

Washington square by henry james



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Washington Square

The novel, *Washington Square*, written in 1880, is considered to be one of Henry James's most exciting and admired novels, with the most open style and plot of his works. This novel takes place in the New York City neighborhood of Washington Square during the mid-nineteenth century. The plot of this story is based on a true account narrated to Henry James by a British actress, Fanny Kemble, who is also his close friend (James 207). It very effectively describes a story of cruelty mixed with comedy by using the characteristics of psychological realism and melodrama. As such, the themes of the novel relevant to such a melodrama revolve around the family and include coming of age, an authoritarian father, betrayal, and truth. Although the novel is set in the 1800's, these are all timeless themes that readers will continue to relate with today. In addition, while James's writing style can come off a bit complex or ironic, the way he narrates the events of the story engages the reader until the captivating ending. Henry James utilizes various literary elements such as point of view, characters, themes, and imagery to tell the story of how an innocent girl, Catherine, misinformed by her meddling aunt and ill-treated by both her lover and father, grows in wisdom and strength throughout her familial troubles. Due to its appropriate shortness, intense dialect, array of themes, and its accurate exploration of human experience, *Washington Square* is a classic novel that many readers will continue to enjoy throughout time.

To begin with, *Washington Square* is an intrinsically simple tragicomedy which narrates the conflict between a sweet, but dull daughter and her intense, unemotional father. The story commences with a detailed

description of Dr. Austin Sloper, a respected physician, who soon becomes a widow and is left to raise his daughter, Catherine, alone. Dr. Sloper is a rich and authoritarian father who is seemingly upset with the ordinary daughter that he has brought up. He blatantly describes her often as simpleminded and plain (Gargano 355). As such, Dr. Sloper sees Catherine as an overall disappointment and soon enlists the support of his sister, Lavinia, to help raise her in his home. The novel then moves ahead to Catherine's adulthood and narrates the story of her romance with Morris Townsend. Things begin to fall apart when Catherine falls in love with Morris, whom Dr. Sloper accuses of only being after the family's inheritance. Catherine dares defy her father and a battle of will which will leave her changed forever emerges. In this book, Henry James applies a refined technique of narration, symbolism, language, and irony as he tries to explore the psychological extent of the characters' actions, motivations, as well as interpersonal relationships (I. Bell 17).

This novel is narrated from a third person omniscient point of view in order to allow the writer to have better control over the plot. This is a technique in which the narrator distinguishes the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters in the story, therefore the narrator usually provides his or her comments directly to the reader. By doing so, it allows the author to move more freely within the story, give smaller bits of information at a time, and show what multiple characters are thinking within one scene of the novel. It also assists in Henry James's use of dramatic irony in the story by manipulating the tension that arises from the reader knowing of something that the character does not. Throughout the novel, James uses this point of

view to cautiously scrutinize his characters' opinions and motivations all while creating suspense via the delicate struggle between good and evil. This method of storytelling is an excellent literary maneuver for Henry James to utilize as it aids immensely in character development.

Various characters are used throughout the novel to effectively illustrate the enduring struggle between Catherine and her father. Perhaps one of the most complex and main characters is Dr. Austin Sloper. He treats his daughter with a lot of cruelty. However, his clever mind and undeniably correct criticisms of Morris Townsend, makes it hard to depreciate Dr. Sloper off as a bad person (Kaston 102). During the entire story, Dr. Sloper is perceived largely as a symbolic father figure. He is a great man within their society and is treated as a local celebrity in Washington Square since he is renowned and intelligent. Regardless of his social status, he also experiences lows and highs. For even though he is a respected doctor, he could not save his wife or son from dying when they became sick. Thus, his prominent standing within his own family becomes of no use when as well, he could not convince his daughter to obey his wishes either.

Catherine Sloper is another main character considered as the heroine of the novel. For most of the story, Catherine is clouded by dictating people who tend to make decisions for her. Throughout her adolescence and adulthood, Catherine finds herself incapable of living up to her father's standard of a good daughter. Being good is not a difficult task for Catherine, but Sloper defines goodness by being smart. In her father's eyes, Catherine is not considered as clever. However, as Catherine gains strength throughout the

novel, she realizes that she is intelligent and decides to defy her father by pursuing marriage with Morris Townsend (M. Bell 31).

Another important character, Lavinia Penniman, presents an important part in the novel as she aids in the coming of age theme surrounding Catherine. She is one of Dr. Sloper's younger sisters and is also a widow to a poor clergyman. Seeing as she has nothing keeping her at home, she willingly comes to reside with Dr. Sloper and Catherine soon after Dr. Sloper's wife passes. Therefore, she takes the role of Catherine's replacement mother.

Due to Catherine not being such a romantic lady, Lavinia has to work hard in order to connect her with Morris Townsend. Regardless of the couple's differences, she persists for the two to get married. Despite her reluctance to accept her failure of matchmaking, Lavinia remains a person with good intents as she ultimately wanted the best for Catherine (James 29).

Obviously important, the character of Morris Townsend, who is a distant cousin of an individual that is married to one of Catherine's cousins, plays a significant role in the plot as Catherine's romantic partner. Although Morris is not a purposely unkind guy, it is clear that he is hopelessly selfish. He lives off of his poor widowed sister, Mrs. Montgomery, because he does not want to work. Thus, it is clear that Morris wants to marry Catherine to enjoy her prospective wealth (I. Bell 18). However, when Dr. Sloper decides that he will disown Catherine for marrying Morris, Morris develops no option but to desert Catherine and he then leaves for Philadelphia. Almost 20 years later, Dr. Sloper dies believing that Catherine still wants to get married to Morris. After the death of Dr. Sloper, Morris comes back to Catherine asking to date her again, thus proving his underlying goal of fortune seeking, and ultimately

proving Dr. Sloper to have been right. Catherine has grown and changed as a result of her experiences and she undoubtedly rejects him.

Numerous themes are exhibited in the novel to support the characters' actions and motivations. The most dominant themes in the book all revolve around the family and home. Home is often considered as a representation of tradition, family, culture, and the past. The novel being set in a residential neighborhood within a community of homes, as compared to other regions of Manhattan, supports this idea (Harris 41). It is the neighborhood where James was born and spent his childhood years (James 1). As well, the majority of the narrative in this novel takes place within the Sloper home. In addition, the home of the Slopers is presented as a contrast to the Almonds. As the lineage of the Sloper family declines, the Almond family continues to thrive. Henry James writes that Dr. Sloper visits the house of the Almond's every Sunday and portrays Aunt Almond as a sympathetic mother figure for Catherine after she is dumped (James 47). As the novel ends, the house develops into a living monument for Catherine where she finds stable family life.

Primarily, the theme dealing with coming of age, along with obedience and rebellion initiates the story. This focuses on the growth of Catherine as she emerges from a simple childhood into the responsibility of adulthood. This theme highlights her own psychological growth as she learns to deal with the conflict of being independent from her father by marrying Morris, yet still lacking her father's approval and support throughout the process. While trying to discover herself, she struggles to be obedient to her father and eventually, rebellion becomes her only option.

Likewise, the authoritarian father theme is what set the scene for Catherine's eventual betrayal. As a father, Dr. Sloper's actions could be justified, mainly because he wanted the best for his daughter. Within the patriarchal family, it is typical for the father to control the important choices in a child's life, especially when it comes to marriage. Thus, seeing as how Dr. Sloper considered Morris as a person of low means and low character, it is suitable that he should try to control Catherine and forbid her to marry Morris.

Equally important, the theme of betrayal is exhibited in almost all of the characters within the novel as they are all afraid of being betrayed in one way or another. Dr. Sloper feels that his family has betrayed him. The majority of characters in the story are so scared of betrayal, and others are surprised to find themselves betrayed. When analyzing the main characters in the novel, betrayal ranges from failed expectations to intentionally broken agreements (Kaston 134). In certain situations, the impressionable person senses a betrayal even when no actual deception has even taken place. Dr. Sloper feels that Catherine has betrayed him because she refused to respect his advice against getting engaged to Morris. As a result, Dr. Sloper promises to disown Catherine for failing to respect him. The effort of Dr. Sloper to avoid the perceived betrayal of Catherine pushes her to limit the respect that she has towards her father. Dr. Sloper's hostility increases and this pushes Catherine to see betrayal as the only alternative (Kaston 140). The most relevant betrayal in this story is in the abandoning of Catherine by Morris, after the ample expense that Catherine offered for the benefit of Morris. Seeing as how the original intentions of Morris were always selfish, it is clear their relationship never consisted of mutual love as Catherine struggled

often to convince herself into loving him. Regardless of Lavinia's good intentions, Catherine is also slightly betrayed by her. Lavinia is responsible for portraying the illusion of love with Morris and caused Catherine to experience great suffering as a result of her ill advice. Lavinia seemingly created a fictitious family with Morris because she cared more about the interest of Morris rather than Catherine's. Likewise, Morris as well feels betrayed by Lavinia. The same way that Lavinia pushed Catherine into a failed romantic relationship, she has trapped Morris into an unsuccessful financial outlook.

Along with betrayal comes the theme of truth that is evident throughout this novel. When someone has been betrayed, it only a matter of time before the truth too will be exposed. The primary interest of Dr. Sloper is to pursue and expose the truth. He initially prevents Catherine from getting married to Morris but also wants to discover whether Catherine will adhere to her plans. When Dr. Sloper comes to realize that Morris is a con, he considers informing Catherine to convince her to change her mind. However, Dr. Sloper only hurts Catherine in the process, and his conduct brings the question of whether truth should always be chased to the maximum level (Gargano 355). This suggests that it may, at times, be better to leave some truths unrevealed. As well, Lavinia and Morris are characters who choose to leave a decent amount of truth hidden. In many circumstances, Morris lied, and the gullible Catherine could not help but describe him as artistic to suffice for her innocence. Similar to Catherine's father, Lavinia tends to direct and advise other people rather ineffectively, thus portraying her lack of value for genuineness.

Lastly, one of the significant literary elements in the novel is its imagery. For instance, one image in the novel that is associated with the concept of home is the image of the fireplace. This is typically a source of warmth and a site for family events. Dr. Sloper lacked a family feeling seeing as how his wife and son died and then his daughter also betrayed him. On several occasions, the doctor is described as cruel, cold or unemotional. This cold imagery of Dr. Sloper's character is illustrated in direct opposition to the tender warmth of the fireplace. For example, Catherine cannot feel the warmth emotionally from her father when making eye contact, and as a result, she physically looks at the fireplace.

This short novel has a relatively simple construction coupled with various literary devices. Although the novel is set in the 1800's, it includes several timeless themes that readers will continue to relate with today. It provides an outstanding opportunity to study the mechanics of story writing because of its ways of handling conflict. Catherine is the viewpoint character, and she is mostly affected by the rivalry between her father and Morris. However, she is helpless but determined to change her fate. Men seem to care more about power and money while women like Catherine care much about love than social position or personal pride. She realizes that love is a rare commodity, particularly in a world of the upper classes. Catherine's slow but distinctive development of wisdom and independence is a notable success for the writer and has received much appreciation from readers and critics as well. In the novel, James uses a perfected technique of narration, symbolism, irony, and language as he attempts to explore the psychological dimensions of the motivations, interpersonal relationships, and actions of his characters. He did

this as he tackled the tragedy of immorality of humans, evident in the characters of Dr. Sloper and Morris, in their domineering behavior towards Catherine. The quality of writing that James utilized and his subtle insights into the inner lives of his characters aids in his outstanding literature. The story is well crafted, and Henry James is considered a master of elegant writing style. Although the style of the writing may sometimes appear a bit odd to the modern reader, the manipulation of language is commendable and is what will continue to make this story a success throughout the future.

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