

# HENRY JAMES

## Washington Square



ENRICHED CLASSIC

**E N R I C H E D C L A S S I C S**

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**HENRY JAMES**

Edited, and with an introduction by  
**PETER CONN**

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HENRY JAMES was born in 1843 at 21 Washington Place in New York City. The son of Henry James Sr., a prominent intellectual, James was educated by tutors abroad. After a brief stint at Harvard Law School when he was nineteen, James concentrated on literature. He published his first short story, "A Tragedy of Errors," at the age of twenty-one and soon became a contributor to *The Nation* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. He later moved to Paris, where wrote for the *New York Tribune*. From 1876 James lived in England, becoming a British citizen in 1915. He is renowned for his incisive portrayals of Americans living abroad.

Before his death in 1916, James wrote twenty novels, 112 short stories, and a dozen plays, in addition to literary criticism and travel writing, a body of work that benefits greatly from James' gifts for psychology and philosophy—and from his occasional incorporation of paranormal elements. Among his most revered works are *Daisy Miller*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and his famous ghost story "The Turn of the Screw," several of which have made their way to the big screen and all of which continue to resonate with modern readers.

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This Enriched Classic has been prepared by Peter Conn, the Andrea Mitchell Professor of English and Deputy Provost at the University of Pennsylvania. His books include *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Peter Conn also edited the Washington Square press Enriched Classics edition of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*.

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## INTRODUCTION



*Washington Square* was published in 1880, when Henry James was still in his thirties. James was born in 1843, and he had grown up in one of the most remarkable American families of the nineteenth century. He was, according to his older brother, William, "a member of the James family, and [had] no other country." His father, Henry James, Sr., was a tireless spiritual seeker and a friend of Emerson, Lowell, and other major New England thinkers. William pursued an academic career of great distinction, shaping the development of the disciplines of psychology and philosophy as a professor at Harvard. The family's only daughter, Alice, spent much of her short life as an invalid, but produced richly interesting letters and journals.

Henry James, Sr., provided his family with an eccentric but cosmopolitan education. As a child and adolescent, the younger Henry spent years traveling with his family throughout Europe, developing early on the habits of observation and analysis that would mark his mature fictional practice. Even as a teenager, he started to feel the call of a literary vocation; as he read the novels of Turgenev, George Eliot, and Balzac, he began to imagine himself in the company of such writers. He published his first short story in 1864,

when he was barely twenty-one and the Civil War was still raging. When he died, over half a century later, in the midst of World War I, he had written more than twenty novels and over a hundred stories—several million words of fiction, together with scores of essays on art and literature, a dozen plays, travel books, biographies, memoirs, and thousands of letters. Many of his fellow writers called him “The Master,” in tribute to his tireless and lifelong dedication to the craft of fiction.

At the time he published *Washington Square*, James had reached a major turning point in his life and writing. Concluding that America did not offer the aesthetic traditions or the social complexity that significant art required, he resolved to settle permanently in Europe. This New York novel thus serves as a kind of valedictory to James’s native land, and it is set specifically in some of the places he had known as a boy. James was born on Washington Place, a small street on the Square’s eastern side. Soon afterwards, the family moved to West 14th Street, where they lived for the next dozen years. Many years later, in a memoir called *A Small Boy and Others*, James looked back with affection on what he called the “small warm dusky homogeneous world” of New York in the 1850s. The streets and sights around Washington Square were, in his own phrase, a kind of Eden. He wandered the city’s lanes and avenues and even some of its back alleys, usually in the company of his brother, William, peeking into houses and taverns, visiting Barnum’s American Museum and the circus, delighting in the smells of flowering trees and freshly-baked bread that



filled the air in the blocks around his house. When he came to write *Washington Square*, James included an extended and nostalgic homage to his fond boyhood memories in the novel's early pages:

I know not [comments the narrator] whether it is owing to the tenderness of early associations, but this portion of New York appears to many persons the most delectable. It has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long, shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honorable look than any of the upper ramifications of the great longitudinal thoroughfare—the look of having had something of a social history.

Through his narrator, James is looking back at the pleasant images of his own childhood and at the same time recalling the more intimate scale of antebellum New York—taking the reader back to what he once called “a visitable past.” The three decades that separate the novel's action from the time in which James wrote the story encompassed years of ferocious change. After the Civil War, the nation experienced the astonishing industrial and urban development that would transform the United States into the leading economic power in the world, and simultaneously transform New York into the world's financial capital.

The New York of the novel is still a fairly quiet place, many of whose inhabitants know each other. The forces of change have already started to assert themselves: one of the characters talks about moving to some farmland



uptown, building a new house, and waiting just a few years for the city to grow out to join him. Nonetheless, the general tenor of life in those years was slower, sensitive to custom and the idea of social norms.

As it must, evil intrudes on the tranquility of this Eden. In his novel, James introduces a small cast of characters, who engage each other in a decorous and almost noiseless struggle, which is nonetheless sustained, bitter, and ultimately destructive. The plot of *Washington Square* has the simplicity of old-fashioned melodrama: a plain-looking, good-hearted young woman, the only child of a rich widower, is pursued by a charming but unscrupulous man who seeks the wealth she will presumably inherit. On this well-worn and slender premise, Henry James constructed one of his most memorable novels, a story in which love is answered with betrayal and loyalty leads inexorably to despair. Catherine Sloper, in the first impetuous act of her life, gives her love to the fortune-hunting Morris Townsend. Her father, a physician of large talents and even larger income, forbids the marriage, accurately judging her suitor's character, but permanently blighting his daughter's life with his cruelty.

The book has several sources, including Jane Austen's matchmaking novels and Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*. The most proximate origin, as James identified it in his notebooks, was a story that the celebrated English actress Fanny Kemble had told at a dinner party. Kemble's story dealt with her own younger brother, whom she described as "luxurious" and untrustworthy. He had courted a "dull, plain, common-place girl," attracted exclusively by her money.

The girl's father, a Cambridge Master, threatened his daughter with disinheritance if she married. The marriage never took place. When the still "handsome, selfish, impecunious" young Kemble returned years later, he proposed once again, and was once again refused. "H.K.'s selfishness," Fanny Kemble concluded, "had overreached itself and this was the retribution of time."

In translating Fanny Kemble's story from England to New York, James conferred a distinctively American literary genealogy on Dr. Sloper. Just before he published *Washington Square*, James had written a book-length biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne. James argued that Hawthorne was the best novelist America had produced, but that even Hawthorne had been trapped by the meagerness of America's cultural resources. Nonetheless, whatever James's view of Hawthorne's limits, *Washington Square* clearly exhibits Hawthorne's powerful influence. Dr. Sloper unquestionably recalls that gallery of Hawthorne's male figures, from Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* to Dr. Rappaccini in "Rappaccini's Daughter," to Ethan Brand, in the story of that name. Cut off from what Hawthorne called "the magnetic chain of humanity," these are men who exchange love for a pernicious curiosity, who permit humane feeling to be dominated by manipulative intellect. Like them, Dr. Sloper puts the demands of his superior knowledge ahead of whatever claims love might make. He is right in his suspicions of the fortune-hunting Morris, but the joy he takes in his powers of observation and deduction inflicts a terrible cost.

His daughter, Catherine, has grown up knowing that

he finds her unattractive and unpromising; sadly, these are opinions with which she agrees. And, as the narrator makes clear, she is indeed far from brilliant. But she pays a high and undeserved price for her failure to measure up to her father's expectations. Although Dr. Sloper is rarely explicit in his cruelty, he regards Catherine with bemused contempt, and treats her with an elegant irony that ultimately reaches to a species of sadism. Mrs. Almond, the shrewder of his two sisters, asks at one point whether he shall ever relent in his opposition to Morris. The doctor's reply takes the form of a rhetorical question—"Shall a geometrical proposition relent?"—a self-chosen metaphor that vividly reveals the sterile inhumanity of his own conception of himself.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Catherine is presented as the passive object of everyone else's exertions. The unscrupulous Morris wants to maneuver her into a marriage that will assure his permanent comfort. Aunt Lavinia Penniman, Dr. Sloper's second sister, eager to serve as matchmaker, conspires with Morris out of a brainlessly misconceived benevolence, mainly to satisfy her own longing to play a featured role in a fairy tale elopement. Dr. Sloper challenges Catherine again and again to see Morris's deficiencies for what they are and give him up.

Catherine will neither marry Morris in defiance of her father, nor will she renounce him. Midway through the novel, dissatisfied with the stalemate, the doctor decides to take his daughter on an extended tour of Europe. After several months of travel, during which Catherine continues to display a stolid obedience but

also continues to receive letters from Morris, the story reaches an emotional climax in a lurid scene set in the Alps. Father and daughter find themselves on a high ridge, separated from their guide and alone together under a threatening sky.

Dr. Sloper chooses this gothic setting, amid the "hard-featured rocks," to challenge her: "He stopped in front of her, and stood looking at her with eyes that had kept the light of the flushing snow-summits on which they had been fixed. Then, abruptly, in a low tone, he asked her an unexpected question: 'Have you given him up?' " In this dangerous setting, his question seems deliberately intended to frighten her: " 'I am not a very good man,' " he tells her. " 'Though I am very smooth externally, at bottom I am very passionate; and I assure you I can be very hard.' "

Even under this duress, Catherine refuses to yield. A few weeks later, in a Liverpool hotel room on the eve of their return to America, the doctor confesses his defeat in an exceptionally vulgar figure of speech: " 'We have fattened the sheep for him before he kills it.' " In the face of this unconscionable assault, Catherine is reduced to dumbstruck silence. Her simple decency begins to assume the dimensions of heroism, though she doesn't recognize it herself. Heroism is the last thing that this shy, insecure, instinctively agreeable young woman wants for herself. On the contrary, she wants only to be a good daughter, a task that, throughout her life, had actually filled her with "great excitement." But her father's adamant resistance arouses a strength she never quite suspected she possessed.

Catherine's courage is tested again on her return

from Europe. When Morris is finally convinced that Dr. Sloper will never accept him as a son-in-law, and that marriage will not bring the wealth he had longed for, he simply walks out. At that point, Catherine has lost whatever chance of happiness she may have had. The adoration that had bound her to her father has been stifled, and the love she has offered to her suitor has been rejected.

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

Though still in her early twenties, she can see all the way to the end of her life, and the vista is unrelievedly bleak.

In the end, Catherine extracts a kind of revenge on the two men who have wronged her. Though she is absolutely sure she will never marry Morris, she refuses to share that conviction with her father, thus denying him his mean-spirited triumph. He in turn attempts to punish her, by writing her out of his will, but it is a gesture that merely ratifies his own failure. Catherine grows into a quiet middle age, a mild and modestly conservative presence among her nieces and nephews. Two men make marriage proposals, but she rejects them. "I

didn't wish to marry,' " is all she can say; but it is clear that her capacity for affection has dried up.

As for Morris, he reappears in the final pages of the novel, after years of absence, a stout, pathetic figure, stripped of whatever glamour once attracted Catherine. Urged on by the irrepressible Lavinia, Morris makes one last attempt at reconciliation: even her small income would be preferable to the poverty in which he is now trapped. Catherine listens for only a moment or two before she dismisses Morris, then stands alone and motionless, "her eyes on the ground." There is no hint of exultation in Catherine's self-assertion. For her the future holds only survival, and the constant dull ache of the double abandonment she has suffered. The novel's last sentence captures her fate with chilling precision: "Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlor, picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again—for life, as it were."

*Washington Square* was published serially on both sides of the Atlantic. The novel appeared in six installments in England's *Cornhill Magazine* and in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in New York, both America and Great Britain. Both magazines included illustrations by the noted artist, George du Maurier. Book publication followed, in December, 1880 (though the original title page is dated 1881). On several occasions, James himself expressed reservations about the book. When it was about to be published, he called it a "poorish story" in a letter to his friend, William Dean Howells; and he wrote another friend, Grace Norton, that it was "a slender tale of rather too narrow an interest." To his brother,

William, James wrote that "The young man in *Washington Square* is not a portrait—he is sketched from the outside merely. . . . The only good thing in the story is the girl." Years later, when he was preparing the great collected edition of his work—the twenty-four volume "New York Edition"—*Washington Square* was among the novels he omitted.

How to explain James's small regard for a book that many readers have found irresistible? Perhaps he disliked its reliance on melodrama, or its reduction of several of the main characters to near-caricature. Or perhaps he was reaffirming his discomfort with the American scene in which the story is set. Certainly, he would rarely again set a novel wholly or even in large part in the U.S. (*The Bostonians* [1885] is perhaps the most significant exception—and James omitted that novel from his "New York Edition" as well.)

Beyond that, the novel's narrative tone is ultimately uncertain. There is a good deal of comedy in the book, and much of it is fine. But the narrator plays his comic part too readily; in particular taking inappropriate liberties with his own limited heroine. It is one thing for the book's other characters to insist on Catherine's inadequacies: their callousness is in fact measured to the inch by their treatment of her. It is quite another thing for the narrator to participate in Catherine's diminishment, since she is intended to provide whatever moral centering the book possesses.

A couple of examples will suggest the problem. The first occurs early in Morris Townsend's courtship: " 'We shall meet again,' he said to Catherine as he left her, and Catherine thought it a very original speech." Rather



than simply conveying Catherine's narrow upbringing and her naiveté, a comment such as this reduces her to lumpishness, and reveals the narrator as a merely sarcastic observer and commentator. Or when Mrs. Penniman suggests that Morris Townsend admired Catherine's bright red dress: "Catherine did not say to herself in the dark, 'My dress only?'" Mrs. Penniman's announcement struck her by its richness, not by its meagerness." Here again the narrator's undisguised superiority to his own heroine effectively subjects her to ridicule, as do his comments on her bad taste in clothes, her indifference to ideas, even her tendency to overeat. Having undercut his main character in such passages, the narrator has difficulty investing her with the gravity her role eventually requires. Even in his early fiction, James's narrative strategies were usually far more subtle than this.

Despite the relatively low valuation James set on the novel, *Washington Square* has remained among his most popular works. One evidence of the book's enduring success lies in the numerous adaptations that have appeared. The first was a successful stage play, under the title *The Heiress* (1947), written by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. Two years later, that script was produced as a first-rate film; directed by William Wyler, this version of *The Heiress* starred Olivia DeHavilland as Catherine, Montgomery Clift as Morris Townsend, and Ralph Richardson as Dr. Sloper. Yet another version of the same script was refilmed for television in 1961, with Julie Harris in the role of Catherine. In 1977, Thomas Pasatieri transformed *Washington Square* into an opera in three acts. And in 1997, a second Hollywood

version of the novel was produced, this time under James's title; Jennifer Jason Leigh starred as Catherine, with Albert Finney in the role of her father.

These adaptations, and the novel's steady sales over the past century, pay tribute to the vitality of James's achievement. Whatever his own estimate, *Washington Square* has impressed generations of readers with the energy and insight of its central conflict, with its engaging and often witty narrative voice, with its clear-eyed account of an insular antebellum community, and above all with its unforgettable portrait of a young woman quietly asserting her dignity against the massed pressures of disparagement and greed.

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