CHAPTER II
Catherine Sloper of Washington Square is perhaps the unlikeliest of all the heroines of Henry James, because, though the novel is her story, he has not assigned her a dominant role. Her mediocre intellect and plain looks evoke no romance or excitement. She has none of the usual charms of his other heroines. Here is her description in Chapter II:

She was a healthy, well-grown child, without a trace of her mother's beauty. She was not ugly; she had simply a plain, dull, gentle countenance. The most that had ever been said for her was that she had a 'nice' face; and, though she was an heiress, no one had ever thought of regarding her as a belle. Her father's opinion of her moral purity was abundantly justified; she was excellently, imper turbably good; affectionate, docile, obedient, and much addicted to speaking the truth.

The description further continues to emphasize Catherine's mediocrity. "Catherine was decidedly not clever; she was not quick with her book, nor indeed with anything else." (WS, p.11).

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1 Henry James, Washington Square, First published 1880 (London, Penguin Books, 1963), p.11. All other references hereafter are to this edition cited as WS.
When a person of such attributes happens to have been born after the death of a much adored son and whose birth was the event of her mother's death, and the father happens to be a successful society doctor who "knew his own value" (WS, p.12), the sense of the father's irritation at having produced such a "commonplace" (p.12) child becomes somewhat understandable. But the irritation assumes quite a different proportion when it remains unmitigated by any paternal affection whatsoever. Moreover, Dr. Austin Sloper has an unflattering estimate of feminine characteristics in general, whom he thinks of as the "complicated" and "imperfect sex" (WS, p.9). The only woman who ever "dazzled" him was his wife whose greatest virtue according to him was her reasonableness. Translate this as one who always agreed with him, and one can understand his chagrin at Catherine who is the exact opposite of her mother.

Such disappointment with his unpromising child being the dominating force, his relationship with her assumes an unnatural character in which he keeps her at a disdainful distance by adopting a mockingly ironical tone with her. It is as though he is trying to maintain an emotional and mental distance because
he feels that she has somehow cheated him of his potential glories of being the progenitor of a charming and intelligent girl. Instead, by being what she is, Catherine seems to be a bad reflector of his genius.

Catherine on the other hand however, thinks him "the cleverest, the handsomest and most celebrated of men," and "her deepest desire was to please him and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him". (WS, p.12). If there was any sense of alienation in her mind regarding her father, it was because she sensed that "she had never succeeded beyond a certain point" in pleasing him. Her affection for him was therefore tinged with awe - "that gentle dread which gave its stamp to her admiration of her father". (WS, p.11-12).

Though Dr. Sloper is convinced of the "moral purity" of his daughter, who is "imperturbably good", he puts a low premium on it when he says, "You are good for nothing unless you are clever". (WS, p.10). Therefore he wants his sister Lavinia Penniman to make a "clever woman" of Catherine. This statement itself is a ridiculously ironical proposition when one sees
that Mrs. Penniman's dubious qualification for this
task is pointed out from the very outset. She had
"a taste for light literature, and a certain foolish
indirectness and obliquity of character: -- She was
not absolutely veracious;" (WS, p.10).

When the father casts his clever, clinical
eyes on his daughter, he sees only a poor specimen
of humanity more to be pitied and ridiculed than
appreciated for her moral worth. When he envisions
a future for her in his mind, he conjures up a pitiable,
pathetic little scene for her.

"When Catherine is about seventeen,
he said to himself, Lavinia will try and
persuade her that some young man with a
moustache is in love with her. It will
be quite untrue; no young man, with a
moustache or without, will ever be in
love with Catherine. But Lavinia will
take it up, and talk to her about it;
perhaps, even, if her taste for clandestine
operations doesn't prevail with her she
will talk to me about it. Catherine won't
see it and won't believe it, fortunately
for her peace of mind; poor Catherine isn't
romantic". (WS, p.11).

The doctor is thus denying Catherine not only
any imaginative power but also seems to be trying to
stunt her natural growth where love for, and response
to the opposite sex is a part of living - whether one
is "pretty" or "plain" - "lively" or "dull". As far as
the doctor is concerned, Catherine's life is an open and shut case.

Therefore when the surprise element in the person of Morris Townsend enters to cause a stir at Washington Square, the doctor is sufficiently aroused to take notice of the fact. But his agitation is not on behalf of poor Catherine - his interest is almost purely clinical; he wants to find out if Catherine can ever be loved for her moral worth alone. The doctor is "amused" - and expects some entertainment, from the little drama (WS, p.35) of Catherine's courtship. The attitude displayed here is one of objective distance - he is not at all bothered that his daughter is poised on the verge of a new sensation, a new relationship. He sees only the improbable, only the ludicrous element in the situation.

'It must be deucedly pleasant for a plain, inanimate girl like that to have a beautiful young fellow come and sit down beside her, and whisper to her that he is her slave - if that is what this one whispers. No wonder she likes it, and that she thinks me a cruel tyrant; which of course, she does, though she is afraid - she hasn't the animation necessary - to admit it to herself. Poor old Catherine!' mused the Doctor; 'I verily believe she is capable of defending me when Townsend abuses me!' (WS, p.45).
In many respects the doctor is right about his assessment of his daughter's characteristics and absolutely so about his intuition about the worthlessness of Morris Townsend. But his critical analysis is devoid of any positive concern - he is only a dispassionate observer of the drama of his daughter's love - and irony is his tool to maintain the emotional distance that he has created between him and his daughter. For instance, when he sees his otherwise insipid daughter in a red satin gown trimmed with gold at the Almond's party (WS, p.18), he exclaims, with his eyes not on her but on her gown - "Is it possible that this magnificent person is my child?" and brushing aside her protestation, continues, "you are sumptuous, opulent, expensive. You look as if you had eighty thousand" (WS, p.22). The irony and contempt for his daughter is betrayed by the epithets he uses, "magnificent, sumptuous, opulent and expensive" for a person whom he had long ago categorized as "common place". The cutting irony also signifies a de-humanizing metamorphosis that Catherine undergoes in her father's estimate. He seems to have converted his lack-lustre daughter of negligible "moral worth" into a marketable commodity "worth" several thousands a year.
The epithets therefore belong rightfully to the dress which is the index of her 'worth', rather than the human personality called Catherine Sloper. He maintains this mocking tone with Catherine all throughout. He taunts her, "Well my dear, did he propose to you to-day?" (WS, p.31) after one of Townsend's visits with Catherine. And again, when she tells him later that she is engaged to be married he asks sneeringly, "And who is this happy mortal whom you have honoured with your choice?" (WS, p.54).

The tension that the father creates between himself and his daughter dominates everything in the novel and determines the course of events for everyone concerned. Even Morris Townsend plays only a contributory role in the overall drama and his introduction into the scene seems merely to heighten the doctor's self-righteous domination of his daughter. Catherine is therefore best seen, observed and understood in the context of her relationship with her father. Seen from this vantage point then, the novel becomes the story of the self-centred and strongwilled father's attempt to manipulate his daughter's life and of the contention between two men of similar dispositions trying to manipulate and dominate a young
innocent girl. The father uses his paternal authority to subdue her will and the threat of disinheritance to stop her from marrying her sweetheart. The young man on the other hand, tries to manipulate her vulnerable young heart with the idea of love and romance while all the time his main interest is her inheritance only.

Catherine’s vulnerability in the hands of these two men is rooted in her own psyche too. She has grown up in the shadow of her brilliant father whom she worships with a sincere devotion and naively believes in his infinite goodness and the sincerity of his parental concern for her. Her awareness that she did not succeed 'totally' in pleasing him leaves a deep impression in her mind about her inadequacies and in her ardent devotion she thinks that "to go beyond the point in question seemed to her really something to live for". (WS, p.12). She is also aware that she is in no way anything like her beautiful and brilliant mother whom her father adored. Mrs. Penniman constantly reminds her of this, WS, p.127. All the more reason perhaps why she is so conscious of her duties towards him which is to obey him and not do anything which might cause him pain. It is precisely because of her submissive but sincere nature that Morris Townsend is able to
impress upon her that his love is genuine. He plays the ardent lover to the hilt while the father assumes the distant, disdaining attitude of a deity who is extremely critical of the devotee but who at the same time takes a perverse delight in the devotion and uses that devotion against the worshipper. Catherine's devotion to her father is described thus, "She had an immense respect for her father and she felt that to displease him would be a misdemeanor analogous to an act of profanity in a great temple"; (WS, p.67). But the father, playing the role of the brilliant but pompous father to a dull, plain girl sees, not her goodness, nor her devotion but only her plainness of looks and dullness of personality. When he thinks of her she is always 'poor Catherine' (WS, p.11, p.44) said in a derogatory way. He even talks to Mrs. Montgomery of her as 'my poor girl' (WS, p.67). The lover also has no better opinion of Catherine. "Gracious Heaven, what a dull woman!" Morris thinks of her during a conversation just before she leaves for Europe. (WS, p.111).

However, the author takes care to hint that it would be a gross mistake to dismiss Catherine out of hand and decide that she is incapable of growing out of the mould that the father and the lover have assigned
for her. Early on in the novel we are told,

Both she [Mrs. Penniman] and her brother however exaggerated the young girl's limitations; for Catherine, though she was very fond of her aunt, and conscious of the gratitude she owed her, regarded her without a particle of that gentle dread which gave its stamp to her admiration of her father. To her mind there was nothing of the infinite about Mrs. Penniman; Catherine saw her all at once, as it were, and was not dazzled by the apparition; whereas her father's great faculties seemed, as they stretched away, to lose themselves in a sort of luminous vagueness, which indicated, not that they stopped, but that Catherine's own mind ceased to follow them. (WS, pp.12-13).

It is therefore very interesting to note that the possibility of psychological growth hinted at in this passage should be manifest with the advent of the young and dashing Morris Townsend into her hitherto uneventful life. The girl who has been described as "much addicted to telling the truth" is seen speaking untruths on three instances in the course of an evening. (The Almond's party - WS. Ch. 4). But this may be interpreted as the confused reactions of an inexperienced person to a new situation rather than deliberate acts aimed at deception. Being constantly aware of the father's critical eyes and her aunt's curiosity Catherine is unable to give a direct response to the first stirrings of a new
sensation. But some deeply felt chord has been struck and she responds to the possibility of a new personal relationship. Certitudes are few as yet — assertions much less but her meetings with Morris become "the most important, the most absorbing thing in her life". (WS, p.39). There is no great flurry and flutter about the business because she is not made that way but the signs are unmistakable — she is in love.

The girl was happy, she knew not as yet what would come of it; but the present had suddenly grown rich and solemn. If she had been told she was in love, she would have been a good deal surprised; for she had an idea that love was an eager and exacting passion, and her own heart was filled in these days with the impulse of self effacement and sacrifice. (WS, pp.39-40).

For Catherine, love as an emotional involvement of sharing between two equal persons is an alien concept and the new sensation leaves her with an impression which so touchingly reveals her loveless existence so far.

Love demands certain things as a right; but Catherine had no sense of her rights; she had only a consciousness of immense and unexpected favours. Her very gratitude for these things had hushed itself; for it seemed to her that there would be something of impudence in making a festival of her secret. (WS, p.40).

But however inadequate her responses and whatever be the uncertainties, her love for Morris Townsend
promises the start of her psychological expansion.

The opposition which the father sets up against Morris Townsend on the question of his real motive for wanting to marry Catherine, actually provides her with the opportunities for self-assertion and attaining a new personality. The first instance of this process is seen in her reply to her father's mocking question whether Morris had proposed to her that day. "Perhaps he will do it the next time". (WS, p.32). Quite a flippant retort from the timid and submissive daughter, but that is not all - she wishes that he should ask the question again so that she can give him a more fitting answer like 'Oh yes, Mr. Morris Townsend proposed to me and I refused him'. (WS, p.32).

As Catherine tries to tackle a human, practical problem for the first time in her life, we see certain subtle changes taking place in her. First she is seen deriving "a great excitement at trying to be a good daughter" (WS, p.74) - a good daughter who is even trying to justify her father's stand by saying that he is merely playing the role of a "conscientious father" (WS, p.75) in opposing Morris and suspecting his motives. She also displays a good deal of naive piety in viewing
the problem. While "the idea of a struggle with her father, of setting up her will against his own was heavy on her soul and it kept her formally submissive" (WS, p.75). She piously hoped that "if she were only good enough, Heaven would invent some way of reconciling all things - the dignity of her father's errors and the sweetness of her own confidence, the strict performance of her filial duties, and the enjoyment of Morris Townsend's affection". (WS, p.76). What Catherine is really hoping for is a fairy-tale ending to her problem, with a little intervention from Heaven. But practical problems of the world have no such ready solutions and Catherine has to make a painful choice between her loyalty to her father and her love for Morris Townsend. (WS, pp.106-107).

Though her naivete is apparent from such wishful thinking, Catherine displays another aspect of her character which constitutes her greatest strength. For lack of any ready phrase, this may be defined as the sincerity of her intentions and actions. At every stage of her confrontation with her father on the question of her marriage with Morris Townsend, we see her meekly seeking her father's permission like a dutiful and
conscientious daughter. She tries to convince her father thus that her desire to be married to Morris Townsend is in no way an act of disloyalty or defiance towards him. And by proving this about her intentions she hopes to soften his heart and obtain his consent. Even to Morris Townsend she makes it very plain how much her father's permission matters and how difficult it is for her to go against his wishes. When Morris tells her - 'I should have liked you to say, "If my father doesn't think well of you, what does it matter?"' she replies, "Ah, but it would matter; I couldn't say that!" (WS, p.38) Catherine's integrity is such that she tells her father that she ought not to say with him and enjoy his kindness and protection if she cannot obey him and fulfil her duties as a daughter. (WS,p.109). She also chides her aunt Penniman for visiting Morris without her father's knowledge or consent and tells her, "I don't see why you should have seen him. I don't think it was right", and goes on to say that she herself has not seen him because her "father has forbidden it". (WS, p.84).

The meekly pious stand that Catherine has taken on this issue cannot be maintained long. This is partly
because of Morris Townsend's impatience at her docility and mostly because of her father's unreasonableness towards her entreaties. Though he is right in thinking that Morris Townsend's motive is avarice, his opposition to the marriage did not merely rest on the fact of Townsend's poverty.

The fact that Morris Townsend was poor, was not of necessity against him; the Doctor had never made up his mind that his daughter should marry a rich man. The fortune she would inherit struck him as a very sufficient provision for two reasonable persons, and if a penniless swain who could give a good account of himself should enter the lists, he should be judged quite upon his personal merits. There were other things besides. The doctor thought it very vulgar to be precipitate in accusing people of mercenary motives, in as much as his door had as yet not been in the least besieged by fortune hunters; and lastly he was very curious to see whether Catherine might really be loved for her moral worth. (WS, p.36).

The "other things" which the doctor talks about have mainly to do with his own natural antipathies to the young man.

The doctor was struck with his appreciative quest; he saw that he was not a commonplace young man. 'He has ability', said Catherine's father, 'decided ability; he has a very good head if he chooses to use it. And he is uncommonly well turned out; quite the sort of figure that pleases the ladies; but I don't think I like him'. (WS, p.37).
And again his dislike erupts. "He has the assurance of the devil himself!" (p. 37) said Morris's host. It is interesting to note here how the doctor's mind is working on the subject. The young man who is not a "commonplace man" cannot be in love with his daughter who is a "commonplace child". This is the reason, along with his own dislike of him, why he cannot accept the fact that Morris Townsend loves his daughter for her "moral worth". Undoubtedly a very lucid academic analysis of a problem but if in the beginning his opposition to the young lovers stems from such thinking, it gradually grows into a perverse curiosity as Catherine shows signs of "sticking" to her young man. And finally his curiosity turns to a hostile determination to prove himself right. So he uses the most lethal weapons at his disposal - attack Catherine's filial piety and threaten to disinherit her in an obvious attempt to expose Morris Townsend for what he is.

It is thus that the doctor's bemused interest in the affair turns to open cruelty. In terms of mental cruelty unleashed on Catherine, there are two scenes in the novel which 'unmask' the doctor as it were; the
Alps scene in Europe and the other one in Chapter 18, (p.92). Though there is a definite physical terror evoked by the desolation of the scenery, the gathering darkness of dusk and the stark emptiness of the doctor's soul revealed by his action in the Alps scene, there is also a considerable amount of melodrama; it is as though the scene and tableau has been very carefully selected and constructed in order to evoke the desired response from Catherine. But in the little scene in Chapter 18, there is something more chilling and dehumanizing than the Alps scene. In the cosy comfort of a rich man's library the daughter stands meekly seeking the father's permission to see her sweetheart just once, of whom the father disapproves thoroughly. She could have met the sweetheart secretly as her aunt does, but the sincerity and adherence to 'veracity' in this young girl makes her want to do her duty by her father. But her humble request is met with an icy, unrelenting authoritarian rebuff.

'Exactly as you choose', he repeated, standing there with his hand on the door, 'I have told you what I think. If you see him, you will be an ungrateful, cruel child; you will have given your old father the greatest pain of his life'.

This was more than the poor girl could bear; her tears overflowed, and she moved towards her grimly consistent parent with a pitiful cry. Her hands were raised in supplication, but he sternly evaded this appeal. Instead of letting her sob out her misery on his shoulder, he simply took her by the arm and directed her course across the threshold, closing the door gently but firmly behind her (WS, p.92).

The cruelty and finality of the gesture is such that years later, she sees it as even more hurtful than the inconsistency of Morris Townsend. "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", (WS, p.160, italics mine).

The European tour is only a temporary truce between two persons now trying to humour each other, as it were. As Catherine begins to perceive that the father will never relent and agree to her marriage with Morris, a certain resolve takes shape in her mind and the hitherto unresisting Catherine comes back from Europe quite a changed person. On the other hand as the doctor also sees how steadfast Catherine is in her devotion to Morris Townsend, his attitude towards her hardens into greater cruelty. If in his former ironical addresses, there was a certain flippancy,
now there is deliberate malice and despise in his tone.
The night before they leave for England, he tells her,

He ought to be very thankful to me, do you know, I have done a mighty good thing for him in taking you abroad; your value is twice as great, with all the knowledge and taste you have acquired. A year ago, you were perhaps a little limited - a little rustic; but now you have seen everything, and appreciated everything, and you will be a most entertaining companion. We have fattened the sheep for him before he kills it. (WS, p. 119).

For the first time here, the doctor makes a direct allusion to Catherine's deficiencies and mocks at her supposed education abroad. A little later he tells his sister Mrs Almond what he thinks about this 'education', "Exactly the same; not a grain more intelligent. She didn't notice a stick or a stone all the while we were away - not a picture nor a view, not a statute nor a Cathedral". (WS, p.130).

If Europe failed to arouse Catherine's interest or rather if Catherine failed to appreciate Europe - her European trip has however given her a new perspective, a moral comfort - in knowing that her father has ceased to occupy the same position in her mind as before. She tells her aunt Penniman,
Nothing has changed - nothing but my feeling about father. I don't mind nearly so much now. I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't care for that. I have come home to be married - that's all I know. (WS, p.124).

For a person who always seemed to languish in the shadow of her father's domineering personality and who has hitherto suffered her frivolous aunt's interferences without demurring, this is a very incisive little speech indeed.

With Morris Townsend also her demeanour is more assertive and demanding. She tells him

'You mustn't pity me' said Catherine,  
'I don't mind it now I am used to it'.

(WS, p.126).

And she explains her father's opposition to their marriage thus,

He talked to me one night - the last night - and then it came over me. You can tell when a person feels that way. I wouldn't accuse him if he hadn't made me feel that way. I don't accuse him; I just tell you that that's how it is. He can't help it; we can't govern our affections. Do I govern mine? Mightn't he say that to me? It's because he is so fond of my mother, whom we lost so long ago. She was beautiful, and very, very brilliant; he is always thinking of her. I am not at all like her; Aunt Penniman has told me that. Of course it isn't my fault; but neither is it his fault. All I mean is, it's true; and it's a stronger reason for his never being reconciled than simply his dislike for you. (WS, p.127).
There is no pathos in the statement, no bitterness, no sarcasm, and no undue sentiment whatsoever. It is as detached and dispassioned a statement as if it were made by a person like her father and not Catherine. But it is the moment of truth for her and she accepts it without a murmur. This new awareness is what has freed her from any sense of obligation and what makes her tell Morris Townsend. "I have great moral comfort now". (WS, p.126).

But unfortunately for Catherine, though she is now poised for the final break from her father and all that her submission to him has meant to her, the person for whom she is ready to renounce everything betrays her and leaves her once again in his cruel clutches. When she realises that Morris means to leave her, she cries out to him - "Think of what I have done!" she broke out. 'Morris I have given up everything'. (WS, p.143).

Catherine has never been depicted as a person sparkling with good looks and brilliant conversation. Nor is she a high minded romantic idealist like Euphemia Cleve or Isabel Archer. But all the same the process of her disillusionment is fraught with the same treachery, betrayal and cruelty that James's more celebrated heroines
suffer. Where she thought she saw true love—only the crass glitter of avarice mocked her in her hour of disillusionment. And where she expected genuine human sympathy and understanding she was met with only a wall of adamant self-justification. In the end then her father and Morris Townsend manage to blight her youth and leave her maimed, for life as it were. She is thwarted in her attempt at forging a distinct personality of her own by the two persons whom she thought were dearest to her. As such it is only natural that she recoils into herself and tries to eke out what savour she can out of a life which has only left her a big "void". Catherine Sloper's consciousness remains only partially awakened and her story ends almost at the point where it started. The distance between these two points is strictly chronological and the psychological expansion possible for a person who has undergone the kind of experience that Catherine has, remains mostly unexplored. Her life is the chronicle of a person who remains unobtrusive, unassertive and unimpressive all throughout. The concluding sentence of the novel is the confirmation of this. "Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlour, picking up her morsel of fancy work, had seated herself with it again— for life, as it were". (WS, p.174).
Her negative passivity stems largely from her notion of 'goodness' which demanded an unquestioning abnegation of the self - From the very outset, her goodness is pointed out as her one positive quality. The father's conviction of it is complete - "Her father's opinion of her moral purity was abundantly justified; she was excellently, imperturbably good, affectionate, docile, obedient and much addicted to speaking the truth". (p.11). When Dr. Sloper tells his sister to make a clever woman of Catherine she replies, "Do you think it is better to be clever than to be good?" - the implication here being that Catherine is already good, Catherine herself, after returning from Europe tells her aunt Penniman, "Nothing is changed - nothing but my feeling about father. I don't mind nearly so much now. I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't care for that". (Ch. 25, p.124).

The domination of this goodness and the attempt to take advantage of it becomes the nature of the moral conflict in Washington Square. The concept of evil, which was treated as the polarities of worldviews in
Daisy Miller and more especially in *Mme de Mauves* becomes now actualised as the attempt of the three other principal characters in the novel - Dr. Austin Sloper, Morris Townsend and Lavinia Penniman, to dominate and manipulate the inner life of the heroine, Catherine Sloper.

Dr. Austin Sloper’s is the most damaging effect on Catherine because he possesses the greatest power to harm her, the unalterable fact of his fatherhood, a relationship which began at the instant of Catherine’s birth and which naturally involves mutual responsibilities. But sadly for Catherine, this is entirely a one-sided affair. Her affection and awe for her father assume even certain divine proportions - not because of Dr. Sloper’s god-like propensities but because of the sincerity of her devotion. Such devotion, however is used against her, as a means to intimidate and humiliate her. His interference in her affair with Morris Townsend, however well-meaning he may try to make it appear, is nothing but the exercise of his power to control and dominate her. Beside such a power, Catherine’s goodness is ineffective and her quest for a meaningful personal relationship ends in disaster.
The tension in the story is between the father's latent capacity for evil and Catherine's passive goodness. Therefore their relationship dominates everything in the novel. Catherine is best seen, observed and understood in this context. The introduction of Morris Townsend into the household at Washington Square is not to be seen as the cause of this tension but rather a result of the peculiar relationship between Catherine and her father. Therefore, though he does become an important factor in her life and is partly responsible for her misery, he provides mostly the melodramatic element of the novel.

Morris Townsend's monetary designs on Catherine remain starkly so. His role is therefore that of an unethical operator who had his assured good looks and the girls' naive innocence to his advantage. Though cast in a typical role, he is no Baron de Mauves, or Gilbert Osmond or Merton Densher or Prince Amerigo. From the beginning of the story we see a young man with a predilection for extravagance who sees in Catherine and her money the promise of an easy contented life. His selfishness is unmitigated by any other quality; he has no breeding, no culture, no sophistication. The only
consistency that he displays is in his pursuit of Catherine, the heiress. When he thinks the prospect of her disinheritance is real he leaves her heartbroken. The obvious exit for such a character is comic rather than anything else. "Goodbye, then", said Morris, "Excuse my indiscretion", and exits from Catherine's presence, (Ch. 35, p.174) and greets Mrs. Penniman in the hall with the exasperation of an actor who has bungled his lines due to bad prompting "That was a precious plan of yours!" Said Morris clapping on his hat. (p.174). In a gallery of portraits that James created of the male seducers, Morris Townsend is an 'American' in the most literal sense of the word and what James lamented of as want of 'paraphernalia' in this novel is perhaps the lack of suavity and sophistication that his Europeans and Europeanised American men possessed.

The sense of betrayal suffered by Catherine becomes doubly more so because of the ironical fact that her father's opposition contributes to Morris Townsend's betrayal and this betrayal only justifies the father's opposition to their match. She is caught between the sadism of her father and the treachery of
her sweetheart. Materialism is the name of the evil that these two men practice in two different ways.

If avarice is the mask of Morris Townsend's evil, there is yet another kind of evil - however unintentioned, in the comic interference of Lavinia Penniman in the affair between Catherine and Morris Townsend. In the name of well-meaning intervention Lavinia is merely seeking some perverse self-gratification which is the result of an addlebrained imagination. From the very beginning the comically light weight characteristic of this woman is emphasized - "a certain foolish indirectness and obliquity of character", "not absolutely varacious" (p.10) these descriptions are an indication of the role she was to play later in Catherine's tragedy.

She takes an unduly active interest in the relationship between Catherine and Morris Townsend, sensing that Lavinia would take up Townsend's cause Dr. Sloper tells his other sister Mrs. Almond that "she had better be careful, I will have no treason in my house". (Ch. 13, p.64). It is interesting to note that being a shrewd observer of human nature, he anticipates that if anything underhand is to be expected, it is sure to be from Lavinia rather than Catherine who is
the principal character of the drama.

Lavinia Penniman is at once a comical and a potentially dangerous character. Her girlish imagination conjures up all sorts of romantic escapades for the "guilty couple" - to use her own phrase for Catherine and Morris - the most absurd being their getting married in a subterranean Chapel in New York - with the authorial comment - "Subterranean chapels in New York were not frequent" (WS, p.76) - intruding to emphasize the ludicrous vision. In such an escapade she envisioned herself playing the role of the confidante, intercessor and ultimately the agent to effect a reconciliation with the irate father and thus give to their romance the conventional fairy-tale ending. If such foolish imaginings were simply the day-dreams of a "fantastic widow" as her brother calls her, all that would have happened would be to provide some vicarious pleasure to a lonely widow left to her own devices. But Lavinia puts her fantastic notions into practice and inadvertently adds to the misery of the poor girl. She is the one to tell Morris that he can do anything he likes with Catherine because she was so much in love with him.

'Mr. Townsend', she proceeded, 'shall I tell you
something. Catherine loves you so much that you may do anything'. (WS, p.105).

Thus she seems to encourage Morris even to 'trifle' with Catherine's affection as it were.

In her pursuit of her fantastic notions about this romance, she proves false to her brother as well. She meets Morris in absurd little corners and cafes ostensibly to bear tidings of momentous import - which prove - to the exasperation of Morris Townsend, certain silly enjoinders like 'hold fast' - when she knows perfectly well that her brother strongly objects to any meetings with him. The most blatant example of her disloyalty is when she allows him free access to Dr. Sloper's study where the other so unabashedly made himself at home for one year when the doctor was away in Europe with his daughter. This not only exposes the inherently insincere nature of Lavinia but also the want of breeding and gentility in Morris Townsend.

Though her predilections and her little 'escapades' - like meeting Morris in an oyster saloon are apparently comical, these actually reveal where her loyalty lies. For example - we read her letter in which she exposes her prejudice against her brother - not because she thinks
that he is cruel to Catherine but because he hates Morris. (WS, p. 133). She also exposes her alienation from Catherine - "She is so terribly secretive, like her father". (p. 133) And when she continues in the same letter, "My dear friend, you cannot set up in married life simply with a few pairs of shoes, can you?" - she not only makes light of Catherine's expectation to be married soon but also hints that he should not marry without the assurance of Catherine's inheritance. This is how Lavinia views the subject.

In the first place, Morris must get the money and she would help him to it. In the second, it was plain it would never come to him, and it would be a grievous pity he should marry without it - a young man who might so easily find something better. (WS, pp. 134-135)

Therefore she is not surprised or shocked when Morris says, "I must give her up", instead she says, "I think I understand you". (p. 135)

There is something complex and perverse in this seemingly comical character. In the same breath that she says how his desertion would affect Catherine and delight the father, she can become as detached to ask
him if he intends to marry another woman, to which question Morris gives a theatrical response, "I give her up not for another woman, but for a wider career." (WS, p.137)

In the light of such revelations it would seem that the comicality which describes her personality is rather a superficial assessment - the apparent comedy of her role hides something more damaging than meets the eye. Granting the fact that there is no deliberate malice involved in Lavinia's actions, they all the same contribute substantially to Catherine's betrayal by her sweetheart.

Even the otherwise passive Catherine instinctively grasps this and lays a direct accusation upon her aunt,

Is it you then that have changed him and made him so unnatural? Is it you that have worked on him and taken him from me? He doesn't belong to you and I don't see how you have anything to do with what is between us! Is it you that have made this plot and told him to leave me? How could you be so wicked, so cruel? What have I ever done to you, why can't you leave me alone? I was afraid you would spoil everything, for you do spoil everything you touch. I was afraid of you all the time we were abroad; I had no rest when I thought that you were always talking to him, - and
Catherine continues, 'You made him tired of my very name. I wish you had never spoken of me to him; I never asked your help!' (Ch. 30, pp.150-151)

In all her career, Catherine has not made another such passionate speech as this. Here at last we see that she is able to grasp the harm that her aunt's interference has done her. She can now see that her aunt is a "dangerous woman". (WS, p.169). Catherine is right when she says that Lavinia has nothing to do with what is between her and Morris Townsend because she never asked her aunt's help. Mrs. Penniman simply plays out her self-assigned role to the young girl's infinite grief.

There is an element of evil in such an interference because Lavinia has no moral right to come between Catherine and Morris Townsend especially with her partisan attitude to him. Till the end she is seen championing his cause though in the last chapter she seems to be damned in the eyes of her protege too. "Damnation" is the last word she hears from him. Though she herself remains quite unconscious of the damage she has wrought on her niece's life, Lavinia Penniman does represent an aspect of the evil which is just as damaging as the doctor's deliberate and concious domination of his daughter, and the "trifling of her affection" by the
heartless gold-digger Morris Townsend.

Like all great personal tragedies, Catherine's sorrow is immense when she realises that she is a despised and forsaken woman. Her hour of distress resembles in a certain way Isbel's vigil in a similar circumstances. However, in her hour of reckoning we read, "Nevertheless, she felt a wound, even if he had not dealt it; it seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen from his face". (WS, p.143) For a person who has just been jilted by her sweetheart, this seems a peculiar attitude, whereas he would have seemed to be the prime cause of her misery, she perceives in some mysterious way that he has merely been a contributory factor in the overall fact of her misery. That is why years later she summarizes her life thus.

"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." (WS, p.160) The only accusation that she can lay on Morris Townsend years later when he returns to woo her again is "you treated me badly". (WS, p.172).

With her father however she is altogether a different person now. Her concern, after Morris jilts
her, is that her father should never find out how much her lover's deception hurts her. Therefore she starts telling him lie upon lie about their affair. She tells him that she has broken off the engagement and has asked Morris to leave New York (WS, p.135). The process of mental and emotional distancing that the cruel father has so assiduously pursued is now completed by Catherine through her deliberate misrepresentation of facts. And when the doctor, on his death bed requests her to promise him that she will not marry Morris, she refuses to give him that satisfaction even though she knows perfectly well that she can never take Morris back. In her father's request, Catherine sees certain facts about their relationship which she can view now with more objectivity.

All her feelings were merged in the sense that he was trying to treat her as he had treated her years before. She had suffered from it then; and now all her experience, all her acquired tranquility and rigidity protested. She had been so humble in her youth that she could now afford to have a little pride and there was something in this request, and in her father's thinking himself so free to make it, that seemed an injury to her dignity. Poor Catherine's dignity was not aggressive; it never sat in state; but if you pushed far enough you could find it. Her father had pushed very far. (WS, pp.162-163).

Not only that she refuses to give the promise, she finds a "certain joy" in her own obstinacy. The
docile and obedient daughter has been pushed so far that she has been transformed into a stubbornly dignified personality able to hold her own.

The "rejection" scene in the last chapter does show us this mature and more composed Catherine who has borne her grief in secret for more than twenty years.

She continued to look at him, however, and as she did so she made the strangest observation. It seemed to be he, and yet not he; it was the man who had been everything, and yet this person was nothing. (WS, p.171).

Here we see a girl who has shed her illusions in the worst possible way - by being cheated by the man who had been at one time everything to her.

In terms of achieving psychological maturity through a process of gradual awakening of consciousness, Catherine falls short of the stature achieved by James's more famous heroines like Isabel Archer, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver. Catherine merely seems to act out a pre-ordained role and recedes into a life of passive resignation by "picking up her morsel of fancy-work - for life as it were". (WS, p.174).

Critical response to Washington Square has always tended to favour the author's own dissatisfaction with
this work. He decided to omit it from the New York edition of 1907-9. He called it a "poorish story" in a letter to William Dean Howells because of the meagerness of American life and society - despite the setting. He wrote, "What is your Cornhill novel about? I am to proceed it with a poorest story in three members - a tale purely American, the writing of which made me feel acutely the want of the paraphernalia."  

In another letter written to Robert Herrick, while he was preparing the New York edition of his works, he said, "I have tried to read over Washington Square and I can't, and I fear it must go!"  

However in a letter to his brother William who had praised the novel he seems to have presented the essential truth about the novel, "The young man in Washington Square is not a portrait - he is sketched from the outside merely, not fouille'. The only good thing in the story is the girl."  

Even in an important study like Oscar Cargill's The Novels of Henry James, Washington Square is conspicuously absent.

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However, there is another group of critics who consider this novel one of the early achievements of Henry James. The most notable among these is F.R. Leavis, who considers Washington Square as one of the six greatest novels of James - a work rich in "the abundant, full-blooded life of well-nourished organisms".\(^5\)

Clifton Fadiman on the other hand makes this kind of a grudging comment,

> It is remarkable that so interesting a book could have been written about a heroine who is quite candidly described as dull, one to whom only one important thing happened in the course of a long life, and that one thing a defeat.\(^6\)

On the surface of it, this seems to be a correct summing up of Catherine's life. But viewed from another angle her very defeat and the way she handles it is her moral victory. James has not assigned her a dominant role like his other heroines who in varying degrees, find themselves in similar circumstances. Isabel Archer, for instance, like Catherine, falls a prey to Osmond's machinations but by placing the "centre of the subject in the consciousness" of his heroine, James gives us a

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heroine of considerable psychological stature who seems to have travelled an immense expanse of experience to emerge with a great awareness of herself as well as of her circumstances. But Catherine is always presented in contrast to the other three important characters who play the key roles in her drama. The actions and tensions seem to revolve round her rather than being generated by her active participation in life. D. S. Maini makes this remark in this context.

Had she been invested with a large imagination, she would have been a very different kind of heroine. Indeed her dullness is a thematic necessity.\(^7\) (p. 97)

But the ultimate triumph of this nondescript and uninspiring girl is that her integrity and sincerity remain indomitable. Her 'goodness' seemingly so ineffective against the onslaught of the combined forces of her father's unrelenting will and Morris Townsend's cold-blooded betrayal abetted by the interfering aunt, at last emerges victorious when she, with a remarkable resilience and moral strength refuses to let the tragedy break her spirit. And most important of all, she has proven that

there is an inner life of every individual where certain regions of the mind and intellect should remain inviolate and sacrosanct. This is what constitutes a person's dignity, and James, in his fiction always gives more emphasis to his aspect of an individual's life than his outer circumstances.

Millicent Bell is of the opinion that James's choice of setting for his story suited his style.

There is appropriateness in James's choice of a stage - the little square where the tide of upward mounting wealth appeared to have paused for a moment in the red brick mansions with their white stone steps and delicate fan lights. Here, more than anywhere in America "You had come into a world which appeared to offer a variety of sources of interest". Here was a context in which he could locate Catherine's naivete', such a context as he had found only in Europe for his previous studies of American simplicity.8(p.21)

But to look at Washington Square and its story as a reflection of the attitude of a certain society at a given point in history merely would be to miss the whole point of James's dialectics in the novel. Though the setting is American, and certain aspects of the story's interactions do represent a world-view typical of America of

the early nineteenth century, the novel's moral concerns
however transcend all these and adumbrates a universal
concept of psychological reality. Both Dr. Sloper and
Morris Townsend are materialists - though in different
ways and their attitude to life stems from this basic
fact. But here James is not so much concerned whether
materialism per se is moral or immoral - as with the view
that domination and violation of another individual by
whatever means is as immoral and evil as adultery, murder
or theft is immoral in the external, conventional world.

Catherine's moral growth has been possible
because she has been exposed to the evil in her father
and Morris Townsend and has lost certain illusions about
people and life which, in the Jamesian concept is the
inevitable price for moral expansion.

Catherine Sloper is one more version of the
Jamesian heroine whose 'goodness', innocence and idealism
is pitted time and again against the crass materialism
of a society where acquiring suave manners and material
possessions seem to be the sole purpose of living. True,
she too is a part of this life, this society but she is
different because she recognises the 'other' plane of
life, the life of the mind, the life of the intellect
where personal dignity and the sanctity of personal relationship must take priority over everything else. Therefore the reality of this inner life takes precedence over the reality of the observable world outside. Her triumph is therefore to be reckoned in terms of the values of this inner life of consciousness.

The real life incident in the life of an English heiress which gave James the idea for Washington Square, however established the pattern earlier explored in Mme de Mauves, which was to feature in James's fiction all throughout. Commenting on this Millicent Bell says:

> It is not surprising that Isabel Archer should continue to figure in the pattern established in Washington Square; she too, struggles against the imposition of other's styles and, wishing to be free, is caught in the scheme of their false art. Her final discovery of a mode of her own is almost as silent as Catherine's, yet she will go further toward leaving her imprint upon the life around her; she has learnt how to absorb the style of Madame Merle. In so doing she continues to express the secret history of the artist, his quest for a true voice, an authentic and original being.9

Bell's remark illustrates the point that Washington Square is an important guide post in the author's quest for the "authentic and original being" of artistic creation.

9Bell, p.38.
as well as the style to adequately express this being.

D.S. Maini thinks that "Washington Square has most of the felicities that characterize James's earlier novels. There is a controlled air about the sentences and the writing shows ease and elegance, urbanity and aplomb. 10

In Washington Square James seems to have relegated to the background the influence of Europe on the American psyche. Nor does he concern himself much with Americanism as such except the nostalgic description of New York of his boyhood in Chapter 3— as the setting for Dr. Sloper's gradual rise to prosperity.

The much vaunted European tour which the father forces Catherine to undertake turns out to be an anti-climax. Both father and daughter embark on it with wrong assumptions; the father thinks that the trip might make Catherine give up Morris and Catherine thinks that by consenting to his proposal, her father might relent and agree to her marriage with Morris. What the trip actually accomplishes is the final breach between father and daughter. As such there is nothing of the romance and history of the old world civilization of Europe in this

\[10\] Maini, p.101.
trip, which remains merely the father's psycho-tactical gambit which backfired.

However, *Washington Square* establishes the pattern where the psychology and moral responsibility inherent in personal relationships takes precedence over concepts about culture, civilization and material success in life.