

**VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES: A STUDY ON HENRY  
JAMES' "WASHINGTON SQUARE**

**B. PAVITHRA**

**ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH  
PSG COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE**

**COIMBATORE**

**TAMIL NADU**

**INDIA**

**Abstract**

The study examines the gloriously famed work by Henry James, 'Washington Square'. It is one of the very few works by Henry James that focuses on American characters in an American setting. The story holds the significance of being written from the childhood memories of the author (McGlenn, 2004). The theme of nostalgia and Old New York often makes appearances in the author's most works. Washington Square is often described as a 'psychological novel', as most of the action takes place in the minds of the characters. The novel revolves around the life of Dr. Austin Sloper, his daughter Catherine, his widowed sister Lavinia Penniman and Morris Townsend, the suitable suitor for Catherine in Lavinia's eyes and other secondary characters including Dr. Sloper's other sister Mrs. Almond. The study aims to focus on the character of Catherine Sloper, a 'dull' girl in the eyes of her father, criticised for her lack of intelligence and beauty, a real victim of circumstances. Though a tragedy, the novella entails the story of a young woman who emerges victoriously from years of submission, finally finding her voice (Garbowski, 2013). The most fascinating and absorbing element of Washington Square is definitely the character evolution of Catherine Sloper. A closer look into the story permits one to identify the real underlying theme, which is not great romances, disputed inheritances or dealing with failure and agony but about the cultivation of an identity, the finding of oneself after being buried for so long.

**Keywords: victim, circumstances, identity, finding oneself, Catherine.**

## 1. Introduction

Published in 1880 as a serial in Cornhill Magazine and Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Washington Square is a simple structured tragical-comedy portraying the life of Dr. Austin Sloper and his daughter Catherine Sloper. The plot of the novel was developed based on a true incident told to the author by Fanny Kimble, his close friend. Though compared to great works of Jane Austen for the clarity and the focus on family relationships, Henry James labelled the short novel 'poorish' and wrote, 'the only good thing in the story is the girl' (Rosenberg, 2005). He dismissed the novella as one of his 'unhappy accidents'. Though the readers tend to disagree to this notion of Henry James as 'Washington Square' is a pronounced favourite, both with Henry James' devotees and the wider public. The novella has paved way for being an inspiration for many adaptations. Henry James wrote the novella to complete a trilogy, for Cornhill Magazine. Unlike most writers, Henry James doesn't rely on the basic construction of happy endings or a full blown tragedy. It is often pointed out that, if the readers crave for a tragedy with a happy ending, the writer delivers something more of a comedy with a haunting close. Henry James' characters are referred to as souls; that they are closer to ideas than to bodies.

The book opens by delivering the readers an introduction to Austin Sloper, a well-respected doctor often referred to by his professional title by the author. Though highly respected, the Doctor was a man who was haunted by his personal failure. Both his wife and first son dies while under his care, an irony of Austin Sloper being a father and a doctor is pointed out to the readers by the author in bleak humour. 'For a man whose trade was to keep people alive he had certainly done poorly in his family'. To add to Dr.Sloper's agony and vain, his wife had been both intelligent and beautiful, when she dies giving birth to their second child, Catherine, it is a further loss to him as considered by himself (Kurniawan, 2008). Because Catherine is neither an embodiment of beauty nor particularly gifted. Named after her mother, Catherine grows up in the shadow of a dead woman never being able to surpass her. Catherine lives a half-life burdened with the name of her mother failing to live up to her brilliance. Constantly looking for the approval in her father's eyes that she could never receive because in Dr.Sloper's eyes, Catherine could never be her mother. Through the author's portrayal of Catherine, one can begin to see her in the same light her father does. The readers

are provided with a sense of how mistreated Catherine is in the novella. Catherine fails to fulfil the requirements of a modal daughter to her father, in his eyes she is never well mannered, well spoken, cultured, educated or beautiful. Thus, Catherine is striking as a protagonist as unlike the conventional heroines she fails to fulfil the requirements, mostly in her father's view. Catherine is a product of her environment, being born and brought up in an oppressive setting she could not have turned out any differently. Her personality is a natural reaction to her father's oppressive behaviour as well as his barely concealed disappointment of her. The doctor's attitude of "make the best of her", is nothing but a doubtful environment for a child to flourish in (Bellafante, 2012).

Surrounded by dominating individuals who seek to compose her decisions for her, Catherine finds herself unable to live up to her father's paradigm of what a perfect daughter is throughout her life. It can be observed that Catherine lived a life of being an imperfect daughter only because that was what was expected out of her. She is a victim of assumptions and selfish needs of her father. Morris Townsend, though not intentionally hurtful but irredeemably selfish intends to marry Catherine only to enjoy her fortune. On realizing that Dr. Sloper will disinherit Catherine if she marries Morris, he abandons her. Catherine yet again falling victim to the ruthlessness of the people around her.

## **2. Victim of Circumstances**

On analysing the novella 'Washington Square', it becomes rather evident that the victim of the story is Catherine Sloper. With Catherine Sloper, Henry James has deliberately gone against the traditional norms of a young literary heroine (McGlenn, 2004). The stereotypical literary heroine is beautiful, resourceful, intelligent, and is often sought by a plethora of men, even though she might be from a poor family. They have the ability and capability of making me fall for them at the very first sight. But with Catherine Sloper, the author has given up the stereotypical norms. He describes his protagonist in polite but unflattering terms.

'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.'

Even though it was not permissible to deliver much explicit description of a lady's body during Henry James' time, the author provides many indications that Catherine was

overweight. She has little to recommend in regards of her appearances and Henry James does not give her an intellect or any kind of personality to compensate (Chamberlain, 2005).

‘Catherine was decidedly not clever; she was not quick with her book, nor, indeed, with anything else.’

The author’s negative characterization of Catherine is not to pull the character down, but is a way to define the other characters in the novella. In the entire novella, Catherine is devoid of love and affection even from her own father. She is in fact used by the people around her for their own personal needs. The lack of love and care pushes the protagonist into the path where even a glimpse of love is flared. Victimized for the personal needs of her family and fiancé, Catherine emerges out of the inverted family relations to find the signs of independence (Chamberlain, 2005).

### **2.1 Catherine Sloper and Dr. Sloper**

The relation between Catherine and her father is that of a dysfunctional state. It is the central theme to this novel. Catherine is not the black sheep of the family but was looked down upon. Constantly looking for the nod of approval from her father that she wishes to receive, Catherine is left disappointed because for her father she is nothing but a disappointment. From the beginning of the book ‘Washington Square’, the readers are made aware of the lack of compassion of her father towards her. The first disappointment was she was born a girl and not a boy. Secondly, Catherine’s mother died as a result of complications with the pregnancy, a loss that Dr. Sloper never got over of. He blaming Catherine for the death of his beautiful, intelligent wife though not given much prominence is an underlying major factor in the novella. Admiration and fear of her father ceases her from questioning his opinion. If he says she is stupid, then she is. Living in the shadow of her mother, unable to connect with her father, Catherine lives her life misjudged (Garbowski, 2008). The author often leads the reader into assessing that Catherine is slow and plain. It is all a question of clichéd ideas. Dr. Sloper’s refusal of his daughter’s engagement with Morris Townsend and his assumption of Townsend’s character was reasonable. It was not out of the fatherly concern or affection towards his daughter, but the belief that a striking man of Townsend’s feature will only approach his meek plain daughter in pursuit of

her inheritance. Catherine fails to witness the reality in her father's decision, as she finds it distressing to submit once more to her father's ironic and cruel perceptions. Catherine's father's demeaning perception of his own daughter is major influence on molding her behavior.

Catherine doesn't fit into the damsel-in-distress cliché, but as the novel progresses, the more Catherine reveals herself. Toward the end of the novella she finally breaks free from her father's spell and assess him. On realizing that her father was never really fond of her, Catherine is able to gain the strength to resist and to follow her will. Without the constant judgmental gazes and criticisms from her father, Catherine could have been someone else.

## **2.2 Catherine Sloper and Morris Townsend**

Morris Townsend is the young man who courts Catherine Sloper hoping to marry her. Blinded by the glimpse of love shone on to her by Townsend, Catherine falls head over heels for the man not taking her father's warning into consideration. Morris is termed to be manipulative in achieving his personal needs. When Catherine first meets Morris, the author says that it "was the beginning of something important". The beginning defined in the context here is not that of a fairytale love story but probably the beginning of the conflict between Catherine, her father, as well as Morris. The appearance of Morris Townsend into Catherine's life stirs a crisis in her life. Catherine's importance on being honest is stressed in the novella. The change in Catherine's character is found with the change in her behavior towards her father, as she lies to him for Townsend. Throughout the novella, there is a question of Townsend's motives towards Catherine. Although, from his words and actions it can be conceived that he wants to marry her only for her inheritance. On realizing that Dr. Sloper will disinherit Catherine if she chooses to marry Townsend, he flees the country. Catherine is deserted by the two men she loved and admired which razes her. The conflict between the two men were in terms of her inheritance and not for her. Dr. Sloper did not bother losing his daughter to an adventurer but he cared about the inheritance. A major part of Catherine's development is in relation to her relations

with the people around her. Rejection from both her father and her suitor devastates her (Olasz, 2008).

Townsend returns after a span of twenty years after her father's death and asks for her forgiveness in an attempt to be friends. The rejection of the proposal of a man once Catherine blindly loved and was ready to elope with contributed to the character arc completion of Catherine. The strength of the character in refusing Morris Townsend near the story's end is to be appreciated, although a part of her dies by the novella's end Catherine emerges a hero.

### **2.3 Catherine Sloper and Lavinia Penniman**

One of Dr. Sloper's two younger sisters, Lavinia, the widow of a penniless clergyman lives with Catherine and Dr. Sloper. In the absence of her mother, Catherine was brought up by Lavinia under Dr. Sloper's instructions. Though an individual with good intentions, Catherine is exploited by her aunt for her own form of romantic adventure. Widowed and romantic, Lavinia is a self-centered character, instead of warning Catherine of Morris' wrongful intentions she interests herself in witnessing the dramatic end of Catherine's relationship with Morris. She views Catherine as a project that will never be perfected and holds high hopes for Morris even though she is fully aware of his intentions. Rather than trying to save her niece Catherine, she continued to pursue her own goal of molding Morris into the son she never had. Unaware or deliberately paying no attention to the down side of her plan, Lavinia is obsessed to play out the love story and ignoring the toll it has taken on Catherine (Gregory, 2005). With Townsend fleeing the town, Lavinia "tries to comfort" Catherine but in reality ends up justifying Morris' decision.

On realizing the follies, Catherine calls out on her aunt which can be depicted as the growth in Catherine. Yelling at Catherine for being ungrateful, she still tries to point that she is only trying to mend the broken ties between Catherine and Morris. Ultimately, Lavinia Penniman is left with no life to invade.

### **3. Conclusion**

Catherine Sloper began the novella as a character in the background, even though the plot line revolved around her. Basically 'Washington Square' revolves around the psychological, emotional and spiritual development of Catherine Sloper. Constantly looked down upon, the character was merely there. Catherine's character is the most developed character in the entire novella. She blossomed into a clever strong woman from being an apathetic meek girl. Abandoned by the two men in her life, her father and her fiancé Catherine is left devastated. After realizing her father's selfishness and her fiancé's hypocrisy, Catherine rises above that. She is anything but lacking in character and sensibility, but is deemed to stay in that state as that is all what is expected of her. Henry James portrays Catherine as an ordinary, undistinguished person but leaves a scope for her to grow towards the end of the novella (Sarkowky, 2014). Though in the process of becoming fully herself her affection was trifled and broken by the two men in her life but she forgives them both, which in itself is a reflection of the character quality of Catherine.

Living her life as a victim of circumstances, affected by the factors outside of her control like the death of her mother or her lack of social skills, Catherine's personal appearance may not have changed but she has emerged a woman of strong consciousness. Being aware of her own acts of deception, Catherine has obtained a newfound sense of freedom and the ability to express herself. Achieving self-acceptance and general happiness was Catherine's victory. Her victory is of the human spirit unlike the assumed heroic victories.

## References:

- Chamberlain, R., (2005), A Magnificent Form. Referred from,  
<https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/11375/1/fulltext.pdf>
- McGlinn, J., (2004), Washington Square. Referred from,  
<http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/washsquare.pdf>
- Garbowski, C., (2004), The modernity of Henry James and Agnieszka Holland's Washington Square. Referred from, [http://www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/22/22\\_123-130.pdf](http://www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/22/22_123-130.pdf)
- Olasz, I., (2008), Authorship and the Verbal-Visual Reception of Henry James' Washington Square. Referred from, <http://receptionstudy.org/files/Olasz.pdf>
- Handout, (2010), Realism and Henry James. Referred from,  
[http://www.neabigread.org/teachers\\_guides/handouts/washingtonsquare/washingtonsquare-handout3.pdf](http://www.neabigread.org/teachers_guides/handouts/washingtonsquare/washingtonsquare-handout3.pdf)
- Rosenberg, V., (2005), "The only good thing....is the girl". Referred from,  
[https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/63127/dalrev\\_vol63\\_iss1\\_pp54\\_68.pdf?sequence=1](https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/63127/dalrev_vol63_iss1_pp54_68.pdf?sequence=1)
- Gregory, M., (2004), from melodrama to monologue. Referred from,  
[http://www.shirleymohr.com/JHU/Sample\\_Articles\\_JHUP/HJR\\_2004\\_25\\_2.pdf](http://www.shirleymohr.com/JHU/Sample_Articles_JHUP/HJR_2004_25_2.pdf)
- English lit 19<sup>th</sup>& 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, web version. Referred from,  
<http://www.overthefootlights.co.uk/10.%20George%20Eliot,%20Hardy,%20James%20&%20Modernism.pdf>
- Clark, H., (2011), Henry James and Science. Referred from,  
<http://images.library.wisc.edu/WI/EFacs/transactions/WT1963/reference/wi.wt1963.hhclark.pdf>
- Kurniawan, H., (2008), Catherine's repressed personality. Referred from,  
<http://repository.unika.ac.id/4828/1/01.80.0042%20Hendra%20Kurniawan%20COVER.pdf>
- Macmillan Readers, (2013), Henry James. Referred from,  
<http://www.macmillanreaders.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Henry-James-Author-Data-Sheet.pdf>
- Zackel, F., (2014), Film structure and popular novel. Referred from,  
[https://www.brunel.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/111287/Frederick-Wm-Zackel,-Film-Structure-and-the-Popular-Novel.pdf](https://www.brunel.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/111287/Frederick-Wm-Zackel,-Film-Structure-and-the-Popular-Novel.pdf)

Volume V, Issue II  
February 2017

**IJELLH**  
International Journal of English  
Language, Literature and Humanities

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
ISSN : 2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Moss, L., (2012), Corpus Stylistics and Henry James's Syntax. Referred from,  
[http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1461029/1/Lesley\\_Moss\\_thesis%5B1%5D.pdf](http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1461029/1/Lesley_Moss_thesis%5B1%5D.pdf)

Sarkowsky, K., (2014), The Spatial Politics of Urban Modernity. Referred from,  
<http://dgfa.de/wp-content/uploads/Volume-59-2014.pdf>