

HENRY JAMES
WASHINGTON SQUARE

Henry James was in many respects the inspirer of the modern experimental novel. His theory of the novel is based on the premises laid down in his famous essay "The Art of Fiction", where he asserts that the novel should be concerned with the major values of life: "The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life." The author's interest concentrates not so much upon the external aspects such as the past family relations, the social background, as it does upon the inner side.

Washington Square, written in 1881, belongs to James' first period of creation. This short novel reveals James' special gift as a subtle observer of human behaviour and psychology in a money oriented society. The heroine of the novel, Catherine Sloper, falls victim to a domineering father and an interested suitor. At the age of 20, Catherine's advantage is her prospect of inheriting a fortune and this attracts a suitor, Morris Townsend, who proves to be a fortune-hunter. Dr. Sloper embodies the type of the parent in a dramatic and fatal relationship with his only child. He is quite singular in his refinement and sophisticated nature as well as in his controlled impulse by reason and he is endowed with the faculty of self-analysis.

The excerpt presenting the dialogue between Dr. Sloper and Morris Townsend is one of the most brilliant examples of James' gift as a subtle observer of man's behaviour and psychology and also his mastery of witty dialogue handled in a straightforward manner by an omniscient writer. All through the discussion, Dr. Sloper tries to make Morris betray his mean interest in Catherine's allowance, while the latter avoids any direct answer by feigning exaggerated modesty and reserve.

The doctor is informed that Morris Townsend has already spent all his money and now depends on his sister, never thinking of a serious career. Dr. Sloper is determined to try the young man's character by exposing him to a witty examination and begins asking him whether he has really been looking for a position. They both are clever, cunningly trying to find the interlocutor's weak point and, through subtle allusions and half-truths, are trying to trap each other. With faked modesty, Morris Townsend replies that a "position" would be too much for him and that he is looking for a "quiet place" where he would be able to turn "an honest penny" with his "good right arm". But then he cunningly asks Dr. Sloper if he is of the opinion he should not despair, implying he is waiting for the doctor to offer him a good opportunity. Then, with a look at his neat polished shoes, he asks the doctor whether he is intending to propose something to his advantage. The doctor, in his turn, takes the opportunity to suggest to Morris to leave New York and take a job elsewhere. To this, Morris Townsend falsely declares himself the sustainer of his sister and her children, but then he is forced to admit that his present occupation "won't make his fortune". Thus, the double meaning of the word "fortune" finally betrays his intentions to come by a fortune. By the last two sentences of the dialogue, the "opponents" come into open, the doctor "advising" Morris not to be too much bent on a fortune and, giving him a sarcastic assurance that he will not lose sight of him, while Morris Townsend abandons his hypocritical mask of modesty and respect and, with an insolent smile and raising his voice, tells the doctor he will take the liberty of contradicting him if his situation becomes desperate.

James is considered a master in creating remarkable characters, and his skill becomes obvious when presenting a gradual change within one and the same character. The statement is valid with Morris Townsend's changing attitude during his very short conversation starting with a modest and reserved self-criticism, passing through insolence and a few lies and ending in betraying himself and his actual aim. He embodies the mercantile type, too greedy to be honest and too corrupt to feel generosity towards his fellow-beings.

Henry James uses the omniscient point of view, the story being told in the third person and filtered through the consciousness of one or another of the characters involved. The two men's hidden thoughts are revealed by tricky questions, subtle allusions, half-truths, double meaning sentences, ironical remarks, faked self-criticism and good humour, false encouragement, pretended respect or downright lies.

Washington Square has a certain didactic and moral impact and it is obvious that the author views life only on moral terms and, within the conflict between the good and the evil, he seems to side with the virtuous and perfective characters.