

## FILM

*Washington Square* (1881)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

adaptation *The Heiress* (1949)

Ruth and Augustus Goetz

## ANALYSIS

*Washington Square* is one of the brilliant novellas by James in his clear early style. As a boy he lived on Washington Square, at that time the most fashionable residential district in New York. Young Catherine Sloper, plain and shy, is the daughter of a wealthy doctor, Austin Sloper. She is courted by young Morris Townsend (town's end, or goal), a fortune hunter who leaves her when he learns that her father will disinherit her if she marries him. She is in love with Townsend, the only suitor she ever had. Making a renunciation comparable to that of Emily Dickinson, she chooses never to marry.

Moral renunciation is a recurrent theme in James and Wharton, an expression of spiritual transcendence. Catherine's father dies, disinheriting her, but she has enough inheritance from her mother to go on living comfortably at Washington Square. She is free at last. Townsend returns hoping to renew his courtship, but he looks different now. Stronger and wiser, Catherine is able to read him: "If she had first seen him this way she would not have liked him." She turns him away with such honest integrity she stands in moral contrast to Townsend: "You treated me too badly... Impressions last, when they have been strong."

The story was adapted to the stage in 1947 and in 1949 was filmed in black and white by Paramount, both adaptations written by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. *The Heiress* had soundtrack music by Aaron Copland and was directed by William Wyler, one of the few literate people in Hollywood. Olivia de Havilland is Catherine and the British Shakespearean actor Sir Ralph Richardson plays her father perfectly as detached, urbane and sardonic, with aristocratic manners. Montgomery Clift too is well cast as Townsend--handsome, charming, weak and parasitic--disgusting in his fakery. In film adaptations of literature, color photography can be glitzy and distracting. Black and white emphasizes substance rather than surfaces and expresses the either/or predicament of Catherine, who is dependent for her happiness upon decisions by her patriarchal father. The plot is simple, the characters are few and the story is short, making it easier for the screenwriters to be faithful to the art of Henry James.

The movie is faithful to an admirable degree--until after Townsend leaves Catherine. The adaptation done in 1997 is much superior to this one in every way. In the 1949 version Hollywood commercialized the story, turning it into a feminist revenge movie for the female audience. The subtleties vanish. Catherine looks drab and acts servile until she gets betrayed by both of the males. Then she rejects marriage and becomes strong, forceful, independent and *beautiful!* She becomes the lovely Olivia de Havilland. In the book she rejects Townsend in the end partly because underneath his charm he has become "hard." In the movie it is Catherine who becomes hard.

At the end she seizes the opportunity to set up Townsend and do to him what he did to her, with vindictive delight. She pretends to accept his proposal, then locks her door when he comes and refuses to answer his pitiful knocking and pleading. She leaves him outside in the cold and ascends her stairway, elevating herself above him--not spiritually nor morally, but merely as the victor. She is played so righteously by de Havilland that we enjoy her triumph without considering that she can afford to reject all proposals because she is rich. Her revenge is very satisfying and the movie won an Oscar for Best Picture.

Hollywood turned Catherine from an admirable even heroic woman of integrity who deserves our sympathy into a mean-spirited feminist whose cruelty makes her worse than Townsend. The book ends with Catherine returning to her “fancy-work”--her art--whereas in the movie she finishes her last piece, as if it merely expresses the completion of her revenge against Townsend. Henry James would have loathed this adaptation as an epitome of everything crude and vulgar in America.

Michael Hollister (2015)