask myself what impression this book has left on me, the idea that comes immediately to mind is stillness. The stillness radiates from the main character, Catherine Sloper. I see her as a monumental figure in a hieratic pose, immobile, meek, but solid to the core.

Her immobility impressed me greatly, especially as this book is quite like a play. There is a lot of dialogue, a small number of characters, and one principal location where most of the important scenes take place. The characters circle that space, and they circle Catherine. She rarely moves, and since she pauses before answering every question addressed to her, we have time to imagine her face turning slowly towards the speaker as she meditates her careful response. The result of Catherine's overly cautious responses is that the other characters fail to know her, and fail abysmally. Though he allows the reader to see more of her inner life than the other characters ever guess at, Henry James allows Catherine to keep the core of her being a secret even from us. I like to think that as he developed his heroine, his respect for her grew so that he had no choice but to preserve her privacy and to keep the mystery at the heart of her stillness a mystery to the end. That's what I wanted for her and that's what he delivered.

.....

While Catherine doesn't say very much, the other characters more than make up for her lack of verbosity. The exchanges between Catherine's various relatives reminded me of Jane Austin's ability to deliver witty dialogue line after line (of course people don't talk like this in real life, but how we wish they did). There were in fact many moments during reading when I was reminded of Jane Austin, and particularly of Fanny Price from Mansfield Park. Like Fanny, Catherine is undervalued by her entourage, and treated quite badly by certain among them. But Fanny acquires a savior. Henry James prefers Catherine to be her own savior.

Steven Godin says

Washington Square (1880) was originally published in two different magazines as a serial and Henry James himself didn't really think much of it as a small novel, and I would partly agree with that. Structurally simple in its approach the story basically recounts a conflict between father and daughter over her wishes to wed a gentleman called Morris Townsend, who he greatly disproves of. The father, Dr. Sloper is a cold but intelligent man who after losing his wife seems to struggle with the realization that his Catherine is growing up, while Catherine is child like and has a quivering nervousness that seems like she is going to burst into tears at any given moment, which she regularly does. She is also one of the most dull characters I have ever come across!, But saying that I found it extremely difficult to like anybody. Things would improve later on, but the whole novel never really gets out of first gear. As a father only wants what's best for their children he believes Morris is only after Catherine's inheritance once married. He would take her to Europe and try to shake the memories of him away, the fact he will never give his blessing to such a marriage only confounds that he really does love her, in spite of his harsh treatment. This was always an easy read, and the fact many compare James's writing with that of Jane Austin, I was

expecting something more, but as a psychological study of family during the latter part of the 19th century, it just about delivered.

Maria Thomarey says

Αγαπ? αυτό το διαμάντ?κι , που είναι αφιερωμ?νο στην αγαπη απ'όπου κι αν προ?ρχεται ...

Perry says

" **James Writes Fiction as if it were a Painful Duty** " - Oscar Wilde

One of the Nicest Old Ladies I Ever Met-Faulkner, describing James

On my journey to read most of the modern "classics" as well as at least one novel by each renowned author, I've repeatedly avoided Henry James. Several years back I started on one and found myself daydreaming that my late grandmother was offering a sudsy soliloquy on a couple of "nice" and "clean" romances of her time (the 1930s). In all events, I finally opted for *Washington Square*, primarily because it's his *shortest* novel.

Despite a few pretty turns of prose and exquisite character delineation, I found the driving narrative and dialogue passionless and soporific, with characters so melancholy and settings so glum, I soon did not care one wit about what happened. Instead, as I read, my terrible need to be put out of my misery was, lucky for me, ultimately staunching by my innate sense of survival.

In sum, this is the unhappy story of a rich, controlling, widowed father and his only child Catherine, whom the dad deems "**unattractive**," "**unintelligent**" and "**uninteresting**."

I too find alliteration effective to describe a novel that is **Unbearable, Unrelatable Ennui**.

A young man asks his daughter to marry shortly after meeting her at a society party in Washington Square, NYC. Daddy suspects a money motive and forbids the marriage, else he'll disinherit the daughter. It sounded like a good plot. Oh well, to say any more would ruin for you a story that I could not force myself to finish.

My Conception of "*Catherine Sloper*" (as played by James Spader)

President Teddy Roosevelt was overly cruel when he called Henry James "*a little emasculated mass of inanity*." To Oscar Wilde's assessment though, I shout **AMEN!**

Henry Avila says

Time the late 1840's, in New York City, Catherine Sloper, a twenty-one year old woman, is the daughter of a prominent and wealthy doctor, you'd think all the young men would be trying to marry her, but Catherine is plain of face and very shy. There's a good probability, that she'll remain a spinster, till the end of her life.

Catherine adores her father, and is intimidated in his presence, a very intelligent man, Dr. Austin Sloper is. The widower, invites his widowed, and emotional sister Lavinia, her penniless clergyman husband left no money, to stay at the Washington Square mansion, recently built by the sad physician (he couldn't save his beloved wife and son) . A nice quiet neighborhood, by the pretty park. Everything changes, this peaceful situation, when Catherine meets Mr. Morris Townsend, a beautiful man as she thinks, at her cousin's engagement party. Morris dances with the tongue -tied girl, Catherine, she falls hard for him. But Townsend is lazy, an idler who lives with his sister, a widow, Mrs. Montgomery and five children (medicine must have been very primitive back then). Morris the desperate sponger, pays close attention to Miss Sloper, talking to her enthusiastically, she doesn't say a word. The suspicious but busy father has reservations about Morris, what does he want with his daughter? It's apparent to everyone else...poor boy wants to marry rich girl, for her money. Aunt Lavinia is a romantic, has read too many of those type of books, and helps the young couple in their courtship. The aunt imagines that she is the main character, in one of the novels she loves ...This foolish woman, brought there as a companion for Catherine, causes much turmoil in the household. Mr. Sloper has to save his daughter from this evil man Townsend or he fears Morris will ruin her, spending all his money and treating Catherine badly . Nevertheless does a lonely girl have the right to take a chance on love? No matter how dubious the prospect is...Can a little happiness be worth all the headaches, that will inevitably follow, or does she live the rest of her days by herself, comfortable but bored....existing and nothing more. Dr. Sloper takes Catherine to Europe, for a six- month Grand Tour, that turns into a year, seeing the glories of the past, but in the future, will his daughter forget her beau? One of the best books from Henry James, very accessible to the reader, unlike later novels, his prose and narrative are clear and not convoluted.

Kalliope says

STICKY SQUARE

Since I plan to be walking around Washington Square in a few months, I picked up this book for a reread. I can't even remember exactly when I first tackled it, but I am delighted with my revisit - (the book and the square). And rereads are lately becoming highly enjoyable ventures.

My enjoyment with Washington Square may lead to a rerun and a completion task of the major novels by Henry James. I am already familiar with a few but I have read them at different times in my life and in no particular order. It is time I consolidate my impression of his writing.

What I did not expect in this revisit is the degree in which I relished lounging in James prose. Even though this is an early work, I felt such pleasure in drinking his writing as if the lines of his book were fresh water drunk avidly after a long walk or run in the heat of a summer day. Reading James had an almost sedative effect.

I was somewhat taken aback when I found how familiar some of his syntax seemed to me. The way he strung words together evoked a similar pleasure to that of recognizing a painter's work just by the texture of the brushstroke.

I noticed his attention to prepositions, which for a non-English speaker, is therefore more baffling. He shifts them and this shifting had at times an equivalent effect to that of a purple dub in a shadow.

- *I am told he lives upon her.*
- *Lives upon her?*
- *Lives with her.....*

This example also contains another one of James's idiomatic uses. The repetitions in his dialogues of expressions that seems ambiguous not only to the reader but the characters in the novel as well. Like throwing light to an obscure corner in a poorly lit room. Here is another sample:

- *Why are you so dry, Catherine?*
- *So dry?*
- *So cold—so irresponsible.*

The main character is an exercise of the maxim 'show and not tell'. We are told from the beginning, mostly by hearing her father's hammering opinion, that Catherine Sloper is a non-interesting character. She is bland, dull and insipid. In the early pages I asked myself, then, how James would deal with the challenge he had clearly set himself: how he would win the reader's interest in someone that he first presents as offering no interest. So, in spite of the chorus that accompanies every appearance of Catherine, singing or extolling her lack of luster, the reader gradually, very gradually, sees emerging out of her flat mist a very enigmatic, firm, and rightful figure. She is 'substantial' after all. But then she could not be otherwise if she were 'going to stick'. This is after all a story of Catherine's 'stickiness'.

I imagine that many other readers would not share my reaction to Doctor Sloper, for I found myself liking him. Of course he is the culprit of much that Catherine has to suffer. He is responsible for branding her and thereby determining her life. More so than the right to arbitrate his progeny that any father may feel entitled to. But I also liked his rightfulness, his intuition, and also that his curiosity seemed to take the upper hand over his drive to authoritarianism.

In this reading I paid particular attention to the fleeting references to time and place. Which streets or avenues are mentioned, the topography of that rapidly changing city, what are the perceived differences between Europe and the still forming new country, etc. Although this is most of all a study of character, the visual elements for me stood out precisely because there are not many of them.

Beautiful work. So, soon Roderick Hudson and Daisy Miller...

Tony says

Doctor Sloper - who is definitely *not* Doctor Slop in *Tristram Shandy*, I don't think - is an exquisitely drawn character, and his etching here by James - who is definitely not E. L.; well, I'm pretty sure - is so remarkable that I can almost understand the lasting purchase.

Aunt Lavinia - who is definitely *not* Aunt Lavinia from Great Granny Webster; though, how many Aunt Lavinias can there be? - is similarly exquisitely drawn, if in less likable hues, and certainly less likable than the previously mentioned Aunt Lavinia.

Washington Square - which came and went - is a parcel of land, in another parcel of land, where rich folk stop on their way, historically, to another parcel of land, all isolated from the real events of the day, like the coming fracture.

A 'Negro oyster bar' - where plotters meet for nothing more than mercenary marriage - is all we get; yet I do not think James thought to divert from his abstract.

Jim Fonseca says

Here we are in New York City in the mid-1880's, a bit before Edith Wharton's time, but in the same social milieu. This is a kind of novel of manners, a mid-19th Century soap opera. Our author is Henry James, so be prepared for the long, convoluted, comma- and semicomma-laden sentences akin to those of Jane Austen.

Yet a fascinating book. Catherine, more or less our heroine, is plain, stolid, timid, obedient and, quite frankly, a bit on the dull side. She lives in her father's house. With her mother deceased, a widowed aunt is her caretaker and companion. Catherine is in her late 20's when a suitor finally appears (a late age for that era). Her suitor would be quite a catch for a gal like Catherine, so her father, a wealthy physician, immediately recognizes (and so do we) that he's after her inheritance. Her father forbids the marriage and in that process we learn that he is vindictive, petty, tyrannical, bullying - and wait --- there's something even worse: he doesn't really even LIKE his daughter.

The novel fast-forwards in the final chapters so we get to see how it all works out decades in the future. It's great writing --- it's Henry James after all. A good book for those who have a taste for the oblique references and flowery style of writing from that era.

Beverly says

Heartbreaking glimpse of the dynamic between a cruel father and his dependent daughter, Washington Square is a great short story; however, it is so melancholy I have never reread it because I can never forgive or forget the despotic, mental barbarity of her father.

Malia says

I'm of two minds when it comes to this book. On the one hand, the writing and James' observations are exquisitely on point, and he is able to create such a fleshed out story with so little story-line. On the other, I disliked all the characters. I did sympathize with Catherine, and in a way, even with Morris, but I did not connect to them. I've found this to be the case with other books by Henry James as well as Edith Wharton. They are such masters of language, but for me, they are not as acutely talented in drawing out characters with whom I have an affinity. I never perceived great passion or chemistry between any of the characters, so the "love story" did not strike me as terribly authentic or believable. That being said, I did strangely enjoy it. After reading far too much news in recent months, and quite a number of creepy thrillers, I felt a need for beautiful language, and eloquence in a world where some days it seems there is decidedly too little of either. I wasn't looking for a book to break my heart or fully engage all my emotions. I read this because I trust James to provide something of linguistic beauty, and in that respect, I was quite satisfied.

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Flora says

I love this book so much I can't bear it. As someone who adores just about every last word that Henry James (over-) wrote, it has never gotten any more deliciously (un-)satisfying than this -- a slim, tart little novel about plain, socially unpromising Catherine Sloper, whose wealthy father refuses to allow her to marry Morris Townsend, whom he believes to be mercenary. No matter how many times I read this book, the question still nags at me: "Does Morris have any feeling at all for Catherine, or is he really just after her fortune?" But why is this even a question?

It's usually taken for granted that Morris is sketchily-drawn, the standard handsome and callow fortune-hunter of melodrama, and his own remarks to other characters in the novel seem to provide ample evidence. I'm not fully convinced of this, which isn't to say that he's fully-drawn; rather, I wonder if Morris Townsend might be a kind of failed stereotype, a failure *of* the novel to keep him in his appointed place. If he's so successfully sketchy, then wouldn't the novel be redundant, and its central ambiguity unambiguous? If that were so, then "Washington Square" would do little more than encourage the reader's contemptuous pity for its heroine, whose tragedy would be utterly generic: her inability to recognize her beloved's venal motives. That would be straight-up melodrama, or mean-spirited satire. That wouldn't be Henry James.

The tragedy of the novel depends, though, on Catherine's father, Dr. Sloper, one of James's most stunning and indelible creations. The man despises his daughter, yet wants to protect her; he sees through Morris's dandyish charm, yet is most offended by the idea that his awkward, unlovely daughter would win herself such a handsome, charming husband. His opposition to the match may be, on the one hand, patriarchal duty, but it is no less an act of cold-blooded cruelty, and it is through his refusal to allow that the young man may like the money and yet be a fine husband that the real drama of "Washington Square" emerges. In fact, the pressure of this character produces the novel's greatest and least predictable achievement: the transformation of Catherine Sloper from a non-character -- the pathetic, jilted heiress -- into a character, and the reader's tormented resistance to Dr. Sloper not only keeps the door of "Morris Townsend" ajar, but keeps the novel on a wonderfully shaky course, morally and aesthetically.

In later years, James himself commented that he started "Washington Square" with great disdain for

Catherine, which metamorphosed into something much more complicated (similar, maybe, to Tolstoy's creation of Anna Karenina). Maybe it's possible, then, to read Morris Townsend (to whose consciousness we only have access in scant, sharp shards of observation) as the most reflexively novelistic in the book, in the sense that his own ambivalent heartlessness may well mirror the novel's own confused motives. James ultimately disavowed "Washington Square" -- he even omitted it from his "Collected Works" -- but it marks the first appearance of the central conflict that governs his later, greatest novels: the predation of love upon money, and vice versa. The moral puzzle of the passionate mercenary haunts his major work, and "Washington Square" may well mark the death of the non-characters (villain and victim) that started it all. A strange, beautiful, perfectly unsatisfying book.

Jason Koivu says

Henry James should have gone with the more apt and obvious title *Two Shitty Men Say Mean Things To Two Silly Women*.

Sue says

My first completed book of the year and one that has totally altered my view of Henry James and his fiction. Instead of being what I had thought of as the somber "master" of cold 19th century fiction, he is a man with sharp and perceptive humor, a clever sense of inequalities between sexes and in society. My enlightenment is partially responsible for my rating, though I also enjoyed the novel!

The story is really quite simple...wealthy father knows what is best for future heiress daughter. Rogue suitor comes to town and captures her heart but does not pull the wool over daddy's eyes. Silly Aunt plays go-between and girl falls as deeply in love as a 19th century novel allows us to see. But James does not stop there he provides so much more by giving us asides filled with sarcastic, humorous "digs" at various characters, revealing deeper traits.

In one exchange with his sister, Mrs. Almond, Dr. Sloper and she are discussing are discussing how the doctor will manage the situation.

"You are shockingly cold-blooded!" said Mrs. Almond.

"I need to be with all this hot blood about me. Young Townsend, indeed, is cool; I must allow him that merit." p 144

And later, James briefly summarizes three of the main actors.

"Mrs. Penniman, of the three persons in Washington Square, had much the most of the manner that belongs to a great crisis. If Catherine was quiet, she was quietly quiet...If the doctor was stiff and dry, and absolutely

indifferent to the presence of his companions, it was so lightly, neatly, easily done, that you would have had to know him well to discover that...he enjoyed having to be so disagreeable. But Mrs. Penniman was elaborately reserved and significantly silent; there was a richer rustle in the very deliberate movements to which she confined herself, and when she occasionally spoke, in connection with some very trivial event, she had the air of meaning something deeper than what she said." p 152

And, as a final, briefer selection describing Mrs. Penniman once more:

"'You leave him in good hands,' she said, pressing her lips to Catherine's forehead. (She was fond of kissing people's foreheads; it was an involuntary expression of sympathy with the intellectual part.) p 159

I have perhaps fallen for the style more than the story here but one adds to the other. Certainly, I will seek out many more of James' novels in the future. The intimidation of the past is gone!

Wonderful introduction for me as I've only read A Turn of The Screw in the past.

Paul Bryant says

Henry James is Gangnam style
Gangnam style

Catherine Sloper is warm and humanle during the day
A classy girl who know how to enjoy the freedom of a cup of coffee
A girl whose heart gets hotter when night comes
A girl with that kind of twist

I'm a guy called Morris Townsend
A guy who is as warm as you during the day
A guy who one-shots his coffee before it even cools down
A guy whose heart bursts when night comes
That kind of guy

Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, Catherine Sloper, yes you, hey
Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey
Now let's go until the end

I don't want your money Catherine Sloper
I don't want your money Catherine Sloper
No, yeah, no, yeah
I want you
Morris Townsend, gangnam style

Henry James is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Henry James is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady, Henry James is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh

Catherine Sloper looks quiet but plays bridge
She puts her hair down when the right time comes
She covers herself but is more sexy than a girl who bares it all
A sensible girl like that

I'm a guy called Morris Townsend
I said it once now I say it again
A guy who seems calm but plays when he plays
A guy who goes completely crazy when the right time comes
A guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles
That kind of guy

On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby
Oh oh, the daddy is the flying man baby
Dr Austin Sloper, a wealthy and highly successful physician
You know what I mean baby
You know what I'm saying baby

Parasitic spendthrift, oh no no
Parasitic spendthrift, oh no no
Parasitic spendthrift, oh no no
Parasitic spendthrift, oh no no

Fat, balding, cold-eyed, but still somewhat attractive
Fat, balding, cold-eyed, but still somewhat attractive
Fat, balding, cold-eyed, but still somewhat attractive
Yeah!

Watch out – here comes the daddy
Boo hoo – gangnam style
Boo hoo – gangnam style

Henry James is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Henry James is Gangnam style, Gangnam style

Melki says

James presents the story of a wealthy doctor's wholly unremarkable daughter, and her whirlwind courtship with an untrustworthy gold digger.

While reading this book is certainly not the worst thing that will ever happen to you, the whole experience is a bit like having tea with your Aunt Gertrude: expect a staid, rather dull affair where everyone minds his or her manners, trivialities are discussed, and then all go home . . . lulled into complacency, but still feeling slightly peckish.

Orsodimondo says

MR (e Ms) JAMES

Washington Square non era tra le sue opere che James considerava migliori: infatti la escluse tra quelle che scelse per la New York Edition che fu la sua vetta editoriale (una raccolta dei suoi lavori maggiori in 24 volumi uscita in US e UK tra il 1907 e il 1909).

Però *Washington Square* è tra le opere di James che i suoi lettori, io incluso, hanno preferito, e ha ispirato più di un adattamento, sia teatrale che cinematografico.

Padre e figlia nella versione cinematografica diretta da William Wyle nel 1949: il dottor Sloper è interpretato da Ralph Richardson e Catherine da Olivia de Havilland. Il film uscì col titolo “The Heiress-L’ereditiera”.

Come succede (sempre?) con James, quello che conta non è tanto la trama, spesso presa da un episodio vero e poi innestata di elementi disparati, a cominciare dal melodramma. Dico questo nonostante in queste pagine l’intreccio è a suo modo avvincente e fluido, non privo di colpi di scena, con molti dialoghi brevi e ben ritmati.

Quello che conta davvero sono le ossessioni di James: e su tutte, sopra dentro sotto, la personalità dei suoi sfaccettati personaggi, l’incapacità d’amare è l’ossessione regina.

Anche qui i personaggi incarnano più un’idea che soggetti realistici. Più anima che corpo. Nonostante James ripeta più volte che Catherine è goffa e sgraziata, manca di bellezza e si veste male, tentare di descriverla fisicamente risulterebbe difficile a qualsiasi lettore: molto più semplice sarebbe descriverne i dettagli psicologici.

Nel più recente adattamento diretto da Agnieszka Holland (1997), Jennifer Jason Leigh è Catherine e Albert Finney suo padre, Dr Sloper.

C'era una volta, prima che "Washington Square" abbia inizio, un uomo, il dottor Sloper, che si sposò per amore. E fu così fortunato che l'amore, cioè la donna che sposò, arrivò insieme a diecimila dollari di reddito e gli occhi verdi più belli di Manhattan. Visse felice e contento per cinque anni. Poi perse tutto: il figlio morì a tre anni, e due anni dopo sua moglie morì dando alla luce una bambina, Catherine, per la quale il padre, il dottor Sloper predisse che non avrebbe conosciuto l'amore, che non si sarebbe mai sposata con qualcuno davvero innamorato di lei. Il dottor Sloper non si sposò una seconda volta, non s'innamorò più, neppure di sua figlia, per la quale non nutrì mai amore paterno, piuttosto disprezzo.

Olivia de Havilland con Montgomery Clift che interpreta Morris Townsend, sempre nella versione di Wyler.

Data la premessa, ovvio che invece la figlia s'innamorò eccome, e per amore commise sbagli su errori, scegliendo l'uomo che puntava solo ai suoi soldi.

James ha un bel sminuire e criticare Catherine, però è lampante che la sua simpatia è tutta per questo personaggio, per questa creatura femminile che sembra non poter accendere passioni, ma di passione vive, e si consuma.

Ciò nonostante, dopo il primo sbaglio, Catherine riceve le attenzioni, affettuose, se non innamorate, di altri due candidati, un vedovo e un giovane avvocato: ma la giovane donna ripete l'errore paterno, vive come in un santuario, quello del primo amore. E non si innamora più, non ricambia, non accetta. Persevera nella tara di famiglia, l'incapacità d'amare.

Quando il primo amore ritorna a bussare, ormai disilluso e sconfitto, Catherine potrebbe accoglierlo, aprirgli la porta. Invece, rifiuta anche quest'ennesima possibilità, e si consola con il ricamo.

Una godibilissima tragicommedia in salsa freudiana.

Jennifer Jason Leigh-Catherine Sloper con il suo spasimante Morris Townsend, interpretato da Ben Chaplin. In secondo piano un altro personaggio fondamentale, la zia Lavinia (interpretata da Maggie Smith), inguaribile romantica che si prodigò sempre perché l'unione riuscisse.

Il film di William Wyler è bello e ben fatto, vinse quattro Oscar, e oltre al talento del regista e produttore, lo si deve molto anche al talento della protagonista che s'innamorò del play teatrale e spinse Wyler ad acquistarne i diritti (su sua insistenza lo fece la Paramount per \$ 250.000 dell'epoca, e diecimila dollari a settimana ai due autori della commedia, moglie e marito, per adattarla in film). Olivia De Havilland è una più che notevole Catherine Sloper.

Il film è 'suggested' dal breve romanzo di James. Il play era probabilmente più fedele: ma poi si volle rendere il personaggio di Morris Townsend meno arrivista e maramaldo perché a interpretarlo fu chiamata un divo romantico come Montgomery Clift. E quindi il film raddrizza le magnifiche curve di James, evita i bivi che lo scrittore amava, non rende giustizia alla complessità della novella di James, va dritto, ma funziona a meraviglia, è un buon film più che godibile, alleluja.

Washington Square intorno al 1880, quando veniva pubblicata a puntate la novella di James, ambientata nella prima metà di quel secolo. A destra gli alti edifici in stile gotico costruiti nel 1837 dalla New York University. Al centro, nascoste dagli alberi, le case a schiera descritte da James, in buona parte ancora esistenti.

HRH says

I had read *Daisy Miller* and enjoyed it so I thought I would like another Henry James novel, *Washington Square*. Furthermore, one of the remarks on the cover said something about the man writing as good a family story as Jane Austen. What could be better?

A lot of things actually.

I even read somewhere that James didn't like the novel so he didn't include it in his anthology. I'm surprised he made it through the first time knowing the ending as he presumably did.

Staged in New York City, *Washington Square* is the story of Catherine Sloper, the twenty-something daughter of a wealthy physician. When the handsome, clever, and prospectless Morris Townsend courts and proposes to Catherine, her father vehemently refuses his consent which basically adds up to an inheritance a third of what was originally promised. The book tediously accounts the little meetings and conversations, the escapade of Catherine's Aunt Pennyman, Catherine's trip to Europe, and Morris's eventual "jilting" of Catherine. The reader believes that at any moment the real story will begin.

There are no side plots, only a handful of characters, and no other subject addressed than the "will they -won't they" question of Catherine's and Morris' wedding.

The ending was the worst of all. In a chapter or two, James leads us through Catherine's life after her engagement is broken off. For a moment one guesses that it will have an ending similar to *Persuasion*, where the slightly older version of the meant-to-be couple finally comes together. But then Catherine just keeps getting older. Thirty, Forty, Fifty. There is a reason why the romantic escapades of old people are not usual. It is not romantic to hear how the hero has become fat and bald. Finally, Morris shows up and one thinks, aah finally! But no, Catherine awkwardly refuses him and that is the book. It was the sort of moment where one looks about oneself, sure that something was dropped. If one could only find the last pages then the book would be good and resolved.

Alas, that was the book.

Agnieszka says

Catherine Sloper doesn't strike us as a representative heroine. This novel has definitely more expressive and memorable protagonists but it is Catherine who, of all residents of the house at *Washington Square*, draws my attention. Though she is neither pretty nor smart she is gentle and kind and painfully shy. Just before *Washington Square* I read *Daisy Miller* and now I simply can't help comparing the main heroines. Where Daisy is coquettish and reckless Catherine remains modest and immovable. Where Daisy fancies for romantic adventure Catherine has her feet firmly on the ground. When the first shines and dazzles us with her beauty the other is plain and dull. Or so we were told. Unlike Daisy Catherine does not want to shine, she does not demand our constant attention. And though both like nice dresses unfortunately Miss Sloper's taste

leaves a lot to be desired. So where Daisy looked lovely and dazzling Catherine appeared old and rather ridiculous. Had only Daisy had a bit of Catherine's common sense. Or the other way round: what if Catherine was more flirtatious in the image of Daisy Miller?

Catherine, who was extremely modest, had no desire to shine, and on most social occasions, as they are called, you would have found her lurking in the background.

Catherine, being respectful and dutiful daughter, is nonetheless a great disappointment to her father. She has neither beauty of her late mother neither wit of her father. Her days go on knitting, keeping house, visiting relatives and attempting at all cost to please her father. Doctor Sloper is remarkable figure. He's a brilliant man, renown doctor and he flatters himself being an expert in reading people. He has neither good opinion on his sister Lavinia nor his daughter. In his estimation Lavinia was *like a revolving lighthouse; pitch darkness alternating with a dazzling brilliancy!*. And about Catherine he used to think *she is about as intelligent as the bundle of shawls...; her main superiority being that while the bundle of shawls sometimes got lost, or tumbled out of the carriage, Catherine was always at her post, and had a firm and ample seat.*

As one can see Catherine has not an easy life. She is a victim of cruel remarks of her brilliant father who does not miss any opportunity, any neat bon-mot, any snide comment, even if it would hurt her feelings. And his remarks can cut to the quick, really. She is a victim of her foolish aunt Lavinia whose unbridled appetite for love affair and secret romance makes her push Catherine into the hands of fortune hunter. She is a victim of a handsome con man who made her to believe she was loved and wanted because of herself not her money. Finally, she is a victim of own good character and just awakened heart.

But I do not see a victim in her at all. I see a woman whose way to independence and self-determination is long and bumpy, I see a woman whom any humiliation and disappointment will not be spared, I see a woman who is fed up with being constantly send to the corner.

Catherine loves her father dearly but at the same time she's afraid of him. But it lasts until it dawns to her that father doesn't love her, that he doesn't see his daughter as an independent, self-reliant person, that he denies her right to own opinion and choices, that even her act of rebellion is to him a kind of entertainment and he only thinks that his dull daughter had, after all, the guts to stand up to him, that Catherine wasn't to him a partner at all. And once becoming aware of that fact she's free. She can acknowledge finally the fact that Maurice had trifled with her devotion. She can see that aunt Lavinia eased him the task. And recognition of that liberates her.

From her own point of view the great facts of her career were that Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring. Nothing could ever alter these facts; they were always there, like her name, her age, her plain face. Nothing could ever undo the wrong or cure the pain that Morris had inflicted on her, and nothing could ever make her feel towards her father as she felt in her younger years. There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void.

I liked her loyalty and raw honesty, her defiance and stubbornness to make her point, her silent opposition to her upbringing, to her father. Doctor Sloper says at one point of Catherine not being scenic. Poor Doctor, he couldn't be more wrong. And after all he deserved that little revenge from her hand in the end. Everyone used to see Catherine as poor thing. They couldn't be more wrong either. And the fact that Doctor saw through Maurice from the beginning and despite that failed I found highly ironic.

After reading the last passage of the novel I couldn't help but smile when this image came to my mind. Let's

call it alternative review for *Washington Square*, though Catherine is too polite to express it that way. But I can say it for her. (view spoiler)

4,5/5

James says

Book Review

4 out of 5 stars for *Washington Square*, a classic novel written in 1880 by Henry James. Henry James is my favorite American realistic period or classic novelist, and *Washington Square* is an example of why. This man can take a small situation and write 300+ pages all about it. And this is one of his shorter books. In this classic, the tale of the average woman, who is set to inherit a large sum of money, meets dashing man... but of course, he's only after her money. She's considered plain-looking. He's considered ruthless. They couldn't possibly be in love. And as you follow the course of their "romance," you see what couples and relationships go through during the courting period... at least as it was 150 years ago. James is not shy when it comes to providing detailed descriptions of feelings and actions. You read his words as though you are in your head, thinking about choices and decisions for hours, then acting on them. This is a very direct story... commentary on the normal every day live, the differences between classes, the way in which women must act to find a husband, the efforts men go to so they can be free, the attitudes of society towards older women or those who are not considered great beauties. When you step away from this book, hopefully not too frustrated at the story being so basic and calm, you realize it's a reflection on reality... on what actually was happening at the time. Who would accept it today? Who would tolerate being treated in such a manner? And where do you go when you end up a bit hopeless? Stories like this aren't common nowadays, at least in this form. But when you put yourself into the time period, this is a true treasure.

About Me

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by.

Emma says

Poor Catherine! Her father Dr Sloper was absolutely vile and I just wanted to slap her horrible interfering, gossipy old aunt! Then there's Maurice Townsend, the gold digger...slimeball! My first Henry James but not my last!
