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**Washington Square:
From the Novel to the Screen**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Michela Vanon Alliata

Assistant Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Simone Francescato

Graduand

Alessandro Decarolis

871857

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Abstract

Washington Square is a novel by Henry James published in 1880. It examines the effects of the father-daughter relationship, but it also inspects the ongoing changes in the America of James's time and how they affected that country considering the economical, social and psychological aspect. Despite it is not the most popular work written by James, Washington Square later inspired a lot of theatrical, cinematic adaptations and other works by other authors. One of the most popular adaptation of Washington Square is the movie *The Heiress* directed by the celebrated William Wyler in 1949, that followed the 1947 play written by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. The protagonist of the novel, Catherine, was performed by the brilliant Olivia de Havilland who, for that role, also won an Oscar for Best Actress.

Introduction

This thesis is based on studies and research I did on Henry James's novel *Washington Square* and on William Wyler's film adaptation "The Heiress". After glancing over Henry James's life, I started considering the first publication of James's work and how it was even visually represented thanks to George du Maurier's illustrations. Du Maurier's contribution was essential to the distribution of *Washington Square* both in America and Europe, and to highlight that James was a pioneer of American Aestheticism. Going on, I examined the importance of that anecdote which drew James's attention and that eventually gave him the inspirational basis for his novel. Analyzing the novel, many aspects came to light and demonstrated how James dealt with many kinds of topics and issues in it. One of them is Catherine's difficult relationship with her father and with his authority. Not only she is alone in her fight with no one to support her, but she also finds in the other main characters around her people who try to oppress her. Each one of these other characters has his/her own peculiarities and they all raise different issues. Doctor Sloper embodies an unloving example of fatherhood, Morris is a fortune-hunter who cannot find his place in the American society and Aunt Penniman a widow who has her own delusional vision of life. Additionally, I presented the importance of the international setting in this work and how it is crucial here as well as in James's other works. It is meaningful because throughout his entire life, James had an ongoing inner fight in which he was divided between his native land, the United States, and Europe, the continent inhabited by history and a more refined culture. Moreover, I discussed James's choice of genre and style in *Washington Square*, taking several authors as examples to follow, but eventually creating his own style and identity as writer. To gather all of his works in a single and vast project, James planned *The New York Edition*. It represented his final and biggest

effort, for James described and explained the processes behind his works in it. He also chose to keep *Washington Square* out of it and I tried to collect and investigate the reasons behind his decision.

After the first part concerning James's novel, I briefly introduced film adaptations. I examined the initial phases in the history of film adaptations and how initially they were criticized and seen as inferior. It was an issue connected with the idea that literature and books as medium were considered pure while, on the other hand, movies were judged incomplete and imperfect. I also shortly described various aspects which belong to adaptations, how adaptations can be defined and which are those elements that can be transposed from a medium to another. Furthermore, there are guidelines to follow when adapting a literary work and when making historical adaptations. But there are sentiments they provoke in the audience too and, as a matter of fact, they have to take viewers' taste and needs into account when adaptations are produced.

A quick examination of William Wyler's life and career is followed by the description of circumstances that brought to the production of *The Heiress*. I analyzed the characters from the movie, its plot and relevant events, comparing them with the novel and noticing what has been changed and what has been kept the same or, at least, similar to it. Furthermore, I focused on techniques Wyler employed in order to emphasize the role of objects, surroundings, costumes and details in the movie. These techniques, like, for instance, camera angles and close-ups, make viewers better understand the situation, sometimes even giving them hints on what is about to come. They also are used to emotionally involve spectators, making them feeling empathy towards characters' issues, joys and doubts. In the end, I examined the reception of *The Heiress*, especially by the female American audience, and how the movie accentuates the relevance of an important issue like women's independence.

Henry James's Biography

Henry James was born at 2 Washington Place in New York City on the 15th of April in 1843, the second son of Henry James Sr. and Mary Walsh. His father was a lecturer and a philosopher, follower of the Swedenborgianism; his mother was a New Yorker coming from a wealthy family. Their eldest and Henry's older brother was the celebrated philosopher and psychologist, William James, while Henry also had two younger brothers, Wilkinson and Robertson, and a younger sister, Alice.

James did not receive the typical education in Greek and Latin classics, but his father exposed him to different scientific and philosophical influences. After Henry's adolescence, his family traveled for some years among European cities, and it strongly affected the young man that, especially in their stay in France, sensed a feeling of belonging and became fluent in the language of the place. It is also curious how he had a stutter speaking in English, but he did not expressing himself in French.

His family returned to Newport in 1860 and here Henry was introduced to French literature by the painter John La Farge, but more particularly to Honoré de Balzac, one of the authors that most inspired James' work. A year later James, in an attempt to fight a fire, injured his back and it made him inadequate to participate in the American Civil War.

In 1864 James' family will move again, this time to Boston, Massachusetts. In that same State, Henry attended Harvard Law School, not finishing his studies to pursue his literary interests. His first published work was a review of a stage performance, "Miss Maggie Mitchell in *Fanchon the Cricket*" in 1863 and, a year later, James published anonymously his first short story, *A Tragedy of Error*. He also wrote for *The Nation* and *Atlantic Monthly*, where James Fields was his editor. His first novel, *Watch and Ward*, was serially published in 1871 in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

During a European trip that lasted fourteen months, James met many renowned authors and Dickens, Ruskin and George Eliot among them. In 1869, James settled in London writing and publishing other serialized novels principally received by a public of middle-class women. He lived in rented rooms, but he entered illustrious clubs of the English society, like Reform and Travellers' clubs.

When he returned to New York, in 1874-75 he published *Transatlantic Sketches*, *A Passionate Pilgrim* and *Roderick Hudson*. Though this was his last stay in the United States, apart from a couple of trips there, because, after he decided to move to Paris, he spent in Europe the rest of his existence. Here James met Maupassant, Turgenev and Zola, and later he moved to London.

Even in England, James kept publishing: *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), *Hawthorne* (1879) are among the most important works. *Daisy Miller*, in 1878, drew attention upon him because the main character of the novella was a woman that lived not respecting the rules of the European society. In the same year and the next one he published *Confidence*, *Washington Square* and started working on his masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, finally published in 1881.

Unfortunately the publication of the latter was followed by a period in which the author had to face several family losses: his mother, his father and, in the end, his brother Wilkinson.

In 1884, he visited Paris again, hoping to feel inspired by his French realist models. Therefore he met with Zola, Daudet and Gouncourt once more and their influence was clear in James's novels *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, both published in 1886. Even after publishing another novel, *The Tragic Muse*, James felt pressured by the failure, both critical and monetary, of his works.

It was the reason why he started writing for the theater, but in 1895, when his play *Guy Domville* was first staged in London, it was a complete debacle. This occurrence made him feel hopeless about his career and his abilities as a writer, but his studies on dramatic works later gave their results. James used them in the last phase of his career, for many of his most renewed works were written during this late stage. In his long stay in Italy, he published *The Aspern Papers* and *The Reverberator*. Later, when he decided to go to live in England, between 1897 and 1904 he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Awkward Age*, *The Sacred Fount*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. After he also published *The American Scene* and *The New York Edition*, in 1910 his brother William died. The latter was remembered in many memories and reflections within James's autobiographies *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and a Brother*. In 1915 James received the British citizenship and one year later, more precisely on the 28th of February 1916, he died in London.

Washington Square and Aestheticism

Washington Square is a novel that was devised by James in the autumn of 1879, just before starting to write *The Portrait of a Lady* and after he terminated *Hawthorne*, his novel *Confidence* and his short story "A Bundle of Letters". At the beginning, it was serially published in 1880 in *Cornhill Magazine* (it was meant to be the final piece of a trilogy that began with *Daisy Miller*) and there in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.

In the British *Cornhill Magazine*, *Washington Square* was accompanied by illustrations made by the caricaturist George du Maurier. He was famous because of his work for the British satirical magazine, *Punch*, and,

more specifically, for his parody of the Aesthetic Movement, for creating imaginary characters based on actual exponents of the Aestheticism.

The novel was a double first time for James, for it was his first novel to be accompanied by illustrations and, with its publication, he was given the opportunity to have it serialized in both America and Europe. The twelve illustrations prepared for *Washington Square* by du Maurier were printed on the *Cornhill Magazine* in Britain in 1880, more precisely from June to November. The American version of the work (this time a book) was published by Harper and Brothers in December of the same year. In du Maurier's sketches, the physiognomic traits of the cosmopolitan fortune-hunter, Morris Townsend, were inspired by the most popular member of Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde.

Writing about taste and money in America, James was drawing attention to the fact that Aestheticism was not present in British society as well as in Transatlantic society. Du Maurier's drawings emphasized Henry James's work and helped his novel in becoming popular in the European continent as well.

Since *Washington Square* was set in the New York of the 1850s and it presented characteristics of the Aestheticism between 1870 and 1880, these features gave resonance to the task James was trying to accomplish: to insert American Aestheticism in the Aesthetic tradition. James gave it dignity by also treating American social and cultural history, and it served to demonstrate how the American, and not only the British, society participated to the Aesthetic debate as well.

With works like *Roderick Hudson* and *The Europeans*, James had already started to explore the world of the aesthetic culture. Its full realization came with the publication of *Washington Square* and du Maurier's artistic contribution. Many critics considered the illustrations that accompanied James's work as disappointing. As a matter of fact, du

Maurier's drawings took inspiration from his caricatures on the *Punch* and this aspect gave James the opportunity to show how his work took into consideration aesthetic values and debates. Apart from the taste for art and beauty, the transatlantic Aestheticism was especially concerned with money and commercial aspects.

The perfect example is embodied by Morris Townsend, where his passion for European travels, squandering money and leading a "wild"¹ young life is closely connected to his role in the society. Morris, portraying the figure of the aesthete, does not have a defined and fixed place in American society. The aesthetic phenomenon can only exist in a society that is not static and that is undergoing perpetual changes, and that is the exactly the case of *Washington Square*, where Morris an "infiltrate" defying social hierarchies and Doctor Sloper's view of the world.

Du Maurier's illustrations helped James in rendering and perfecting the protagonists' traits of *Washington Square*. The caricaturist not only parodied the character of the aesthete, but also the American young woman. He viewed the type of person as more natural but also clumsier than the English woman. In addition, the women who decided to adhere to the aesthetical views were usually older than their partners, and they often were willing to even marry for poverty (and not despite it), for they thought that simplicity was a noble ideal. Ironically, Morris, the aesthete, has more taste than money, while Catherine is his opposite, soft-hearted but determined.

Significantly du Maurier drew Morris's appearance taking inspiration from the most popular personification of the values of the Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde. In his depiction of Morris, du Maurier sketched him with his body curled up in a strange kind of letter "C", a pose that recalls a homosexual stereotype easily associated to Wilde; Morris's long hair is

¹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 35.

also another physical characteristic that links him to the famous Irish aesthete.

In contrast with Morris's moral ugliness, Catherine's is nowhere to be found in du Maurier's illustrations. James depicts the poor girl as unattractive, large and not clever, but not even one of those flaws is traceable looking at his sketches of Catherine. This motive is because like James presented the female protagonist intensifying her blemishes above all, using an ironic and indifferent tone towards her, in the same way the illustrator caught in his own work what is actual ugliness and what is not, being so familiar with the Aesthetic Movement.

Some critics claim that du Maurier's illustrations for *Washington Square* were closer to the British and not to the American taste², but this actually was the caricaturist's goal, even if the entire novel is set on American soil. This brought critics to also consider James as the quintessentially American aesthete, where James was often compared to Morris. Unfortunately, these sometimes even offensive comments that saw him as a Wilde's follower or as his American version were not what James sought, even if he tried many times to distance himself from the British member of the Aestheticism.

The Aestheticism finds its incarnation in Aunt Penniman as well. She insists throughout the novel on plotting various ways to arrange Catherine and Morris's encounters and she is ready to do it even behind his brother's back in order to achieve her purposes.

«James's satire of Mrs Penniman emphasises his own critique of the Aesthetic Movement as a whole: she shows no concern for decency or morality and only values superficial beauty and romantic quality. She is unwilling to acknowledge the

² M. Mendelssohn, Henry James, *Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 79.

inappropriateness of her relationship with Townsend, and delights in her tawdry trysts with him.»³

She perfectly represents the type of the female aesthete who is older than her suitor. Aunt Penniman idealizes Morris so much that, in the first part of the novel, she compares him to her dead husband and, going forward, she even thinks that he should have been the man she should have married.

Morris is indolent, has refined and expensive tastes, he has no profession and lives on other people's expenses. When Doctor Sloper is away during his journey in Europe, Morris transforms the doctor's office in his own private club, smoking at the doctor's desk, enjoying the taste of living in such a rich environment working his way through society and using his good manners rather than his dedication to find an actual job.

Another resemblance between Morris and Wilde is that they both love money, and, as a matter of fact, Morris is willing to marry Catherine in order to obtain it. On the other hand, Wilde's love for money has been a matter James continuously pointed out criticizing it. A good example could be the lecture tour that Wilde undertook in American, where Americans were aware of its financial implications.

Morris and Wilde are also connected thanks to one more peculiarity: they both excel in the oratorical art. Morris's talkativeness, at the beginning of the novel, is what strikes Catherine, the naturalness of his discourse and how, in this way, he gives her the possibility to remain silent, listening to him and contemplating his beauty.

Morris's character demonstrates that there was not just a single way to depict the American man, but that the cosmopolitan idler and the art lover could also exhibit different shades. The Americans loved to read about themselves, furthermore they had ambiguous feelings towards British

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

people, admiring and despising them at the same time. That is one more reason why *Washington Square* was so appreciated by James's compatriots who could find there in the portrayal of the Europeanized American.

It was not easy for James to unite the American and the European world, since the author himself knew they were pretty diverse. The British editor W. E. Henley was aware of James's ability to succeed in the task (it had been proved with the publication of *Washington Square*), encouraged him in doing so and this brought James to write *Daisy Miller*. For the American readers were impatient to know more about the European world, but also to find some familiar elements about themselves. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the greater part of the profit derived from the American market and that is why it was so important to satisfy it, giving readership what they wanted.

Aesthetic societies in America existed even before Wilde's arrival to the States. The movement found its development during the post-Civil War period, when the aesthetic taste for art collecting and its ideas about nature, beauty and religion was a response to the previous tragic historical fragment that Americans had lived and were trying to overcome.

The Germ

The plot of *Washington Square* is inspired by an anecdote that a friend of Henry James's, the famous actress Fanny Kemble, told him.

This was about her brother's engagement to Miss T., a "dull, plain, common-place girl"⁴ (the same adjectives Henry James uses in the novel when he refers to Catherine Sloper, the protagonist) who had a great fortune of £4000 per year. While the girl was in love with this handsome but also two-faced man, he was plotting to take advantage of her money and to use it for his own worldly pleasures. Her father took position against

⁴ M. Simpson, *Introduction* in Henry James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. ix.

their marriage plan and warned her that she would not have a single penny if she married the young man.

The girl asked for advice to Fanny, who counseled her to not marry her brother, because he would have been gentle to her only if things had gone well. If that had not happened, Fanny told the girl that the young man would have behaved in an unpleasant manner, causing her to feel wretched and condemned to his intolerable company.

When Fanny's brother opted for leaving, the girl inherited her father's money after he died. Time passed and the fortune-hunter returned in the hope that they could finally get married, but she rejected him even though she was still enamored of him and resolved to never marry another man.

Mona Simpson, in her introduction to the novel, highlights Henry James's genius and creativity for transforming such an usual event, nothing more than pure gossip during those years, in a masterpiece. James used the scheme of Fanny's anecdote as the base for his story, to which he added his own significance and a different ending. The most innovative element was the character of Doctor Sloper, the real enemy in the story, where everyone would expect the fortune-hunter to be the real threat.

Cynthia Ozick, talking about the anecdote, saw a connection between the young man who leaves the heiress behind because she would be disinherited if she married him, and *Washington Square's* author leaving his own native land and continent to flee to Europe.⁵

The Novel

In a grand house within the neighborhood of Washington Square, a really simple girl in her early twenties, Catherine Sloper, lives with her father, a renowned doctor and a quite unloving parent.

⁵ C. Ozick, *James as Jilter: Absenteeism in Washington Square in The American Scholar*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, Autumn 2002, p. 56.

The narrator's voice and his wit are really close to the doctor's. Plus, the narrator's irony helps readers to understand that he is well aware that Doctor Sloper's celebrity was intensified also thanks to the public opinion or, as the narrator calls it, the "popular voice". Doctor Sloper achieved his fame because of his intelligence and competence, but he just came from a modest family of New York. Things (and the "popular voice") started to be in his favor when he

«Had made his mark sufficiently to mitigate the anomaly of his having been chosen among a dozen suitors by a young woman of high fashion, who had ten thousand dollars of income and the most charming eyes in the island of Manhattan.»⁶

Fortune seems to turn its back to Doctor Sloper when his son dies at three years of age and, two years later, his wife dies too, while she was giving birth to Catherine. The turn of events of the story seems tragically ironic, as if Doctor Sloper had to pay for the luck that he assisted him earlier in his life, just to be eventually punished.

Devoid of a motherly figure, the doctor decides that one of his sisters, Lavinia Penniman, should take care of Catherine's education and growth. Like her brother, Aunt Penniman is a widow who abandoned the idea of remarriage and, additionally, wore black for twenty years.

These two parental figures cannot give Catherine the love a daughter needs and, ironically, the other aunt and Doctor Sloper's sister, Elizabeth Almond, is the only one that sincerely loves and cares for her. Unfortunately she is already married and has to take care of her nine children, uptown in New York and far from the turbulent events that take place in Catherine's life.

Doctor Sloper is not the only one to be punished though. His daughter, Catherine, will be the victim of her father's frustration and disappointment

⁶ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 3.

throughout the entire novel. Catherine starts her life with a great sense of loss: the loss of her mother and the loss of her father's affection, that, more precisely, she will never come to know. Since her birth, Catherine will always represent nothing more than a sense of failure to the doctor, almost a curse, a twist of fate.

In order to fill this void and to make amends for her constant feeling of guilt, Catherine searches for her father's approval, not longing for the attention of any other man. Doctor Sloper's thoughts and feelings point to another direction, and he nearly does not consider Catherine as a daughter, but rather as an experiment to study and observe.

His daughter actually surprises him at a party where they celebrate the engagement of Aunt Almond's daughter, Marian, with Arthur Townsend. There Catherine draws the attention of Morris Townsend, Arthur's cousin, a handsome and garrulous young man whose intentions Doctor Sloper seems to be well acquainted with. The doctor personally understands Morris's motivations and purposes because, before getting married, he was looking for the same way of moving upward in social positions.

But Doctor Sloper does not only marry an intelligent and wealthy woman, he also shows his propensity towards his rational sister Elizabeth and his disdain for his fanciful sister Lavinia. His preference for Elizabeth does not only come from the respect he shows to her, recognizing her as a clever person, but also because of her marriage with a rich man, while the other sister married only a poor clergyman.

Doctor Sloper's hostile disposition towards Morris is a curious way to express self-criticism. After all, he never actually forgives himself for the unfortunate events that happened to him.

«Our friend, however, escape criticism; that is, he escaped all criticism but his own, which was the most competent and most formidable. He walked under the weight of this very private censure for the rest of his days, and bore forever the scars of a castigation

to which the strongest hand he knew had treated him on the night that followed his wife's death.»⁷

To confirm his doubts about Morris, the doctor goes to pay Mrs. Montgomery, Morris's sister, a visit. He wants her to confess her brother's economical and spiritual unreliability and, after succeeding in moving the poor woman with fake fatherly concern towards his daughter, she admits the truth about Morris. Subsequently, the doctor almost feels guilty for the methods he used in order to force the kind woman to poorly talk about her brother, but, returning to his usual self, he shuts down the softest part of him. He is aware that he humiliated Mrs. Montgomery, but his social status and his intelligence make him feel to have every right to feel superior to every person that stands in front of him.

Aunt Almond has a satisfactory life as a mother and a wife and, consequently, is sincerely concerned for Catherine's destiny. After hearing from her brother that her niece is unmovable in her decision to be with Morris, she notices that Doctor Sloper is pretty amused by the news. He, as a scientist and a doctor, wants to discover how Catherine would handle the fight between her love for Morris and her adoration for her father. This discordance inside her would create a "third element"⁸, as he calls this phenomenon.

International Setting

Italy always was an important country for Henry James, to which he felt connected and enamored of. It occupied a relevant place in James's real life and formation, but it was also meaningful in some of his works. Italy, and more in general the international setting, was used as a location where central events of the story took place. Even if these relevant episodes were

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

set in Italy or another European country, most of the time their origins could be found in American and English societies.

The international setting allows the author to write about feelings like melancholia and mourning for something or someone lost, the loss of an idealized situation that clashes with the daily and grey reality. These are sentiments that can be treated by James because of the place in which these situations are set. It would have not been possible for James to write about such matters and to feel so inspired, if he had been in his too familiar native land, America.

Additionally, the emotions of melancholia and mourning are not explored in the usual manner, but from a social point of view, as they can lead to a social change. One of them can be alienation, since characters distance themselves from damaging social formations. James understood how the social wounds also infects one's psychology and that is the reason why he destined some of his characters to live never-ending cycles of misery.

In the so-called "Italian affairs"⁹, as a model that repeats itself, there is a daughter who has an intense bond with her father. Unluckily, the father ends up by "sacrificing" her and their relationship for something of a higher value to him and this *modus operandi* has a long tradition in literary history. The paternal callousness comes from the father's insecurity about his own paternity, bringing him to cause damage to his daughter.

Washington Square was written while James was also working on *The Portrait of a Lady*, and that gave him the possibility to examine in depth the dynamics in a relationship between a father and his daughter. This novel seems to have nothing that recalls the setting of those "Italian affairs" that have been cited before, but the truth is that Doctor Sloper's cruelest declarations to Catherine occur while the Alps serve as their landscape.

⁹ M.H. Ross, G. W. Zacharias, *Tracing Henry James*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 53.

The curiosity for the aforementioned “third element” leads the doctor to bring Catherine on a six-month journey in Europe, believing that she will be more open to leave Morris after the trip. Catherine, on the contrary, seems to not be moved and does not reveal any feeling to her father. In the Italian Alps, Doctor Sloper finally decides to face the matter, asking her if she is willing to give Morris up, but she answers negatively, causing his anger. Catherine can feel the melancholy of the place in which the doctor brought her, but this time is Doctor Sloper’s turn to surprise her, confessing her that he knows he is a bad man.

This scene on the mountain is very similar to another mountain scene taken from the ancient tradition: Abraham’s sacrifice of his son. In the same way, Catherine, frightened, starts thinking that maybe her father took her there to sacrifice her and to use violence to her. Going on, the doctor even compares her to a sheep, commenting that her value now is even higher before Morris kills her. As a matter of fact, Morris will act as Doctor Sloper prophesized.

«“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 that 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.”»¹⁰

On the mountain, the character that is tested is not the father, but rather the daughter. The “third element” finally appears before Doctor Sloper’s eyes and it is Catherine’s transformation. The protagonist here speaks openly against her father’s will and defies his authority.

«“Do you mean that in all this time you have not yielded an inch?”

“I would if I could Father, but I can’t.”

¹⁰ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 142.

The doctor looked round him too. “Should you like to be left in such a place as this, to starve?”

“What do you mean?” cried the girl.

“That will be your fate – that’s how he will leave you.”

He would not touch her, but he had touched Morris. The warmth came back to her heart. “That is not true, Father.” she broke out, “and you ought not to say it. It is not right, and it’s not true.”»¹¹

When the doctor admits that Morris is not a good man, he thinks so remembering what he suffered, his losses, but this is how he sees himself, using his own perspective. The truth is that Doctor Sloper is not a good man because he manipulates people and because he does not offer medical service to anyone, but only to wealthy people who can afford his treatments.

Catherine, discovering her father’s cruelty, is liberated from his authority and from any power he had on her. Moreover, when Doctor Sloper, admitting his wicked nature, invites his daughter to hate him, she refuses it. In doing so, Catherine establishes her own moral code and keeps her dignity, even after all the emotional and psychological pain the doctor caused to her.

At the end of *Washington Square*, when the doctor is on his deathbed, he keeps nurturing his patronizing scorn towards his daughter, ordering her to nurse him until his very last breath. Catherine obeys him and performs her task. The question is that as she eventually chooses to remain unmarried, it can be observed how she holds the same bitterness that Doctor Sloper had. With his death, she has been condemned by her father, in a very bizarre way, to take his place.

There is a hole in Catherine’s life and she tries her best to fill it, even when her father hinders her, for she considers sulkiness and self-pity

¹¹ Ibid., p. 140.

useless. Regrettably, in the end, Catherine is doomed to an unhappy life, where her unsatisfied sexuality and inner feelings are not so visible, but visible to the attentive reader.

Even though Catherine is not able to know the affection of her mother's love, the latter does help her to build her own independence, leaving her a small fortune. Apart from her mother indirectly helping her through economic legacy, Catherine confronts Doctor Sloper's maliciousness, Morris's greed and Aunt Penniman's silliness, maintaining and respecting her own moral integrity.

Lastly, she finds some peace in dedicating her time and efforts in charity work, assisting those people her father refused to have as patients. Catherine rejects two marriage offers and when Morris returns after several years, she finds the strength to dismiss him one last time.

Catherine and the Relationship with Her Father

Catherine's relationship with her father starts to crack with the arrival of Morris in her life. He is the reason of a chaotic battle in the protagonist's mind and he is also the person who indirectly questions her beliefs. "Indirectly" because Morris actually understands and agrees on Doctor Sloper's philosophy of life. The example is given in the story when Morris's commitment to Catherine depends on her loyalty to her father. It should actually be the exact contrary, because she risks (and eventually loses) Doctor Sloper's inheritance and what she thought was her father's affection in order to stay with Morris.

He finally betrays Catherine's trust when he ends their engagement. He himself was the first who asked her to never break the promise they made to each other, to stay together at all costs. He does that when he discovers the doctor has disinherited Catherine.

What brings the doctor to disinherit her right before his death is her refusal to promise him that she will never marry Morris. It is pretty obvious that Catherine would have never done that, but her final dare to the doctor literally is both a way of punishing and provoking him. Morris's last return gives only another chance to Catherine to reject him and to seal their fates once and for all.

Condemning herself to a solitary life without a partner or the happiness that only a family can give, it seems that Catherine has to live buried alive in Washington Square. Her condition is similar to the destiny that another literary character has to endure: Antigone.

What Polynices symbolizes for Antigone, Morris symbolizes for Catherine: both women suffer the departure of their beloved; but if Morris's departure is literal, Antigone has to face the death of her brother Polynices, so that the term "departure" is interpreted in its most tragic meaning. Catherine and Antigone are associated not only for the loss of people who were dear to them, but, more significantly, because they are deprived of the possibility to mourn for those losses. The act of depriving them, in both cases, is made by figures who stand for the power of authority.

Because of that power, Antigone is sentenced to be buried alive, as her will to grieve for her brother's remains is too strong and intense. Catherine, playing the role of a "less tragic Antigone", lives the rest of her life in such an isolation that she ends up feeling melancholy. This is the result caused by their limitation in expressing their emotions and in talking about them explicitly. The heroines have to deal with scarcity and inadequacy of words in their circumstances. Their linguistic issue reveals how fragile speeches and discourses can be sometimes compared to the reality of the situation, and how many restrictions language can have.

On Catherine, this linguistic insufficiency seems to be indirectly imposed by her father's behavior. She, in contrast to his sermons, remains silent and keeps most of her thoughts to herself. Doctor Sloper shows to always have something to say about anything and anyone, and his knowledge seems to be without limits. This, at least, is what Catherine believes for good part of the story. It is also what he forces himself to believe until the moment of his death, when it is clear even to him that he has to admit his ignorance and, consequently, his defeat. When Catherine is able to control the same language her father uses, the "language of authority"¹², she will never renounce to it again.

Indeed, when the doctor insists that Catherine should not accept Morris's request for marriage, she refuses to keep that promise. With this deed, Catherine loses the money she should have received and, more importantly, she figuratively kills her father. The protagonist kills Doctor Sloper because she turns against him the same language he exploits to incapacitate whoever stands in his way. Additionally and logically, Catherine cannot be blamed to have killed her father, for, as it has already been said, she uses the authoritative language that consequently makes him kill himself with his own hands.

Like Sophocles's tragedy, *Washington Square* has its most remarkable and fateful moments in significant dialogues and speeches. The novel places emphasis on language, how it is exploited, employed and denied, until it completely becomes a tragedy of language.

During the initial phases of the story, Catherine and Doctor Sloper perfectly incarnate the two components of an ideal Oedipus complex. Catherine looks at her father as the most intelligent and refined person in the world, while the doctor can always count on his daughter's adoration and loyalty. Unfortunately, what seems to be a steady relationship, it will

¹² T. Jukić, "An American Antigone: Henry James's *Washington Square*", *The Errant Labor of the Humanities: Festschrift Presented to Stipe Grgas*, Zagreb, FF Press, 2017.

not be able to last because of its being unbalanced. Doctor Sloper's fatherhood does not signify any kind of affection for his poor daughter, but nothing else than power and authority over her.

What is more, there is also another problematic symptom in the father-daughter relationship between the two characters, and it is the name that Catherine has to bear, the same name that her mother had. It is not casual that her father named her Catherine after his deceased wife, and it leads to the conclusion that, at the bottom of their tie, there is incest.

“She had been named, as a matter of course, after her poor mother, and even in her most diminutive babyhood the Doctor never called her anything but Catherine.”¹³ It is weird and nearly unsettling how the doctor, even after his wife's death, refuses to stop calling her name, in a strange kind of masochism.

The protagonist has to replace her dead mother as her father's new wife, but she fails because she does not have her mother's beauty and intelligence. She has only her mother's name, nothing else, and that is what makes incest only a distant concept in the story and not its focal point. Later she also fails in proving her loyalty to her father, preferring to protect her own interests and desires.

If Catherine has many points in common with Antigone, Doctor Sloper does not play just one role, but he is both Antigone's blind father, Oedipus, and the man who sentences her to death, Creon.

Besides, the doctor, known as a famous physician in New York, considers Catherine a dull girl. But, moving forward, the physician's opinion changes. As she becomes more mature, complex and challenging, he does not see her as the heiress who deserves his money, but rather as a medical abnormality that must be studied and cured. This is evident when, talking to his sister Elizabeth, Doctor Sloper admits his curiosity to

¹³ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 4.

discover the third element Catherine will create from the circumstances she has been facing.

From Doctor Sloper's attitude towards Catherine comes his final will to not give her his money, but to fund hospitals and similar medical institutions instead, as if to support them in finding a cure for clinical cases like his daughter. It is curious how Doctor Sloper's research continues even after his death.

As a matter of fact, Doctor Sloper's death does not stop him from keeping being present, in a certain way, in the story and it does not stop his will from being done. On the contrary, the doctor's pledges become concrete after his physical disappearance, when Catherine does not receive his money and when he succeeds in compelling her to live an unhappy and solitary existence, abandoning her desire of marriage and Morris. Paradoxically, Doctor Sloper fatherhood, perceived as authority, is more alive when he is deceased.

Keeping his daughter from getting married, Doctor Sloper's role in the Oedipus complex that binds Catherine to him and vice versa is even more apparent. Behaving like that, the doctor makes clear how he also stops his daughter's sexual desires from being expressed, repressing them in a weird act of jealousy. But, as Doctor Sloper uses legacy to restrain the protagonist from acting freely, legacy emerges as the only actual but also shallow element that binds father and daughter.

The girl's dullness and sometimes even misplacement within the narration are accentuated during the European tour Catherine goes on with her father. In the Alps, at a certain point, Doctor Sloper seems so committed to put an end to his daughter's life, but it unlikely is an act of punishment towards Catherine. The fact that the gesture remains unfinished shows how the doctor, returning to reason, understands that his plain

daughter could never make a difference and serve as a proper “sacrifice” to placate his anger and frustration.

Catherine’s bareness is comparable with the bareness of the location represented by the Alps and her life does not even deserve to be taken by Doctor Sloper. The sacrifice of Catherine’s life cannot take place for her existence is not so meaningful to be opposed to death. It is not a relevant element in a balanced exchange that could solve or end the story, or at least the solution to the enigma that Catherine embodies for Doctor Sloper.

When Catherine chooses to live in Washington Square in the end, it is true that she seems to lead a repetitive and empty life, almost confirming Doctor Sloper’s idea on her. Even though she excludes fatherhood from his deceased father’s house, deciding to not marry anyone and to not live a life devoted to a possible family, she is also doomed to a bare life.

As Doctor Sloper evaluates his own daughter a pathological case, Catherine’s final state of melancholia can be the perfect, and yet pretty ironic, example of another right diagnosis made by the renowned doctor. The protagonist’s state of mind is properly connected and presented by the end of the novel, that remains uncertain and as if it was interrupted.

Doctor Sloper’s Irony and Cold Rationality

It can be observed how Doctor Sloper can easily anticipate the outcome of a situation or other characters’ behaviors. Still, he cannot read his daughter’s mind and he cannot guess her intentions. That happens because, in his reasoning, Doctor Sloper uses his mind scientifically and almost seems to follow rules of mathematics and geometry. On the contrary, Catherine bases her deeds following the reasons of her heart and, obviously, if her father does not even try to understand her, he will never be able to know what moves her to act like that.

As it has already been said, the doctor has some ideas and psychological traits in common with Henry James, since even he uses the comparison with geometry looking at the literary work. Fiction, in James's opinion, sometimes forces the author to write being enclosed in forms and shapes prescribed by conventional rules and styles.

Irony, other than cold reason, is the matter of which Doctor Sloper is made. He speaks in an ironic tone with all the characters, even with the most similar ones to him, like his sister Elizabeth and Morris. Contrarily, he intensifies his uses of it mostly with people he values greatly inferior to him, like his sister Lavinia and Catherine. One of those rare occasions in which Doctor Sloper does not rely on irony, it is when he is on his European tour with Catherine, in the Alps, and he reveals his true nature to her.

Furthermore, irony allows Doctor Sloper to discern two sides of every situation, for he perceives the side connected to reality, how things truly are, and the other one connected to irony, for it is not real but fictional. Through the doctor's way of looking at the events, the reader has the feeling of knowing everything too. But James demonstrates, in the final part of the story, how the doctor's knowledge is limited and, killing two birds with one stone, surprises the physician and the reader as well.

Catherine finds herself incapable of expressing her personality through ironic discourses or thoughts, she actually does not even know what to do when she receives ironic comments from her father.

«You would have surprised him if you had told him so, but it is a literal fact that he almost never addressed his daughter save in the ironical form. Whenever he addressed her he gave her pleasure; but she had to cut her pleasure out of the pieces, as it were. There were portions left over, light remnants and snippets of irony, which she never knew what to do with, which seemed too delicate for her own use; and yet Catherine, lamenting the limitations of her understanding, felt that they were too valuable to waste,

and had a belief that if they passed over her head they yet contributed to the general sum of human wisdom.»¹⁴

Catherine expresses herself through her extravagant taste in dressing since she is not capable of doing it with words. She “lets the dresses talk in her place”, but, not understanding her difficulty, people around her do not judge her positively, just like Doctor Sloper. He even attacks her, comparing her like he would do for a product with an exorbitant price: “You are sumptuous, opulent, expensive,” he continues. “You look as if you had eighty thousand a year.”¹⁵

Initially in the story, the narrator himself refers ironically to Doctor Sloper’s unfortunate life events before Catherine’s birth. He uses against the doctor the same weapon he then utilizes against the other characters. Moreover, life itself seems to have punished the physician who was not able to save his wife and first child from death. Life gives the doctor its final ironic response when Catherine refuses to tell him that she would have fulfilled her promise to never marry Morris, and also when she does not disclose to him her feelings and thoughts, letting him die in the ignorance that uncertainty brings.

Catherine’s Simplicity and the Power of Money

Washington Square is a novel about money and its power. James’s desire was to represent in his novel how money could affect people’s lives and what people would do in order to save it or have more of it.

Perhaps James did not completely love money, but he, as a member of the aristocratic society, respected its power. James lived in a century where industry was increasingly progressing and, unfortunately for him, where the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

power given by money allowed many people to join aristocracy simply by possessing a great amount of it.

The central figure of the novel, Catherine, has money and nearly nothing else, as she lacks all the essential qualities a normal protagonist should have. It is ironic how she does not embody the standard ideal of heroine, but how, if anything, she entirely represents the usual character of the second half of the nineteenth century fiction, an extremely rich protagonist. In addition to the humble protagonist of the novel, its modesty also lies in the fact that its most powerful scenes are set in a parlor.

In his epilogue to *Washington Square*, Michael Cunningham contextualizes Catherine's character in the novel:

«She has only steadiness and honesty, which puts her in company with Herman Melville's Bartleby the scrivener and hardly anyone else in literature. She is, in a particular sense, the most distilled of James' characters, in that her story hinges entirely on her fortune. Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, and other heroines in James' oeuvre have more to offer. Money affects their lives profoundly but, if they lacked money, they would still be people worth writing novels about. If Catherine had no money, she would have no story at all.»¹⁶

Catherine is not a "scenic" type of person, meaning that she does not fit the usual description of a heroine doomed to be in love and then refused. In view of Catherine's lack, James thought that the location of Washington Square would provide to produce in the tale that missing "scenic" element. The author used the specificity of the place to fill the gap created by the protagonist's tenuous vividness. James's distinctive trait is that he chose to not describe the setting of New York evoking its noises, murmurs and chaos, as his predecessors Balzac and Dickens would have done.

¹⁶ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 211.

James learned what “to be scenic” meant when he gave an account of the concept in his autobiography *A Small Boy and Others*, talking about when his spoiled cousin Marie refused to go to bed.

«“Come now, my dear; don’t make a scene – I insist on your not making a scene!” That was all the witchcraft the occasion used, but the note was none the less epoch-making. The expression, so vivid, so portentous, was one I had never heard – it had never been addressed to us at home; and who should say now what a world one mightn’t at once read into it? It seemed freighted to sail so far; it told me so much about life. Life at these intensities clearly became “scenes”; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose.”»¹⁷

Catherine chooses to not sulk when her father opposes his will to hers, she chooses to not be “scenic”, and her choice disappoints Aunt Penniman, widow who uses her scenic abilities all the time.

Catherine is not an interesting person for the characters around her and she is not even an interesting character for the reader, at least not at the beginning. She becomes interesting because James made her so, because he gave her relevance and he showed to care about her own story and personal growth. It was a way to make heroes and heroines compelling, even though their roles were played by characters who were not smart, fascinating or perceptive, but who still strove and kept existing in the world.

James was interested in humanity in general, but women could draw more his attention than men did. Probably, it was because of the situation in which women lived during his time, how they were trapped from many points of view:

¹⁷ H. James, *A Small Boy and Others*, New York, Wilson Press, 2007, p. 89.

«By their filial and financial dependency, by the expectation that they would marry and the hope that they would marry well, by the cleverer and more subvert strategies required of them if they were to get whatever it was they wanted.»¹⁸

James felt a sentiment of sympathy towards them and their arduous circumstances and, at the same time, he admired them for their manners and how they survived in society. Catherine does not have the qualities that James presumably admired in women, but he did admire the way she keeps fighting for what she believes in, so that the soft tones of her voice and her powerful silence are heard by the people who surround her.

Aunt Penniman, the other female character of the novel, is a well-written and fully developed character from every possible standpoint. She is not treated by James as a minor character. On the contrary, if another parallel novel existed in which Aunt Penniman was its protagonist, she would not be less than who she is in the original *Washington Square*. She starts and she remains until the very end of the novel an egotistical, delusional and meddlesome woman.

James's men do not conduct the same struggle that women do, quite the opposite, they are the planets around which the satellites-women revolve. Morris and Doctor Sloper are not doubtful about their roles: Morris must try to marry Catherine in order to obtain her money and Doctor Sloper must dismantle his plan. They do not exist to help or support Catherine, but just to make her choices harder and to prevent her from being autonomous and think with her own mind.

The doctor spares his daughter misery, but, in doing so, he keeps her far from happiness as well, not comprehending that maybe the two are complementary to each other. It is true that Doctor Sloper knew misery thanks to Catherine, for her birth was the main cause of his wife's death,

¹⁸ M. Cunningham, *Afterword* in Henry James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 218.

but he could have also tried to seek for happiness accepting his daughter. Catherine is no comparison to her mother's likeability and intelligence, and yet, rejecting her for who she is, the doctor outsmarts himself, becoming his own enemy.

The doctor fails in what Henry James could do so well: the author could study the details and analyze the behaviors so to notice and appreciate what is extraordinary in normal people that day by day live their lives, without acts of grandeur but with humility. Doctor Sloper, who was unable to truly see Catherine and to recognize her value, at the end of the novel is punished through his inability to see her daughter becoming a woman worth of social respect and attention.

If money is the reason why bonds between people exist, money is also the cause that separates them. Its relevance is so great that when Catherine proposes Morris to live with less money, she is nearly considered insane. James showed that even people who have enough money do not have happiness in return or live a less troubled life.

One of Henry James's amazing abilities as a writer was his genius in considering a character's normal life interesting. He was able to find in it, even if poor of resounding events, detailed analyses about human's nature. The only thing that he seemed to require was a great quantity of patience, for the more the lives he observed moved slowly, the easier it was for him to attentively study them.

James helped the novel as a literary genre move forward, for he did not offer the reader some right model of behavior to diligently follow, but he just offered windows on others' lives. James did not try to instruct the reader, but he only gave him/her an opportunity to immerse himself/herself in the characters' own point of view. Even though there is a remarkable distance between James's way of writing and that of Modernists, like

Woolf and Joyce, nevertheless he was their precursor and was a pioneer of the stream of consciousness.

To try to fully understand and know the characters of *Washington Square*, the reader has to follow their stories. It is essential for the reader to interpret, observe and be empathetic with the characters during those crises that change them and make them more mature, but it is also significant to stay with them during their “after-effect”. It is not a case that the novel did not end even with the death of its co-protagonist, Doctor Sloper.

Naturalness and Cleverness

The word “natural” is used especially from Catherine’s point of view and it is attributed to Morris: it is the way in which she sees him, until he even defines himself “natural”. In the sixth chapter, Morris also refers to her employing the same adjective, but Catherine’s naturalness is evidently different from her suitor’s. “ “That’s what I like you for; you are so natural. Excuse me,” he added, “you see I am natural myself.” ”¹⁹

The protagonist, opposed to Doctor Sloper and Morris’s personalities, is different because she is naturally good and even innocent. Unlike the two male characters, Catherine does not exploit her intelligence for her personal purposes, regardless of the damages it can bring to the people around her.

What her father and Morris use to achieve their goals is cleverness and this element is in contrast with Catherine’s naturalness. She does not think in utilitarian terms, for she incarnates “the romantic idea of Nature”²⁰, an idea pre-existent the concept of “cleverness” and not yet corrupted by it.

But Catherine’s being not clever does not imply that she is stupid, as all the other characters erroneously think. Not possessing that ability means

¹⁹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 32.

²⁰ M. Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 66.

that she is not capable of speaking the false, on the contrary, she is even too honest and, subsequently, too natural.

She is so natural that when things start changing and she starts answering indirectly to Doctor Sloper, the reader does not blame her for doing it, after all that her father have put her through. On the contrary, the narrator ironically evidences it, even counting the first times in which Catherine does not speak directly the truth. In doing so, the narrator teases the reader to notice this slow development in the heroine's mind and how she is learning to play the same game all the characters play for the entire length of the novel.

During the novel, the reader has to understand if Morris is sincere or not, and that task is taken by Doctor Sloper who goes to Mrs. Montgomery's house to discover the truth about her brother. Thus, the doctor uncovers the reality he was expecting, but when he discusses his thoughts with his intelligent sister, Elizabeth, she tries to make him see the situation from another perspective.

«I don't see why you should be incredulous. [...] It seems to me that you have never done Catherine justice. You must remember that she has the prospect of thirty thousand a year. [...] I don't mean that is her only merit; I simply mean that is a great one. A great many young men think so; and you appear to me never to have been properly aware of that. You have always had a little way of alluding to her as an unmarriageable girl.»²¹

Aunt Almond wants his brother to accept that Catherine can be a marriageable girl, even though her money is part of what makes her "attractive" to other men. It seems like she tries to remind him how he himself got married, not just falling in love with "the most charming eyes in the island of Manhattan"²², but also considering the financial situation of his deceased wife. Doctor Sloper acts as if he deliberately forgets about it,

²¹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, pp. 35-36.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

nearly trying to deny the fact that another man can be as clever as he was in his youth.

The conversation goes on and Aunt Almond keeps supporting her theory, underscoring how Morris surpassed that early phase in life in which a man contemplates to marry an attractive and energetic girl. She comprehends how Morris, being now in a more mature phase, also takes into consideration other factors and how he follows “the sincerity of calculation”²³, the same doctrine Doctor Sloper follows, after all.

Arthur, Morris’s cousin, early in the novel, talking to Catherine, refers to his cousin addressing him as “too clever”²⁴ and the protagonist does not see it as a merit, a quality, but she has “a feeling that if Morris Townsend had a fault it would naturally be that one”.²⁵ Even Catherine, unconsciously, partially understands Morris’s true nature.

Like Morris, Doctor Sloper is too clever as well. Too clever because his excessive cleverness is what brings ruin to him, as he thinks he is capable to know everything about anyone. The doctor is convinced that a single glance is enough for him to study a person or a situation and to have it under control. After forgetting how he found himself in the same circumstances Morris is, he also seems to forget that he already experimented the negative effects of his exaggerated self-confidence, losing his child and his wife.

He eventually loses his daughter too, even if in a different way, because instead of showing his fatherly love (that he seems to have lost with the death of his first child), he treats Catherine as a curious experiment, using his mind, and so his cleverness, and not his heart.

²³ M. Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 67.

²⁴ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

He seems to not be able to show Catherine any kind of fondness, because his daughter proves herself dull, plain and boring, she cannot give him any surprises. This is, at least, what he initially thinks, but Catherine is actually able to offer him the unexpected and the doctor does not like it, he does not like what goes against his predictions. The doctor's intelligence wanted a light resistance that could make the situation interesting, but when he receives it, when his daughter decides where to lead her own destiny, he prevents her from doing it on her own terms.

Doctor Sloper, as reader or spectator of the story, supposes and fosters an end to the events that Millicent Bell defines "aesthetic". His view is traditional, for he prefers an ending that declares him the winner and where his previsions become reality. But, if he can actually foresee what Morris's intentions really are, on the other hand, he cannot anticipate his daughter's actions and cannot guess her thoughts and feelings.

Washington Square, with its plot and characters, would have normally been a novel with an easily predictable conclusion and with no plot twists. But James managed to astonish not only the reader, but his most clever character, reminding him how life is unpredictable and that he should have learned something from it, for he already suffered earlier in his life.

Catherine and Her Quest for Freedom

In James's work, the characters try to interpret the other characters' intentions and actions, but they plainly obtain always the same thing: failure. Doctor Sloper fails to understand what is really going on in Catherine's mind, as she fails to understand Morris's true intents and as Aunt Penniman seems to keep missing the seriousness of the entire situation. It is interesting to notice how there is constantly the presence of a prominent instability inside James's characters' minds.

Characters can never truly understand each other or themselves, they are not able to find a shared agreement, for they cannot gather the actual sense of the others' silences and impetuses. James's characters are paralyzed, they are not able to communicate with each other and it also happens because in such a dangerous and uncertain environment like American society, they do not have a single belief, ideal or moral to which they can hold onto once and for all, feeling safe.

Concepts like "meaning" or "identity" are incessantly elusive and fleeing in James and his characters try to rely on social conventions, structures and rules, searching for a common ground, but they just keep discovering obscure truths, repressed feelings and unresolved conflicts.

At the inception of *Washington Square*, Catherine lets the other characters around her take the reins of her life, first and foremost Doctor Sloper, secondarily Morris and Aunt Penniman. She almost seems unaware of what freedom is, that her life does only belong to her and that she has power over it. As the story progresses, she slowly develops her own identity and resolves to make her own choices, even if they go against the other characters' desires. Her silences start to signify that she listens to her inner voice at last, they are not the symbol of her submission and embarrassment anymore.

The protagonist, seeking liberty, has to let go of her past ideas, based on her father's authority, a man that she thought infallible. The social and familiar hierarchy that sees him on the top and that was Catherine's point of reference falls down in front of her, leaving her without any other certainty and eager to find a new person she can count on: Morris.

Catherine undertakes this fight to reach her own freedom and happiness, to find a meaning in her own life. In attempting to do so, she needs to stop from being subject to the others' will and from being led where the others want her to be. She can give a meaning to her life only

being unrestrained from the other characters' manipulations and from the established social restrictions imposed on her.

When Catherine battles for her own independence, she is not able to look back at her past anymore, to her old self, to her misconceptions concerning Doctor Sloper, Morris and Aunt Penniman, all people that she sincerely believed acted for her sake.

The naked truth is that she was victim of the other people's decisions and that she will remain a victim until that day she dies. She does not live the life she wanted and chose for herself, for she remains trapped in a web made of constraints, fears and deceptions. Catherine is admired by the reader because she decisively wants her voice to be heard and tries to adapt herself to the complicated situations around her.

The Fifth Kind of Will

The word "clever" is never associated to Catherine, while, on the contrary, it perfectly describes characters like Doctor Sloper or Morris, subtle manipulators. To make interesting a story that has as its protagonist a character like Catherine, a dull and common-place girl, it was not an easy task for James to undertake. One of the features he used referring to Catherine was to list all the qualities that she did not possess and all the kinds of personality she did not embody.

«She was not ugly [...] Catherine was decidedly not clever; she was not quick with her book, nor, indeed, with anything else. She was not abnormally deficient, and she mustered learning enough to acquit herself respectably in conversation with her contemporaries [...] had no desire to shine.»²⁶

It is not simple for a reader to notice such a great number of negations, but eventually James managed to create a character with a strong will out

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

of an individual who, with all those negations, nearly seemed a passive shadow.

Catherine is at the center of a conflict that involves many other characters around her, but she also lives a conflict in her own mind, something that is even more problematic to handle for her. However, it is pointless how hard the other characters try to manipulate her, she is not a victim. She refuses to be incarcerated by the others' expectations and roles they want her to play: the female protagonist, with perseverance and determination, asserts her reasons and her point of view.

Doctor Sloper's daughter shows him and the others strengths they were never able to actually value. Aunt Penniman affirms that Catherine is "true" and "steadfast"²⁷ and the doctor himself notices her "unaggressive obstinacy"²⁸. If initially Catherine is unable to even protect her own interests because of her "excessive goodness", going on she is capable of seeing how the other characters do not really care about damaging her, as long as it gives them the possibility to reach their purposes.

Another of Catherine's strengths is her silence, an element that normally would communicate submission and blinded acceptance, but that James converted into a positive force that makes the main character unique. If the doctor, Aunt Penniman and Morris all indirectly agree on following the rules of publicly expressing themselves with feigned manners and speeches, Catherine does not deceive herself and the others with histrionic behaviors and discourses.

When the story begins, Catherine does not even seem to have a will, for it is bent to her father's and to the desire of pleasing him. Later on her will starts developing and she feels guilty for going against Doctor Sloper's wishes, behaving as a bad daughter according to her conscience. Near the

²⁷ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

end, she continues to defy him and manages to refuse to fulfill the doctor's will of never marrying Morris, despite her father is on his deathbed.

At the conclusion of the novel, Catherine opts for remaining an old maid, opposing herself to the conventions of her time, society and class. She refuses to spend her life dedicating herself to marriage and motherhood, remaining an independent, respectable and wealthy woman. Of course, in this way she is not able to know and enjoy the pleasures of having a family of her own, nonetheless she keeps living her days in a dignified loneliness.

Even though Catherine's rest of her days is grey and melancholic, her life is defined by her own choice at the closure of the story. And, again, even though her conventional ideal of happiness was to marry her handsome lover, the way in which she remains faithful to her own desire makes her the personification of the American love for freedom.

In his studies, William James delineates five kinds of will that it seems his younger brother bore in mind writing *Washington Square* and portraying its characters.

Doctor Sloper well represents the first will, "the reasonable type"²⁹, the person who uses rationality and imposes his authority on the others to make them believe what is most convenient for his own interests. He never questions his own methods and convictions, besides he is praised and feared since he never stops until he obtains what he wants.

Secondarily, Morris embodies "the obstructed will" and "the explosive will".³⁰ Concerning the latter, Morris has a spirited and impudent personality that pushes him to act impulsively. If he has a desire, even temporary, he will do anything to fulfill it anyway, acting fast rather than thinking about its consequences. About the other kind of will, he never

²⁹ M. Banta, *Introduction* in Henry James, *Washington Square*, London, Penguin Books, 2007, p. xxiv.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

dictate his own terms to the others, contrarily to what the first kind of will does.

Masculine presences dominate Catherine's life, regardless of what kind of will they portray, and yet she survives and has the energy to become the mistress in Washington Square. William James explained how a will surrounded by other sturdy wills, resisting them, it is made powerful by their existence. The last kind of will, "the resistant will",³¹ mixed with the element of the "habit", is the one which overcomes difficulties and this is why Catherine gains her own strength from defeating the tough and persistent wills of her father and Morris.

Habit is what permits Catherine to go on with her life, despite the storms she has to weather. Habit is the factor that gives her balance when she cannot decide between her father and her suitor, what helps her to survive the emotional emptiness she perceives in the mature stage of her existence. Day after day, year after year her life is not altered, but this repetition reinforces her, as she is ultimately portrayed sat and focused on her fancywork, nearly condemned to work on it even after the end of her lifetime.

The final will that shapes Catherine into a new person has its roots in another will. When the story starts, she succumbs to her father's demands, but the situation changes as she meets Morris. She starts living in an alternative way, for an external presence comes into her life and she undergoes an inner evolution. It brings her new needs and new expectations, as if she spent her life in a reverie until she met Morris. Her meeting with the young man symbolizes the moment of her awakening and the phase in which this fourth will causes significant transformations in her and her everyday life.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. xxvi.

When Henry James had to explain what separates “the romantic” from “the real”, he underscored how the former is associated with dangerous happenings and a life full of risks. Though he emphasized that dangers and the unknown are daily present, even in a normal and ordinary existence like Catherine’s.

Doctor Sloper and Morris are different under many aspects, but they rely on the scientific rules of reason and on what can be demonstrated by facts. They believe they know everything and that this makes them both realists. But it is on this point that they are mistaken, for they are subjects of “romance” as much as Aunt Penniman is.

«The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth, and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.»³²

In opposition to them, Catherine stands as the only genuine realist in the novel. She is the only one who actually tries to investigate her deepest thoughts and emotional conflicts, that is “the unknown”, and to understand how to deal with it, searching for a compromise.

Her desire to find a communal agreement with the opposing characters and to try to not feed resentful feelings show how good-natured she actually is. When the doctor is dying and asks Catherine to keep a promise, that is the only moment in which she retaliates for everything that her father submitted her to. Catherine’s revenge is to not give her father information on what he wants to know the most; that same man that thought of knowing everything and everyone from the beginning to the end of the novel.

³² H. James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James; New York Edition; Volume II; The American*, Victoria, Leopold Publishing, 2016.

Morris's Social Freedom

The character of Morris Townsend has been often criticized, as he has been seen as the same old handsome fortune-hunter who makes his appearance in so many novels. His importance and the fact that he has been perfectly positioned in the social and historical context of the novel have been rarely stressed.

Similarities between Doctor Sloper and Morris are easy to detect. They both look at Catherine not seeing her simply as a person, but as heiress of a fortune. At the engagement party, the doctor tells her: "You look as if you had eighty thousand a year."³³ Moreover, the both see the world like an enormous market where people are nothing else but products that can be purchased for a fair price. Morris is envious of what Doctor Sloper has and the doctor can easily understand what Morris wants: it is because they both share the same middle-class beliefs.

But, unlike the doctor, Morris has a certain "naturalness" that even Catherine notes in him. They both possess some kind of social awkwardness, but if Morris shows it in his loquacious discourses, in the opposite manner Catherine has it in her silence. Even if it is undeniable that Morris's naturalness is part of his artificial ways of behaving, it also represents the impossibility to define and classify him in one of the Doctor Sloper's fixed social categories, for Morris has no business in New York. This is the reason why "he was a great stranger in New York"³⁴ and also why to Catherine "He's more like a foreigner."³⁵

Not having a job, Morris is in an indefinite situation that gives him a problematic and strange kind of "freedom", according to Doctor Sloper's opinion. It does not exist an expression to define what and who he represents in the society, thus there is no place for him in Washington

³³ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Square. What Morris really threatens is not so much Catherine's inheritance nor Doctor Sloper's role and position, but society in its wholeness. He unconsciously reveals the uselessness of social boundaries and classes, since he can surpass them without being trapped by any hierarchical restriction.

Morris's cousin, Arthur Townsend, when he has to decide where he wants to go to live with Marian Almond, Catherine's cousin, he talks about moving to the northern part of New York. This side of the city is the most chaotic one, where the effects of energy of the industrialization and of the overcrowding are more present and visible.

On the opposite side there is Washington Square, the bastion that embodies the desire of those people that do not want to move north. It is the ideal place for who seeks calmness and quietness in the general agitation that dwells in the flourishing city of New York. Doctor Sloper contemplates and then actualizes his idea to live in this precise area, so to have the chance to practice his profession, benefit from his prestige and lead a financially secure life.

Morris has not both the need and the possibility to move northward, so he finds himself content to think of his future in Washington Square, finding peace and stability among its walls, taking the place of Doctor Sloper as master of the house and beneficiary of Catherine's fortune.

The job that Morris acquires at the end of the novel excellently represents the perpetual social changes and the progress of the emerging classes in the new American landscape. His employment is "to mediate between manufacturers and the selling of their products in foreign markets".³⁶

James noticed that employments like Morris's, that seems so unpractical and detached from any kind of dependency, were the ones to

³⁶ I. F. A. Bell, *Henry James: Fiction as History*, London, Barnes & Noble Books, 1985, p. 38.

distinguish the new American industrial society. Morris's profession is distant from the process of production itself and, contrary to it, he works in a world wholly made of paper. The fragility of his world is connected to the fragility of the concept of money, more abstract than ever during the author's lifetime.

American Society

Many critics focused on the Henry James's adherence to the principles of the philosophy of Emerson, a great influence for the writer and his father. The thing is that both Henry Jameses never completely approved the futurity of Emerson's thought and its way of going beyond social laws, neglectful of the present. Father and son, on the contrary, believed more in the flawed individual and in his/her own fallibility, his/her capability of accepting errors and of overcoming the fake certainties of the self.

The fallibility of the individual is a concept that involves the acknowledgment of the fact that a person can never know everything already, or there would not be any point in the discovery and in the continuing research in life. This is the only way in which an individual and his/her knowledge can grow and become mature, moreover the notion of fallibility was an essential phase in the epistemological process for Henry James Senior and his son.

James's being American does not focus on history or politics as much as he focuses on the self, almost trying to find shelter from the difficulties of the society and its institutions. And that need for seclusion also came from the weight of the role that Henry James Senior played in society. It is not a coincidence that many of his son's works lack a precise and a well-defined historical context and critics often reprimanded James for that.

With his paternal authority, James Senior has always been an inhibitive presence for his children. William and Henry Junior felt it during their lives; Alice gave an account of it in her diary, describing how there was not any space for her in a family dominated by male authority; the other two children, Wilkie and Roberson, never really had a drop of attention from their father, as they were just a disappointment to him.

Habegger points out how James's need for escaping family and the surrounding society was born from his father's failure to impress him "any sense of masculine identity or role"³⁷. The novelist never actually learned how boys communicated among them, their language or behavior, and it caused in him the painful feeling of never being a true man.

Poirier, talking about a tradition of American writers, demonstrates that in a society where people felt trapped and where everything seemed hopeless, the only escape route that the writer had was to defy and change the language through innovations.

In this and other works, James depicted his view of modern societies and how they had a certain characterization that lied upon the fragment of history in which they were situated. James's description of modern societies was pretty unemotional, underlining how the individuals who lived in them had to, sooner or later, face and, in some cases, also acknowledge their own fragility.

James saw what changes took place in his time and described the tragedy of human beings that were forced to adapt themselves to new ways of living and of relating themselves with the others.

«A new way of making and accumulating money, a dizzying new form of social mobility tied to this new economy, a new culture obsessively dedicated to work and financial success, consumerism, a cult of celebrity and fame, a mass culture based on journalism and advertising, a new conception of individuals as untrustworthy centers of

³⁷ A. Taylor, *Henry James and the Father Question*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 12.

self-interest, a new sort of dependence on the views of others for social esteem, and many others factors mean that things have not simply changed, they have changed in an unprecedented way.»³⁸

That new modern context had no space for genuine interest, honesty, social understanding, reliability and emotional insight. Quite the contrary, it encouraged people to judge others, to be hypocritical, to be cold-hearted and to focus only on themselves.

James identified those new modern societies as a first step towards a mass failure and what he questioned himself about in his works was how people would have responded to that big change, how they would have kept their humanness in such inhuman surroundings.

James represented a context in which people had to deal with a situation of instability. This caused the spread of issues and fears among people, such as anxiety, pretense and the feeling of being out of place. They were all ways in which people tried to react to modernity, where a new kind of sociality led them to doubt, paranoia, despair and even to actual pathology.

The problem was that people did not understand the society they were living in. When they had to deal with it, they preferred a static situation to a changing one, for mutability meant risk, disappointment and unhappiness. That is exactly how Catherine unfortunately ends up at the end of the novel: she decides to live her life alone and in the same house her father lived in.

Unfortunately, in this new modern society people had to accept to be in contact with others every day, but these relationships were built on social and economic interests, leaving out feelings and concerns. People became nothing else than a small part in a big mechanism, where they eventually had to let go of their subjectivity and humanity.

³⁸ R. B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 57.

It comes a moment in which these relationships undermine people's lives, taking away from them even their own meaning. When this happens, when one's life depends on such intrusive and inhibiting connections, then freedom itself is lost, and identity with it.

The other side of the coin is that people will always need to build relationships with other people, so, in order to completely obtain freedom, they will need to be recognized by the others. In such modern societies, people need, more than ever, to exchange opinions and to be perceived as individuals by other subjects that are their equals.

In this kind of societies, another step towards freedom is made only if one possesses enough capital. James knew it well and, even if it may seem an unromantic solution, it actually is the starting point that leads to freedom. The problem is that it does not matter if money is not earned, acquired through marriage or inherited, it will always bring desire of power over others and create dependency.

The method James used to demonstrate what his characters lost in their battle against society was to display their dependence on others, their need to experience an acknowledgment given by a person equal to them. Catherine needs to be recognized by her father and by Morris; the doctor needs to be recognized by society and by everyone else around him; Aunt Penniman needs to be recognized by the protagonists of her personal melodrama.

James wanted to prove the fallibility of that American desire for searching some kind of presumed independence and self-reliance, when, in truth, the stress was put on the centrality of social esteem and of being seen more than actually seeing. Even if Catherine succeeds in conquering independence, it is not of the romantic or heroic kind. Her independence comes at a price and with her refusing to come to terms with untrue alternatives.

In James's work, morality, represented within that new social modernity and its historical context, is not something that his characters try to attain, struggling to be good or to commit to their duties, but rather their determination to simply live their lives, as Catherine does, or at least tries to do.

James was always interested in how power worked and in what aspects it could appear, especially regarding the power deriving from social classes.

America vs Europe

James's work is set in a pre-Civil War New York, between 1830s and 1840s when the novel starts and during the 1850s at its end. Contrarily to what James normally did, he decided to set the story in a period of time previous to the one in which the story was written and published. The environment was very familiar to him, for Washington Square was the place in which he was born and grew up. James resolved to not write the novel from the standpoint of a New Yorker, but he did write it while living in Paris. In this manner it can be noticed that he chose to write *Washington Square*, an American book, deliberately from a distance.

Even if the title "Washington Square" seems to be out of place or out of context, as the critics noticed when James published his work, because it cannot be categorized as a historical novel, James's choice of the title is actually accurate. Surely, it does not give the reader a general picture on the situation that develops within the novel, the conflict between Catherine and Doctor Sloper, and it also does not specifically refer to the house in which the central part of the story takes place, but rather to the public space that is in front of it. And yet the square is a prolongation of the house itself, and this is, in turn, a symbol and a building closely connected to the

protagonist. Additionally, the range of Washington Square can be extended so much to include the city of New York and finally even the American country in its entirety.

Like his colleague and fellow countryman Nathaniel Hawthorne, James, in his book *Hawthorne*, looked at America, compared to the European continent, and saw how little it could offer him to his imagination. That is the reason why, as an expatriate, he found shelter and home far from his native land. On the other hand, if his physical self could stay away from his motherland, his mind could not, for in 1880 he created “his most American fiction”³⁹ taking refuge in the French capital from the harshness of that winter.

The novel also illustrates the ‘Old New York’, a kind of society that started undergoing serious changes by the early 1880s, and of which Doctor Sloper is a resolute exponent.

When James set foot again in the United States in the early 1900s, he returned to the neighborhood of his childhood just to discover that almost everything that he knew has departed. The confusion created by the arrival of commercialization, immigration and industrialization has taken the old houses and the social circles of Washington Square away. James, viewed New York from an external point of view, as the American expatriate he was, barely recognizing his native city; on the other hand, he did not lose the internal point of view of the American who lived there for many years and could notice the social, economical, political changes that had taken place in New York.

Having spent several years in Europe, a continent that preserved the history of many ethnic groups, James’s sentiment of “Americanness” did not include a narrow and exclusive opinion of his own national identity as something fixed and closed; but he did know that to be American meant to

³⁹ C. Ozick, *James as Jilter: Absenteeism in Washington Square in The American Scholar*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, Autumn 2002, p. 54.

be a subject coming from a mixture of different cultures and to be open in accepting diversity.

This sentiment is called “modern cosmopolitanism”⁴⁰ and it is addressed to Henry James by John Carlos Rowe. The latter explains how James was interested in other cultures and tried to incorporate them into his own work or life every time that he had the chance. James’s cosmopolitanism assumed the idea of cultural subjectivity that included two crucial concepts: the concept of the culture to which one belongs and the concept of the “culture of the other”.

This is the reason why James thought “Americanness” was not some kind of “essence” possessed by every American citizen, but rather a pretty ambiguous and fleeting feature. In James’s opinion this feature involved the awareness that Americans came from a mixture and that it made it impossible to distinguish between various cultures and communities within American society.

A curious image presents itself in a passage at the beginning of the tenth chapter, when Catherine receives Morris in her drawing room and where a “narrow mirror” reflects two volumes, entitled *History of England*. This detail gives no further information directly concerning the events of the story, so it distances itself from novelistic expression; on the other hand, it also has no moral function, as it could have had in Hawthorne. It is just a simple adornment, but with another purpose, a kind of strange remainder, because as the novel is about the American past, the latter originates from that of England. It is England which “lends” the novel some of its features, even though James considered *Washington Square* as an American tale.

⁴⁰ M. H. Ross, G. W. Zacharias, *Tracing Henry James*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 261.

Style and Genre

The title of the novel seemed to propose a historic topic, maybe James's own reconstruction of the neighborhood of his childhood, with traces of melancholy and nostalgia, but if critics were expecting a work of that kind, they were all disappointed.

The atmosphere of New York that James evoked in his work was more similar to the one belonging to fairy-tales than to historical novels. The structure seemed to confirm it, for Catherine could recall the orphaned princess, Doctor Sloper as the pitiless king, Morris as the prince charming and Aunt Penniman as the interfering stepmother.

The narrator expresses a feeling of nostalgia that can be noted in the third chapter of the book. This surfaces when he seems lost in his own thoughts, remembering a New York of "forty years ago"⁴¹, the period of James's childhood.

From the fourth chapter on, time and space seem to disappear and the Square, the perfect place for "The ideal of quiet and genteel retirement"⁴², is surrounded by an atmosphere of timelessness, unlike the chaotic and more commercial Lower Manhattan.

When James wrote *Washington Square*, he did not exactly know what model to use. He was undecided between the Realism adopted by one of the greatest James's masters and influences, Balzac, and the Romanticism of his compatriot, Hawthorne. Eventually, he resolved to find a compromise between them and to make them work together in *Washington Square*.

«One of the main complications of the novel is Catherine's quietude. Her rare-spokenness and broken syntax articulate both the object of James's disquiet (by its paralysed, non-dialogical incapacity) and the putative alternative to it (as an

⁴¹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 13.

⁴² Ibid.

increasingly impossible gesture towards authenticity and a freedom from lexical and institutional impositions). It is thus simultaneously frozen in the material world that we experience (as a reminder of the unchangeability of commodities, their denial of their own production) and a resistance against such materiality (as a Romantic refusal of discourse to taint itself by a world already given). [...] In other words, the situation of Catherine may be read as an index to James's negotiation of Balzac and Hawthorne, and his interest in the urge, encouraged by novelistic convention, to locate the alternative worlds of fiction within the world we ordinarily experience.»⁴³

James does not want to take liberty away from his readers and, in order to obtain it, he shows them only a possible vision of the object and never the object of his vision straightforwardly. This allows his readers to interpret his work in different ways and to keep their freedom. "Liberty in style and in behaviour are thus equally guaranteed by obliquity of angle"⁴⁴, a lesson that James had learned from Hawthorne.

The same debate, but from the economic point of view, took place during the 1830s (the period in which Doctor Sloper changed his residence to Washington Square): the money issue between paper and coin. The problem presented the same query that James was trying to resolve, the one between the rhetoric of imagination and that of realism. In his readings of Balzac and Hawthorne, James was exploring possibilities about the materiality of writing itself.

The money discussion gave James the pretext to reflect on the question between the substantial and the abstract aspect of his profession. In *Washington Square*, he illustrated how the conceptual elements had the same weight and relevance of the concrete ones, influencing people's attitude, social structures and the historical development of events. And it was pretty visible in the America at that time since the practices of the

⁴³ I. F. A. Bell, *Henry James: Fiction as History*, London, Barnes & Noble Books, 1985, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

spreading industries affected minds and bodies of groups of people, bringing damage to them.

James's ironic touch is palpable and is all over the novel, making it similar to a tragicomedy. This is achieved especially thanks to Doctor Sloper's presence, always ready to cruelly make fun of the people around him and to sarcastically comment on their situations. It is not so difficult to recognize some of the author's points of view so close to the doctor's ones: "The doctor's categorizing instinct and sense of probabilities are very much that of the novelist who admired Balzac."⁴⁵ The doctor's irony, used by the narrator as well, is turned against Austin Sloper himself, so to suggest that sarcasm is not the answer to everything and that to be blind to someone's feelings does not represent a way to solve problems.

Throughout the novel there is a change in the narrator's ideas and in his way to look at the events that take place. He seems to become more understanding towards Catherine's unfortunate situation and shows empathy for his anti-heroine. It can be observed how the narrator's tones, going forward in the novel, grows more serious and less ironic towards the protagonist and the reason is that he ends up considering her with respect, for her love is pure and honest and deserves his admiration.

The narrator intervenes in the novel, showing to know more than the characters do and almost anticipating relevant information, but then he withdraws, as if he remembers that he is revealing too much and should only tell the story as it is, omitting the knowledge he has on the entire situation.

«She grew up a very robust and healthy child, and her father, as he looked at her, often said to himself that, such as she was, he at least need have no fear of losing her. I

⁴⁵ M. Bell, *Style as Subject "Washington Square" in The Sewanee Review*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Winter 1975, p. 32.

say “such as she was,” because, to tell the truth— But this is a truth of which I will defer the telling.»⁴⁶

The narrator offers us even insights on the main characters, but, as the story proceeds, he steps back and distances himself from Doctor Sloper, stopping himself from acting like someone who possesses all the wisdom of the world.

The novel has the pattern, traits and characters of a melodrama: the rich heiress, the charming but manipulative fortune-hunter, the authoritarian father determined to prevent their engagement and the intrusive and over-imaginative aunt in the role of the young niece’s confidant.

The characters’ melodramatic elements are noticeable. Catherine plays the part of the dull girl, too good, too honest, but she does not receive goodness and honesty in return from the people around her. She finds herself at the center of the intrigues that the other characters have plotted around her life, suffocating her and depriving her of having a choice of her own.

When James was writing *Washington Square*, he probably kept in mind Balzac’s example, for he was the most important influence to him. More specifically, James’s novel is similar to *Eugénie Grandet* in certain aspects. For example, Felix, Eugénie’s father, has gained wealth coming from a worse social condition, like Doctor Sloper. Charles, Felix’s nephew, wants to marry Eugénie and, like Morris, he is an indolent young man. Initially, Felix does not approve the engagement between his daughter and Charles, but, unlike Doctor Sloper, he finally accepts it. Unfortunately, Eugénie suffers abandonment and disappointment when Charles leaves her, after she gave him her fortune. But if in James’s novel, Catherine chooses to reject Morris, in Balzac, Eugénie is jilted by Charles, because he decides to marry another woman.

⁴⁶ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 4.

Furthermore, the principal characters of the novel and, more particularly, the trio composed by the figures of the rationalist doctor, his good-hearted daughter and the fascinating but perfidious suitor seems to recall the same protagonists in the short story written by Hawthorne, *Rappaccini's Daughter*. The framework of the story is also rather similar to that of *Washington Square*, as the female character's destiny is too arrogantly determined by the two male forces that compete with each other to gain power over her life and decisions. Assuredly, James's novel is different from Hawthorne's short story, but James could have been taken Hawthorne's work as an initial point of reference.

Doctor Sloper is ironic, he is always ready to answer back his interlocutor with calculated wordplays or logical reflections. There are times in which his rationality becomes cold-heartedness and even pure and groundless cruelty.

Morris is compared by Catherine to a young man "in a novel, or, better still, in a play, on the stage, close before the footlights, looking at the audience, and with everyone looking at him"⁴⁷, but the unlucky girl cannot gather that Mr. Townsend was pretending right in front of her as well.

Aunt Penniman tries to play the role of the love moderator between the two parts, but she usually plans things so that her "mock romanticism"⁴⁸ can be satisfied, without giving actual help to the couple.

Even if Aunt Penniman is the character most easily associable with the melodramatic tones of the novel and often reproached by her brother because of it, the cold and tyrannical Doctor Sloper is not completely immune to its contagion. When Catherine informs him that she does not want to give Morris up, he reacts threatening her to wait until his death. As the eighteen chapters comes to an end, he also reprimands her, calling her "an ungrateful, cruel child" that gives her father "the greatest pain of his

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

life”⁴⁹. This passage splendidly demonstrates the pure melodramatic tone of Doctor Sloper’s assertion.

The elements of melancholia and mourning characterize the melodramatic genre and they are both present in *Washington Square*. Even though melodrama is not considered as majestic as tragedy, it surely is a genre that debates everyday matters, but it does not mean they are irrelevant. In James’s novel such themes are physical and mental submission, the power of influence, freedom from control, and so on.

The author tried and accomplished to adapt the melodramatic genre within the novelistic form. Moreover, as he succeeded in making a dull girl as Catherine an unexpectedly interesting protagonist, on the other hand he also transformed the simplicity and familiarity typical of melodrama in a masterpiece like *Washington Square*.

The crowning element that represents the appropriate closure of the melodrama is the isolated figure of Catherine that spends the rest of her life alone in her house. The peculiarity of the genre is recalled by the plain girl, become a woman eventually, that chooses solitude over marriage and refuses the fate that is imposed by the authority of the society.

And yet James’s novel is not just a simple melodrama. In *Washington Square*, the melodrama itself is criticized and the melodramatists (Doctor Sloper, Aunt Penniman and Morris) are compelled to surrender themselves and the genre they represent to the improviser Catherine. Her way of reciting is unpredictable, for it is made of incomprehensible silences and pauses to which soft murmurs are added. The fact that Catherine seems not to follow any theatrical script brings down the style all the other characters adopt.

Looking at it from another perspective, the novel could also be seen as something different from a melodrama, since the characters’ social

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 109.

language cannot adapt itself to the fast changes and turn of events in which the American society has been swallowed up.

Contesting Richard Poirier's interpretation of *Washington Square* as fairy-tale with melodramatic shades, John Lucas evidences how the characters act as if they were on a stage representing a melodrama because they have to accept the roles that society asks them to play.

This clarifies how, even though *Washington Square* is predominantly a classic realist text, it also shows to fit in the description of an expressive realist text.

«In an expressive realist reading the narrative discourse denies its own materiality and offers itself as the vehicle of truth as contrasted with the more or less fallible discourses of the characters. [...] it seems important to foreground and question by means of feminist psychoanalytic discourse the kind of subject positioning (both for characters and readers) that *WS*, produced as classic realist text, invites.»⁵⁰

The narrative voice in the novel is masculine and definitely close to Doctor Sloper's point of view. For example, Catherine, earlier in the book, is described as “excellently, imperturbably good; affectionate, docile, obedient”⁵¹, but if these qualities look positive in a woman, they surely would not be regarded as such in a description of the average man of Henry James's times. Moreover, when Doctor Sloper expresses his opinion about his daughter's taste for dresses, the narrator agrees with him:

«When it had been duly impressed upon her that she was a young lady – it was a good while before she could believe it – she suddenly developed a lively taste for dress: a lively taste is quite the expression to use. I feel as if I ought to write it very small: her

⁵⁰ B. Rasmussen, *Re-Producing “James”: Marxism, Phallogentrism and “Washington Square”* in *Journal of American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, April 1989, p. 65.

⁵¹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 8.

judgment in this matter was by no means infallible; it was liable to confusions and embarrassments.»⁵²

As Barbara Rasmussen claims, the masculine point of view is incessantly stated (the doctor and the narrator disdainfully refer to women calling their sex as the “more complicated”⁵³, “imperfect”⁵⁴ and “complaisant”⁵⁵ sex) and it happens mainly because of “the narrator’s patronizing stance”⁵⁶ that brings the reader to ponder over his reflections and to accept his truth as the definitive one.

Throughout the whole novel, James mingled together and played with diverse literary styles and methods of constructing a story. With *Washington Square* he explored melodrama, tragedy, comedy, fairy-tale, romantic and realist novel, and putting them all in a single work, he decided to not be bound to a unique genre, but accepted the challenge to tell the reader a story exhibited in many forms and yet flowed into one book.

Reviews of Washington Square

Washington Square was generally not so well-judged by James’s contemporary critics. They were ready to evaluate all the elements of the novel as “common-place” and to judge James’s work using the term “dreariness”.

The character who was appreciated the most was nearly always Lavinia Penniman, the dreamy and deluded aunt. The Dial’s magazine wrote about her:

⁵² Ibid., p. 10.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 82.

⁵⁶ B. Rasmussen, *Re-producing “James”: Marxism, Phallogentrism and “Washington Square”* in *Journal of American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, April 1989, p. 66.

«And, best of all, this aunt, Mrs. Penniman, a fatuous and absurd old jenny whose meddlesome solicitude for others is pretty certain to prove in the end the greatest calamity that can well befall them. This character is a most amusing and delightful one, and might be sufficient to make the reputation of a literary artist less a master of this kind of portraiture than is Mr. James.»⁵⁷

The New York Tribune added:

«By far the best character in *Washington Square* is Aunt Lavinia Penniman. This romantic dame, with her passion for wholly superfluous mysteries and her good-natured but mischievous intermeddling in the love affairs of her niece, is drawn with a masterly skill».⁵⁸

Most of the critics also found *Washington Square* too light or having banal plot and characters, but they always appreciated Henry James's skill in "sketching" the people that inhabit his novel, every one of them with his/her own personality, habits and peculiarities. Every character represents a specific kind of person in the American society of the time: the rational doctor, the too romantic aunt, the dull girl and the handsome fortune-haunter. James does not fail to impress the critics with the ability to portray his characters, and the Appleton's Journal does not miss it:

«The title leads the reader to expect more than he actually finds; for, while such local color as there is is probably faithful enough, the book does not reproduce with any degree of adequacy either the period or the society of which *Washington Square* might be regarded as typical. On the contrary, it depicts neither a place nor a period, but belongs to the order of novels which might be classified as character-studies.»⁵⁹

⁵⁷ K. J. Hayes, *Henry James: the Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

The New York Edition

James was not very fond of his novel though, and in a letter to his brother William, he wrote that the only positive character of the story was Catherine. The concluding act of his complicated relationship with *Washington Square* happened between 1907 and 1909, when the author published the revision of his own works and decided to not insert the novel in it, calling it “one of his ‘unhappy accidents’”.⁶⁰

The *New York Edition* was a 26-volume collection of Henry James’s Anglo-American novels, novellas and short stories. Apart from *Washington Square*, James excluded some of his early works from the edition, like *The Europeans*, and heavily modified other ones, like *Roderick Hudson* and *The American*.

When the massive work was published, critics paid attention to James’s revisions of his early novels and, in particular, to the prefaces he wrote for every work included in the Edition. In these prefaces James explained the style, the meaning and the efforts behind his works, so that posterity could appreciate and understand him as a great writer.

The problem is that not many studies put the stress on the Edition as a single text, but they were too focused to see it as a fragmented project. One of those few that considered the Edition as a completed and successful achievement was Leon Edel, the most important academic on Henry James’s biography and work, who looked at it as a colossal masterpiece that represented the peak of James’s productive literary career.

Additionally, studies on the Edition not only were necessary to pose questions about Henry James as an author, but to also contemplate the matter of modern authorship itself. An issue, unfortunately, was that James

⁶⁰ M. Simpson, *Introduction* in Henry James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. vi.

should have been addressed as the writer he was and not as a supernatural entity that poured into his work all of his knowledge.

«Part of the problem with traditional readings of the Edition, moreover, is that they enshrine not only Henry James but a conception of authorship – the author as autonomous, unitary, originating, and decidedly masculine genius – that seems increasingly untenable in the wake of poststructuralism, and more than a little suspect in the context of recent historicist, cultural, and gender criticism.»⁶¹

Presenting himself as the Master in the Edition, James had to erase from it all the traces of the impudent manners of his youth. Most of the time, that kind of men tried to draw attention to the mistakes of other people, feeling themselves superior to the rest of the multitude. This satirical attitude was easily retraceable in Doctor Sloper's behavior and he was consequently associated with James, for the latter wanted to avoid this juxtaposition. Thus, this is one of the reasons why *Washington Square* was not included in the Edition where James had to appear as a more mature and wise man and author.

James's idea of assembling the Edition began with the literary popularity that he could never reach during his career, for he has never been one of those writers liked and appreciated by the market and the public at large. The author was obsessed by success and how it could have brought to him wealth and recognition, and, with the Edition, he was hoping, among other things, to earn some more money from his literary activity.

The *New York Edition*, when published, was a product of a precise type, the so-called "Deluxe Edition", with refined bindings, garnished frontispiece and explanatory additions written by the author. All these

⁶¹ D. B. McWhirter, *Henry James's New York Edition: the Construction of Authorship*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 2-3.

elements made it an object that was almost a trend during those years, and James wanted his Edition to be as good as Robert Louis Stevenson's collection, published in the late years of the nineteenth century.

To attain his Edition and to give it an appreciable structure, James had to accept various publishing compromises, for example restrictions involving copyright, literary ownership and economical obstacles. He also had to low his barriers to the world of illustration, as he did for *Washington Square*, and to surrender to it, agreeing on adding photographs to the frontispieces of the Edition. It was a stratagem to encourage his readers to have a different approach to his work and to make their reading activity lighter.

Some of the works that were not included in the Edition were not just excluded, but they had a more tormented story behind them, like in the case of James's considerable novel *The Bostonians*. The author could not succeed in having back the copyright for this work from the publisher that possessed it, and so he had to give it up, leaving it out of the Edition.

With the *New York Edition* James wanted to re-think and re-examine his entire work for the twentieth century, creating a literary monument that could express his view as fiction as a form of art. Attempting to achieve it, James wrote prefaces for every single one of his works, except the ones aforementioned, and depriving *Washington Square* of such a preface, the author's intent was clearly to ignore his novel, almost denying its own existence. Ironically, acting like that, James treated his novel as Doctor Sloper did with his daughter. Even doing so, nevertheless *Washington Square* remained a fundamental milestone for the modern narrative that was in development during those years.

As it has been stated, not *The Europeans* nor *Washington Square* were included in James's most massive effort of his literary career, but if the

works were to be compared, the latter seems to be more complex, mixing together elements derived from both tragedy and comedy.

«Gertrude, the odd American girl who resists Mr. Bland but finds happiness in her beautiful young cousin, is replaced by Catherine, who loves another beautiful young man who this time deserves her father's bad opinion. Yet although Catherine seems powerless, victimized by both father and lover, she does in the end exercises choice, refusing a belated ringing down of the curtain on a marriage ceremony; she is left free to work out her own destiny, however limited.»⁶²

But if, on the one hand, giving the collection that precise title signified that James wanted to pay tribute to his hometown, on the other hand, he also wanted to criticize that chaotic and noisy society that was evolving and was moving towards technology and industrialization.

James's critics and readers though were more attentive towards his estrangement from his native land and his significant connection with Europe rather than the homage he paid to the United States. On the one hand, there was the attempt made by James's editors to promote his work as the entire collection of the first of the American novelists. On the other hand, the Edition did not really sell in America, for American readers did never forget James's so-called "treason" regarding his homeland.

Film Adaptations

Origins and the Risks of Adaptation

Since the origins of cinema, film adaptation has always been a practice of filmmaking pursued by directors and a derivative work that they tried to achieve respecting the works they were bringing to the big screen. These works can be of many and different kinds: autobiographies, comic books, historical sources, novels, plays and even other films.

⁶² M. Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 52.

Initially, studies and critics on film adaptations did not exist, as they represented an innovation in cinematic history. Literary and film criticism belonged to two diverse areas and they were always treated separately until then. When film adaptations started to become popular, it still was complicated to criticize one of them not following only the parameters of literary criticism and considering it a product of filmmaking as well. Critics had to begin to evaluate the various problems, obstacles and limitations that this transference from a medium to another implicates, and to base their comments and reviews bearing in mind these complications.

Every time a film adaptation was released, the audience expected the movie to be “faithful” to the original work it has been taken from. To insert in the film adaptation every line, dialogue and description present, for example, in a novel, it may not just create a product resulting in a total failure in every aspect, but it would also be unwatchable.

A perfect example could be Erich von Stroheim’s film adaptation of Frank Norris’s 1889 novel *McTeague*. Von Stroheim, attempting a literal adaptation of the novel, in 1924 produced an original cut four hundred and sixty-two minutes long. Lastly, he had to cut that version more than once, to finally attain a reasonable duration of about two hours, but the result was still unsatisfying, for it looked disjointed, as though there were some missing parts.

This shows how it is of great importance to not excessively prioritize the source text, because a literary and literal adaptation could result in a flop. On the contrary, when spectators go to the cinema to watch a film adaptation, most of them do not even know the work it was taken from; and there were many cases in which the adaptation gained success, consequently making the original work popular. Thanks to this process, sometimes original works are made popular by means of their film adaptations, where complicated narrative strategies or discourses are

simplified in order to bring the audience closer to it, and to even promote the reprint of, for instance, a book.

Slowly, since the 1960s, studies on films and literature started to merge together in a new area of expertise, with an innovative approach towards film adaptations. Both cinema and literary work began to be regarded as of equal significance and fair attention was given to the two media, without putting one of them before the other.

The popularity that cinema acquired also encouraged contemporary authors to adapt their style and to try to achieve with their writing strategies an effect as close as possible to the frames, where one quickly comes after the other. This phenomenon was illustrated and explained by David Rernstein in a famous article published on *The New York Times* in 1937, where he interviewed Lev Tolstoj.

«You will see that this little clicking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life – in the life of writers. It is a direct attack on the old methods of literary art. We shall have to adapt ourselves to the shadowy screen and to the cold machine. A new form of writing will be necessary...But I rather like it. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience – it is much better than the heavy, long-drawn-out kind of writing to which we are accustomed. It is closer to life. In life, too, changes and transitions flash by before our eyes, and emotions of the soul are like a hurricane. The cinema has divined the mystery of motion. And that is greatness.»⁶³

Many critics were firstly in disagreement with Tolstoj's words and, even more so, they were skeptical about cinema and its potentialities. They did not believe that it could have reached the peak of complexity in plot, characters, style, and so on, that can be found in a novel. They thought that those elements could just have been reproduced through writing, language

⁶³ D. Rernstein, "Tolstoj on the Cinema", *New York Times*, 31st January 1937, p. 158.

and figures of speech, and that, moving them on the screen, they would have been simplified and trivialized.

But, as time went by, cinema was shown to be not an inferior art and how it is more than capable to deal with complex questions and themes. Just like literary works have their own structure, movies also go through a long and not less complicated process of linguistic and audiovisual adjustment. While the creation of a book, in most cases, involves only a single person, the production of a movie instead requires a vastly greater amount of people and a central role is played by an adequate coordination between them, every group working in a different field of competence.

Moreover, the audience of a book is usually restricted to a smaller circle of people, if compared to all those viewers who go to the cinema to watch a movie; and while a book rarely has to face censorship, for a movie to be released, it has to respect conditions imposed by the Production Code.

Another danger that an adaptation can face is that its outcome can actually be disappointing. When producer and director undertake the adaptation of a book, they already know that the original text has to be dismembered and that many of its parts are likely to be erased or substituted. Therefore, what they have is a reference point, a rough material that needs to be developed without the discourses, reflections and descriptions given in the book. They preferably focus on its characters, main facts and culminating moments.

What is more, they are compelled by the constraints of the aforementioned Production Code, by the necessities of the public and by a cast formed by actors who try to play the roles of the characters at their best. All these factors must be contemplated during the production of a movie and the web represented by the combination of personalities, roles and points of view of all the people within the vast team that contributes to the final product, sometimes can turn into an impediment.

Countless times original works become something completely different on the screen, with the title remaining the only element left indicating the work it took inspiration from. This likely happens when people who work on the adaptation do not consider its adherence to the original work, but only its success or its failure regarding the box office, so that the budget expenses can be compensated.

Adaptations Theorized

Compared to adaptations, literature has always been seen as superior to them, for it has a longer history and tradition. Nonetheless, this superiority has its roots in two phenomena: iconophobia, fear of the visual, and logophilia, love for the word, seen as something pure. Despite these two elements, the increasing of adaptations in our culture is unavoidable. A considerable number of movies, miniseries and series is adaptations and takes inspiration from works represented by other media.

«Nonetheless, there must be something particularly appealing about adaptations *as adaptations*.

Part of this pleasure, I want to argue, comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change. Thematic and narrative persistence combines with material variation, with the result that adaptations are never simply reproductions that lose the Benjaminian aura. Rather, they carry that aura with them.»⁶⁴

Adaptations should be considered and seen as adaptations, treating them not as a single work, but rather in a pluralistic sense, as sums of references and innovations. Because adaptation is not, of course, a completely new work, for it always relies on an older product, but it has

⁶⁴ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 4.

original aspects as well. “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication.”⁶⁵

Adaptation can be considered from three different points of view, but all connected between them.

«First, seen as a *formal entity or product*, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This “transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation. Transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama.

[...]

Second, as a *process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation or salvaging, depending on your perspective.

[...]

Third, seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.»⁶⁶

Adaptations are not prequels or sequels, where the public almost craves a never-ending story, but they represent the narration of the same story again and again. As it has already been said, adaptation satisfies both the desire of repetition and alteration.

From a legal perspective, copyrights cannot protect ideas, but they can protect expressions of ideas. Thanks to adaptations, it is clear how expressions can actually be parted from ideas. Form can exist and be independent from the content that created it. But there are elements that can be adapted and others that cannot be transferred from the original work to its adaptation.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 7-8.

The primary element free to be adapted from one medium to the other is the story. Genres in which the story is told and approaches to the story are both susceptible to alteration. All that does not change can be divided in “themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on.”⁶⁷

Themes are the simplest elements to adapt. Characters are more difficult to transfer, because they represent points of reference for the audience acquainted with the original work. Moreover, characters’ adaptation is crucial for narrative and theatrical texts, the two genres in which human subjects and everything that concerns are central. Characters’ psychological development plays an important role as well, for it creates a connection between readers/spectators and characters themselves.

Narrative units can undergo alteration, but, during the process, it has consequences on other more specific parts, like pacing and focalization. Ultimately, what is the beginning or the end in a story can be relocated, substituted or deleted, on the basis of what the adapter decides to do.

How to Adapt a Literary Text

Geoffrey Wagner in *The Novel and the Cinema* recognizes three kinds of adaptation:

«Transposition – a novel ‘directly given on screen’; commentary – ‘where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect’; and analogy (e.g. a film that shifts the action of the fiction forward in time or otherwise changes its essential context; analogy goes further than shifting a scene or playing with the end, and must transplant the whole scenario so that little of the original is identifiable).»⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁸ I. Whelehan et al., *Adaptations*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 8.

In delivering a literary text on the screen, many features of the book (like focalization, style, point of view and figures of speech) are lost and need to be effectuated in other and distinct ways. The person that has the task to adapt the book on the screen has to understand and consider which features can be kept and reproduced in the movie and which ones are impossible to recreate.

In his *Novel to Film*, Brian McFarlane alludes to Roland Barthes's theory in which he looked at narrative as the only element that never needs to be changed or transformed from a medium to another, but always stays the same. Besides, Barthes made a list of narrative units that were divided in distributional ones (represented by all the facts, events and actions that take place during the story) and integrational ones (descriptions of places and locations, characters' psychological depiction, and so on). The distributional units are further subdivided in cardinal functions (those components that, if erased, alter the entire story) and catalyzers (those secondary parts that fill the spaces between the main events of the story and that can dictate the rhythm of the narrative, but cannot change its foundation).

Distributional features can be, even if just partially, "transplanted" and brought to the screen, but just those ones that do not involve cardinal functions, for if they are changed, the principles on which the bases of fidelity to the original work are built upon will collapse. On the contrary, integrational features need to be adapted through linguistic and audiovisual representations.

If these elements can be rendered with the adaptation, the first or third-person narrative technique is more complex to obtain, for the reason that camera lens will always give viewers an omniscient perspective, letting them see what the protagonist sees, but not, for example, what they feel and think.

Adapting the Past

Historical adaptations require the use of costumes, manners, expressions related to a specific period of time, but this never stopped directors from adapting nineteenth-century novels. This is linked to curiosity and to a kind of nostalgia that contemporary audiences feel. Those sentiments lead people to the wish of seeing evoked the last century in which the contamination and oppression of technology was not as powerful as in the last decades. This need emerges because people live with thousands of issues and concerns piling up in their minds in these days. These adaptations give them the chance to break free from a stressful reality and to lose themselves in an idyllic past, even though it is just for a matter of hours.

Adaptations of this type are also usually regarded as a light and easily assimilable matter, since in the majority of cases, people who watch them did not previously read the literary work as well. It is not completely correct to consider these adaptations something not so demanding; on the other hand, it actually is what gives them large visibility. They seem apt to receive cinematic treatments and become popular without trouble.

The audience has always proved to prefer movie adaptations of nineteenth-century novels, and a valid reason could be that these novels embody some kind of moral and ideological response. In addition, they also represent a link to the past and strengthen the public's relationship with it, all the more when costumes and settings are reproduced accurately and faithfully to the period they belong to.

On the contrary, it is always difficult to truthfully represent in a movie concepts and ideas like gender or social class, for they keep changing in time. A proper example could be given thinking of how in movies people who belong to working classes have an emphasized and regional accent, while the ones belonging to upper classes speak with a perfect inflection.

In the end, even if directors try to make their works as faithful as they can be, working on costumes, sets and screenplays, eventually adaptations age as well. There is a constant evolution in technology, filming, shooting and acting, and this evolution requires a specific study.

William Wyler's Biography

William Wyler was born on the 1st of July in 1902 in Mulhouse, Alsace, now a region of the eastern France. At the time of Wyler's birth, the region belonged to the German Empire. He was born to a Jewish family, where his Swiss-born father, Leopold, initially was a traveling salesman and later became a haberdasher; Wyler's mother, Melanie, was German-born.

After having had a tumultuous childhood in which Wyler was expelled from several schools, his mother started to take him and his older brother, Robert, to concerts, the theater and the early cinema. Wyler should have continued his father's job as haberdasher, but when Melanie noticed he was not interested in it, she contacted Carl Laemmle. The latter was a distant cousin of hers and, nevertheless, founder of Universal Pictures. He habitually came to Europe seeking for talented young men who would work in USA. Laemmle eventually hired Wyler at Universal Studios in New York and, some years later, he moved to Hollywood to become a director.

Wyler spent the early 1920s cleaning stages and moving sets, but his work ethic was still inconstant and he was even fired in some occasions. Finally he decided he wanted to be a director and put all his effort into it. Wyler started as third assistant director and later became the youngest director on the Universal, directing those westerns the film studio was so popular for.

The first non-western movie Wyler directed was *Anybody Here Seen Kelly?* in 1928 and, after several part-talkie films, the first one he directed which was all-talking was *Hell's Heroes* in 1929. Wyler never lingered on a single genre of movies, but he directed for Universal Pictures dramas like *The Storm* (1930), *A House Divided* (1931), *Counsellor at Law* (1933) and comedies such as *Her First Mate* (1933) and *The Good Fairy* (1935).

When he ended his collaboration with the Universal, Wyler began a new one with the producer Samuel Goldwyn. For the latter, Wyler directed *Dodsworth* (1936), *These Three* (1936), *Dead End* (1937), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *The Westerner* (1940) and *The Little Foxes* (1941). During this period, Wyler met with cinematographer Gregg Toland and together they ideally created the “deep focus” style of filmmaking. It consisted in various layers of action or characters that could be seen in one single scene; a famous example can be found in the bar scene of Wyler’s masterpiece *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).

The actress Bette Davis and the actor Laurence Olivier, who both worked with Wyler respectively in *Jezebel* (1938) and *Wuthering Heights*, never stopped praising him. They thanked him in different occasions for having helped them to become better film performers, for they both received Oscar nominations under his direction.

In 1941, Wyler directed *Mrs. Miniver*, in which he showed the story of an English family during the Second World War period of the German Blitz campaign against Britain. The film intended to make feel Americans closer to the British people’s suffering. It eventually reached its purpose, even if it was banned by the Hays Office (before USA entered the war in December 1941), for it was considered anti-Nazi. The entire situation did not stop the movie from winning six Academy Awards and Wyler from receiving his first Academy Award for Best Director. In 1949 Wyler

directed *The Heiress*, giving Olivia de Havilland her second Academy Award for Best Actress and four Awards to the movie altogether.

Wyler started the 1950s directing other remarkable movies like *Detective Story* (1951) and *Carrie* (1952). In 1953 he introduced Audrey Hepburn to the public with her first starring role in *Roman Holiday*. The movie gave her the chance to win her first Academy Award for Best Actress, but it also won Best Costume Design and Best Writing. In 1959, Wyler directed one of the most successful movies in cinema history, *Ben-Hur*, with Charlton Heston as its protagonist. The entire film was really difficult to make and even those that seemed simple scenes took a long time to be filmed. The budget for the film was also considerable, the highest one ever at that time, and there was great tension even among actors of the cast, for the movie was meant to be an exceptional success from the very beginning. Eventually it brought Wyler his third Academy Award for Best Director and eleven Academy Awards in total, the most ever won by a single movie.

In 1968, Wyler directed Barbra Streisand in her debut movie, *Funny Girl*. The movie was a huge financial success, was nominated for eight Academy Awards and gave Streisand her first Oscar. His final movie was two years later, in 1970, *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*.

On the 24th of July 1981, Wyler died from a heart attack. He surely was one of the most important directors ever and wrote important pages in cinema history. Under his direction, fourteen actors won an Oscar, for he always was a point of reference for the cast and all the other people who worked with him.

Introduction to *The Heiress*

James never considered *Washington Square* one of his finest works, on the contrary, he was always a bit unsatisfied about it. He tried to write a

play for the London stage with *Guy Domville*, but since it was a total failure, he did not attempt again to conquer the theater scene.

James never thought about rewriting *Washington Square* for mass audiences and it is what Ruth and Augustus Goetz achieved transforming the book into a Broadway play. The novel started drawing attention during the mid-twentieth century, but, more generally, James's works began to become popular in Hollywood. *The Lost Moment* was released in 1947, taking inspiration from *The Aspern Papers*; David Selznick had in mind a film adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove* with Jennifer Jones, unfortunately unproduced; in the end, Paramount Pictures wanted to bring on the screen *The Portrait of a Lady*, but as it was not possible, they chose to buy Goetzes' play *The Heiress*.

Ideation and Casting for *The Heiress*

Olivia de Havilland, the famous actress who played Catherine in the adaptation, brought to Wyler's attention the idea for an adaptation of James's novel. De Havilland attended as a spectator to the stage version produced by Jed Harris with Wendy Hiller as Catherine, Basil Rathbone as Doctor Sloper and Peter Cookson as her suitor Morris.

Wyler attended the play in New York in January 1948, four months after its opening. Afterward, he reached the playwrights' agent in order to meet with the Goetzes. When Ruth was interviewed by Jan Herman, Wyler's biographer, she recalled that episode:

«We came down from the country and met him at the Pierre Hotel. He wanted to know all about James's original story, and what we changed and what we had supplied. I'm always amused when people say we simply took everything from the original. It's not true. The James story doesn't have the jilt in it. We also found the key to the story:

the cruel fact that Catherine is a child her father didn't love. It was brutal stuff, and nobody had put that in the theater before.»⁶⁹

Paramount made Ruth and Augustus Goetz an offer, but they refused it, for they wanted a percentage from the total amount. Thus, Paramount eventually offered them \$250,000 for the rights, plus \$10,000 a week for writing the screenplay: the Goetzes agreed on those terms.

Barney Balaban, as producer and president of Paramount, wanted an excellent production and established a budget of \$2.5 million. Wyler worked not just as director but also as producer, so he hired his brother Robert and Lester Koenig to help him as associate producers.

After the success de Havilland achieved with her last role in Anatole Litvak's film noir, *The Snake Pit*, she was in search of a challenge where she could have played another important role. For the 1948 Academy Awards, she was nominated as Best Actress for the movie aforementioned, but could not win the award. Thus, she realized that the adaptation of James's novel and the collaboration with Wyler could have been a golden opportunity for her to fulfill her aspirations.

De Havilland, in *Gone with the Wind*, played the characters of Melanie Wilkes, a mild woman, and, with this new movie, she was willing to perform a different kind of woman, initially good, but eventually rebellious against her father's authority. Still, de Havilland's Catherine is not exactly the same Catherine James depicted in his novel.

«In de Havilland's hands, the character is less stoic than in the novel, particularly in the scenes with Aunt Penniman (Miriam Hopkins), where there is a hint of deeper feelings and even a suggestion of wit. For example, Catherine undercuts her aunt's patently insincere effusions about her late husband and then covers her face with a fan so that her startled aunt cannot read her expression. Her voice even changes timbre in

⁶⁹ G. Miller, *William Wyler*, Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, pp. 264-265.

the latter part of the film to denote her hardening of character and a new stiffening of defenses against people who seek to take advantage of her former trust.»⁷⁰

When *The Heiress* was released, critics commented upon it that it did not represent the tragedy of *Washington Square* in its full harshness. Moreover, Catherine Sloper of *The Heiress* (both play and movie) significantly varies from the protagonist of the novel. Jerry Clarkson argued

«Whereas James's heroine shows internal moral development, Wyler's heroine displays an abrupt reversal of character: first she is a duped innocent, and then she is a stoic domestic warrior returning injury in kind. Or, to put it differently, whereas James's narrative is based on a line of moral development, Wyler's film is based on the symmetry of revenge.»⁷¹

The fact is that Wyler's intention was not to reproduce in detail the plot of the novel with all its intricacies. His idea was especially to build a movie centered on the star Olivia de Havilland, paying attention to the theme of contemporary gender politics.

De Havilland's persona was changing during those years. As it has already been said, initially she was associated to "lovely" characters. Warner Brothers kept assigning her roles she did not like, so she started taking suspensions without pay. When her contract with Warner Brothers was expired, de Havilland thought she could leave, but the company did not let her go. Warner Brothers insisted that the actress still owed the studio seven years of active labor that she accumulated taking suspensions. But after she won in court in 1944 against the company, she acquired the fame of a strong woman. This gave de Havilland the possibility to decide in which movies to appear and also to rely on her own economic resources.

⁷⁰ N. Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013, p. 124.

⁷¹ L. Raw, *Adapting Henry James to the Screen*, Lanham, Maryland, Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006, pp. 41-42.

The Heiress helped her to strengthen this impression and image people held of her.

Ralph Richardson, having played already many roles, was already popular on the British stage along with his contemporaries Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier. In London the play based on *Washington Square* was staged by the aforementioned Gielgud, Ashcroft, alternating with Wendy Hiller for Catherine's role and Richardson as the doctor.

In an interview⁷², Wyler defined him an actor who could not be directed. Even more, he admitted that the very first time they were deciding to prepare a scene, the one in which Doctor Sloper returns home and hangs his hat and coat, Richardson did everything so naturally that the director was astonished by his talent.

Not only Richardson's physical grace, but his vocal control is remarkable too. A scene in which Richardson's quality stands out is the one where Doctor Sloper, at the engagement party of his niece, looks at Catherine, noticing her clumsiness and how she inherited nothing from her mother's elegance. Aunt Almond reprimands him, telling him he should appreciate his daughter more, but he resentfully answers: "Only I know what I lost when she died, and what I got in her place". In the second part of his statement, Richardson lowers the tone of his voice, making it sound like a bass note where pain and bitterness can be both distinguished.

In one of the final moments of the movie, when Catherine and her father return from their journey in Europe and he discovers Morris has been in his house during their absence, Richardson emphasizes how the doctor completely loses his composure. He underscores how Catherine has no other true value than money and, violently hitting the chair, accentuates his anger on the word "money". Additionally, Richardson adds that the only

⁷² N. Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013, p. 124.

value he recognizes in her is that she can embroider neatly, this time stressing “neatly” in a scornful way. This part suggests the end of the father/daughter relationship, because Catherine finally understands that she did not just fail his father, but that he disdains her.

The choice of Montgomery Clift to play Morris Townsend’s part was not as simple for Wyler. Clift had appeared in only a couple of movies and people would not have known what to expect in Morris’s role.

Initially, Wyler wanted to exploit Errol Flynn’s public image as Casanova. Flynn also costarred by de Havilland’s side in *Robin Hood* and other movies, having a solid career behind him. In the end, Wyler, uses Clift’s unknown persona to his advantage and choose him instead of Flynn, because of the latter had no interest in the role and because it was requested from the Goetzes to make of Morris’s character less of a villain than he was in their original play. Later, after the box-office failure of the movie, Wyler reflected:

«He’s got to be convincing to her or she looked like a fool. And he was so convincing that when it turned out that he was after her money it was such a disappointment...That the audience was so disappointed, you know not getting a happy ending to this beautiful couple...I went too far this way...I don’t know what happened.»⁷³

In the novel, James depicted Morris almost from the beginning as untrustworthy, and the reader, already from the first pages, could understand which were his real intentions. Wyler, on the other hand, offers another interpretation where Morris is more ambiguous and fragile before the doctor’s authority and even thoughtful towards Catherine, for instance in the scene where, before her trip to Europe, he makes her a gift.

⁷³ G. Miller, *William Wyler*, Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, p. 277.

In order to preserve Morris's ambiguity, Wyler keeps him away, in shadow, hiding his facial expressions during the phases in which he courted Catherine. An indicative example is the initial engagement party, where Morris conceals himself so that the audience does not precisely know what he is actually thinking or feeling.

Because of the disappointment Wyler receives for the box-office of the movie, he even wondered if this Morris's vagueness was the right choice, for the public usually favored him and felt sorry when, in the end, he is rejected by Catherine. But, in the end, Wyler knew that his own decision was right after all, for he understood that, portraying Morris like that, he made the character more interesting and prolonged the audience's curiosity about his motives.

Clift was impatient to meet Wyler, whom he greatly admired, despite feeling intimidated by his popularity. During the very first days of shooting, the actor asked Wyler to not reprimand him in front of everyone. The director, even amused by this weird request, reassured him he would not have done that. To tell the truth, Wyler never liked the fact that Clift was routinely accompanied by his acting coach on the set and continuously asked for her advice.

In general, the actors were not really friendly with each other, even if they had to work together on the set. More than once Clift expressed his antipathy towards de Havilland, believing she was not such a good actress.

«She memorizes her lines at night and comes to work waiting for the director to tell her what to do. You can't get by with that in the theater; and you don't have to in the movies. Her performance is being totally shaped by Wyler.»⁷⁴

The Goetzes agreed with Clift, for they, too, thought Wyler was focusing too much on de Havilland.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 266.

«She got a lot of attention from Willy because he knew she didn't really have the ass to swing it. She was so heavyweight. Tola [Anatole Litvak] had gotten a good performance out of her in *The Snake Pit*. That was really her only serious picture. Willy believed he could get a good performance too, if he kept at her.»⁷⁵

The Heiress (1949)

When Martin Scorsese was working on his adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, he also kept an eye on Wyler's *The Heiress*, for the latter embodied a point of reference for all the dramas set in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Tom Cruise was considering a remake of Wyler's masterpiece, but, with the director Mike Nichols, eventually decided to give up, because the 1949 adaptation had already reached perfection.

The Heiress was premiered in New York in October 1949 and after three months in London as well. Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* wrote about Wyler's movie:

«'Not many film producers are able to do the sort of thing that William Wyler has done with 'The Heiress', the mordant stage play of two seasons back. For Mr. Wyler has taken this drama, which is essentially of the drawing-room and particularly of an era of stilted manners and rigid attitudes, and has made it into a motion picture that crackles with allusive life and fire in its tender and agonized telling of an extraordinary characterful tale.'»⁷⁶

After the release, the movie earned enough money to cover production costs in six months, so it was not as successful outside New York from that point of view. Wyler, disappointed, in an interview to *Variety* admitted:

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 276-277.

«I expected it to make a lot of money. It cost too much. It should have been done cheaper. But then it wouldn't have been the same picture. As it was, I didn't go over the estimated budget by more than sixty to seventy thousand dollars.»⁷⁷

Even so, it was nominated for eight Oscars and won half of them: Best Actress, Best Art Direction, Best Costume Design, and Best Score. In addition, it also gave James's *Washington Square* a boost, as a paperback edition of the movie was published in 1949 with the text of the novel and thirteen pictures taken from the adaptation. Hollywoodian adaptations started to generate interest at the end of 1940s and many reprints of James's works were published.

In the credits of the movie it is important to notice that there is no "adapted from", but "suggested by" James's *Washington Square*. It is a detail worth noticing, for in the movie there are many parts that were not present in the novel. The title is the first thing that was changed from the novel to the film; the focus is on the protagonist and on the fact that her father is going to leave her a conspicuous inheritance.

With James, Wyler shared a European point of view, as the director preferred domestic tragedies over normal ones. *The Big Country* is another movie in which Wyler highlighted the relationship between father and daughter and here there is an engagement party as well.

But in *The Heiress* the engagement is Catherine's cousin's and the close-ups of her face are not fortuitous. One is led to believe she is jealous of her cousin because Marian got engaged, but, thinking about it more carefully, it could also be that her jealousy is directed towards another kind of desire. As she stares at her uncle, it is possible that all that Catherine wants is the love and affection that he shows his daughter in front of all those people, showing how he is a proud and not a disappointed father.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 277.

The difference between Doctor Sloper's fatherly behavior and Uncle Jefferson's one is apparent right from the beginning. Before the engagement party, when Catherine desires to show her new red dress to her father, he makes her seem ridiculous using the same sentence the novel character addresses to his daughter: "Is it possible that this magnificent person is my daughter?"

The doctor goes on mocking Catherine, knowing that her dress has the same color that was her mother's favorite, cherry red: "Ah, but your mother was fair. She dominated the color." It is evident here how Catherine eventually shows her pain after her father's words.

An alteration occurs in the movie regarding Catherine's first meeting with Morris. In the novel, they meet at Aunt Almond's place for a small *soirée* and not for a crowded engagement party. Additionally, Catherine lets Morris lead the conversation nearly for the entire time, for she is shy and too busy studying his naturalness and talkativeness.

When they first meet in a gazebo, scenes focus on Catherine's growing interest for this young man who sits next to her and then also invites her to dance. Her interest is highlighted by close-ups of de Havilland's facial expressions. At the beginning, Catherine feels uncomfortable, she covers her face with a fan to hide the embarrassment to be there with an unmarried man.

The situation changes the moment in which Morris looks at his blank dance card and Catherine, looking at it as well, feels more confident, for her dance card is empty as well. This gives her the courage to put her fan away and to directly look into Morris's eyes, following his discourse.

In the novel, the description written by James about Morris's tenor kind of voice is transformed in the movie. He plays the piano and sings a popular song for Catherine. The song is called "Plaisir d'Amour" and was inserted in the movie by the composer Aaron Copland, who wrote his own

soundtrack for *The Heiress*, except for this song. It is a sign of the importance of that moment of courtship between Morris and Catherine, for the lyrics of the song say: “The joys of love/Last but a short time/The pains of love/Last all your life/All your life”. The words represent an ominous prophecy, but Catherine does not pay much attention to them; she is lost in the contemplation of her lover and defines “Plaisir d’Amour” a “lovely song”.

She does not even realize that Morris’s rendition is somehow off-key and that even the piano needs to be retuned. Later, as if to confirm that, Doctor Sloper asks her how the harp lesson went and Catherine answers that she seems not to have “a very true ear” for the instrument. The doctor hurts Catherine’s pride in front of Morris by recalling her mother’s “impeccable” ear.

During the first phases of courtship, Morris keeps invading Catherine mental but also physical space: when he is insisting on being her lover, trying to convince her to give him an opportunity, he even ends up making her fall backwards while she is pressing herself against a door.

Catherine’s comparison with her deceased mother is a leitmotiv throughout the movie. Another significant moment is Doctor Sloper’s meeting with Morris’s sister, Mrs. Montgomery. Unlike in the novel, where Doctor Sloper goes to her place, in the adaptation she comes to pay him a visit. The meeting is kept in the doctor’s office and there, on his desk, there is a little portrait of his wife that Mrs. Montgomery notices and analyzes closely. She thinks that the woman in the portrait is Catherine and the doctor takes advantage of this misinterpretation to show Mrs. Montgomery his daughter’s frailty and awkwardness, as he calls her into his office.

The relevance of that portrait returns later in the movie, when Doctor Sloper, returning to his office after he diagnosed himself as terminally-ill, grabs it and puts it in his pocket. It is a moving scene because, being the

doctor aware that he will never have the chance to return to that room again, he takes with him what he considers his dearest and most precious object.

In Paris, when Catherine is on a journey with her father, he conveys an aura of sadness, stressed by a shot of his loneliness when he is surrounded by the empty tables of the café. Only later Catherine discovers that it was a special place to her father, for he used to go there with her wife.

Morris's words resound in this scene, words he says during his first dinner at Washington Square. Discovering that Doctor Sloper had been in Paris as well with his wife for their honeymoon and learning that he prefers Paris to never change, Morris answers: "Oh, in that case, Paris can never change for you, doctor." This statement reveals how the doctor tends to have a conservative behavior towards everything and everyone that surrounds him. It seems that he does not even want his daughter to find happiness and to have a life of her own, built on the basis of her choices and experiences.

After Catherine has been jilted by Morris, there is an encounter between her and the doctor, where he tells her that he will soon die. De Havilland's countenance does not communicate any kind of emotions while Maria bursts into tears, as if she were Doctor Sloper's actual daughter and not Catherine. Even on the doctor's deathbed, when Maria calls Catherine for her father wants to see her, she refuses.

Maybe Catherine's reaction can seem exaggerated and excessively harsh, but in the end she just gives Doctor Sloper the same treatment he reserved to her for her entire life. After all, in the movie, Wyler perfectly followed what James wrote in the book about the doctor's behavior towards his daughter: "You would have surprised him if you had told him so, but it

is a literal fact that he almost never addressed his daughter save in the ironical form”.⁷⁸

In an article he wrote on his film for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Wyler admitted that one of the particularities of James’s novel that attracted his attention was the fact that the protagonist, in the end is not the same person she was at the beginning of the story.

“Unlike so many films which leave their characters pretty much as they discover them, Catherine Sloper would undergo a series of experiences which would change the very texture and inner structure of her personality.”⁷⁹

The female protagonist starts from being a character that is almost a spectator of her own life, observing how all the other characters make their moves around her, to finally be an active presence and make her own decisions.

«In a claustrophobic masculine house, in which the sliding doors seem to turn the rooms into so many cells, the quiet heroine is variously buffeted by the rival challenges of scientific rationalism (her father), effusive romanticism (her aunt), and mercenary opportunism (her suitor).»⁸⁰

Growing and becoming more mature as a person, on the other hand, Catherine also seems to resemble more and more Doctor Sloper in some of her aspects. It is as if she does not inherit only part of his fortune, but even part of his disposition.

She eventually has for her father the same contempt he has for her during the entire film. When the doctor enters the embroidery room, Catherine nearly does not have the courage to look at him straight in the eyes. He definitely appears ill, nonetheless his daughter cannot directly turn her gaze towards him, rather she addresses his reflection in the mirror.

⁷⁸ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 21.

⁷⁹ N. Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013, p. 127.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Even her behavior towards Morris undergoes a substantial transformation. Initially, during Morris's courtship, Catherine seems less mature and inexperienced compared to him. This changes later in the movie as she makes him look silly and ridiculous, while she is cold and unconcerned. In the final scene, when she gives Morris the ruby buttons that meant to be the wedding gift, he interprets it as an act of renewed love in his regard. In truth, they represent a parting gift, as Catherine makes a difficult decision, but also shows that she can learn from her past and from her mistakes.

After rejecting Morris, Aunt Penniman accuses Catherine "Can you be so cruel?". Catherine answers "Yes, I can be very cruel. I have been taught by masters." The term "masters" is not accidental, for, during the movie, all the people around Catherine do not care about her feelings and needs, but use her to achieve their own purposes.

If in the novel Catherine was left by James "in the parlor, picking up her morsel of fancywork"⁸¹, in the movie she does not appear as mournful. On the contrary, with Morris's return, she seems motivated to react and to put an end to that unfortunate event of her life.

She says that the embroidery she just finished is the very last one she will ever make, as a symbol of closing between her and Morris. The act of cutting the last thread of the embroidered alphabet and, more specifically, of the letter "Z" signifies the ending of her story with Morris. The meaning the protagonist conveys with that deed is clear: any woman can gather strength and follow Catherine's example, cutting the threads of an unhealthy relationship and conquer freedom.

The act of Catherine finally rejecting Morris is represented by the door that she orders Maria to bolt. While Morris continues to pound on the door, screaming Catherine's name, at a certain point he can clearly see the light

⁸¹ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, p. 209.

coming from the inside that slowly fades away. While Catherine climbs the staircase, Wyler highlights with the angle of the camera how her steps are firm, for she succeeds in defeating those men who had dominated over her.

From *Washington Square* to *The Heiress*

One of the first decisions Wyler made was to soften the male protagonists, Doctor Sloper and Morris. He wanted them to be more ambivalent, to give them a different connotations compared to the characters in the novel. Spectators could never be sure about Morris's true nature until the end. The doctor, unlike in the novel, before dying, decides not to disinherit his daughter, as if he regretted all the bad he has done to her. Wyler, after all, could cause those changes in the characters as he was his own producer.

Furthermore, the movie shows a kind of bleak postwar atmosphere already seen in the 1946 *The Best Years of Our Lives*. As in those movies soldiers came back home to find out that their wives or lovers were dead or adulterous, in the same way Catherine discovers that the patriarchal society in which she put her trust in, actually never helps her to achieve her desires. The fact that the social world she lives in appears gloomy and spoiled to her, makes her almost similar to a protagonist from a *noir* movie.

In the movie Catherine emerged as a powerful dramatic character: her father's irony and contempt forced her to change her nature and to have a role she does not like. Unlike in James's novel, Catherine's reaction in the film is more evident and the end itself is clearly a direct revenge the protagonist takes against the people who wronged her.

Money is central in the novel and Wyler highlights its relevance from the very beginning by entitling his film adaptation *The Heiress*. Catherine's income, \$30,000 a year, at least initially, seems to be even more important than the protagonist who owns it. The heroine's money is surely more

mentioned than Catherine's qualities and positive aspects. Her father, her two aunts, Morris, everyone makes comments about it, but in the end Catherine proves them wrong because she has never been positively considered or truly loved by anyone.

Making Catherine's vengeance more visible than the book, the Goetzes also embitter the conflict between her and Doctor Sloper. Moreover, in the book Morris ends in a clumsy way his relationship with Catherine, sending her a letter. In the film instead he plans to elope with her, but he finally does not keep his word. In this way, circumstances are even more dramatic, for the protagonist understands that she is not loved by him either, right after her father admitted his scorn for her.

The final scene is no exception, because Catherine, in the novel, is more mature (twenty years have passed since her last meeting with Morris), thus she keeps her composure and tells Morris she is not willing to marry him. The fact that in the adaptation Morris keeps his youthfulness makes Catherine's final choice even more tragic. At the end of James's novel, she is just "an admirable old maid"⁸² who almost feels no satisfaction at all in rejecting her former suitor. In the film, the protagonist at first seems intentioned in giving Morris a second chance. She makes him and the audience believe it, until she has the door bolted and, in a very dramatic way, keeps him out of her house and life forever.

One of the greatest differences between Wyler's adaptation and the novel is that the protagonist not only becomes aware of her father's disdain, her suitor's dishonesty and her aunt's insincere interest towards her, but she plans to wreak revenge on them all.

The way in which her behavior radically changes in the story makes the audience nearly feel more empathetic towards Doctor Sloper and Morris. Becoming stronger and colder towards the people who hurt her, Catherine

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

turns into a version of herself who is more similar to her father than to her former self. With Catherine adapting herself to the atmosphere and world that surround her, Wyler leaves his audience in a hopeless condition. In the novel, James's final situation is not better, but at least readers can admire Catherine. Here the anti-heroine refuses to become the same monster her father was and finds her peace closing herself in a silent and resigned dignity.

Women's Freedom and Luxury Goods

On the one hand, the ending of *The Heiress* can be seen as a warning for the 1940s women who dreamed of a future where they are independent and without a marriage partner. On the other hand, Wyler, with de Havilland playing Catherine's role, showed a strong, attractive and rich woman who did not need a man's company, especially during the last scenes of the movie.

Moreover, the production design aiming at promoting jewels, cars and handbags through the film emphasized even more women's independence. Their freedom was connected to the purchase of luxury goods and was also the reason why movies with women as protagonists underscored sets and costumes as objects for consumption.

The Heiress deals with the difficult path a woman has to take, finding herself into a critical moment in her life and trying not to surrender, but to make the best out of it. Catherine's growth, from a simple girl to a resolute woman, is also symbolized through Harry Horner's costume designs.

When dressing for her cousin's engagement party and in the first scenes of the movie, Catherine wears unfashionable clothes. Doctor Sloper also reminds her how she is not able to wear them in a classy way. At the engagement party and in other circumstances, Catherine keeps showing how she completely lacks grace in her manners. When she returns from

Europe, Catherine is a changed person, for she possesses elegance and dresses in the latest French style.

Critics were also struck by the fact that de Havilland, playing Catherine's role, did not wear make-up on her face, presenting it as natural as it was. Thus, de Havilland, embodying Catherine's character and principles, in *The Heiress* represented the exact antithesis of the standard Hollywoodian beauty.

Apart from the attention given to costumes and their meaning, Horner also helped Wyler to recreate settings. The director specified how he wanted the house to be arranged: "The story may be a serious one, but this should not show in the designs of the house, since the structure could not know in advance what the inhabitants would do."⁸³ Horner respected Wyler's indications and they resolved to place a "dramatic staircase"⁸⁴ in the entrance hall.

What the movie communicated was that anyone who was trying to achieve a betterment of his/her life could find it by looking at Catherine as role-model. She does not just mature as a person, but has dresses, jewels and a large inheritance. These were the things advertised on the posters at the movie premiere at the Radio City Music Hall in 1949 and in other circumstances.

«Paramount organized several tie-in campaigns – one invited filmgoers to write reviews of the film, with three Kaiser-Frazer cars valued at over \$2,000 each as prizes for the best entries. Any enterprising cinema manager who worked out the best promotional campaign could also win a car; he or she (though presumably he) would be taken to the factory in Willow Rim, Michigan, where he would pick up the car for himself. [...] They could try making her costumes for themselves; a sampler design was published in November 1949 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, with a chart for embroidery based on the film's title being published in the same magazine three months later. Anyone seeking more embroidery could send for a booklet of designs. The press book

⁸³ L. Raw, *Adapting Henry James to the Screen*, Lanham, Maryland, Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006, p. 44.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

also proposed an heiress-for-a-day campaign where local business were encouraged to provide free services for one lucky girl, who would have the chance to buy the clothes she wanted and enjoy a free beauty treatment.»⁸⁵

Those people who organized the campaign did not want just to encourage American people, women particularly, to spend their money in goods. With *The Heiress* and its campaign, Wyler and the people who worked at them also tried to give women an alternative to their traditional role of wives or mothers. The person who embodied this alternative was Catherine in the movie and Olivia de Havilland in real life. She became an example of woman who fought and achieved her own independence, rejecting the roles other (chiefly male) studio bosses wanted her to accept.

Catherine's Three Phases

Three different climbs of staircase that Catherine makes in the film represent the passage through three emotional stages she experiences and each time she climbs the stairs, it has a symbolic meaning in the movie.

The first climb is after Catherine told her father of her engagement with Morris and she is joyfully ascending the stairs. In his study, Doctor Sloper is caught by the camera anything but joyful, his gloomy mood being pretty evident. These two opposite emotional states are emphasized by Copland's music: a lively theme for strings to describe Catherine's happiness and a pensive and heavier motif to render the doctor's feelings.

When Catherine communicates her decision to the doctor, highlighting the fact that Morris truly loves her back ("and he wants me"), her father turns away, not just feeling awkward because of this announcement, but also incredulous. In this scene, Richardson's acting is remarkable, as even in little gestures or light movements of his body, he is able to convey those exact feelings spectators would expect, with unique accuracy.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

The second climb happens when Catherine is jilted by Morris, after she waited for him to come pick her up. Wyler's decision to add this part to the movie is a substantial change when compared to the novel, where the romantic relationship between the two is almost nonexistent. Of course Wyler wanted to alter James's original version, for the medium was different from the book and he wanted to add more drama and pathos for the mass market.

When Aunt Penniman rhetorically asks Catherine "Oh dear girl, why were you not a little more clever?", she refers to the fact that Catherine should have told Morris that her father wanted to disinherit her only after their elopement, not before. The protagonist rejects to even think of it and the two women remain there, both not daring to move from that room. They avoid eye-contact and even though they are both unhappy, the reason is not the same.

As the clock strikes, Catherine starts crying uncontrollably and Aunt Penniman tries to unsuccessfully console her, closing the sliding doors behind her. Later, Catherine finally leaves the room and climbs the stairs carrying the suitcase she previously prepared for her journey with Morris. The ascent seems really difficult for her and this effect was obtained by Wyler adopting a precise stratagem. He decided to fill de Havilland's baggage with books, so that her climb in the movie appears difficult not only because of the weight of the baggage, but especially for sorrow and desperation felt by the protagonist. Apart from being rejected by her lover, additionally Catherine has to surrender herself to the idea that her father was right about Morris.

The third and last climb takes place at the end of the movie, when Catherine ascends the stairs, as if she is deaf to Morris's pleading, while he screams her name behind the bolted door. Though this final climb is different, for Catherine does not feel the burden of disappointment and pain

on her back, but like a towering figure, dominating the scene, thanks to Wyler's placement of the camera.

In James's novel, when Morris returns to Washington Square twenty years have passed since his departure. Catherine shows surprise looking at him to study all the changes he underwent through all those years, she is not even sure why she liked him. There are in the book many observations the protagonist makes in her mind while analyzing that forty-five year old man in front of her.

«She would have never known him. [...] 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. [...] It was very different from his old – from his young – face. If she had first seen him this way she would have not liked him.»⁸⁶

After Catherine points out that he should not have come and resisting Morris's attempts to persuade her, he leaves the house frustrated and she returns to her embroidery.

In the movie things go differently, because only five years have passed and, unlike in the novel where it is clear he still is the same opportunist he was, Wyler's Morris is younger and more ambiguous. This lets the audience that did not read the book hope for some kind of redemption and for a Hollywoodian happy ending.

Another change in the adaptation is that Doctor Sloper did not disinherit his daughter and Morris claims that his flight was caused by his desire to not let Catherine's father disinherit her. Being informed of it, Morris defends himself saying "I didn't know that" and, with a hint of bitterness, Catherine answers "I know you didn't", giving a completely new interpretation of the scene.

⁸⁶ H. James, *Washington Square*, New York, Signet Classics, 2013, pp. 205-207.

Furthermore, Morris seems to like even more Catherine now that she has become more cynical and less naïve. This detail is really ironic, like the scene in which Doctor Sloper thinks she has given up Morris, almost admiring her for her decision. But when he knows the truth, he explicitly shows her all the contempt he harbored during the years. Later, on his deathbed, when Maria, Catherine's maiden, calls her for her father wants to see her, the protagonist answers her "Too late, Maria".

The Symbolism of Objects and Space

From the very beginning of the movie, in the opening credit, Wyler let the audience understand that the space surrounding the protagonists played an important role. In Wyler's adaptations like *The Heiress*, it was even more noteworthy, for it represented the confines in which characters were "trapped", almost without having the opportunity to be in contact with the outside.

«Most of the film takes place in various rooms of the house – with one notable exception and two minor ones. One central scene takes place at a dance at the home of Catherine's cousin, where she meets Morris. The other two are brief: a scene in a Paris café during Catherine's unhappy European trip with her father, and a later one in the park outside her house, when she refuses to go to her father's deathbed.»⁸⁷

In Wyler's movies, stairs hold a significance of control and strength while mirrors and windows frames represent helplessness and constriction. When, for example, Catherine occupies a space within the frame of her father's office, she conveys an impression of imprisonment. Creating an opposite mood, in the famous final scene, ascending the stairs with Morris out of her door, Catherine is the one who holds authority.

⁸⁷ G. Miller, *William Wyler*, Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, p. 270.

The scene of the engagement party is quite different from how James depicted it in his novel. If the author makes things between Catherine and Morris develop really quick, in the movie the entire party is seen differently. Catherine and Morris seem to have more time to know each other, in a more natural way.

Morris's arrival on the scene already gives a hint of what his real intentions are. His being caught in the frame reveals that he is not a positive character. Initially Morris's face is not even showed and only his back is visible, as he walks across the frame. Then he sits next to Catherine, taking Aunt Penniman's place, and it is clear that he does not share the screen with her, but tries to dominate it.

Later, when Morris and the protagonist start dancing, the camera angle has the effect to make them seem the only couple to dance. In this scene, Catherine looks finally comfortable and at ease in his presence. Her emotional state is different from the previous one in which Doctor Sloper was with her and her awkwardness was painfully evident.

When Morris arrives at Washington Square to meet Catherine and they remain alone, he keeps trying to invading her space in this scene as well. She tries to move away to a separate frame, but Morris goes after her anyway.

In the following scene, to emphasize the contrast, while Morris plays the piano, the physical distance between them is notable. Even after Morris's exhortation to sit closer to him, Catherine keeps her distance from her pursuer. The moment is meaningful, because the song Morris sings for Catherine is not fitting. Morris is courting Catherine, but the song he dedicates to her is actually sorrowful and sad. After Morris translates the words of the song to Catherine, the distance between them acquires a more revelatory significance.

At this point, Morris proposes to Catherine and leaves. Catherine is framed once more, this time by the doorway, and her image is reflected in a mirror. Near her, there is a lamp and a similar one is present in the next scene, when she tells Doctor Sloper of Morris's proposal and her father walks away from her to take a cigar.

Again, when Catherine joyfully climbs the staircase, this time shadows can be noticed behind her, despite her ecstatic mood. To close this series of shots in a crucial part of the movie, Doctor Sloper is caught in a frame, and his facial expression clearly tells about his preoccupation. All these objects and elements are perfectly arranged and filmed by Wyler, for they prefigure ominous events as the movie goes on.

From the first scene in which he appears, Morris's ambiguity, played by Clift, is undeniable. His modern and American charming presence contrasts with the more traditional and English style embodied by Richardson. Morris's ambivalence is even more perceivable at the end of the engagement party, after having said goodnight to Catherine. Here, Wyler's camera insists on Morris's countenance, covered by a veil of mystery, and stays on him for a long time, until the closure of the scene.

Another significant scene in the movie is the one in which Morris escapes leaving Catherine behind. Before this tragic event, the two meet out of Catherine's house to arrange their elopement. The encounter is under the rain and in Wyler's movies it is always an ominous element. Catherine tells Morris that she does not want to receive her father's money and, for an instant, he looks at her in a different way. Nonetheless he ensures Catherine that, after making the necessary preparations for their trip, he will come back to pick her up.

Back into her house, Catherine brings with her some bags down the stairs using a lamp to light the dark space around here. Not just her

surroundings are black, but her dress as well. The gloomy atmosphere does not stop the protagonist from feeling thrilled.

As she sits near the lamp, next to her there is a mirror in which moving shadows can be seen when Aunt Penniman is coming down the staircase: a scene that could perfectly be taken from a horror movie. Catherine explains the entire situation to her aunt and also that her father will disinherit her. Aunt Penniman asks her niece if she has told Morris of those circumstances and Catherine confirms it. In this moment, from her aunt's reaction, Catherine understands that she shares the same opinion about Morris that Doctor Sloper has. So they sit together waiting in silence.

As Gabriel Miller claims

«Wyler stages the next sequence formally, emphasizing its pictorial and geometric style. Catherine is seen in profile, seated by a column in the sitting room and parallel to her aunt, who is seated by near the lamp by the window. Catherine, though anticipating her wedding, is dressed in black, like a widow; her aunt is in white. The color reversal highlights Catherine's betrayal. Both women sit still, a shadow between them. When Catherine finally asks why she shouldn't have told Morris about the money, Aunt Penniman replies, "Oh, dear girl, why were you not a little more clever?" Her aunt's words imply what Catherine must now recognize – that the male-dominated social world is governed by money and power. Aunt Penniman herself has learned to survive in the constricted space she inhabits – after all, she lives in the house at her brother's invitation.»⁸⁸

After the bitter lesson Aunt Penniman gives her, Catherine bursts into tears and the aunt closes the sliding doors of the room, as if to shield her niece from the audience. When Catherine later leaves the room, she ascends the stairs with her baggage, heavily dragging them.

The opposite action is performed by Doctor Sloper in the next scene, weak and ill, when he descends the staircase. It is the first time the doctor is

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

seen on the stairs and the fact that he is descending them represents his loss of power, both physical and mental. The doctor enters the room and Catherine is there working on her embroidery: her image is once more reflected in a mirror and her countenance shows her strength and determination. She is now the one who holds control, contrasting with the limping figure of her father.

Unlike the previous scenes, Doctor Sloper's office is unlit and the curtains are drawn. Becoming aware of the fact that he will die soon, Doctor Sloper gives his daughter and Maria the tragic news. The latter starts crying while, on the contrary, Catherine is unmoved. As Maria goes away and the two remain alone, the protagonist uses her father's words and contempt against him, uncaring of the fact he is dying.

«“You have cheated me. You thought that any handsome, clever man would be as bored as you were...It was not love that made you protect me. It was contempt.” She goes on to say, “I don't know that Morris would have hurt me or starved me for affection more than you did.”»⁸⁹

Further, when Catherine threatens the doctor of rewriting his will by disinheriting herself, Wyler places him at the front of the frame to underscore his desperation. In this passage, it is Catherine the one who is cruel. The result of this dialogue is that the audience ends up favoring and feeling closer to Doctor Sloper's reasons. Now the doctor is defenseless, he is in the same position that Catherine has at the start of the movie.

In James's novel, the doctor, even if doomed, feels pleasure in having guessed Morris's true intents. Here, Wyler's doctor is evidently hurt and defeated. He leaves the room causing a feeling of pity in the viewers, passes under the door frame and ascends the staircase, close to his death.

Outside the house, with Catherine sitting on a bench, Maria announces her mistress that the doctor is dying and he asking for her. Wyler places

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 275.

Catherine in profile again, the same position she had after being rejected, near her embroidery. Before entering the house, Maria turns one last time to see if the protagonist joins her, but Catherine does not move or show any emotion.

In the final meeting between Catherine and Morris, the protagonist reacts differently to the approaches of her suitor. If in the previous scenes of courtship, Morris successfully had occupied Catherine's space, the situation is now different. Catherine is clearly detached from him both physically and emotionally.

After leaving him outside the door, Catherine is once again caught in profile and, after having cut the last thread of her embroidery, she takes the lamp and climbs the stairs. Wearing a white dress, the heroine closes the movie married to a life in which she is divorced from everyone.

Conclusion

In my research I tried to show how Henry James's 1880 *Washington Square* does not only represent a crucial point in his literary career, but also raises many questions. The novel deals with different kinds of issues: familiar, economic, societal, national themes and so on. Catherine, the anti-heroine, is forced to fight her father in order to achieve her independence; Doctor Sloper's rationality is defeated and he has to surrender before his daughter's will; Morris is able to fool Catherine once, but, when he returns, he finds a strong woman and not an innocent girl.

In *Washington Square*, James realistically depicts American society and questions it and its cruel rules. He shows the battle of a lonely and unloved young woman in a male-dominated world, where she is oppressed by those men who try to take control over her life. Knowing that context so well and having experienced some of Catherine's difficulties, it is understandable to notice James's admiration for the heroine. Because

Catherine eventually becomes a heroine, even if not the average heroine who is usually found in a novel.

Despite the criticism surrounding movie adaptations (and adaptations in general) on their first representations on the screen, they have finally become popular. Over the years, the skepticism has diminished and adaptations have been considered as having their own importance, even if derivative works.

Through *The Heiress* William Wyler has demonstrated it, directing a successful movie. Moreover, he was capable of making innovations which considered the needs of his audience and perfectly adhered to James's intentions. After adapting the Goetzes' play for the screen, Wyler chose an excellent cast: Montgomery Clift, Ralph Richardson and Olivia de Havilland, who eventually even won the Oscar for Best Actress thanks to her performance. With *The Heiress*, Wyler gave American women a way of becoming aware of their own power and free from patriarchal and male domination.

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