THE UNEXPECTED EMANCIPATION OF MISS SLOPER: CHARACTER ARC AND FATHER-DAUGHTER DYNAMICS IN HENRY JAMES' *WASHINGTON SQUARE*

LA INESPERADA EMANCIPACIÓN DE LA SEÑORITA SLOPER: ARCO DE PERSONAJE Y DINÁMICA PATERNOFILIAL EN *WASHINGTON SQUARE*, DE HENRY JAMES

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ABSTRACT

Henry James' novel *Washington Square* (1881) revolves around the power struggle between wealthy Dr. Sloper and his daughter Catherine, a shy, sensitive young woman accustomed to following her father's orders without offering resistance. The discord that breaks the status quo stems from Catherine's choice of a suitor whom her father deems a fortune hunter. This article explores Catherine's personality and character arc as she unexpectedly evolves from dependence to self-reliance, and that of Dr. Sloper, a man who sees his biased assumptions about his daughter shattered. Influenced by the gender prejudices that pervade their social milieu, the unhealthy dynamics of their bond are progressively revealed. Besides, their actions and choices result in a series of ironic outcomes culminating with Catherine's resolve to reject

her suitor, a paradoxical conclusion that she could not have possibly reached had she not rebelled against her father's command in the first place.

KEYWORDS: American realism; character arc; family relationships; Henry James; irony

RESUMEN

La novela de Henry James *Washington Square* (1881) se centra en la lucha de poder entre el adinerado doctor Sloper y su hija Catherine, una joven tímida y sensible acostumbrada a seguir sus órdenes sin oponer resistencia. El origen de la discordia proviene del pretendiente que elige Catherine y a quien su padre considera un cazafortunas. Este artículo explora la personalidad y el arco de personaje de Catherine, que evoluciona inesperadamente desde la dependencia hacia la autosuficiencia, y del doctor Sloper, que ve cómo se derrumban sus ideas preconcebidas sobre su hija. La dañina dinámica de su vínculo, influenciada por los prejuicios de género propios de su contexto social, es revelada progresivamente. Además, sus acciones y decisiones resultan irónicas, culminando en la decisión de Catherine de rechazar a su pretendiente, una conclusión paradójica a la que no habría podido llegar por sí misma si no se hubiera opuesto inicialmente al mandato de su padre.

PALABRAS CLAVE: arco de personaje; ironía; Henry James; realismo norteamericano; relaciones familiares

1. INTRODUCTION

What makes a good parent? This question does not seem to have a unanimous answer. Some might say that what characterizes a good parent is their concern for the happiness of their offspring, while others may argue that it is the means they undertake to protect them from harm's way, even at the risk of making them unhappy. What in turn seems to be a universally shared belief is that parental love is unconditional. However, Henry James' novel *Washington Square* (1881) suggests that a father's love could be conditioned to the choices that a daughter makes or even to her personality. In this case, could he still be considered a good father? The main conflict of this novel revolves around the power struggle between widower Austin Sloper, a wealthy middle-aged New York physician, and his only daughter Catherine, a socially

withdrawn, soft-natured young heiress. Their friction is set in motion by the appearance of Morris Townsend, an attractive young man who seduces Catherine and whom the doctor believes, and rightly so, to be a fortune hunter. Thus, it is Catherine's first incursion into the sphere of romantic love, which will prompt the battle of wills between father and daughter, that the present article is about. A father's robust opposition to his daughter marrying a man whom he deems a charlatan is, to a reasonable extent, a noble endeavor, and a sign of good parenting. However, if this opposition entails belittling a daughter's worth as an individual, then it would be safe to assume that the endeavor is not so noble, and it invites the reader to question the dynamics of this father-daughter relationship.

Set in New York in the 1840s, *Washington Square* features the recurrent Jamesian topic of family dissolution. Jonathan Freedman asserts that James' representations of family "pose a remarkable affront to dominant domestic ideals", as he regarded it "with eyes at once clear and skeptical" (1998: 5). Family relations and domestic life are certainly not idealized in this novel. In the paternal-filial relationship that *Washington Square* foregrounds, Catherine's journey towards emancipation reaches its decisive point when she finally realizes the devious, disparaging nature of her father's attitude towards her. As a result, while in no way does she cease to abide by her sense of filial duty and respect, her new consciousness leads her to painfully cut all emotional ties with him. In "direct[ing] his attention to the multifarious psychological motivations and familial disfunctions" (Haralson and Johnson 2009: 168) that take center stage in *Washington Square,* James sheds light on a prototypical American obsession through the character of Catherine Sloper: the individual's need to exert their own will against externally imposed constraints. Achieving freedom from authoritarianism is a theme that remains finely ingrained in American imagery since the birth of the nation. As the American *Declaration of Independence* states, individuals are provided with certain "unalienable Rights […] [such as] Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", being therefore their duty to rebel against those who aim "to reduce them under absolute Despotism" (US 1776). This very principle is reflected in *Washington Square,* as Catherine emancipates psychologically from her despotic father and accomplishes self-sufficiency. She learns to live according to her own judgement and choices, rather than remaining dependent and subjugated.

Another fundamental aspect of the novel that is directly connected to both father and daughter is the pervasive presence of irony. According to Jack C. Gray, two types of literary irony can be distinguished: verbal and situational (1960: 220). Both types are fully present in *Washington Square,* which, according to Bette Howland, is the novel in which James "offers his irony at its most efficient. The novel is a system of ironies — a closed system. That is its

special brilliance" (1996: 93). Verbal irony permeates the discourse of Dr. Sloper in the way that he addresses and refers to other characters, especially to his daughter. Catherine's innocence prevents her from understanding it. Instead, she either takes it literally, thinking that she is being complimented, or humbly thinks that she is not equipped to comprehend everything that her brilliant father says. However, as Ticien Marie Sassoubre points out, "there are many ironies of which Sloper is the author in *Washington Square*, but also a great many that James invites the reader to author" (2007: 1070). These are the situational ironies that mostly result from the unexpected behavior of Catherine Sloper as she rebels against her father throughout the narrative. Her rebellion blindsides Dr. Sloper, an ironic outcome considering that he was always conceitedly confident in his predictions regarding his daughter's submissive conduct.

Two central and interrelated topics in *Washington Square* are the importance of money and the role of women. Morris Townsend's main aim consists in obtaining Catherine's wealth, and Dr. Sloper's consists in preserving it. More importantly, although the novel's heroine does not regard affluence as a key aspect of her life, it is in Catherine Sloper's innermost sense of being that the greedy dispute between suitor and father produces the greatest effect. All matters personal and social become inextricably linked in this novel, thus exemplifying James' tendency to portray "the relation between intimacy and economy, the way that private relations, particularly those involving women and children, always involve the transmission of property" (Freedman, 1998: 5). During the time in which the novel is set, the 1840's, young women were supposed to remain under their father's custody until they found a husband who would become their new custodian. Since a woman's value in the marriage market depended on the worth of her assigned dowry, it could be asserted that women were objectified as property to be sold. By the time in which James wrote and published the novel, the 1880s, this situation had not changed much in general terms, but the forces of early feminism and women's fight for suffrage were already gaining considerable support. In parallel to these political movements, Henry James proved that he had one of the finest sensibilities in his appreciation and concern for women as individuals, as it is made evident in his portrayal of female consciousness and the oppression that women suffered. Banta links James' concern about the woman question with that of suffragists by alluding to "their mutual desire to allow a woman's will to break free of constraints, even though the means to that end are markedly different" (2012: 81). *Washington Square* limits the scope of women's fight for agency to the domestic sphere, but it is nevertheless a portrayal of a woman who discovers an inner wisdom and strength that no one suspected of her, and which allows her to rebel against the patriarchal injunction that is imposed upon her, thus defying social expectations and gender conventions.

This article explores and analyzes the character arc of *Washington Square*'s protagonist, Catherine Sloper; an inner journey through which she evolves from a state of submission and complacency into one of self-reliance and assertiveness. To do so, it is necessary to dissect her personality traits as well as her external circumstances, mainly the dynamics of her relationship with her father, Dr. Sloper, a character whose psychology needs to be explored as well in order to understand the process whereby Catherine's emancipation comes about. The aim is to highlight the irony that results from the actions and choices that both characters undertake in their battle of wills and eventual estrangement. Dr. Sloper, a man overly self-identified with wisdom and reason and who can easily assess the true nature of a stranger such as Morris, comes to realize that, in turn, he is mistaken about his conception of his own daughter. Catherine shows that she is not the dutiful and compliant woman that her father thought she was, as she refuses to follow his prescription and comes to de-idealize him once she realizes his undermining attitude towards her. Catherine's opposition to his father's mandate is what allows her to grow into a self-sufficient individual, and only after achieving this can she see for herself that her father was right about the matter that she originally disputed. The outcome that results from Catherine's transformation into an emotionally emancipated individual is the greatest irony of the novel, considering that her final resolve consists of rejecting Morris. Her ultimate decision fully aligns with what her father unsuccessfully wanted her to do many years before. Thus, the paradox resides in the fact that Catherine's opposition to her father's wishes sets her on an inner journey that eventually leads her to comply with them. Had she not contested her father's authority, she would not have ascertained the truth behind his warnings.

2. A FATHER'S UNFORTUNATE BIAS

During the 1840s, Dr. Austin Sloper, a man of reason, "an observer, even a philosopher" (James, 1881: 9), is one of the most respected professionals within the New York economic elite. His spotless reputation as an extraordinarily clever man has gotten him far in the medical field. But besides his intelligence, there is something else that constitutes his character and that will be essential to understand both his success and his eventual rejection of his daughter's choice of suitor: Dr. Sloper is a man with a strict work ethic, which is precisely what he will find absolutely lacking in Morris Townsend. The doctor is a hard-working man of vocation, and it is this attribute that has made him thrive. His professional purpose "had not been preponderantly to make money. It had been rather […] to learn something interesting and to do something

useful" (1881: 10). But despite the doctor's success and his righteous set of principles, he also projects an arrogant sense of superiority. This less commendable trait will play a significant part in shaping his behavior towards his daughter Catherine, thus setting the tone for the paternal-filial conflict of the novel. Greg W. Zacharias points out that Henry James is interested in the "effects of Sloper's conduct in relation to his daughter and in the ramifications of one individual's conduct upon another" (1990: 208). The doctor's shortcomings entail crucial repercussions upon his daughter's identity and demeanor from a very young age.

Despite Dr. Sloper's brilliance as a physician, he prematurely loses his firstborn son. Shortly after, his wife also perishes due to complications related to the birth of their second infant, Catherine. Tragedy has stricken the Sloper household, and the doctor is left alone with his newborn daughter, named after her late mother. "Though she was not what he had desired, he proposed to himself to make the best of her" (James, 1881: 11, 12). To assess the full implications of such a revelation leads to ambivalence. One the one hand, it seems clear enough that Dr. Sloper is going to devote himself to the well-being of his daughter, as any father should do. On the other, it seems striking to think that one's offspring, especially as a toddler, can be regarded as something that does not comply with what the parent expects. This lack of appreciation comes from the doctor's demanding and hard-to-please nature. But what is it that displeases him in Catherine even at the beginning of her life? This is where the issue of gender comes into play. In fact, as Banta argues, "in Henry James's mind […] every issue is ultimately gendered" (1998: 21). This does not only apply in romantic terms, but also in familial ones. The fact that his daughter shares a name with her deceased wife can precondition him to regard her as a painful reminder of the woman he has lost, especially considering that the reason why she perished was related to Catherine's birth. Besides, having lost a male heir previously also reinforces Dr. Sloper's consideration that his daughter is a disappointing substitute.

At a time and place in which sexism and gender prejudices were the norm in the United States, Dr. Sloper proves no exception to the rule. This is particularly ironic considering that he is what was called 'a ladies doctor', but the narrator clearly points out that, except for his wife, "he had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever" (James, 1881: 14). Harold Schechter states that it is through Dr. Sloper's relations with females in the general sense and with his daughter in particular that we can see he is spiritually isolated (1973: 139). He is an aloof man; and it seems that his taking care of Catherine results from his own sense of duty rather than a genuine feeling of love. It does not seem that he is going to make the best of her, even though that is what he tells himself. Arguably, doing the best for her would be raising her in the same way as he would have liked to raise his deceased male heir. Undeniably, doing

the best for her would have been to love and nurture her immensely irrespective of his opinion that, as she grows, there is nothing special about her. But "he had moments of irritation at having produced a commonplace child" (James, 1881: 18), which suggests that his aversion to mediocrity is stronger than his love.

The narrator emphasizes that there are certain features of Catherine —especially physical ones— that make her common and plain. However, she is not a dull woman as far as personality is concerned. The reason behind her apparent flatness is that "she was shy, uncomfortably, painfully shy. This was not always understood, and she sometimes produced an impression of insensibility. In reality, she was the softest creature in the world" (1881: 19, 20). This information can lead to infer that maybe she is not as commonplace as her father thinks she is, given that sensitivity, well nurtured and trained, can be an enormously powerful asset. Her capacity to feel "reveals remarkable powers of introspection and imagination" (James W. Gargano, 1976: 358). Therefore, what is more likely the case is that her usual quietness and modesty are the result of growing up with an emotionally absent father who has not encouraged openness of feeling in her. Her shyness might be the result of her lack of external validation. Her lack of self-confidence is very likely the outcome of her father's underestimating her natural traits or not finding them remarkable enough. Therefore, his father has, in some way, already preconditioned her to behave the way she does. For Dr. Sloper, according to Karen Michele Chandler, Catherine's quietness means absence of substance, given that he "takes the ability to use words precisely and sparely as a sign of intellect and sophistication" (2001: 174). This is definitely the way that he sees himself, but his conceitedness and lack of empathy prevent him from imagining that there might be other factors to consider for determining somebody's intelligence, or other valuable qualities to appreciate in a person. He acknowledges her "imperturbably good nature" (James, 1881: 16), but as he tells his sister Lavinia when discussing Catherine's qualities, "you are good for nothing unless you are clever" (1881: 15). However, as Catherine's arc along the narrative proves, her lack of eloquence does not entail lack of intelligence.

The narrator ensures that the reader understands that Catherine adores and idealizes her father to the utmost extreme, as well as fears him a great deal: "Her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him" (1881: 17). Thus, the dynamics of their relationship before the appearance of Morris are already not entirely healthy. There is a father who loves his daughter not for what she is, but in spite of what she lacks, or of what he is convinced that she lacks. There is a daughter who dotes on her father and whose contentment depends on his approval, something that she constantly aspires

to, but never reaches. In Dr. Sloper's eyes, she is simply not naturally fit for the task of satisfying him, so he does not expect her to. But he is aware of his daughter's soft spot for him, and he takes pride in it. Besides, there is something else in the doctor's attitude towards life that can be seen as especially demeaning when he directs it towards his daughter: mockery. As Millicent Bell states "his characteristic style of speech is that of a man accustomed to express his meaning by ironic indirection, even sarcasm" (1975: 29). This is particularly evident in how he thinks of his offspring as a lady who cannot possibly attract the attention of any gentlemen, and yet, when a suitor appears to have shown interest in Catherine, he asks his sister Lavinia while in front of his daughter: "He is in love with this regal creature, then?" (James 1881: 34). Dr. Sloper assumes that Catherine will not catch his irony. And in fact, at this point in the narrative, she does not. She simply gets nervous because she has undoubtedly started fantasizing about the suitor in question: an apparently charming young man called Morris Townsend.

3. A DAUGHTER'S UNEXPECTED EVOLUTION

The first change in Catherine's behavior is subtle and almost imperceptible for those around her. It is ignited by the charming ways and courting strategies of Morris, whose "outward, performative traits: physical beauty, elegance, winning manners, effortless conversation" (Leonardo Buonomo, 2019: 32) allow him to play "to perfection the part of a young man who is deeply taken with Catherine" (2019: 34). His staging of this fiction is radically successful, as Catherine's inner life expands with intense feelings that she had not known before. Due to her lack of previous experience in matters of the heart, she does not suspect any second intentions in this fortune hunter. In fact, she readily confides in him and his words of love. But, as Gargano states, "James makes the delusion testify not to her stupidity but to her capacity for wonder, the unreserve of her faith in the possibilities of existence" (1976: 358). Catherine's ingenuousness derives not from any lack of intelligence, as her father would believe, but from a subtlety of emotion, an ability to imagine and to dream, and a delicate receptiveness that no one around her suspects she has. The uplifting inner joy that she experiences after meeting Morris is what sets in motion her evolution. It is this innocent incursion into a brand-new side of life that will eventually lead her all the way to reaching knowledge and experience at the end of the novel, which is certainly a recurrent transformation in Jamesian female protagonists, of which Howland asserts: "At the beginning, the good heroines are all in the dark; by the end, they are the only ones who see" (1996: 108). Catherine's arc throughout the narrative precisely comprises an excruciating reassessment about the true nature of the two most influential men

in her life. The unfolding of events forces her to come to terms with harsh truths that she originally remained oblivious to.

When it becomes evident that the suitor has come to stay, and Catherine's framework of idealization widens to a second man, the state of affairs in the father-daughter relationship starts shifting. Dr. Sloper can almost instantly see right through Morris' real goal: "the position of husband of a weak-minded woman with a large fortune" (James, 1881: 67); he naturally wants to protect his daughter, whom he would never expect to do the contrary of what he asks her to do. However, one of the most notable ironies in the succession of events is that, as talented and brilliant as Dr. Sloper is, and as right as he is about a man he barely knows, he will end up being wrong about Catherine, who is the woman he has known from the beginning of her life. He "fails to glimpse the inner revolution that has taken place in his daughter" (Gargano, 1976: 357). Catherine, as she demonstrates through the progression of the novel, is not weak-minded, but rather resilient and determined in a silent manner. She might be mistaken about Morris' nature at first, but she is going to follow the dictates of her heart and, in the long process of asserting her own emotional independence, she is going to come to several realizations regarding the people that surround her, especially her father.

Catherine's devotion and submission towards her father are so finely ingrained in her psyche that her emotional emancipation from him is going to be a slow process filled with resistance. She simply would not want to do anything contrary to his desires, as this would bring a great deal of guilt and shame upon her. But her falling in love with Morris is already modifying her conduct and she finds the courage to appeal to her father's sympathy, despite already suspecting that he disapproves of her fiancée. She undertakes the unusual measure of informing the doctor of her decision to marry before Morris does. Dr. Sloper's unmitigated answer of disapproval, not only of the engagement itself, but also of her secrecy about it until that point, starts shattering Catherine's self-image of a good, honest daughter, which is what she values most about herself. Her father accuses her of having a bad conscience, which hurts her deeply, as this notion represents to her "something base and cruel, which she associated with malefactors and prisoners" (James, 1881: 83). But as much as his accusation displeases her, she does not relent and breaks "into a vehement protest" (1881: 84). This is probably the first time in Catherine's life that she contests her father's authority, the first time that she engages in an ideological, even dialectical battle against Dr. Sloper. Although she lacks the wittiness and self-assuredness of her father, she starts catching the glimpse of an inner strength that she had not experienced ever before. Nevertheless, as Darshan Singh Maini states, a nature such as Catherine's does "not erupt or explode until challenged to the bone" (1979: 98). It is still too

soon for her to be able to show full determination, and the disgust she feels at the prospect of upsetting her father remains unwavering.

To restore her self-image of dutiful daughter, Catherine decides to pause, as it were, her engagement and her meetings with Morris, with the delusional hope that somehow "if she should be very good, the situation would in some mysterious manner improve. To be good, she must be patient, respectful, abstain from judging her father too harshly, and from committing any act of open defiance" (James, 1881: 115). The narrator's description of Catherine's resolve exemplifies her pure, innocent, and somehow childish tendencies. Her mixture of naivete and humility is still what drives her behavior. At this moment in the evolution of her character arc, and despite the doctor's emphatic resolve, she is credulously telling herself that his attitude will be properly modified if she remains mindful of her place as a diligent daughter. Laura Berlant asserts that Catherine preserves her innocence by willingly misreading her father's remarks (1987: 446), in what would be a kind of defensive denial. But when she judges that enough time has passed, she will make a second attempt at convincing her father that Morris is not, in fact, the fortune hunter that Dr. Sloper thinks he is: "Her purpose had slowly ripened, and she believed that her prayers had purified it of its violence" (James, 1881: 132). Thinking that she has somehow atoned for displeasing her father with her first attempt, she now feels legitimized to continue with her endeavor.

However, Dr. Sloper's opinion of Morris remains immutable. What is more, this time he amuses himself by resorting to a series of strategies to turn his daughter around. Schecter states that Dr. Sloper's behavior towards Catherine exemplifies a kind of peculiar enjoyment in manipulating others (1973: 139). His first resource consists of appealing to the admiration and respect that he knows his daughter holds for him: "Have you no faith in my wisdom, in my tenderness, in my solicitude for your future? […] Don't you suppose that I know something of men: their vices, their follies, their falsities?" (James, 1881: 135). But as this scheme proves futile and Catherine insists on defending Morris' character, he is going to modify his strategy by resorting to emotional blackmail. He will never consent to the union for as long as he lives, so she might as well wait for his death to marry. "If I don't marry before your death, I will not after" (1881: 137), says Catherine, in a sort of premonition that foreshadows the novel's ending. Although what she means is to assure her father that she would never wait for him to die, he takes her observation as a sign of impertinence, which upsets his daughter even more. There seems to be no common ground to be reached between them. Catherine even feels she has "exhausted all arguments, all replies" (1881: 138). Austin informs her of his decision to disinherit her if she keeps on going with her marriage plans. To her, the inconvenience of this

possible outcome is not financial, as she could not care less about the money. In Catherine's case, disinheritance is a grave matter because of the "moral reprobation" and the "feeling of loneliness and danger" that the concept entails for her (1881: 155). It is the fact that her father would consider her morally unworthy of his heritage that brings her anguish. But she humbly accepts this imposition as the price to pay. This marks a turning point in Sloper's awareness of the fact that there is more to Catherine than he ever conceived possible. He has underestimated her for her whole life. That she is capable of steering away from the path he prescribed for her is something that he never saw coming: "'By Jove,' he said to himself, 'I believe she will stick. I believe she will stick'" (1881: 140). In another ironic turn of events, Dr. Sloper must come to terms with the idea that he is not always right. Ever since Catherine's childhood, he always thought his daughter disappointingly unsuitable to surprise him in any way. But now that she has surprised him, he would rather his daughter had remained predictable.

As Catherine 'sticks', that is, as she remains adamant in her resolve to marry Morris, the relationship between father and daughter becomes estranged. There are no open arguments or disputes, but the relationship seems broken. Catherine's position is particularly uncomfortable considering how harsh her father has been to her on their last encounter. However, she still justifies him: "The poor girl had an admirable sense of honor; and from the moment she had brought herself to the point of violating her father's wish, it seemed to her that she had no right to enjoy his protection" (1881: 163). Catherine's sense of respect and deference towards her father has not decreased at all. It seems that her love for him is unconditional, unlike his love for her. To some extent, there seems to be a reversal of roles between them. Catherine is discovering an ability to withstand the storm with a temperance that would never have been expected of her, even if she suffers in silence. On the other hand, Dr. Sloper is becoming more emotional and irrational, even if he tells himself otherwise. He is losing the equanimity that he always took pride in possessing. When Catherine, very wisely and logically, tells him that since she will not obey him, she should stop living under his roof, he reacts in the following manner:

> This striking argument gave the doctor a sudden sense of having underestimated his daughter, it seemed even more than worthy of a young woman who had revealed the quality of unaggressive obstinacy. But it displeased him […] deeply, and he signified as much. "That idea is in very bad taste" he said. "Did you get it from Mr. Townsend?" (1881: 167)

It is ironic that a man who is overly identified with his intellectual, analytic self, reacts in such a defensive and infantile way. Although internally he can appreciate the drive of a daughter

whom he always thought had no drive at all, he is uncapable of being proud of her. As Dr. Sloper keeps obtaining proof of his lifelong misconception about Catherine's abilities, his anger only intensifies. As a result, he dismisses her remark and resorts to overt sarcasm. This reaction is utterly inconsistent with his self-perception as a reasonable man. As Maine asserts, "Sloper is driven by his emotional and psychological needs […] more than he is driven by 'reason', as he insists he is" (2016: 219). Considering his conceitedness, his exasperation is due to the simultaneous presence of two factors. On the one hand, the mere fact that his daughter opposes his instruction; on the other hand, the frustrating realization of his error of judgment in his estimation of her competence.

As a last resource and taking advantage of the guilt that he knows his daughter feels for 'disobeying' him, he asks her to put her affairs with Morris on hold for a few months so that they can travel to Europe together. Catherine, seeing that there is something that she can do to please her father, readily accepts. On the two occasions that the doctor mentions her engagement throughout their year-long tour, "Sloper discloses the cruelty and possessiveness behind his former coolness" (Bell, 1975: 35). The first time, around the middle of their voyage, when she answers him that she has not renounced Morris, the doctor tells his daughter, as a kind of warning or veiled threat: "You try my patience […] and you ought to know […] I am not a very good man. […] at bottom I am very passionate; and I assure you I can be very hard" (James, 1881: 178). Still under her naïve idolization of her father, Catherine does not know what to make of these words. She simply does not understand what he means. To her, "this confession proves only that he is too clever for her simplicity" (Bell, 1975: 35). Her soft, well-intentioned nature still drives her to make excuses for him. But the second time that they discuss Morris, already on their journey back home, her father's words will leave an indelible mark upon Catherine:

> He ought to be very thankful to me, do you know. 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 before he kills it! (James, 1881: 181-182)

Dr. Sloper is displaying his contempt towards Catherine in a rather unconcealed manner. He is objectifying her as if she were a commodity to be enjoyed by someone else and he is taking credit for being the one responsible for 'improving' her. Dr. Sloper's overtly humiliating

discourse, including the final metaphor he makes identifying her as a 'fat sheep', suggests the type of parental abuse and gender violence that many women suffered in a context in which they were monetized and treated as appendages to men.

As much as her perception of her father is altered after his outburst, Catherine does not react angrily. It would probably seem justifiable to readers, but it would be inconsistent with this Jamesian heroine. Catherine "is made of finer stuff than nearly anyone in the story can appreciate" (Maine, 2016: 210). This 'finer stuff' includes Catherine's ability to act according to her own ethos even as the circumstances around her shift in an unfavorable way. And these shifts, far from downgrading her, only make her grow as an individual. "As she judges each person, she suffers a loss but is more herself, loses a support but builds a more personal strength" (Gargano, 1976: 360). Catherine is undergoing a quiet but firm evolution in her process of emotional emancipation. She has released herself from her lifelong dependence on her father's judgment. Despite the harshness of her realization about him, she is also gaining clarity of thought and self-confidence. She does not feel anger: "He is not very fond of me. […] I wouldn't say such a thing without being sure. I saw it, I felt it. […] I don't accuse him […] We can't govern our affections. Do I govern mine?" (James, 1881: 196). Therefore, she is determined to leave behind the life that she knows, and the man that she thought she knew, to start a new one with Morris. But her resolve includes maintaining her utmost respect for her father as a matter of principle, allowing herself to feel the sadness that the estrangement provokes in her, and assuming that she must endure the consequences of her decision to contradict his wishes: disinheritance. Nevertheless, the final blow is yet to come.

Catherine remains deluded into believing that Morris is an honest, genuine companion who will marry her even when she is no longer an heiress. But Morris soon shatters the illusion of his charming ways as a strategy to break off the engagement. He provokes a quarrel with her while trying to gaslight her into believing that she is the one who is instigating it. However, Catherine senses what transpires behind Morris' attitude, and she has the courage to say what he does not dare to mention: "Morris, you are going to leave me […] Think of what I have done! […] I have given up everything!" (1881: 218). She is assertively asking him to review his current attitude to her, considering the sacrifice that she has made to be with him. But, at the same time, her outburst betrays her dependence on Morris; her necessity for him to prove, now more than ever, that he is truly the noble, committed man that she has been telling herself he is. In the moment of truth, Morris resorts to evasiveness and leaves abruptly. After the immediateness of this encounter, its oddity and inconsistency induce in Catherine a state of uncertainty about the future. How can she reconcile her original perception of Morris with his

recent behavior? Such evident incoherence shocks her into self-doubt: "All the evening, alone, she questioned herself. Her trouble was terrible; but was it a thing of her imagination, engendered by an extravagant sensibility, or did it represent a clear-cut reality, and had the worst that was possible actually come to pass?" (1881: 222). Since the latter possibility seems unbearable, Catherine will undergo a process of bargaining with her realization that he has left for good: "Knowledge comes […] only after a long struggle during which she will not consciously believe what her subconscious already 'knows'" (Gargano, 1976: 361). Until she comes to terms with the truth that she already envisages, she resists accepting it and hopes that Morris returns soon with a perfectly reasonable explanation.

In the meantime, Catherine resorts not only to silence, but also to lies and concealment, as she refuses to disclose her desperate situation and profound heartbreak to her aunt and her father. She will not give them the satisfaction of seeing her crumble: "She was sustained at table by the immensity of her desire that her father should not perceive that anything had happened" (James, 1881: 221). Catherine's departure from pure honesty, which was one of her main personality traits at the beginning of the narrative, is mainly the demonstration that she is acquiring a sense of independence and healthy pride that she did not know she had. It is enough for her to keep her feelings to herself, and she does not seek support elsewhere. But when a farewell letter from Morris offers confirmation of what she had already inferred, Catherine must concede to her inner self that, after all, her father was right about him. At first this seems to be an almost fatal blow to the heroine of this novel, but it proves to be exactly what she needed to finally grow into an emotionally independent individual and fully aware of her reality: "Catherine achieves her most impressive development when she returns to Earth from her high fantasies and learns the truth of the human condition" (Gargano, 1976: 359). In time to come, she will no longer base her relations on worshipping anyone. Not her father, not her lover. Catherine learns that she is her best ally; that she and only she has her own best interests at heart. Embodying the US ideal of individualism, Catherine has developed a capacity for endurance and self-reliance that transforms her into a wiser, more resourceful human being. This psychological growth could not have taken place if she had taken her father at his word and pledged to his initial advice. It was first-hand experience that Catherine needed in order to ascertain Morris' intentions.

When Catherine finally tells her father that her engagement is off and that she is the one who has broken it, he certainly suspects that Morris has left her, but he will never know for sure. As it would have gratified him enormously to know and to say that he was right from the start, he "would have given a good deal to discover the exact truth, […] but it was his

punishment that he never knew" (James, 1881: 238). Catherine's irreversible disillusionment with her father prevents her from any attempt at restoring their bond, and considering how Dr. Sloper keeps regarding her, she is the wiser for it. He is incapable of feeling any sort of sympathy for her, despite being warned by a trusted relative that "whether the rupture came from herself or from him, her poor little heart is grievously bruised" (1881: 241). He is ill-equipped to evaluate the situation beyond his rigid, insensitive approach. Another irony emerges: a doctor chooses to neglect his daughter's pain. His perception of her, besides being mistaken, is dehumanizing:

> She seems to me much better than when the fellow was hanging about. She is perfectly comfortable and blooming; she eats and sleeps, takes her usual exercise, and overloads herself, as usual, with finery. She is always knitting some purse or embroidering some handkerchief […]. She hasn't much to say; but when had she anything to say? She had her little dance and now she is sitting down to rest. I suspect that, on the whole, she enjoys it. (1881: 241)

Dr. Sloper speaks of his daughter as if she were intellectually limited. He seems incapable of attributing to her any depth or complexity of feeling. It could be reasoned that, now that the outcome of her engagement has aligned with his wishes and advice, he might begin to appreciate her in a more favorable light. He might have started to appraise her as a more insightful individual than he previously gave her credit for. But Dr. Sloper is a man who has allowed his "emotions to wither and die", and as a result he regards "other human beings as nothing more than objects" (Schechter, 1973: 137). He is unable to empathize with her suffering precisely because he lacks that emotional capacity himself.

4. A WOMAN'S QUIET SELFHOOD

As the years go by, Catherine builds a life of her own. A simple, quiet life. As Bell states, "it is she who writes in the end her own modest story" (1975: 38). She becomes the voice of experience for young single women who trust her with their love lives; she devotes herself to charitable causes, and she is well regarded and appreciated in all high society circles. Her adoption of a more proactive social conduct seems to suit her well, and the motivation behind it seems to result from her need to give a new meaning to her life, a new meaning after her painful awakening: "Nothing could ever undo the wrong or cure the pain that Morris had inflicted on her, and nothing could ever make her feel toward her father as she felt in her younger years. There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void"

(James, 1881: 244). Catherine's emotional emancipation has come with a price to pay: a hole in her heart. Valero-Redondo refers to Catherine as a "stoic heroine" who "sticks to [her] pledges […] and this results in sacrifice, renunciation, and solitary grief" (2023: 251). Thus, in her attempt to ameliorate her condition, Catherine learns to utilize her privileged social position as a source of superficial satisfaction. She takes the necessary measures to construct a life as complete as possible. But she never attempts to revive the wonderful side of existence that set her emancipation in motion and that Morris killed. Despite receiving a few marriage proposals, she rejects them all and chooses to become a spinster, keeping her heart closed. Although in a different light, it is noteworthy to observe that this apparent emotional detachment, as she becomes a middle-aged woman, mirrors her own father's emotional detachment. It is this aspect of conduct that Catherine has ended up inheriting from him. This can lead to believing that Dr. Sloper was not always as insensitive as he became, and that it was the pain of losing his wife and son that turned him that way. The immense sorrow that Catherine felt at being left by Morris in her youth may justify her transformation into an old maid with "extremely conservative views" on "all moral and social matters" (1881: 245). This brings about another of the novel's ironies. In this sense, Katja Sarkowsky points out how sardonic her shift towards conservatism results, considering how she rejected submitting herself to unquestionable patriarchal commands before (2014: 18). It can be inferred that 'old maid' Catherine would never advise a young lady to elope with the man that she loves, to rebel against the judgment of her elders, or to risk disinheritance.

Although Catherine has found her own peace of mind over the years, there are still some predicaments for her to face. When she is about to turn forty, her father offers to include her back in the will if she promises him that she will not marry Morris Townsend after his death, and she refuses to make such a promise: "All her feelings were merged in the sense that he was trying to treat her as he had treated her years before. […] There was something in this request, and in her father's thinking himself so free to make it, that seemed an injury to her dignity" (James, 1881: 248). The passing of the years has not changed Dr. Sloper's attitude towards Catherine. He needs to assert his dominance over a very delicate issue that can reopen a deep wound in her daughter's heart. But what afflicts Catherine is not the remembrance of her pain. It is the audacity that makes him dare to ask such an impertinence after fifteen years. Catherine refuses simply because she will not accept being submitted to her father's abuse of authority. It would have been easy to comply and become an heiress again. But she refuses to promise anything, out of self-respect. When a couple of years later Dr. Sloper dies, it is revealed that he has left her only a fifth of his fortune, claiming on his will that it "is already more than sufficient

to attract those unscrupulous adventurers whom she has given me reason to believe that she persists in regarding as an interesting class" (1881: 250). Not even at the end of his life did he feel any remorse for his shortcomings as a parent, nor trust his daughter's judgment. As Michael Kearns states, Dr. Sloper keeps ill-treating her even from the realm of the dead (1994: 779). However, it must be conceded to the late doctor that his everlasting suspicion about a certain 'unscrupulous adventurer' was well-founded.

Catherine has a final test to endure after Dr. Sloper's death. When she is told by her meddlesome aunt Lavinia that Morris is back in town and wants to meet her, allegedly having 'realized' that Catherine was his only true love, Catherine's acquired fortitude trembles: "She had had a great shock […] There were some things she believed she had got over, some feelings that she had thought of as dead; but apparently there was a certain vitality in them still […] While she waited for a return of her calmness, she burst into tears" (James 1881: 256). It seems that the shell that Catherine has built over the years may have a fissure. Even though she knows her own unwillingness to reopen that wound, she discovers that, if provoked, her feelings do not remain buried; she realizes that it is inevitable that they emerge from the very core of her being. But she hopes that they are transitory and is adamantly clear to Mrs. Penniman that she does not want to make any contact with him. Nevertheless, a few days later her aunt ambushes her and brings Morris to Washington Square. He tries to win Catherine back, but she rejects him as well as any chance of keeping contact with him: "It seemed to be he, and yet not he; it was the man who had been everything, and yet this person was nothing" (1881: 260). It can be inferred that, by facing him, Catherine realizes that it was not her infatuation with him that threatened to return; it was merely the fear that it might do so after all the pain that it caused her in the past. Seeing him one last time makes her realize that there was nothing to be afraid of. This encounter, although uncomfortable, gives Catherine the opportunity to exert her will in accordance with the confidence and wisdom that she has acquired over the years. She can see right through him, and she is the one to make the final call in the matter of their relationship. It is she who has the last word of rejection. This outcome reveals the final and most remarkable irony of the novel. Catherine's final resolve to reject Morris fully aligns with what her father would have wanted her to do in the first place. The difference is that she does so in obeyance to her own judgment, feelings, and senses; not in obeyance to her father. She only arrives at this conclusion at the end of a lifelong process that started by doing the opposite of what her father initially expected of her, by refusing to follow her father's orders, by making her own decisions. Had she not opposed her father's will, she would have never realized that he was right. Although Dr. Sloper always underestimated his daughter, he was utterly right about Morris Townsend.

All the same, Catherine needed to abide by her own will; a will that guided her into reaching emancipation and becoming a woman of her own, the assertive, independent woman that her father never thought she could become.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has traced and analyzed the following aspects of Henry James' *Washington Square*: Catherine Sloper's personality and character arc as she evolves from innocence to experience and reaches emotional wisdom and emancipation, the extent to which Dr. Sloper's personality and actions influence Catherine's, the battle of wills between father and daughter, and the ironic consequences that result from their power struggle. Dr. Sloper's rigid and arrogant personality, combined with the pervasive gender prejudices of the 19th-century in the United States, precluded him from appreciating his daughter's innate qualities, such as her sensitivity and kindness. He never regarded her as a valuable individual. Cordial condescendence and a patronizing attitude are all he ever gave her, combined with recurrent mockery disguised as complicity. Catherine had deeply idealized her father, and her naivete always prevented her from seeing his true colors. However, his disapproval of Catherine's choice of suitor triggers off a process of internal revolution in her that, although misguided at first, eventually leads her to emancipation and knowledge about her true nature and that of her father and her lover. Catherine's deluded yet pure awakening to romantic love causes an unprecedented dissent with her venerated father. As her original position of submissiveness and diligence quietly but irrevocably transforms into one of obstinacy and self-reliance, her father also shifts from an initial state of equanimity and judiciousness to one of exaltation and viciousness.

Catherine's unexpected determination against his wishes unchains a series of ironies in the events that follow, one of them being Dr. Sloper's realization of his errors of judgment, which is something incompatible with his self-image. He thought that he would be able to prescribe the steps that his daughter must take, considering the admiration and respect that she always held for him. But the disdain and cruelty that he begins to show breaks the illusion that Catherine had sustained about her father. Their relationship becomes estranged and, at first supporting herself in a new illusion, that of romantic love, Catherine stands her ground against Dr. Sloper without the cruelty with which he behaves towards her. When Catherine realizes that Morris is the fortune hunter that her father had predicted, desolation swamps her heart. Out of a newly acquired sense of pride, she conceals from her father the fact that it is Morris who has left her, claiming instead that she is the one who has broken the engagement. However, she

cannot fully conceal her dismay. As this occurs, the ugly truth of her father's contempt for her makes itself more evident because of his cynicism and indifference to her sorrow. Instead of making her regress to her initial state of comfortable submission, Catherine's pain makes her grow into an emotionally self-sufficient woman. She rises from her ashes and builds a new life on her own terms. Her kindness remains in place, but her naivete is gone. Fifteen years later, near the end of Dr. Sloper's life, Catherine refuses to be included back in the will as her father imposes the condition that she will not marry Morris after his death. She rejects her inheritance as a matter of principle, since she will not submit to her father's authority. Catherine's eventual rejection of Morris as he, indeed, returns once her father is dead, perfectly exemplifies the irony of this Jamesian novel, as she ends up doing what her father commanded her to do to begin with.

At long last, Catherine aligns with her father. But she could only reach that place through a long and complicated process of opposition to him, and in accordance with her own desires, her own needs, and her acquired sense of autonomy and freedom. It could be argued that Catherine would not have come to mature the way she does if her father had not acted the way he did all along. In fact, Dr. Sloper's cruel actions against his daughter's wishes are precisely what set in motion Catherine's process of emancipation by which she came to de-idealize both her father and Morris and to make her own assertions. She becomes her own woman and sets herself free of her father's tyranny, but it was through her father's tyranny that she was able to accomplish these milestones. So, ironically, despite being unfair to his offspring, Dr. Sloper plays an essential part in Catherine becoming an empowered woman. And after all, is this not what a good parent is supposed to do?

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