FILM

Washington Square (1881)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

adaptation by Carol Doyle and Agnieszka Holland (1997)

ANALYSIS

This adaptation, principally by two women, is a great improvement over the previous one entitled *The Heiress* (1949) and one of the best film adaptations of a literary classic ever made. It improves upon James by expanding his novella, adding scenes, increasing motivations and making characters more complex while interpreting James perfectly and remaining faithful in spirit to his original story.

In luxuriant color, this version opens with an invented deathbed scene prior to the opening of the original story. We are shown how much Dr. Sloper loved his wife, who died giving birth to Catherine, suggesting that he unconsciously blames the child. This helps to explain his subsequent treatment of her. The doctor is never able to heal himself of heartache. The lonely little girl is framed in a window beside a caged parrot, a motif in the film--a metaphor of her predicament. She waits on her father like a maid. When she attempts to sing a solo at a social gathering to make him proud she embarrasses him by croaking like a parrot. Again her window frames her face beside the parrot. She has grown into a maiden, watching out. A painting on the wall of a mother and child introduces another apt motif not in the novel, a reminder of the mother Catherine lost and, later, of the child she will never have. A scene of young people dancing and socializing formally like those in a novel by Jane Austen occasions the first time in her life that Catherine is approached by a man.

Catherine Sloper is slender and redhaired with a lean face pinched by nervous anticipation and thin lips downturning at the corners. Her pained expressions appear to be visible effects of her confined life with her father. Among the other young people she is a blushing knot of nerves, poignantly innocent, with a flustered vulnerability. In the Garden, her heart, she is absolutely defenseless. She is plucked like a rosebud by Morris Townsend, a charming young man with a dark mane and full sensuous features, as handsome as an Italian prince (the kind who are unemployed). He plays humble nice guy and even stammers as if he is an innocent like her, though later he proves to be an articulate smoothy. Almost fainting under his spell, she blurts out, "You are so beautiful!" Miss Sloper falls for him on sight like tumbling down a slope. Morris Townsend (town's end, or goal) is a man of the town, a Morris who wants more.

A comic dimension is added to this adaptation that makes it a lot more entertaining. The screenwriter Carol Doyle turns Aunt Lavinia (played by the funny-looking Maggie Smith) into a matchmaker in the Sloper household. The aging spinster is a melodramatic romantic who schemes, arranges clandestine meetings and orates like she is living a romance novel, even speaking in rhyme to Townsend. After falling in love with Townsend on the spot, Catherine amazes everyone by playing the piano beautifully with a passion she never had before. She is happy and confident and wears deep red in her dresses and ripe red berries on her hat. Townsend is allowed to use the family piano and he plays and sings duets with Catherine, surrounded by the lush Victorian draperies, the polished surfaces, the deep rich colors and artifacts--all the luxury at stake in this story.

Dr. Sloper sees through Townsend almost from the start. He is arch, harsh and sarcastic. As a reductive Realist, he sees that his daughter is not pretty and knows what Townsend is after. Under his desire to protect his daughter he is ashamed of her. At the same time, he is clinging to her emotionally and also does not want to be made a fool of by an obvious fortune hunter like Townsend. Fate seems to be against him, however. At a wedding party, Catherine gets the ring in the wedding cake. She is paired in this episode with a pretty young blonde who makes her look even plainer by contrast. When Townsend introduces her to his sister as the girl he loves, the sister assumes he is referring to the pretty blonde, confirming Dr. Sloper's realistic perceptions both of his daughter and of Townsend, as if such a handsome fellow would ever be attracted to one so plain as Catherine except for her fortune.

Townsend is living with his sister, while he looks for a job. Dr. Sloper goes there and tells the sister he considers Townsend to be a parasite and a fortune hunter and that he will not allow his daughter to marry him. The sister tells him off, accusing him of a selfish fear that he will be made to feel like a fool. One of his female relatives also tells him off, saying that it doesn't matter if Townsend is a fortune hunter, that Catherine is in love with him and that she can afford to be a fool if she wants. In this adaptation, implications in the original story are made explicit in dramatic scenes, invented but enhancing.

The opulent interiors are richly atmospheric, with passionate scenes set in firelight. Some scenes resemble Realist paintings of that period by the great Thomas Eakins. Townsend approaches Dr. Sloper to ask for his daughter's hand in the aftermath of surgery--speaking of Eakins--and the doctor's bloodiness is a comment on what he does to his daughter. Dr. Sloper operates on the hearts of people like a meat cleaver. The big scene when he refuses to allow Catherine to accept Townsend is Jamesian, as it takes place behind a closed door. Catherine emerges from the room like a bird still caged. She has $10,000 a year inherited from her mother but because she still feels obligated to her father, she agrees to his demand that she accompany him to Europe, for a six-month trial separation from Townsend. Another invented scene, the passionate farewell of the lovers, intensifies the suspense, whereas at this point in the novella and in *The Heiress* the tension goes slack.

Townsend proposes marriage whether Dr. Sloper disinherits Catherine or not, but she begs him to wait. More invented details add to the gathering anticipation, as when Dr. Sloper walks in and catches Catherine trying on a wedding dress. This adaptation brings out the individuation of Catherine to integrity and independence in successive scenes. The most dramatic is on a mountain top in Europe, where she confronts her father and defies him, declaring her intention to marry Townsend whether he disinherits her or not. As her patriarchal father descends the mountain, she remains on her stony pinnacle in apparent triumph, then abruptly the wind blows her flimsy scarf away into the sky like a flimsy dream.

They return from Europe to find that Aunt Lavinia the matchmaker, played by the comical Maggie Smith, is not so funny anymore. She has allowed Townsend to live in the Sloper mansion, established him in a business and made him more acquisitive. She has influenced him to want the doctor’s fortune along with Catherine. In their reunion, Catherine agrees to marry Townsend anytime he says. He wants to try once more to confront the Doctor and use his charm to change his mind, but Catherine wants to relinquish the inheritance and get married. When he confronts Dr. Sloper and tries to change his mind, it becomes apparent that Townsend actually does love Catherine to some extent, because she idolizes him and makes him feel good about himself more than any woman ever has. He is a much more complex character here than in the novella or in *The Heiress*, perhaps even sympathetic. The costuming reinforces themes as he, the handsome one, is dressed in common dirt brown, while she, the plain one, is dressed in shiny purple taffeta like royalty.

They meet in the park and quarrel and Townsend claims to reject her on moral grounds: “I am the reason you are disinherited.” Then he admits that by now, after years of waiting, he wanted the fortune as part of their bargain. She begs him to marry her anyway, but he runs away in the rain, abandoning her as she falls in the mud. After he leaves her, she becomes strong. She turns down proposals from other men, becomes a music teacher and surrounds herself with children. Her father is paralyzed by now, whereas she proves herself to be free, by refusing him when he asks her to promise that after he dies she will not marry Townsend. Though she no longer wants Townsend and could easily secure her father’s fortune simply by saying so, she refuses to compromise her integrity. The money she inherited from her mother is enough for her to live comfortably without any more. Upon the reading of his will, she is lightly accepting of her disinheritance as a “perfectly fitting conclusion.”

In the earlier adaptation, *The Heiress* (1949), contrary to the novella Catherine is not disinherited, which increases the pleasure of sharing her revenge when Townsend returns in the end and proposes. This adaptation, in being faithful to James, makes both Catherine and Townsend more sympathetic, the ending more poignant. He knows she lost the fortune and now seems more interested in her for herself. Their clothes are closer to the same colors. The final words of Catherine to Townsend are exactly those in the novella, straightforward and honest: “You treated me badly... You hurt me too badly.... I felt it for years.” After she sends him away, she looks sad for awhile in close-up, then she smiles. The story ends with her spiritual triumph in renouncing what she once desired so desperately, having attained on her own what now she values far more.

Michael Hollister (2015)