Washington Square

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY JAMES

Henry James was born to Henry James, Sr., and Mary Walsh, both New Yorkers from wealthy backgrounds. Henry had three brothers, including noted psychologist and philosopher William James, and one sister. During Henry's childhood, the James household traveled extensively in Europe, especially in France. His greatest literary influence was French novelist Honoré de Balzac. In the 1860s he began publishing reviews and serial fiction in publications like *The Nation* and *Atlantic Monthly*. By the 1870s, he was spending almost all of his time in Europe, where he established himself in elite international literary circles. He settled down in London, where he produced his greatest works, especially *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In the later stages of his career, he followed the style of French naturalist writers like Émile Zola and Alphonse Daudet, though his experimental approach contributed to less popular and commercial success. Many of James's fictional works feature social clashes between "New World" (American) and "Old World" (English or other European) characters and values. He was also known for his deep exploration of his characters' psyche. Henry James became a British subject the year before he died and was awarded the Order of Merit by King George V for his cultural contributions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Washington Square takes place in New York City in the 1840s, a city that was well on its way to becoming the present-day metropolis. James makes glancing references to details such as the burgeoning Irish population, an "intrusion" Aunt Penniman fears, as large numbers of immigrants fled Ireland's 1840s famine for better opportunities in New York. The constant expansion of the city itself is also a recurrent theme, as the Slopers move uptown after watching their residential neighborhood increasingly convert to "offices, warehouses, and shipping agencies," though they don't venture as far uptown as Aunt Almond's more rural neighborhood, "where pigs and chickens disported themselves." Thus Washington Square (now a park in Manhattan's Greenwich Village) was one of the first middle-class, professional neighborhoods in the United States, making it a setting befitting Dr. Sloper's preoccupation with class, employment, and income.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Washington Square's plot is similar to that of *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), a novel by James's mentor, Honoré de Balzac; it, too, features a calculating fiancé, a fortune, and a young woman who must find her own path. James may also have been influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1844 story "Rappaccini's Daughter," a dark tale that includes a tyrannical father and an ill-fated romance. Finally, some of James's other prominent fiction, like *Daisy Miller* and *Portrait of a Lady*, deal with women's struggles to assert and maintain personal independence, as Catherine does in *Washington Square*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Washington Square*
- **When Written:** 1880
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1880
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** New York City in the 1840s
- **Climax:** Catherine defies Dr. Sloper in the Alps.
- **Antagonist:** Dr. Austin Sloper
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Real-Life Triangle. The plot of *Washington Square* was inspired by Henry James's friend, English actress Fanny Kemble, who told him the story—recorded in James's private journal in 1879—of her brother's engagement to a "dull, plain, commonplace girl" with a private fortune, and the disapproving interference of the girl's father.

Oscar-Winning Adaptation. *Washington Square* is one of the more frequently adapted of Henry James's works, the most popular version being *The Heiress*, a 1949 film adaptation starring Olivia de Havilland as Catherine Sloper and Montgomery Clift as Morris Townsend. The film won four Academy Awards.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dr. Austin Sloper, a socially prominent widower, a clever man, and a skilled physician, flourishes in New York City in the 1840s. Some years ago, Dr. Sloper had lost his beloved wife, Catherine Harrington Sloper, and a little boy; he is left with his disappointing daughter, Catherine Sloper, who is plain, modest, and obedient. His sister, Lavinia Penniman, a foolish, romantic widow, also lives with them.

When Catherine is 21, she meets Morris Townsend at her cousin Marian's engagement party. She thinks the smooth-talking Morris is the most handsome man she has ever seen. Before long, Morris begins to court Catherine. Dr. Sloper learns that Morris, about 30, squandered a small inheritance abroad and is now supported by his widowed sister. He invites Morris to dinner and quickly decides that he is "not a gentleman" and therefore unacceptable as a suitor for Catherine. He further suspects that Morris has "mercenary" motives and is primarily interested in Catherine's inheritance, not Catherine herself.

Morris and Catherine get engaged, and Dr. Sloper is displeased, though he responds gently to Catherine at first. When Morris visits the next day, Dr. Sloper says that he "abominates" him as a potential son-in-law, given his lack of means and prospects. Catherine continues to write to Morris, despite her father's disapproval, and she even tries to reason with Dr. Sloper about Morris's character; however, he is immoveable in his opinion and even amused by Catherine's unwonted display of independence.

Dr. Sloper takes Catherine to Europe for a year in hopes of distracting her from Morris. In their absence, Aunt Penniman adopts Morris as a surrogate son and pampers him in the Sloper house. Halfway through the European tour, during a walk in **the Alps**, Dr. Sloper coldly confronts Catherine for her failure to break things off with Morris. In the bravest moment of her life so far, Catherine stands her ground. From now on, she is disillusioned of her deep admiration and loyalty to her father.

After Catherine returns to Washington Square, everyone notices her growth in confidence—with the exception of Morris, who now decides, in light of Dr. Sloper's stubbornness, to break the engagement. Catherine, devastated, finally sees through Morris and is also furious with Aunt Penniman for meddling in their courtship all along.

In later years, Catherine has other opportunities to marry, but she prefers to remain an "old maid," devoting herself to charity and being a confidant for younger women. Nevertheless, Dr. Sloper never trusts that she and Morris might not yet marry, and he reduces her inheritance in his will before he dies. Aunt Penniman orchestrates one last meeting between Catherine and the much aged Morris, but Catherine, though forgiving, steadfastly refuses to be friends with the man who hurt her so irreparably. She resumes her contentedly unmarried life at Washington Square.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Catherine Sloper – Catherine is the protagonist of *Washington Square*. She is named after her mother, Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper, who died soon after giving birth to her. To her father, Dr. Sloper, the young Catherine is "an inadequate substitute" for both her deceased older brother and her elegant, accomplished mother. Catherine is plain, obedient, truthful, modest, and extremely shy. She enjoys expressing herself through fancy clothing, to her father's embarrassment. She has an inheritance of almost ten thousand dollars from her mother and will inherit almost twice the amount on Dr. Sloper's death. She has never attracted suitors, so when Morris Townsend begins to court her, Dr. Sloper assumes he is motivated by money; however, Catherine is in love and, after their engagement, even defies her father to continue writing to and meeting with Morris. She remains faithful to Morris even after Dr. Sloper takes her to Europe as a distraction and angrily confronts her in **the Alps**. Upon her return to Washington Square, Catherine is far more confident and determined to pursue her own happiness. She is devastated after Morris callously breaks their engagement, and she is never again interested in marriage. Her trust in both her father and her meddlesome Aunt Penniman is also permanently damaged. However, Catherine builds a life as an "admirable old maid" devoted to charitable works. She is reunited with Morris at the end of the novel, and though she's forgiven him, she refuses to be friends with him again.

Dr. Austin Sloper – The antagonist of the novel, Dr. Sloper is a renowned New York City doctor and Catherine Sloper's father. A witty, clever man of about fifty, Dr. Sloper lives in a new, modern house in fashionable Washington Square, and he moves among the highest social circles. He fell in love with Catherine Harrington as a young man, and her substantial marriage dowry helped him establish his successful medical practice. They had a very happy, albeit brief, marriage. After both his three-year-old son and Mrs. Sloper die—losses from which Dr. Sloper never recovers—Dr. Sloper is left with his daughter, the dowdy Catherine, who is a disappointment to him from the beginning. With the exception of his dazzling late wife, Dr. Sloper does not have a high opinion of the intelligence or abilities of women in general. He always speaks to Catherine in an ironic manner that goes over her head. From the beginning, Dr. Sloper suspects Morris Townsend of having mercenary designs upon his daughter and thinks he has a vulgar, over-familiar nature. He is confident that, based on Catherine's respect for him as her father, she will ultimately reject Morris's proposal of marriage. When Catherine stands firm, he takes her to Europe for a year and chillingly confronts her one evening while they're touring **the Alps**. However, Catherine is unmoved and never again idealizes her father. Even after Catherine and Morris break their engagement, Dr. Sloper reduces Catherine's inheritance to guard against other fortune-hunters. He and Catherine are emotionally estranged until he dies.

Morris Townsend – Morris, about age 30, is the cousin of Arthur Townsend, Marian Almond's fiancé. Catherine Sloper is introduced to him at Marian's engagement party. He is kind and

talks nonstop as they dance and sit together. Catherine thinks he is the most handsome man she's ever seen. Not much is known of Morris's past, except that he is from a less well-to-do branch of the Townsends, was once in the Navy, and then spent a small inheritance while traveling abroad. He claims to have been deceived by his friends and to be alone in the world. After courting Catherine for a number of weeks, he asks for her hand in marriage and she accepts, but they face immediate opposition from Dr. Sloper, who thinks he is merely mercenary. Though the exact extent of Morris's affection for Catherine is never made clear, he does admit to being interested in her inheritance. Aunt Penniman repeatedly meddles in their romance and acts as an adoptive mother to him while Catherine is abroad. Upon Catherine's return from Europe, Morris breaks off their engagement, citing Dr. Sloper's refusal to accept him. Catherine, genuinely in love, is devastated. Decades later, he seeks to be reconciled with Catherine, and though she forgives him for jilting her, she is no longer interested in being friends.

Aunt Lavinia Penniman – Mrs. Penniman, Dr. Sloper's sister, was left a childless widow at 33 and moved in with Dr. Sloper and Catherine Sloper. Dr. Sloper doesn't think highly of his sister's intelligence but is generally polite to her. Aunt Penniman is romantic and sentimental and loves secrets and mysteries. When Morris begins courting Catherine, Aunt Penniman enjoys meeting with him in secret and relaying pointless messages to (as she thinks) help their romance along. She tries to persuade them to elope in defiance of Dr. Sloper. Eventually, Catherine becomes angry at the way her aunt repeatedly oversteps her bounds. While the Slopers are traveling in Europe, Aunt Penniman often hosts Morris at Washington Square and treats him as a son, spoiling him and increasingly taking his side over Catherine's. Long after Morris and Catherine have broken things off, Aunt Penniman engineers a meeting between the two, which proves fruitless.

Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper – Catherine Harrington was the charming, beautiful, accomplished young woman whom Dr. Austin Sloper married as a young man. Her substantial dowry helped Dr. Sloper establish his medical practice. They had a very happy, albeit brief, marriage—Catherine died less than two weeks after the birth of her daughter, Catherine Sloper. The couple had also lost a three-year-old boy two years earlier. The younger Catherine forever lives under the shadow of her far more dazzling mother.

Aunt Elizabeth Almond – Mrs. Almond is Dr. Sloper's wiser and preferred sister, "comely, comfortable, [and] reasonable." She is frequently a voice of moderation and reason in the book. She sees greater potential in Catherine Sloper than her brother does and sticks up for her. After Catherine is jilted by Morris, Aunt Almond takes a motherly interest in her.

Mrs. Montgomery – Mrs. Montgomery, a widow with five children, is Morris Townsend's sister. Dr. Sloper visits her to learn more about Morris's character. Mrs. Montgomery resists Dr. Sloper's pressure to give him evidence against Morris, but admits that he's caused her to suffer financially and finally tells him, "Don't let him marry [Catherine]."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Marian Almond – Marian is Catherine's elegant 17-year-old cousin, daughter of Aunt Elizabeth Almond. Catherine meets Morris Townsend at Marian's engagement party. Marian marries Morris's cousin Arthur.

Arthur Townsend – Arthur is Marian Almond's fiancé and Morris Townsend's cousin. He is from a socially superior branch of the Townsends.

THEMES

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GAINING INDEPENDENCE

Throughout Henry James's 1880 novel *Washington Square*, 22-year-old heiress Catherine Sloper equates her welfare and happiness with pleasing her father, the clever, disdainful Dr. Sloper: "She was extremely fond of her father and very much afraid of him [...] Her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him." This same subservience characterizes Catherine's relationships with her aunt, Lavinia Penniman, and her sometime fiancé, Morris Townsend, as well. Though Catherine is often described as weak and pliable, she gradually tests her independence from the overshadowing personalities in her life and builds up her courage. Through Catherine's journey, James shows that true independence is gained primarily through quiet, hard-won moments rather than dramatic, climactic triumphs.

Catherine demonstrates an independent streak from the beginning of the novel, though it's subtle and timid at first. During the ride home from her cousin Marian Almond's engagement party, the only commentary Catherine offers on the evening she first met Morris Townsend is: "I am rather tired." The narrator comments that for nearly the first time in her life, Catherine "made an indirect answer; and the beginning of a period of dissimulation is certainly a significant date." For Catherine, this minor "dissimulation"—hiding the fact that she's actually preoccupied with thoughts of Townsend—represents her willingness to keep certain things entirely to herself, a small but significant act of independence.

Later, Catherine insists that when Morris comes to propose to her, he must do it in her own parlor, not in a secret rendezvous: "She hesitated awhile; then at last—'You must come to the house,' she said; 'I am not afraid of that.' 'I would rather it were in the Square,' the young man urged. 'You know how empty it is, often. No one will see us.' 'I don't care who sees us! But leave me now.'" This isn't simply about a meeting location; Catherine refuses to conduct her romance with Morris in secrecy, since truthfulness is central to her character.

When Catherine faces opposition from her father, she puts her fledgling independence to the test, but she does so through careful deliberation and personal reflection. After Dr. Sloper voices his disapproval of Catherine's engagement to Morris, Catherine "made a discovery of a very different sort; it had become vivid to her that there was a great excitement in trying to be a good daughter. She had an entirely new feeling, which may be described as a state of expectant suspense about her own actions." In other words, Catherine discovers that "trying to be a good daughter" involves discerning her own opinion and figuring out how to reconcile that opinion with her loyalty to her father and her own cherished sense of honesty. These stirrings of an independent voice are exhilarating for her.

In the meantime, when Catherine hears that Aunt Penniman has met clandestinely with Morris to try to help their romance along, she discovers her own capacity to feel annoyed: "'No one but I [should see him],' said Catherine, who felt as if she were making the most presumptuous speech of her life, and yet at the same time had an instinct that she was right in doing so." Catherine has her first taste of righteous anger, her eyes are opened to faults within her own family, and she begins to trust her moral instincts, even though it still feels "presumptuous" to do so. Later that same night, "Catherine sat alone by the parlour fire—sat there for more than an hour, lost in her meditations. [...] She had an immense respect for her father, and she felt that to displease him would be a misdemeanour analogous to an act of profanity in a great temple: but her purpose had slowly ripened, and she believed that her prayers had purified it of its violence." She decides to try again to persuade her father to give Morris a chance and to let her see him again. Dr. Sloper hasn't toppled from his pedestal in Catherine's eyes, and defying him feels "profane," yet she nonetheless performs her defiance within the context of a continued sense of filial piety.

When Catherine's tentative steps toward independence are harshly rejected, her father's stature is reduced in her eyes, and she begins to come more defiantly into her own. After much thought, Catherine declares to her father: "If I don't obey you, I ought not to live with you—to enjoy your kindness and protection." Although he is somewhat impressed, Dr. Sloper is dismayed by this show of independent thought and harshly silences his daughter's line of reasoning.

Her father's contempt stings Catherine, but it also steels her. When, during their travels in Europe, Dr. Sloper chooses a remote Alpine pass in which to vent his anger at Catherine's stubbornness, Catherine bravely stands her ground. James writes: "[T]his hard, melancholy dell, abandoned by the summer light, made her feel her loneliness." After they speak harshly to one another and her father returns to the carriage ahead of her, "she made her way forward with difficulty, her heart beating with the excitement of having for the first time spoken to him" heatedly. In this scene, Catherine shows she can decidedly hold her own with her father and won't let his threats intimidate her from staying her determined course. This literal mountaintop experience gives her the strength to continue on her chosen path upon returning to the ordinary environment of Washington Square, New York. Now that Catherine's resolve has been tested in a remote standoff with no one but herself to count on, she won't be bullied by her father, or anyone, again. At the same time, she wouldn't have arrived at this culmination if not for the smaller tests leading up to it.

After the confrontation in Europe, Catherine has equivalent moments of emancipation from Aunt Penniman's meddling and Morris's blithe dishonesty. The ultimate picture of independence is Catherine's eventual status as an "admirable old maid" who makes her own decisions about the use of her time and fortune. However, these achievements are all the more believable because of Catherine's gradual journey from being a shy young woman unsure of her own mind and powers.

LOSS AND IDEALIZATION

Washington Square is a story characterized by loss from its first pages. Dr. Sloper, an acclaimed physician, suffers the stigma of his young son's death and later that of his beloved wife following the birth of his daughter, Catherine. Dr. Sloper's grief has devastating effects on his relationship with Catherine, who idolizes her father despite his aloofness; it stunts her potential for a healthy marriage and ultimately leads to her own crushing disillusionment with her father. Through this story of grief's fallout across generations, James argues that loss, when it's not squarely dealt with, leads to unhealthy idealizing of individuals and grave damage to relationships.

Dr. Sloper idealizes his deceased wife, Catherine Harrington, to the extent that he inflicts lifelong damage on his relationship with his daughter, Catherine Sloper. Dr. Sloper can't love his daughter for herself; he only sees her in the shadow of her mother: "There would have been a fitness in her being pretty and graceful, intelligent and distinguished; for her mother had been the most charming woman of her little day [...] He had moments of irritation at having produced a commonplace child." This is the overarching tragedy of Catherine's life, since her father can't let go of the idea of the child he wishes he'd had in order to accept the one he does have.

Catherine perceives that her father's opposition to her

engagement to Morris Townsend traces back to this irrational, lingering grief and denial. "It's because he was so fond of my mother," she tells Morris after returning from Europe. "She was beautiful, and very, very brilliant; he is always thinking of her. I am not at all like her [...] Of course it isn't my fault; but neither is it his fault [...] [I]t's a stronger reason for his never being reconciled than simply his dislike for you." Dr. Sloper's idealization of his late wife keeps him stuck in the past, and no matter how much this manifests as hatred of Morris, it really has more to do with his deep disappointment in the way his own life has played out. Dr. Sloper never gets over his grief, remaining so hung up on Catherine's long-dead romance with Townsend that, twenty years later, he even modifies his will to make Catherine's inheritance less attractive to possible fortune-hunters. This suggests the degree to which his loss and idealization of his wife have distorted his sense of reality and irreparably damaged his relationship with Catherine.

Catherine, likewise, idealizes her only parent and tries desperately to square her love for her father with her own thwarted desires. Even when Dr. Sloper disapproves of Catherine's engagement to Morris, she continues to idolize her father: "She could not imagine herself imparting any kind of knowledge to her father, there was something superior even in his injustice and absolute in his mistakes. But she could at least be good, and if she were only good enough, Heaven would invent some way of reconciling all things..." In other words, even though Catherine believes her father to be in the wrong, he still overwhelms her life to such an extent that she can't conceive of contradicting him; she hopes that somehow, her faithfulness to him might yet be rewarded so that she can marry Morris without alienating her father.

Though for a long time Catherine's grief over her father's opposition had been untouched by "resentment or rancor," things change when Dr. Sloper scoffs at Catherine's moral reasoning (that is, that she shouldn't live under his roof if she can't obey him). James writes: "For the first time [...] there was a spark of anger in her grief." She begins to feel "that now she was absolved from penance, and might do what she chose [...] If she were going to Europe out of respect to her father, she might at least give herself this satisfaction [of writing to Morris]." As an idealized version of her father stops looming so large over her life, Catherine begins to claim greater agency to act as she believes to be right—specifically, by doing what she believes is best for her own happiness.

Catherine's confrontation with her father while abroad, during which she realizes he will never respect her choices, shatters whatever lingering idealization she had of him. Catherine tells Morris when she gets home to Washington Square, "It is a great thing to be separated like that from your father, when you have worshipped him before. It has made me very unhappy." Ironically, Morris's cavalier reaction to Catherine's sacrifice leads to Catherine's growing disillusionment with their own relationship. After Catherine's engagement to Morris falls through, Catherine, unlike her father, succeeds in coming to terms with the loss of her idealized perceptions of people. She matter-of-factly acknowledges that "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. There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void." Unlike Dr. Sloper, Catherine looks squarely at the "something dead" in her life and searches for consolations, poor though they might be. Her father, by contrast, spends his life avoiding the grief and shame of being unable to prevent his wife's death, and as a result, he places the burden of grief on those he is supposed to love.

Catherine comes to terms with the fallout from falsely idealizing people, in a way that neither her father nor, arguably, Aunt Penniman, who smothers Morris as a surrogate son, does in their own lives. However, the cost is high for Catherine: she never loves her father as she once did, no longer confides in Aunt Penniman, and has no heart for marriage, despite later opportunities. *Washington Square* celebrates small victories in Catherine's life, but it's not a triumphant story; the consequences of her losses are too pervasive for that.

CLASS, WEALTH, AND SOCIAL STATUS

At the beginning of *Washington Square*, James describes the young United States as "a country in which, to play a social part, you must either earn your income or make believe that you earn it." One of the novel's central problems emerges around the fact that Catherine Sloper's suitor, Morris Townsend, doesn't even pretend that he earns his income—a fact that contributes to the ultimate unraveling of their romance. Through Morris's ongoing conflict with Catherine's father, Dr. Sloper, over the implication that Morris is an unemployed fortune-hunter, James suggests that early American society more broadly was also navigating its own identity crisis with regard to class and the proper accumulation and use of wealth.

Catherine's father is an upper-class man of some degree of leisure, even though he has a profession. Sloper has earned his living as a doctor of considerable skill, but his wife's fortune enabled him to set himself up in practice, and he doesn't really need the money he makes: "This purpose [of practicing medicine] had not been preponderantly to make money—it had been rather to learn something and to do something." Class markers are a sticking point for Dr. Sloper—that is, in particular, he hates "vulgarity," or ostentatious excess. This comes up with regard to Catherine's showy wardrobe: "It made him fairly grimace, in private, to think that a child of his should be both ugly and overdressed." Sloper regards it as fine to enjoy the fruits of wealth (as he does his own cigars and wine cellar, and his ability to spend an entire year traveling Europe), as long as one doesn't *appear* to do so too obviously. Thus Dr. Sloper's

attitude toward his own wealth is a conflicted one. His position arguably owes as much to unearned wealth as to his own hard work and skill, and he enjoys the rewards of wealth while scorning the open display of such.

In Dr. Sloper's view, Morris Townsend's lack of an earned income makes him problematic. When Morris comes to call at Washington Square, Morris's cousin, Arthur, explains that Morris is searching for a profession. Catherine is puzzled by this; she "had never heard of a young man—of the upper class—in this situation." Catherine interprets Morris's professional rootlessness as regrettable and out of the ordinary—a problem to be solved. He is a prime example of someone who neither "earns [his] income" nor "makes believe that [he] earns it." Dr. Sloper imagines that he's comfortable with the possibility of Catherine marrying a relatively poor man, and he tries to convince himself that it's wrong to accuse such men of being mercenaries. "[I]f a penniless swain who could give a good account of himself should enter the lists, he should be judged quite upon his personal merits." When such a "swain" actually comes knocking, however, Dr. Sloper is dissatisfied with the "account" he gives of himself. He tells Aunt Penniman: "[Townsend] is not what I call a gentleman. […] He is a plausible coxcomb." Townsend, in other words, doesn't act like a gentleman, but he nonetheless has pretensions of being one. Yet Dr. Sloper struggles to articulate his objections to Townsend, beyond these fumbling impressions. When Morris approaches Sloper to say that he and Catherine are engaged, Dr. Sloper finds it "vulgar" to say what he really thinks, telling Morris: "I don't say that [you are mercenary]. […] I say simply that you belong to the wrong category.'" He declines to elaborate on what that wrong category is, however. Perhaps this is because his own conflicted category—that is, the fact that he enjoys both professional distinction and leisured privilege—complicates his critique of Morris's position.

Washington Square is set against a backdrop of a young city seething with constant economic growth and population change—something its main characters must struggle to keep up with. New York City as a whole is struggling with its identity as a place of both restrained leisure and commercial striving. The Slopers move to Washington Square precisely because their previous downtown neighborhood is becoming dominated by "offices, warehouses, and shipping agencies"; those who desire to live among "quiet and genteel retirement" must move uptown, to places of "established repose" like Washington Square. Those who want to keep up with New York's explosive growth must have a restless, pioneering spirit, ready to uproot themselves every few years if they want to be in the liveliest neighborhoods and have "all the latest improvements." As Morris's cousin Arthur Townsend explains to Catherine, "That's the way to live in New York—to move every three or four years […] it's a great thing to keep up with the new things." The demographic face of New York is changing, too, as evidenced by the fact that Aunt Penniman avoids the Battery because of the "[exposure] to intrusion from the Irish emigrants," and she remembers a certain restaurant because of its black proprietor, a relative novelty. In all these ways, the ever-changing shape, size, and makeup of New York City reflects, on a broader scale, Dr. Sloper's own discomfort with the uncategorizable Morris Townsend.

Catherine's engagement to Morris finally collapses under a combination of pressures—especially her father's disdain for Morris's social status, and the fact that Morris really *does* desire Catherine's fortune. The latter fact doesn't discount the possibility that Morris has at least some genuine affection for Catherine. However, the novel never makes Morris's romantic sentiments clear, suggesting that in the world of New York's upper class in the 1840s, "mercenary" concerns were coming to dominate all else.

REASON, ROMANTICISM, AND BLIND SPOTS

Henry James presents Dr. Austin Sloper's character as adhering to "an idea of the beauty of reason." This guiding principle "set a limit to his recognition […] of Catherine's possibilities," and, as the novel goes on to show, of Morris Townsend's potential as Catherine's suitor. Lavinia Penniman, Dr. Sloper's sister and Catherine's guardian, is presented as likewise hobbled by devotion to a particular worldview, although hers is romantic and sentimental rather than strictly rational. By showing that both Dr. Sloper and Mrs. Penniman are blinded to Catherine's best interests by their own preconceptions, James argues that neither a "scientific" nor a "romantic" outlook, by itself, gives an adequate account of the world.

Dr. Sloper prides himself on being a man of science and reason, but he is able to see Morris Townsend only through the lens of his own preconceptions. When Morris begins courting Catherine, Dr. Sloper fancies that he can reason with his daughter to bring her around to his view of the man. "What I tell you," he explains to his sister, Mrs. Almond, "is the result of thirty years of observation; and in order to be able to form that judgment [of Townsend] in a single evening, I have had to spend a lifetime in study […] I will present [Catherine] with a pair of spectacles," to make her see things his way. Dr. Sloper believes himself capable of making an evidence-based judgment with limited material to go on, and so he thinks that all that's required to produce agreement in Catherine is for her to view the "evidence" through the same lens. Further, Dr. Sloper refers to Catherine on more than one occasion as "a weak young woman with a large fortune," and he sees this as the sum of Townsend's attraction to her. Because of Morris's lack of "means, of a profession, of visible resources or prospects," he is categorically unacceptable as a son-in-law, and Catherine's feelings on the matter, or the possibility of layered motivations

on Morris's part, don't enter into the Doctor's calculations.

When Dr. Sloper goes to visit Townsend's sister, Mrs. Montgomery, he does so not with the attitude of someone seeking more information about a potential son-in-law, but of someone seeking confirmation of his already firm prejudices. He tells Mrs. Montgomery of his instinctual dislike, "I confess I have nothing but my impression to go by [...] Of course you are at liberty to contradict it flat." Yet moments later, when the widow proves hesitant to denigrate her brother's character, Dr. Sloper declares: "You women are all the same! But the type to which your brother belongs was made to be the ruin of you, and you were made to be its handmaids and victims." By the end of their interview, he has effectively bullied the meek Mrs. Montgomery into saying that Catherine shouldn't marry Morris. In the end, Dr. Sloper's "reason" falls short, because even if he is ultimately correct in his "impressions" about Morris's motivations, he does not have enough real evidence to persuade Catherine. He ends up sabotaging her happiness and alienating her for life, all because of a dubious application of his would-be "scientific" principles.

Aunt Lavinia Penniman is as satirically "romantic" as her brother is "scientific," and her worldview proves just as self-defeating as Dr. Sloper's. Mrs. Penniman brings romantic preconceptions into her appraisal of Catherine's and Morris's relationship: "She was romantic, she was sentimental, she had a passion for little secrets and mysteries [...] She would have liked to have a lover, and to correspond with him under an assumed name in letters left at a shop." Since she lacks that opportunity, over-involving herself in Catherine's romance is the next best thing. Mrs. Penniman's romantic fantasies place her at the center of her niece's ill-fated courtship, distorting her view of the relationship from the start. "She had a vision of this [secret marriage] being performed in some subterranean chapel [...] and of the guilty couple—she liked to think of poor Catherine and her suitor as the guilty couple—being shuffled away in a fastwhirling vehicle to some obscure lodging in the suburbs, where she would pay them (in a thick veil) clandestine visits." In defiance of Dr. Sloper, and against Catherine's wishes, she even arranges secret rendezvous with Morris to pass along pointless messages, in order to gratify her sense of self-importance. While the Slopers are in Europe, Mrs. Penniman goes so far as to "adopt" Morris in Catherine's absence, and her hovering "motherhood" leads her to defend Morris's (at least partly) mercenary motivations. "For herself, she felt as if she were Morris's mother or sister [...] and she had an absorbing desire to make him comfortable and happy [...] She had never had a child of her own, and Catherine [...] had only partly rewarded her zeal." Previously having rejected any crude monetary considerations, she is now so absorbed in Morris's perspective that she champions his entitlement to Catherine's fortune. In sum, Mrs. Penniman will favor whichever version of events allows her to claim a dominant place in a romantic narrative.

Despite having been portrayed as suggestible and naïve, by the end of the novel, Catherine is portrayed as the novel's only truly clear-sighted character. When she tells Morris about her confrontation with her father in Europe, Catherine explains that Dr. Sloper's opposition to their relationship is due to deep-seated emotion more than reason: "He can't help it; we can't govern our affections [...] It's because he is so fond of my mother, whom we lost so long ago." And when she perceives her aunt's meddlesomeness, she quickly distances herself from it. Catherine's failure to fulfill her father's or aunt's expectations suggests that she's actually *less* susceptible to the trap of a distorting worldview, and her relative happiness later in life reinforces the idea that both "science" and "romance" are ultimately unsatisfying ways to interpret the world.

WOMEN'S LIMITED FREEDOMS

From the time Catherine Sloper is born, her sex is a letdown to her father, Dr. Sloper, and her upbringing is marked by tacit—and sometimes explicit—rejection due to her failure to live up to rigid expectations of femininity. Because Catherine is not as beautiful and clever as socially successful women are supposed to be, Dr. Sloper assumes that Catherine's inheritance is the only thing that would attract a suitor, and this assumption poisons her relationship with Morris Townsend before it gets off the ground. Catherine's trusting nature and loyalty to her father can't solve the helpless stalemate in which she finds herself after Dr. Sloper threatens to disinherit her if she doesn't break her engagement with Morris. In the end, Catherine attains a certain freedom, but she must sacrifice marriage and happy family relationships in exchange for this degree of autonomy. Through Catherine's story, James argues that women's opportunities in the mid-nineteenth century were extremely limited, and that while some women (especially women of means, like Catherine) could exercise self-determination, this freedom likely came at great personal cost.

Dr. Sloper's misogynistic views shape Catherine's upbringing. Catherine's very birth was a "disappointment" to the doctor, after the death of his promising young son. Furthermore, in his view, no woman has ever measured up to his late wife, Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper—apart from her, "he had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever." Catherine is found wanting in comparison to both her brother and her mother. An exceptional characteristic of the late Mrs. Sloper was that she had been "reasonable." Dr. Sloper's exaltation of "reason" "was on the whole meagrely gratified by what he observed in his female patients." This prejudice—that women aren't usually capable of higher reasoning—limits his expectations and appreciation of Catherine all her life. His interactions with her are shaded with sarcasm more than affection, accompanied by frequent complaints of her dullness ("decidedly [...] my daughter is not

brilliant!"). When Catherine is 12, Dr. Sloper charges Aunt Penniman with making Catherine into a "clever woman." Aunt Penniman asks, "Do you think it is better to be clever than to be good?" The doctor retorts, "You are good for nothing unless you are clever." The fact that Catherine never proves to be "clever" means that she's of limited worth in her father's eyes. Arguably, Catherine carries this stunted sense of self-worth into adulthood, and it hobbles her first serious courtship with Morris Townsend.

Courtship, a process reliant on the practices of traditional femininity, proves to be a minefield for Catherine. Because Catherine is both trusting and endowed with a substantial inheritance, she's susceptible to unscrupulous pleasure-seekers who can't support themselves financially. As Dr. Sloper rants to Morris Townsend's put-upon sister, Mrs. Montgomery, men like Morris "accept nothing of life but its pleasures, and to secure these pleasures chiefly by the aid of your complaisant sex. Young men of this class never do anything for themselves that they can get other people to do for them [...] These others in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred are women." Because Catherine's future husband, whomever he turns out to be, will have access to her fortune, she's never free of the fear of being exploited.

Catherine finds herself caught between Morris's mixed motives and her father's disapproval, unable to please them both or to easily satisfy her own conscience: "Her faith in [Morris's] sincerity was so complete that she was incapable of suspecting that he was playing with her; her trouble just now was of another kind. 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." If she neither marries Morris nor acquiesces to her father, Catherine reasons, there's effectively nowhere for her to go. In effect, the combination of Catherine's sweet nature, her material advantages, and her outsized loyalty put her at great disadvantage in finding a husband who will love her for herself. She has a very limited field in which to act on her own behalf, despite the fact that she has privileges many other women lack.

Only when Catherine gives up on pleasing everyone—and acts according to what she sees as her own interests—does she find a measure of freedom. Even then, though, it comes at a great cost. When Catherine, after a tension-filled year in Europe, steadfastly defies Dr. Sloper's pressure to reject Morris, she realizes that even her faithful "goodness" won't bring about a peaceful resolution. "Nothing is changed," she tells Aunt Penniman, "nothing but my feeling about father. I don't mind nearly so much now. I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't care for that. I have come home to be married—that's all I know." She will do what she thinks is right by marrying Morris, but her relationship with her father has been irreparably damaged in the process. She's been finally disillusioned of the notion that her obedience and sense of principle will win her father's love.

In the years after Morris breaks their engagement, Catherine has other, apparently romantically motivated, offers of marriage, but she turns them all down. James writes that "Catherine, however, became an admirable old maid. She formed habits, regulated her days upon a system of her own, interested herself in charitable institutions, asylums, hospitals, and aid-societies, and went generally [...] about the rigid business of her life." In the end, in other words, Catherine lives her life as she chooses. Within the constraints of her time and class, that essentially means devoting herself to charity work. While she appears satisfied with her lot, her history with Morris has soured her on the idea of marriage, and her ultimate fate suggests that for women at this time, being free often means surrendering conventional goals such as marriage and motherhood.

While Catherine achieves a kind of emancipation, it's of a limited nature. The scarring experience with Morris Townsend curtails her romantic horizons in the future; worse, her family relationships are forever strained by the tangling of wills and motives that ensued. In another sense, though, James displays Catherine's strength and independence by showing that she gives in to neither her father's autocratic manner nor Morris's fickleness. Catherine gets her own way in the end, and this is "admirable," despite the sacrifices it takes to get there.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ALPS

During the Slopers' year in Europe, which Dr. Sloper hopes will distract Catherine from her engagement to the unsatisfactory Morris Townsend, they take a hike in a remote Alpine valley, which takes on several layers of symbolic significance as the journey unfolds. Their route through the valley "proved very wild and rough, and their walk became rather a scramble." The rough terrain symbolizes the oppositional nature of Catherine and Dr. Sloper's relationship, which now comes to a head in a heated confrontation. Dr. Sloper abruptly asks Catherine if she has in fact "given [Morris] up." Catherine admits that she has not, and "this hard, melancholy dell, abandoned by the summer light, made her feel her loneliness"—that is, Catherine finds herself truly alone, having to assert her independence from her father once and for all. Dr. Sloper further asks Catherine if she should "like to be left in such a place as this, to starve [...] that will be your fate—that's how he will leave you." For Dr. Sloper, the desolate

environment symbolizes not his daughter's frightening but necessary emancipation, but the bleak outcome he foresees for Catherine if she persists on the path she's chosen. Angry, Catherine replies that his accusation of Morris "is not true [...] and you ought not to say it." Her father then walks back to the carriage in the near darkness, leaving Catherine to make her own way back. Though her heart is pounding from the confrontation and the novelty of having spoken her mind in opposition to her father, Catherine "kept her course, and [...] she gained the road." Her solo journey back in the darkness signifies that, although she and her father ostensibly continue their travels together, she pursues her own path in life from now on—something of which she is fully capable. Thus, the Alpine scene as a whole symbolizes the end of Catherine's idealization of her father and her ultimate assertion of her independence—the climax of the novel.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Washington Square* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

For a man whose trade was to keep people alive he had certainly done poorly in his own family; and a bright doctor who within three years loses his wife and his little boy should perhaps be prepared to see either his skill or his affection impugned. Our friend, however, escaped criticism: that is, he escaped all criticism but his own, which was much the most competent and most formidable. He walked under the weight of this very private censure for the rest of his days, and bore forever the scars of a castigation to which the strongest hand he knew had treated him on the night that followed his wife's death.

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper, Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper, Dr. Austin Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sets up much of the central conflict in *Washington Square*. Dr. Sloper, a talented young physician, lost his little son and his beloved wife within a couple years of each other. While his medical practice didn't suffer a decline in prestige in the wake of these tragedies, the losses nevertheless burdened Dr. Sloper for the rest of his life; he blames himself for being unable to save his loved ones. This shows the tremendous power with which Dr. Sloper invests science and his own abilities as a doctor; he can't accept that perhaps his family's lives were beyond his capacity to save. This deep sorrow belies the sarcasm that marks most of Dr. Sloper's interactions throughout the novel, suggesting that he uses caustic humor to mask his private pain. His sorrow also permanently affects his relationship with his daughter, Catherine, who can never measure up to the promising son or the idealized wife who have been forever lost to Dr. Sloper. This is worth keeping in mind when Dr. Sloper belittles Catherine and rejects her choices in the story; beyond the specific obstacle presented by Morris Townsend, Dr. Sloper's disappointment in Catherine is rooted in an unreasoning, unshakeable grief for the life he might have had.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Save when he fell in love with Catherine Harrington, he had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever; and though he was to a certain extent what is called a ladies' doctor, his private opinion of the more complicated sex was not exalted. He regarded its complications as more curious than edifying, and he had an idea of the beauty of *reason*, which was on the whole meagrely gratified by what he observed in his female patients. His wife had been a reasonable woman, but she was a bright exception; among several things that he was sure of, this was perhaps the principal. Such a conviction, of course, did little either to mitigate or to abbreviate his widowhood; and it set a limit to his recognition, at the best, of Catherine's possibilities and of Mrs. Penniman's ministrations.

Related Characters: Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper, Catherine Sloper, Aunt Lavinia Penniman, Dr. Austin Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which provides context for Dr. Sloper's view of his daughter, Catherine, throughout her life, also describes his views of women in general. According to Dr. Sloper, his late wife is the only "reasonable" woman he has ever known. Though most of his patients have been women, he has not been impressed with their rational faculties, or indeed with anything else about them. As James points out, this perspective limits Dr. Sloper's remarriage potential and inevitably colors his relationship with his daughter and sisters. It's an obvious example of the way Sloper's idealization of his wife defines "womanhood" in his eyes and

means that every other female is found wanting by comparison. It also suggests, as do later events in the novel, that Dr. Sloper's reverence for "reason" is not actually as rigorously scientific as he believes it to be. His view of women, as of everyone he relentlessly classifies, is based more on rigid preconceptions than on disinterested observation.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Her great indulgence of it was really the desire of a rather inarticulate nature to manifest itself; she sought to be eloquent in her garments, and to make up for her diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume. But if she expressed herself in her clothes it is certain that people were not to blame for not thinking her a witty person. It must be added that though she had the expectation of a fortune—Dr. Sloper for a long time had been making twenty thousand dollars a year by his profession and laying aside the half of it—the amount of money at her disposal was not greater than the allowance made to many poorer girls. In those days in New York there were still a few altar-fires flickering in the temple of Republican simplicity, and Dr. Sloper would have been glad to see his daughter present herself, with a classic grace, as a priestess of this mild faith. It made him fairly grimace, in private, to think that a child of his should be both ugly and overdressed. For himself, he was fond of the good things of life, and he made a considerable use of them; but he had a dread of vulgarity and even a theory that it was increasing in the society that surrounded him.

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, part of the novel's introduction of Catherine Sloper's character, describes one of the few indulgences the young woman favors: somewhat ostentatious dress. Catherine is "painfully shy" and not very articulate, so her wardrobe is one of the chief avenues at her disposal for expressing herself—suggesting how few such outlets a young woman of her time would have had. Unfortunately, Catherine's tastes are rather showy, or "vulgar," as her father puts it, and don't necessarily reflect Catherine's best internal traits. However, her father's view is a marker of his own class-related prejudice; "Republican simplicity" refers to an early American affinity for the style of the ancient Roman republic, which was thought to be marked by restraint and austerity. Dr. Sloper believes that such simplicity is giving way to an unattractive ostentation in the 1840s, and seeing this trend manifested in his own daughter's dress embarrasses him. Though the Slopers are financially privileged, it's considered to be in poor taste to show it off.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"He is not what I call a gentleman. He has not the soul of one. He is extremely insinuating; but it's a vulgar nature. I saw through it in a minute. He is altogether too familiar—I hate familiarity. He is a plausible coxcomb."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Almond; 'if you make up your mind so easily, it's a great advantage."

"I don't make up my mind easily. What I tell you is the result of thirty years of observation; and in order to be able to form that judgment in a single evening, I have had to spend a lifetime in study."

"Very possibly you are right. But the thing is for Catherine to see it."

"I will present her with a pair of spectacles!" said the Doctor.

Related Characters: Aunt Elizabeth Almond, Dr. Austin Sloper (speaker), Catherine Sloper, Morris Townsend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Dr. Sloper talks with his sister Mrs. Elizabeth Almond about his impressions of his daughter Catherine's suitor, Morris Townsend. Morris has just had dinner at the Slopers' Washington Square home, and Dr. Sloper believes that a single evening is enough time to allow him to gain a sufficient grasp of Morris's character. He explains to Mrs. Almond that Morris is a "coxcomb," or somebody who puts on airs above his station, and he also behaves in an unattractively forthright, talkative manner to those around him. These criticisms echo Dr. Sloper's dislike of Catherine's preferred style of dress—basically, he scorns any behavior that associates itself too overtly with the upper class; a true gentleman should be restrained, and his undemonstrative manners should speak for themselves, not his outward display. Morris offends the doctor's sensibility in this regard. The doctor is certain that his single evening's worth of impressions are correct, a view he stubbornly maintains throughout the novel and seeks to impress on Catherine—but which proves to be much harder than simply presenting her with a pair of "lenses" through which

to see.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"And therefore, you mean, I am mercenary—I only want your daughter's money."

"I don't say that. I am not obliged to say it; and to say it, save under stress of compulsion, would be very bad taste. I say simply that you belong to the wrong category."

"But your daughter doesn't marry a category," Townsend urged, with his handsome smile. "She marries an individual—an individual whom she is so good as to say she loves."

"An individual who offers so little in return!"

"Is it possible to offer more than the most tender affection and a lifelong devotion?" the young man demanded.

"It depends how we take it. It is possible to offer a few other things besides, and not only is it possible, but it's usual. A lifelong devotion is measured after the fact; and meanwhile it is customary in these cases to give a few material securities. What are yours? A very handsome face and figure, and a very good manner. They are excellent as far as they go, but they don't go far enough."

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper, Morris Townsend (speaker), Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Morris proposes to Catherine, he comes to Washington Square and speaks to Dr. Sloper about their decision to marry. Dr. Sloper is displeased to have not been consulted first, but more than that, he finds Morris himself wanting as a husband for Catherine. Morris, not wanting to beat around the bush, says forthrightly that this is because Dr. Sloper thinks he wants to lay claim to Catherine's fortune from her father. This frankness does nothing to endear Morris to Dr. Sloper; in fact, it's yet more evidence of his "vulgarity"—it's "in bad taste" to accuse someone of being mercenary, however accurate the charge might be. Instead, he refers to the matter vaguely as a problem of class—Morris doesn't belong to the right "category." As Morris rather charmingly points out, love can't be boxed into categories; it's something between individuals. Nevertheless, the scientifically minded Dr. Sloper wants some sort of evidence ("material securities") that Morris is good enough for his daughter. Promises of devotion can't be measured in advance—they can only be proven in hindsight—so they're not enough to make up for Morris's deficits in the doctor's eyes.

Chapter 14 Quotes

The Doctor eyed her a moment. "You women are all the same! But the type to which your brother belongs was made to be the ruin of you, and you were made to be its handmaids and victims. The sign of the type in question is the determination—sometimes terrible in its quiet intensity—to accept nothing of life but its pleasures, and to secure these pleasures chiefly by the aid of your complaisant sex. Young men of this class never do anything for themselves that they can get other people to do for them, and it is the infatuation, the devotion, the superstition of others, that keeps them going. These others in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred are women. What our young friends chiefly insist upon is that someone else shall suffer for them; and women do that sort of thing, as you must know, wonderfully well." The Doctor paused a moment, and then he added abruptly, "You have suffered immensely for your brother!"

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper (speaker), Catherine Sloper, Morris Townsend, Mrs. Montgomery

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

After Catherine's engagement to Morris, Dr. Sloper arranges a meeting with Morris's sister, Mrs. Montgomery, in the hope of learning more about the young man. However, their meeting proves to be less an interview than a bullying interrogation. Dr. Sloper doesn't gather new evidence about his daughter's fiancé, but continues to question the reluctant Mrs. Montgomery until he gets her to admit that her brother sometimes behaves selfishly. This is all the admission he requires before he launches into a rant about his already decided assumptions about both Morris and Mrs. Montgomery. He sees each of them not as individuals, but as representatives of their respective classes—Morris as an exploitative idler and Mrs. Montgomery, like most women, as a suffering, enabling victim of her exploiter. This quote is a prime example of Dr. Sloper's allegedly "scientific" practice of observing and organizing people into types. As his exchange with Mrs. Montgomery shows, it is actually a way of seeking out evidence to confirm his own prejudices.

Chapter 15 Quotes

She only had an idea that 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. [...] She could not imagine herself imparting any kind of knowledge to her father, there was something superior even in his injustice and absolute in his mistakes. But she could at least be good, and if she were only good enough. Heaven would invent some way of reconciling all things—the dignity of her father's errors and the sweetness of her own confidence, the strict performance of her filial duties and the enjoyment of Morris Townsend's affection.

Related Characters: Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, coming after Catherine's engagement to Morris and Dr. Sloper's rejection of their engagement, reflects Catherine's heart-rending attempt to reconcile her love for Morris with her loyalty to her father. She believes that if only she's a dutiful daughter, then somehow everything will work out—her confidence in Dr. Sloper will be vindicated, and she will still be free to marry Morris. At this point, "being good" for Catherine involves never defying her father or even judging him for his mistakes. While Catherine is clearly tying herself in knots to try to maintain her father's pedestal alongside her own happiness, her struggle makes sense in light of her lifelong idolizing of him; she can't conceive of happiness apart from pleasing him. Over the coming year, she will have to struggle to acknowledge Dr. Sloper's injustice to herself and to openly defy it, recognizing that even her most self-sacrificing attempts at "goodness" won't win him over. Only then will Catherine be able to find a measure of real happiness—one that will inevitably come with loss.

Mrs. Penniman's real hope was that the girl would make a secret marriage, at which she should officiate as brideswoman or duenna. She had a vision of this ceremony being performed in some subterranean chapel—subterranean chapels in New York were not frequent, but Mrs. Penniman's imagination was not chilled by trifles—and of the guilty couple—she liked to think of poor Catherine and her suitor as the guilty couple—being shuffled away in a fastwhirling vehicle to some obscure lodging in the suburbs, where she would pay them (in a thick veil) clandestine visits, where they would endure a period of romantic privation, and where ultimately, after she should have been their earthly providence, their intercessor, their advocate, and their medium of communication with the world, they should be reconciled to her brother in an artistic tableau, in which she herself should be somehow the central figure. She hesitated as yet to recommend this course to Catherine, but she attempted to draw an attractive picture of it to Morris Townsend.

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper, Morris Townsend, Catherine Sloper, Aunt Lavinia Penniman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This amusing passage describes Aunt Penniman's reaction to her brother's stubborn rejection of Morris Townsend and her niece Catherine's resulting dilemma. It reveals Aunt Penniman's tenuous grasp of reality once she gets swept away by a romantic fantasy. While an elopement, by itself, might not have been such a far-fetched outcome for Morris and Catherine, everything else in Lavinia's daydream is fairly ludicrous—especially the conviction that she herself must somehow be at the center of the drama. Her imagined role for herself balloons from being a mere bridesmaid or chaperone to occupying some sort of godlike function in the couple's lives ("providence, "intercessor," "advocate," "medium"), even bringing about the apparent miracle of reconciling the guilty couple with Dr. Sloper. Although it's humorous, this passage does suggest some disturbing things about Aunt Penniman: first, that she ultimately won't prove to be very helpful to Catherine or even genuinely invested in Catherine's wellbeing; and, second, that she won't hesitate to meddle with Morris if she suspects Catherine won't be sufficiently open to her ideas. In other words, though Aunt Penniman is ineffectual, her propensity to meddle means she's not harmless.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Catherine sat alone by the parlour fire—sat there for more than an hour, lost in her meditations. Her aunt seemed to her aggressive and foolish, and to see it so clearly—to judge Mrs. Penniman so positively—made her feel old and grave. She did not resent the imputation of weakness; it made no impression on her, for she had not the sense of weakness, and she was not hurt at not being appreciated. She had an immense respect for her father, and she felt that to displease him would be a misdemeanour analogous to an act of profanity in a great temple: but her purpose had slowly ripened, and she believed that her prayers had purified it of its violence. The evening advanced, and the lamp burned dim without her noticing it; her eyes were fixed upon her terrible plan.

Related Characters: Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Aunt Lavinia Penniman, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

After Catherine learns that Aunt Penniman has met secretly with Morris in an effort to "help" their troubled romance, she is disturbed. Aunt Penniman is inserting herself in Catherine's affairs in an unwelcome manner, and Catherine recognizes for the first time how foolish Lavinia can be. This realization is difficult for Catherine, as it's the first time a trusted adult is knocked from their pedestal in her eyes. While this is an important step toward recognizing her father's fallibility as well, she is still far from making that more difficult breakthrough. Aunt Penniman's fall makes her pensive; the prospect of going against her father feels downright "profane." This dread, however, doesn't deter Catherine from following through on her "terrible plan" to tell Dr. Sloper that she intends to continue seeing Morris. She is making her first tentative steps toward independence from her father's shadow, though it will take time—and a more confident recognition of her own moral authority—to make that consequential step.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "[...] The two things are extremely mixed up, and the mixture is extremely odd. It will produce some third element, and that's what I am waiting to see. I wait with suspense—with positive excitement; and that is a sort of emotion that I didn't suppose Catherine would ever provide for me. I am really very much obliged to her."

"She will cling," said Mrs. Almond; "she will certainly cling."

"Yes; as I say, she will stick."

"Cling is prettier. That's what those very simple natures always do, and nothing could be simpler than Catherine. She doesn't take many impressions; but when she takes one she keeps it. She is like a copper kettle that receives a dent; you may polish up the kettle, but you can't efface the mark."

"We must try and polish up Catherine," said the Doctor. "I will take her to Europe."

Related Characters: Aunt Elizabeth Almond, Dr. Austin Sloper (speaker), Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

As Dr. Sloper continues to oppose Catherine's engagement to Morris, he finds amusement in his timid daughter's unexpected resistance to his will. In this exchange, he describes his feelings to his sister, Mrs. Almond. The "two things" he mentions are Catherine's love for Morris and her loyalty to him as her father; he now waits to observe what surprising "third element" this unprecedented mixture will yield. This is an example of Dr. Sloper's relentlessly scientific outlook, even on those closest to him—perhaps a way of distancing and protecting himself from real pain, like the loss of his wife and son, two griefs from which he's never recovered. In his relationship with Catherine, however, this amused detachment ultimately fails him, as he falls from the lofty position he has always occupied in her eyes, and they are permanently estranged as a result. Aunt Almond's more homely simile of the dented kettle shows that she understands her niece's nature much better. Dr. Sloper tacitly acknowledges that the "dent" is there to stay; what matters to him is to polish the surface, which he mistakenly believes will be accomplished by a trip to Europe.

Chapter 22 Quotes

"I sometimes think that if I do what you dislike so much, I ought not to stay with you."

"To stay with me?"

"If I live with you, I ought to obey you."

"If that's your theory, it's certainly mine," said the Doctor, with a dry laugh.

"But if I don't obey you, I ought not to live with you—to enjoy your kindness and protection."

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—displeased him deeply, and he signified as much. "That idea is in very bad taste," he said. "Did you get it from Mr. Townsend?"

"Oh no; it's my own!" said Catherine eagerly.

"Keep it to yourself, then," her father answered, more than ever determined she should go to Europe.

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper (speaker), Morris Townsend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

After Morris and Catherine are engaged, and Catherine has decided she is willing to marry Morris at the earliest opportunity in defiance of her father, she reflects further on her situation. Even though she believes her father is in the wrong for opposing the marriage, she still admires him deeply, so she feels guilty about going against him while continuing to enjoy his shelter and protection. In this quote, she openly explains her reasoning to her father shortly before their trip to Europe. Dr. Sloper can't help but admire Catherine's reasoning, finding he's underestimated her cleverness and endurance to some degree; yet her point unsettles him all the same. Though he doesn't explain why—all he can say is that Catherine's idea is "in bad taste," an epithet Sloper applies to anything he dislikes—it suggests a degree of moral independence Catherine has never displayed before, and it undercuts Dr. Sloper's total sway over Catherine's decisions. He shows how much he has underestimated Catherine when he asks if Morris had given her this idea. His harshness has a chilling effect on their relationship; Catherine never gets over the sting of having her tentative self-assertion so abruptly shut down.

Chapter 23 Quotes

Her father's displeasure had cost the girl, as we know, a great deal of deep-welling sorrow—sorrow of the purest and most generous kind, without a touch of resentment or rancour; but for the first time, after he had dismissed with such contemptuous brevity her apology for being a charge upon him, there was a spark of anger in her grief. She had felt his contempt; it had scorched her; that speech about her bad taste made her ears burn for three days. During this period she was less considerate; she had an idea—a rather vague one, but it was agreeable to her sense of injury—that now she was absolved from penance, and might do what she chose. She chose to write to Morris Townsend to meet her in the Square and take her to walk about the town. If she were going to Europe out of respect to her father, she might at least give herself this satisfaction. She felt in every way at present more free and more resolute; there was a force that urged her. Now at last, completely and unreservedly, her passion possessed her.

Related Characters: Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a significant moment in Catherine's character development. Up until now, Catherine has subordinated her own happiness to her father's opinion about what's best for her. Even when she defiantly persists in her engagement, she feels guilty for disobeying Dr. Sloper and tries to conciliate him, telling him that she doubts she should live under his roof while flagrantly going against his wishes. When her father contemptuously dismisses Catherine's words, however, she feels angry at him for the first time. She has been doing the best she can to balance her innate sense of loyalty and truth with her desire to marry Morris; her father's cold rejection of this effort, therefore, feels like a rejection of Catherine's very self. Allowing space for anger in her attitude toward her father—believing for the first time that she "might do what she [chooses to]"—makes an irreparable crack in the seemingly indestructible edifice of her trust in Dr. Sloper, and there's no retreating from it.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ After a while the Doctor descried a footpath which, leading through a transverse valley, would bring them out, as he justly supposed, at a much higher point of the ascent. They followed this devious way and finally lost the path; the valley proved very wild and rough, and their walk became rather a scramble. […] Then, abruptly, in a low tone, he asked her an unexpected question—"Have you given him up?"

The question was unexpected, but Catherine was only superficially unprepared. "No, father!" she answered.

He looked at her again, for some moments, without speaking. "Does he write to you?" he asked.

"Yes—about twice a month."

The Doctor looked up and down the valley, swinging his stick; then he said to her, in the same low tone—"I am very angry."

She wondered what he meant—whether he wished to frighten her. If he did, the place was well chosen; this hard, melancholy dell, abandoned by the summer light, made her feel her loneliness.

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper, Dr. Austin Sloper (speaker), Morris Townsend

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

During the Slopers' year abroad, Dr. Sloper says nothing to Catherine about Morris for six months. He has hoped their travels will distract Catherine from Morris and weaken her determination to keep their engagement. Suddenly, while wandering in the Alps one day, he asks Catherine if she has broken off her relationship with Morris. Though Catherine is startled, she doesn't shrink from answering him; unbeknownst to her father, she has been quietly steadfast in her defiance. Though Dr. Sloper's cold response is frightening to Catherine, she stands her ground, making this a turning point in their relationship—Catherine's effective declaration of independence from his authority over her life—and the climax of *Washington Square*. The rugged Alpine terrain symbolizes the rockiness of the Slopers' relationship. It suggests both how tenuous their bond has become and how alone Catherine really is, though she meets the test admirably and doesn't look back upon their return to New York.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ "You were angry last year that I wouldn't marry immediately, and now you talk about my winning my father over. You told me it would serve him right if he should take me to Europe for nothing. Well, he has taken me for nothing, and you ought to be satisfied. Nothing is changed—nothing but my feeling about father. I don't mind nearly so much now. I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't care for that. I have come home to be married—that's all I know. That ought to please you, unless you have taken up some new idea; you are so strange. You may do as you please; but you must never speak to me again about pleading with father. I shall never plead with him for anything; that is all over. He has put me off. I am come home to be married."

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper (speaker), Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Aunt Lavinia Penniman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

When Catherine returns to Washington Square from her travels in Europe, she is very much changed. This quote sums up her transformation in every way. For one thing, it demonstrates Catherine's decisive breaking away from Aunt Penniman. Lavinia Penniman has dominated Catherine's life in her own way, albeit more subtly than Dr. Sloper's tyranny. She has ingratiated herself with Morris in Catherine's absence, and she's gone from favoring a secret marriage in defiance of Dr. Sloper to believing that Morris should fight for Catherine's inheritance. Catherine immediately catches on to her aunt's fickleness and is disturbed by her meddling and presumption. Catherine's angry response to Aunt Penniman also makes it clear that she's parted ways with her father for good. She has tried to be an obedient daughter, she explains, and it has availed her nothing but heartache; Dr. Sloper has rejected her, and he has been diminished in her eyes. From now on, Catherine will act in her own best interests and not try to please the parental figures in her life to her own cost.

Chapter 26 Quotes

"I wouldn't say such a thing without being sure. I saw it, I felt it, in England, just before he came away. He talked to me one night—the last night; and then it came over me. You can tell when a person feels that way. I wouldn't accuse him if he hadn't made me feel that way. I don't accuse him; I just tell you that that's how it is. He can't help it; we can't govern our affections. Do I govern mine? mightn't he say that to me? It's because he is so fond of my mother, whom we lost so long ago. She was beautiful, and very, very brilliant; he is always thinking of her. I am not at all like her; Aunt Penniman has told me that. Of course it isn't my fault; but neither is it his fault. All I mean is, it's true; and it's a stronger reason for his never being reconciled than simply his dislike for you."

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper (speaker), Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper, Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by Catherine when she's reunited with Morris in New York, further showcases Catherine's newfound maturity and independence. Before she left for Europe, she tended to be acquiescent to her fiance's wishes; now she expresses her own desires freely. Here, she explains her discovery of her father's disdain for her, which she now knows will never change. She also displays remarkable insight that neither Catherine nor any other character has shown earlier in the novel—she perceives that Dr. Sloper's dislike of both Morris and herself is rooted in his unhealed grief for his wife. Catherine also understands—likely because of her own pain—that such affections can't be simply overruled. Catherine can't be like her dazzling mother, and Dr. Sloper can never get over his loss of her and accept Catherine for who she is. Though this insight can't fix her relationship with her father (and Morris will never understand it), it allows Catherine to let go of her idealization and move forward according to her own desires for her life.

Chapter 28 Quotes

[...] [S]he had accustomed herself to the thought that, if Morris should decidedly not be able to get her brother's money, it would not do for him to marry Catherine without it. [...] She had grown first to regard [this idea] with an emotion which she flattered herself was philosophic, and then to have a secret tenderness for it. The fact that she kept her tenderness secret proves, of course, that she was ashamed of it [...] In the first place, Morris must get the money, and she would help him to it. In the second, it was plain it would never come to him, and it would be a grievous pity he should marry without it—a young man who might so easily find something better. After her brother had delivered himself, on his return from Europe, of that incisive little address that has been quoted, Morris's cause seemed so hopeless that Mrs. Penniman fixed her attention exclusively upon the latter branch of her argument. If Morris had been her son, she would certainly have sacrificed Catherine to a superior conception of his future; and to be ready to do so as the case stood was therefore even a finer degree of devotion. Nevertheless, it checked her breath a little to have the sacrificial knife, as it were, suddenly thrust into her hand.

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper, Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Aunt Lavinia Penniman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

During Catherine's and Dr. Sloper's absence in Europe, Aunt Penniman becomes a kind of surrogate mother to Morris Townsend. She invites him often to Washington Square, where he luxuriates by the fireside, enjoying Dr. Sloper's good cigars and wine. In the process, Aunt Penniman is increasingly softened toward Morris's view of things—namely, that he deserves access to Catherine's full family inheritance and shouldn't satisfy himself with anything less. She feels ashamed of herself for taking this view, knowing deep down that she ought to be sympathetic to Catherine; however, after the Slopers come back and Dr. Sloper is as immovable as ever in his opposition to the marriage, Aunt Penniman gives up the pretense of being unstintingly on Catherine's side. She justifies this change of view on the grounds that if Morris were really her son, she would want nothing less than the best for him. This shows just how thoroughly Aunt Penniman is swayed by her own romanticized views of things; she places herself on the side of whomever she sees as being wronged most dramatically, and makes sure she is at the center of the drama herself.

Chapter 29 Quotes

"When persons are going to be married, they oughtn't to think so much about business. You shouldn't think about cotton, you should think about me. You can go to New Orleans some other time—there will always be plenty of cotton. It isn't the moment to choose—we have waited too long already." She spoke more forcibly and volubly than he had ever heard her, and she held his arm in her two hands.

"You said you wouldn't make a scene!" cried Morris. "I call this a scene."

"It's you that are making it! I have never asked you anything before. We have waited too long already." And it was a comfort to her to think that she had hitherto asked so little; it seemed to make her right to insist the greater now.

Related Characters: Morris Townsend, Catherine Sloper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

After Catherine returns from Europe, Morris decides to break off their engagement, but he's too cowardly to tell Catherine himself. Instead he makes increasingly awkward visits to Washington Square, trying to provoke a quarrel that will give him an easy exit from the engagement. Finally, he claims, rather transparently, that he must go to New Orleans to sell some cotton, and Catherine can't come with him. Perhaps expecting Catherine to submit to this sudden decision as she would have done earlier in their relationship, Morris is surprised by the way Catherine abruptly flares up in protest. Not only that, but Catherine demands that Morris put her needs first instead of chasing after money—as close to a forthright accusation of being "mercenary" as he ever gets from his fiancée. Catherine refuses to be strung along by Morris any longer and rejects Morris's feeble attempt to blame her for "making a scene." After this conversation, Morris leaves with vague promises of writing, but they both know the engagement is on shaky ground. Thus this quote represents the third of Catherine's big steps toward independence in the novel—the first being her defiance of her father in Europe, the second being her rejection of Aunt Penniman's constant meddling.

Chapter 30 Quotes

"Is it you then that have changed him and made him so unnatural?" Catherine cried. "Is it you that have worked on him and taken him from me! He doesn't belong to you, and I don't see how you have anything to do with what is between us! Is it you that have made this plot and told him to leave me? How could you be so wicked, so cruel? What have I ever done to you; why can't you leave me alone? I was afraid you would spoil everything; for you do spoil everything you touch! I was afraid of you all the time we were abroad; I had no rest when I thought that you were always talking to him." Catherine went on with growing vehemence, pouring out in her bitterness and in the clairvoyance of her passion (which suddenly, jumping all processes, made her judge her aunt finally and without appeal), the uneasiness which had lain for so many months upon her heart.

Related Characters: Catherine Sloper (speaker), Morris Townsend, Aunt Lavinia Penniman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

After Morris breaks off their engagement with no clear explanation, Catherine discerns that Aunt Penniman is somehow to blame and finally unleashes a year's worth of frustration and anger. Aunt Penniman had been Morris's frequent hostess while the Slopers were abroad, and it's not clear how she "worked on him" in Catherine's absence; in fact, it might be more accurate to say that Aunt Penniman had been "worked on," as she is won over to championing Morris's right to the Sloper fortune, after initially supporting a secret marriage in defiance of Dr. Sloper. Nevertheless, Aunt Penniman's indulgent hospitality effectively allows Morris to string Catherine along for a whole year, dumping her heartlessly once he's faced with the prospect of marrying her without an inheritance. Catherine's "clairvoyant" outburst shows her connecting the dots about the past year's events and refusing to be manipulated anymore. She is no longer the shy, compliant girl who passively accepts the interference of stronger personalities.

Chapter 32 Quotes

Catherine, at the time of these events, had left her thirtieth year well behind her, and had quite taken her place as an old maid. Her father would have preferred she should marry, and he once told her that he hoped she would not be too fastidious. [...] Catherine, however, became an admirable old maid. She formed habits, regulated her days upon a system of her own, interested herself in charitable institutions, asylums, hospitals, and aid-societies, and went generally, with an even and noiseless step, about the rigid business of her life.

Related Characters: Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

After Catherine and Morris break their engagement, Catherine has other opportunities to marry—both a rich widower and a successful young lawyer propose to her, and neither of them does so with apparently mercenary motivations. However, Catherine, now in her thirties, turns both suitors down. The problem, contra Dr. Sloper, is not that Catherine is too "fastidious"; after her heartbreak with Morris, she simply has no desire for marriage anymore. She is well established in her routine as a single woman, and any marriage—even a mutually affectionate one—would likely compromise that independence to some degree. For an upper-class woman of the mid-nineteenth century, independence usually meant the kind of work described here—supporting charities, hospitals, and other philanthropic organizations. Catherine has never shown much interest in wealth for its own sake, so it's not surprising that she would choose to distribute her inheritance in this way. Though Catherine seems happy enough with her lot, this also suggests how circumscribed a single woman's life would be in this context; outside of marriage, Catherine doesn't have many other avenues open to her.

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. There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void.

Related Characters: Morris Townsend, Dr. Austin Sloper, Catherine Sloper

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Though Catherine is described as living a contented "old maid" lifestyle, James doesn't romanticize her circumstances, either. It's plain that Catherine was badly scarred by the events surrounding her engagement to Morris Townsend. Their romance basically sours her on marriage for the rest of her life, and her father's cruelty permanently destroys her trust as well. Yet it's noteworthy that Catherine, in her honest acceptance of these wounds, is better able to handle grief than her father. After his wife's death, Dr. Sloper took his heartbreak out on others in his life, chiefly Catherine; in contrast, Catherine pours herself into lovingly caring for others. Catherine has been forced to confront a kind of "death," and even though it isn't a literal bereavement, it requires a similar kind of reorienting of her life, and she's much more successful in this than either her father or Aunt Penniman have been in their own lives. Catherine is a striking heroine in this regard—she neither forgets her scars nor wallows in self-pity, instead becoming a stronger version of the soft-hearted girl introduced at the beginning of the novel.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In New York City in the 1840s, a physician named Dr. Austin Sloper flourished. In America, "you must either earn your income or make believe that you earn it," and the medical profession—with its emphasis on both practicality and science—is an especially honored means of doing so.

James establishes the setting and one of the main characters, Dr. Sloper. He also introduces a major theme—the importance of earned income among the American upper class—and the centrality of science and reason to Dr. Sloper.

Dr. Sloper is a clever man, and because of this has become a local celebrity. He is witty and moves among the highest social circles in New York. He has led a fortunate life—as a young man, he married Catherine Harrington, a charming woman whose substantial dowry had helped Dr. Sloper establish his practice. Aside from the fact that he makes a good living, Dr. Sloper's choice of profession is motivated by his desire to learn something interesting and to do something useful.

Dr. Sloper is intelligent and highly regarded within society. His medical skills speak for themselves, but he values social approval for its own sake, too. While he married for love, his wife's income helped secure his social standing. At the same time, he works for a living, even though he technically doesn't have to.

The Slopers' first child, a promising little boy, died at age three, despite Dr. Sloper's best medical efforts. Two years later, Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper gave birth to a daughter, Catherine, "an inadequate substitute" for the son, and died herself less than two weeks later. Though Dr. Sloper privately faulted himself for these losses, the broader community didn't blame him, and his practice didn't suffer.

The tragic losses of his wife and little son will haunt Dr. Sloper for the rest of his days, though other people understand that even a skilled physician can lose loved ones to illness. From the first time she is mentioned, Dr. Sloper's surviving daughter is described as a disappointment to him, and her birth is couched in loss.

CHAPTER 2

When Catherine is about 10, Dr. Sloper invites his sister, Lavinia Penniman, who has been left a childless widow, to stay with him temporarily. She ends up staying permanently, on the assertion that it's good for young Catherine to have "a brilliant woman" near her—though Dr. Sloper has never been "dazzled" by the intellect, or even the reason, of any woman except for the late Mrs. Sloper. Aunt Penniman is very romantic, with "a passion for little secrets and mysteries." Dr. Sloper suspects that when Catherine is about 17, Aunt Penniman will try to persuade her that "some young man with a moustache is in love with her."

With the exception of his late wife, Dr. Sloper doesn't have a high opinion of women in general—something that will have a lasting impact on Catherine's upbringing and prospects. Aunt Penniman's romantic nature and love of mysteries will also have an outsized influence on Catherine and in the story as a whole.

Catherine herself is healthy and plain, but not beautiful. She is good, obedient, modest, and truthful. She is not exceptionally clever and doesn't shine socially. She idolizes Dr. Sloper, both adoring and fearing him and desiring nothing more than to please him, which she's never entirely succeeded in doing. Dr. Sloper never lets Catherine know how much of a disappointment she is to him.

Catherine is a thoroughly average and pleasant girl in many respects, and a devoted daughter, but this isn't enough for Dr. Sloper, who wishes she were exceptional and a standout within society, like his wife had been. Meanwhile, Catherine puts her father on a lofty pedestal.

By the time Catherine is 18, Dr. Sloper has largely reconciled himself to his disappointment in his daughter and imagines that she will never surprise him at this point. What most people misunderstand about Catherine is that she is deeply, "painfully shy"—not "irresponsive" or "insensibl[e]." In fact, "she was the softest creature in the world."

Dr. Sloper's assumptions about Catherine's character establish some of the tensions to come in the novel—she will indeed surprise him, and in ways not to his liking. People tend to interpret Catherine as lacking in sensitivity because she is so reserved, but she's actually extremely soft-hearted.

CHAPTER 3

While she is inarticulate, Catherine enjoys expressing herself through a somewhat ornate wardrobe—"[making] up for her diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume." This embarrasses Dr. Sloper, who would prefer that his daughter dress in a manner befitting "Republican simplicity." For instance, to a party at her aunt Mrs. Almond's, 21-year-old Catherine wears a dress of red satin with gold trim which she's coveted for a long time. This party "[is] the beginning of something very important."

Dr. Sloper wishes his daughter's style were more austere; wearing one's wealth on one's sleeve is, in his eyes, unAmerican. This is another example of Catherine not measuring up in her father's eyes. For her, fancy dress is simply an outlet for her otherwise shy personality.

While the Slopers live in fashionable Washington Square, Mrs. Almond and her large family live uptown in an area which still retains some "rural picturesqueness." Catherine grew up close to her nine Almond cousins and enjoyed boisterous games with them. Now, however, the Almonds are beginning to "settle themselves in life." One of the daughters is engaged to a stockbroker, and Mrs. Almond is throwing a party celebrating that event.

New York City is still coming into its own, but the Slopers' home is on the cutting edge, showing how important class identity is to Dr. Sloper. Now that her cousins are beginning to establish themselves in adult life, there's a sense that it might be Catherine's turn, too.

CHAPTER 4

At the party, Catherine's cousin, Marian Almond, introduces her to a young man, the cousin of her own fiancé, Arthur Townsend. The young man, Morris Townsend, had expressed a desire to make Catherine's acquaintance. He is talkative and, Catherine thinks, "so beautiful." They dance together and then sit and talk together on a sofa—or, rather, Morris talks. Catherine finds him clever and unlike anyone she's met before in New York.

Catherine is swept off her feet by Morris Townsend, who is unlike anyone she's ever known. Morris dominates their entire interaction at the party, and shy Catherine is happy to let him; she barely says a word to him at this point. Morris seems to have been planning to meet Catherine and to make a favorable impression on her.

Catherine continues to find Morris's conversation very amusing. She thinks he talks "the way a young man might talk in a novel," or "in a play [...] before the footlights." Yet he seems very natural at the same time. When Marian later asks Catherine what she thinks of Morris, she says "nothing particular"—the first time she's ever spoken dishonestly.

Morris has a way of presenting himself that's at once very polished and apparently natural; it appeals to the unassuming Catherine. But when asked, Catherine keeps her thoughts about Morris all to herself—something she's never felt the need to do before.

Later, when Dr. Sloper asks Catherine if she has enjoyed the party, Catherine "dissembles" for a second time, saying only that she's very tired. When Aunt Penniman speaks approvingly of Morris on the ride home, Dr. Sloper suspects that the time has come when Lavinia will persuade Catherine that a young man is in love with her. When her aunt asks, though, Catherine pretends that she doesn't know Morris's name.

Catherine continues to want to keep her thoughts about Morris to herself. Her desire for privacy in this matter signals a big shift in her life. Dr. Sloper suspects the same, but he anticipates more of an amusing diversion than anything serious.

CHAPTER 5

A few days later, Arthur and Morris Townsend pay a visit to Washington Square. Catherine tells Arthur that his cousin Morris seems "like a foreigner," and Arthur says that some would call his cousin "too clever." When Catherine asks Arthur whether Morris will stay in New York now that he's returned from travels abroad, Arthur says he'll stay "if he can get something to do." Catherine has never heard of an upper-class young man in this situation.

The Townsends' visit hints that Morris remains interested in Catherine. Catherine is still struck by Morris's seeming uniqueness, though his cousin's words suggest there's a darker undertone to his smooth personality. Catherine doesn't know how to categorize a young gentleman who doesn't have a profession—even young men of means were expected to support themselves in some way in the early American republic.

After the young men leave, Aunt Penniman tells Catherine that she believes Morris is "coming a-courting." Given that Morris has "barely heard the sound of her voice," Catherine does not quite believe this, assuming it must be a figment of her aunt's romantic imagination.

Catherine's reaction to her aunt's claim shows how unassuming she is, and also that she's not as susceptible to her aunt's fancies as Dr. Sloper has assumed she might be.

CHAPTER 6

When Morris Townsend calls at Washington Square again a few days later, Aunt Penniman thinks, "That's the sort of husband I should have had!" This time, though, Catherine sees him alone. Morris talks in a friendly way and asks Catherine about herself while admiring both Catherine and the room. Catherine thinks Morris looks like "a young knight in a poem."

Morris's courtship of Catherine is progressing. It appears that, while he's attracted to her, he also has some interest in her home, and by extension, her material means. Meanwhile, both Aunt Penniman and Catherine romanticize Morris.

That night, Dr. Sloper teases Catherine, asking her if Morris proposed to her that day. Catherine wishes she had a readier comeback, and Dr. Sloper thinks to himself, "Decidedly, my daughter is not brilliant!" Dr. Sloper later asks his sister Mrs. Almond what more she knows about Morris. Mrs. Almond explains that Morris is descended from an inferior line of Townsends to his cousin Arthur. He is also reputed to have been "wild."

Catherine does feel some self-consciousness around her father, realizing she doesn't measure up to his standard of cleverness, and Dr. Sloper continues to nurse disappointment in Catherine. He starts asking around about Morris's past, which suggests that Morris' pursuit of Catherine is getting increasingly serious.

Mrs. Almond goes on to say that Morris had been in the Navy when he was younger, then "amused himself" by traveling abroad, squandering a small inheritance. He's now about 30 and looking to "[begin] life in earnest." Mrs. Almond thinks that Morris might well be genuinely interested in Catherine and that Dr. Sloper "[has] never done Catherine justice." Dr. Sloper points out that Catherine is unattractive and has never had any suitors before.

According to Mrs. Almond's report, Morris seems to be an unfocused, pleasure-seeking young man with no apparent plans, which suggests that he may be after Catherine for her inheritance. On another note, Mrs. Almond sees more potential in Catherine than her brother does, once again emphasizing how Dr. Sloper sees his daughter as a perpetual disappointment.

Mrs. Almond defends Catherine, pointing out that she has her own style, but that she seems older than her age, which puts off young men. She is not delicate and she dresses richly, which gives an impression that she has already been married. She suggests that, someday, a man of 40 will be delighted with Catherine. Dr. Sloper has little to say to this, but wonders about Morris's means of supporting himself, as he reportedly lives with his widowed sister.

Mrs. Almond doesn't share her brother's view that Catherine is unmarriageable; she simply might not appeal to immature young men. This suggests the limitations faced by young women who departed from social norms in any way. Dr. Sloper is more concerned with possible ulterior motives on Morris's part.

CHAPTER 7

Dr. Sloper, however, is "more than anything else amused" by the possibility of his daughter having a suitor. He thinks it's "vulgar" to accuse someone too quickly of having mercenary motives, and he is curious whether a young man might love Catherine for her "moral worth." He tells Mrs. Penniman to invite Morris to dinner the next time he calls.

Dr. Sloper still isn't taking the situation—or his daughter—very seriously. He declines to jump to conclusions about Morris's motives and remains open to the possibility that Morris might really love Catherine, even though she isn't a catch.

The dinner takes place a few days later. Morris admires Dr. Sloper's good wine, and Dr. Sloper admires Morris's innate abilities; however, he doesn't like Morris very much, thinking him too self-assured, with great "powers of invention." Morris can tell Dr. Sloper doesn't care for him and tells Catherine, who replies that she never contradicts her father and that his opinion matters to her greatly.

Dr. Sloper suspects that Morris is an overconfident teller of tales. Morris wants to hear Catherine say that she'll defend him to her father, but at this point, such a thing is hardly conceivable to Catherine—she still idolizes her father and can't imagine going against him.

Later, when Dr. Sloper talks with Mrs. Almond, he says that Catherine will have to get over her feelings for Morris, because he is "not a gentleman," having "a vulgar nature […] altogether too familiar." He claims to have arrived at this judgment based on thirty years of observing human nature. All that's necessary for Catherine to be persuaded of the same is to "present her with a pair of spectacles."

Dr. Sloper's estimation of Morris's character appears to have less to do with his financial status, per se, than with his too personable interactions with others. Dr. Sloper thinks his view is justifiable based on long years of observing people, and that if only Catherine looks at the clear evidence in the same way, she will arrive at the same opinion.

CHAPTER 8

Morris visits Catherine more and more, and Catherine is very happy. Though she is in love, she has "only a consciousness of immense and unexpected favors." Dr. Sloper wishes to give Catherine her liberty, but is nevertheless annoyed by her secrecy and Aunt Penniman's complicity in it. He presses Aunt Penniman for details, with limited success.

Catherine is unassuming in her romance with Morris, having never experienced courtship before and perhaps not having expected it. Dr. Sloper, on one hand, seems to want to be a liberal-minded father, or to believe that he is, but he's unhappy with his limited knowledge of what's happening under his own roof.

Aunt Penniman finally reveals something of the "misfortunes" Morris has told her about, claiming he's alone in the world and has been betrayed by false friends. She claims he's "earnestly" searching for a position, and Dr. Sloper retorts that he's looking for one in the Slopers' front parlor—"the position of husband of a weak-minded woman with a large fortune would suit him to perfection!" Aunt Penniman is disgusted by this statement, asserting that Catherine is not a "weak-minded woman."

Morris has taken Aunt Penniman into his confidence, or at least has claimed that he has. Dr. Sloper is suspicious of Morris's account of himself and by now is convinced that he is merely exploiting Catherine. Aunt Penniman says that he continues to underestimate Catherine, and he certainly does appear to discount Catherine's agency.

CHAPTER 9

The next Sunday evening at Aunt Almond's house, the Slopers are visiting their relatives, and Morris joins the party. Catherine, aware that Dr. Sloper doesn't like Morris, shrinks from his gaze as Morris sits by her, and Dr. Sloper almost pities her in her complete lack of defiance.

Catherine's cowering discomfort before her father's disapproving gaze is painful even for Dr. Sloper to see.

Dr. Sloper wonders if perhaps he hasn't given Morris enough of a chance and starts a conversation with him about his search for work. He advises Morris to "choose his line with discretion" and wonders if he would consider leaving New York for opportunities elsewhere. Morris explains that he has obligations to his widowed sister, Mrs. Montgomery, helping to bring up her children. Dr. Sloper resolves to meet Mrs. Montgomery.

Dr. Sloper shows some willingness to give Morris a fair chance. However, the conversation is filled with double meanings, as Dr. Sloper is obviously trying to gain a sense of Morris's intentions toward Catherine.

Meanwhile, Morris asks Catherine if she will meet him somewhere in private, as he has something particular to say to her. He explains that he can't enter the Slopers' house again because Dr. Sloper has insulted his poverty. Catherine replies that she doesn't care who sees them and that she will meet him in the house. He consents. When Aunt Penniman hears of this, she is shocked by her niece's unromantic preference for "a chintz-covered parlor" over "a sentimental tryst beside a fountain sheeted with dead leaves."

Catherine shows her capacity for self-assertion when she insists on meeting Morris on her own terms, in an environment she is comfortable with. Aunt Penniman, amusingly, can only take from this that Catherine is shockingly unromantic.

CHAPTER 10

The next day Morris comes to the Slopers' house as expected. Having told Catherine that he loves her, he now tells her that they must settle things. Catherine knows he is right, though she dreads the prospect of a conflict with her father. She says she will speak to Dr. Sloper first, since she's able to be more tactful and conciliating. Morris warns her that Dr. Sloper will say he is mercenary. He asks Catherine if she will be faithful to him even if Dr. Sloper forbids their marriage, and Catherine wordlessly agrees.

Morris wants to move ahead toward marriage. Catherine is bravely willing to face her father, though she shrinks from the likely confrontation and still finds it difficult to assert herself verbally. Morris anticipates what Dr. Sloper's biggest objection is likely to be and warns Catherine of the fact in advance. Though Morris has shown affection to Catherine, it's difficult to fully guess his motives.

CHAPTER 11

That evening Catherine goes to Dr. Sloper's study and tells him that she is engaged to Morris. Dr. Sloper observes that their relationship has moved very fast Then he tells her that he doesn't like the engagement and that she has taken advantage of his indulgence; she ought to have spoken to him first. Catherine explains that she was afraid he didn't like Morris, and she argues that he doesn't know Morris well enough. Dr. Sloper says that he has his "impression" of Morris, and that Catherine only knows what Morris has chosen to show her of himself.

Catherine shows a degree of boldness in her willingness to push back against her father's disapproval. Dr. Sloper continues to maintain that a bare "impression" of Morris tells him everything he needs to know. At the same time, he's right that Catherine's knowledge of Morris is limited, too.

Catherine says that Dr. Sloper thinks Morris "mercenary," and Dr. Sloper concedes that this is true, since Morris has already spent his own fortune, and there's every reason to expect he would do the same with Catherine's. Catherine finds "something hopeless and oppressive" in having to argue with her father, but nevertheless vouches for Morris's abilities and character. Her father embraces her and promises to be kind to her, but tells her not to spread the news of her engagement. He will speak to Morris tomorrow.

Catherine idealizes her father so much and trusts so deeply in his judgment that arguing with him is disorienting for her. Yet she steadfastly speaks up for Morris despite her discomfort, which shows her conflicting loyalties. At this point, Dr. Sloper responds to his daughter with gentleness, which may feel to the reader more unsettling than comforting.

CHAPTER 12

Dr. Sloper remains at home the next day in anticipation of Morris's visit. He tells Morris that he ought to have spoken to him before proposing to Catherine. Morris replies that he had thought Catherine to be "her own mistress." Dr. Sloper replies that while this is literally the case, he is not indifferent to Catherine's decisions and still believes her morally bound to consult him. Morris explains that he has long thought Catherine "a charming girl," and Dr. Sloper scoffs at this turn of phrase.

Dr. Sloper explains that while Catherine might have the freedom to act as she pleases on paper, he still expects to have a say in her marriage. He continues to reject the idea that someone would pursue Catherine for love alone, showing how strong his preconceptions are and the degree to which they color his view of Morris and his relationship with Catherine.

Morris acknowledges that he knows Dr. Sloper doesn't like him. Dr. Sloper agrees that, in view of Morris's being a son-in-law, he "abominates" him—Morris lacks means, a profession, or prospects, and it would be completely imprudent for Dr. Sloper to let Catherine, "a weak woman with a large fortune," marry him.

Dr. Sloper continues to maintain that it's really up to him whom Catherine marries, especially in view of Morris's unsatisfactory qualifications in terms of wealth and profession.

Dr. Sloper goes on to say that it would be "in bad taste" to call Morris "mercenary," but that he does belong to "the wrong category." Morris protests that Catherine isn't marrying a category, but an individual. Dr. Sloper replies that he's an "individual who offers so little in return." Morris asks what more he can offer than lifelong devotion, and Dr. Sloper retorts that such devotion can only be measured after the fact, and that in the meantime, it would be best if Morris could offer some "material securities."

Dr. Sloper finds it crass to openly accuse Morris of "mercenary" motives, even though that's clearly the issue. When Morris makes the rather good point that Catherine wouldn't be marrying an abstract category, but a person who's devoted to her, Dr. Sloper replies that he wants more solid (presumably monetary) assurances than vague promises of devotion. Unlike his sentimental sister, Dr. Sloper rejects romance out of hand and believes that only an evidence-based read of the situation will do.

Morris and Dr. Sloper continue to go back and forth about Morris's past dealings with money and their possible impact on Catherine. Morris admits that he was wild and foolish in his previous spending, but says that this reckless phase of his life is over. He thinks Dr. Sloper is being unjust in his stubborn assessment of him. Dr. Sloper is unconcerned; moreover, he's sure that even if Catherine also finds him unjust, she'll ultimately give Morris up—"I have a great fund of respect and affection in my daughter's mind to draw upon." He can't *forbid* Catherine, because he is not "a father in an old-fashioned novel," but he's confident that his urging will be sufficient to change her mind. The two men part ways, at an impasse.

Dr. Sloper is confident that, based on a lifetime's worth of affection and reverence for him, Catherine will come around to share his view of Morris. It's a purely rational matter to him—a lifetime of respect outweighs a few weeks of passion. This suggests how little he understands the workings of his daughter's mind, and, at that, of human nature. He also continues to want to see himself as fundamentally liberal-minded in his treatment of Catherine, even if he's actually quite heavy-handed.

CHAPTER 13

Dr. Sloper has spent his entire medical career making quick estimations of people, and 19 times out of 20, he has been right. Aunt Almond suggests that perhaps Morris Townsend is the 20th case. Dr. Sloper doesn't think so, but to give him the benefit of the doubt, he will meet Morris's sister, Mrs. Montgomery.

Aunt Almond represents a voice of moderation and balance compared to Aunt Penniman's romance and Dr. Sloper's devotion to "reason." She wisely points out that a quick "diagnosis," like those upon which Dr. Sloper's career has been built, might not be sufficient in this scenario.

Dr. Sloper continues to rely on the belief that Catherine's longstanding admiration for him will win out over her newfound love for Morris. Aunt Almond is not so sure, and anyway, she points out, Aunt Penniman will be pulling on Morris's side. Dr. Sloper replies that he will have "no treason" in his house. He says that though he is "harmless," he builds on Catherine and Lavinia's fear of him—"the salutary terror I inspire!"

Though he makes a joke of it, Dr. Sloper rightly estimates the stifling effect that he has on Lavinia and Catherine. His representation of dissent as "treason," though satirical, is a bit chilling.

CHAPTER 14

Dr. Sloper meets with Morris's sister, Mrs. Montgomery, at her house, whose exterior suggests she is a "thrifty and self-respecting" person. He quickly takes Mrs. Montgomery's measure and decides she is humble and brave and looks up to him as a "fine gentleman." He asks Mrs. Montgomery to tell him about Morris's character for the sake of Catherine, who is "such an easy victim." He explains about Catherine's inheritance from her mother and that Catherine will inherit almost twice that amount upon Dr. Sloper's death, should he approve of her husband. But, he adds, if Catherine marries without his consent—and that includes marrying Morris—he will leave every penny of his own fortune to charity.

Once again, Dr. Sloper shows his capacity for quickly summing up a person's character based on a few limited observations. He appears inclined to do this in ways that flatter his own character. He continues to view his daughter chiefly in the category of a "victim," thinking little of her agency. He also makes clear how much Catherine's future prosperity will depend on his judgment of her choices.

Mrs. Montgomery thinks for a while and asks what makes Dr. Sloper dislike her brother Morris so much. He explains that although Morris seems like excellent company, he appears ill-suited to be Catherine's caretaker and protector. He is "in the habit of trusting [his] impression," though Mrs. Montgomery is "at liberty to contradict it flat." He further explains that he's in the habit of dividing people into classes or types, and that while he could be mistaken about Morris as an individual, Morris has every appearance of belonging to the selfish "type."

Dr. Sloper is transparent about his habits of observing, judging, and classifying people. While he seems to regard this as an extension of his scientific profession and "reasonable" turn of mind, it's easy to see how these habits would readily enable Dr. Sloper to confirm his own prejudices about people. In other words, he's not as "reasonable" as he believes himself to be.

When Mrs. Montgomery hesitantly admits that her brother can be selfish, Dr. Sloper says, "You women are all the same! But the type to which your brother belongs was made to be the ruin of you, and you were made to be its handmaids and victims." He goes on to explain that men like Morris exploit the devotion of women like Mrs. Montgomery and Catherine in order to pursue their own pleasures in life.

Dr. Sloper continues to confirm his own preconceptions about both Morris and Mrs. Montgomery, even going so far as to claim that women are all alike in their capacity to be victimized by men like Morris.

Dr. Sloper imagines that Mrs. Montgomery has "suffered immensely" because of her brother, and she admits this. Dr. Sloper explains that he figured this out "by a philosophic trick—by what they call induction." He is amused to learn further that Morris tutors the five Montgomery children in Spanish, and asserts that Morris "sponges off" his sister. Dr. Sloper even promises Mrs. Montgomery financial support if she will help put a stop to his marriage to Catherine.

Dr. Sloper's questioning of Mrs. Montgomery has a manipulative feel, though he maintains that he's simply drawing conclusions based on evidence. Morris's teaching Spanish to the children is implied to be fairly useless, further proof that Morris does little to earn his keep. Dr. Sloper goes so far as to effectively bribe Mrs. Montgomery to say something damning about her brother.

Almost in tears, Mrs. Montgomery resists Dr. Sloper's pressure to speak ill of Morris's character, but she finally bursts out with, "Don't let [Catherine] marry him!" Dr. Sloper leaves with a feeling of moral satisfaction.

Mrs. Montgomery is understandably upset to be put in the position of putting down her brother in front of a stranger, though she ultimately breaks. The fact that Dr. Sloper is "morally satisfied" by this high-pressure interview suggests a coldness about his own character.

CHAPTER 15

Dr. Sloper is puzzled and almost disappointed by Catherine's passive, unemotional response to his rejection of her engagement; he assumes she will do as she's told and that there will be no more "entertainment." Catherine, meanwhile, begins to discover that there is "great excitement in trying to be a good daughter," but is unsure what she will do.

Dr. Sloper's inclination to take his daughter's relational drama as a form of amusement suggests a lack of tenderness toward his own child. At the very least, he underestimates her. Catherine, for her part, feels an unfamiliar stirring that she won't always be perfectly obedient and fulfill her father's expectations—a new sensation she finds curious and exciting.

Catherine obeys Dr. Sloper's orders not to see Morris, but she exchanges letters with him. She asks Morris for a little time to think, as the idea of "setting up her will against [her father's] own, was heavy on her soul." She still believes that if she is both obedient to her father and faithful to Morris, somehow Heaven will reconcile both sides of the apparent impasse.

Catherine still struggles with the idea of going against her father's will in any way, after so many years of steadfast admiration and loyalty. In a touching display of naïve reasoning, Catherine trusts that if she continues to be good, somehow everything will come right in the end.

Aunt Penniman, meanwhile, is not much help. She can only daydream about a fantasy scenario in which Catherine and Morris are secretly married, with herself playing some heroic role in the arrangements. She writes Morris daily updates from Washington Square and eventually asks to meet with him in secret. To Morris's irritation, she invites him to an oyster restaurant in another part of the city. Thrilling at the romance of it all, Aunt Penniman arrives there wrapped in a thick veil.

While Aunt Penniman's secret maneuverings (and Morris's thinly veiled annoyance in response) are humorous, they also hint at Aunt Penniman's pathological need to put herself at the center of other people's drama and to romanticize their circumstances—traits that will only become more prominent and more troubling.

CHAPTER 16

During her secret meeting with Morris at the oyster saloon, Aunt Penniman tries to convince him that Dr. Sloper will never be reconciled to his romance with Catherine; he must marry Catherine first and tell Dr. Sloper after the fact. ("The woman's an idiot," Morris thinks, though he is outwardly civil.) Aunt Penniman explains that this course of action will persuade Dr. Sloper that Morris is not mercenary, and in the end, he will make some amends for his earlier coldness. Morris is unconvinced, even admitting that he *does* "like the money." When he walks Aunt Penniman home, he eyes Washington Square and thinks the Slopers' place "a devilish comfortable house."

Caught up in the romantic potential of the whole situation, Aunt Penniman tries to convince an exasperated Morris that an elopement is the only way forward. Morris doesn't conceal the fact that Catherine's fortune is appealing to him, and he finds the Slopers' house, which he would stand to inherit, attractive. Nevertheless, he sees through Aunt Penniman's meddlesome self-importance and only indulges her with this conversation.

CHAPTER 17

That evening, when Aunt Penniman tells Catherine about her meeting with Morris, Catherine feels angry for almost the first time in her life, realizing that "her aunt was meddlesome." Though it feels "presumptuous" to say so, Catherine tells Aunt Penniman that only she ought to visit Morris. Aunt Penniman asks why Catherine seems so "cold" and, in light of Catherine's fear of Dr. Sloper, whether she means to give Morris up. Catherine, vexed, asks her aunt why she pushes her this way. Aunt Penniman says dramatically that Catherine doesn't feel the importance "of not disappointing that gallant young heart."

Catherine's conversation with Aunt Penniman shows that Catherine, in spite of her timidity, does have her own opinions about things and will stand up to the authority figures in her life. Here, she perceives that Aunt Penniman is overstepping her bounds out of a desire to be involved in Catherine's love triangle. Catherine's reactions are signs of a slowly developing assertion of independence.

Aunt Penniman thinks that she has never seen such a "dark fixedness in [Catherine's] gaze." Catherine says that she doesn't think her aunt really knows her. Aunt Penniman doesn't know what to make of the fact that her niece has "suddenly become stern and contradictious." Catherine asks Aunt Penniman not to meet with Morris again. Aunt Penniman finds her "thankless."

Catherine's unprecedented firmness unsettles Aunt Penniman, and she chalks it up to ingratitude on her niece's part, not understanding that Catherine sees her behavior as unwelcome and intrusive, not to mention deceptive.

CHAPTER 18

That evening Catherine sits in front of the fire for more than an hour, thinking. Recognizing Aunt Penniman's foolishness makes her feel "old and grave." She still respects her father, and feels that displeasing him "would be a misdemeanor analogous to an act of profanity in a great temple," but she believes she must follow through on her "terrible plan." When she goes to Dr. Sloper's study, at first she's unable to speak, but finally she admits that she has been writing to Morris and would like to see him again; she doesn't intend to give him up.

Recognizing Aunt Penniman's foolish behavior seems to have prepared Catherine for the possibility that her father, too, is wrong, and that it's right for her to go against him. Doing so still feels like a "profanity," however, and it's very hard for her to do, given how much pleasing Dr. Sloper and believing in him has meant to Catherine's sense of wellbeing over the years. Taking this step toward independence is very significant for Catherine's character development.

To Catherine's surprise, Dr. Sloper greets her confession with an embrace. He explains that if she wishes to make him happy, she has only to give Morris up, and it would be better for Catherine to be unhappy for a few months than for a lifetime. He asks her to trust his assessment that Morris is "a selfish idler." Catherine asks only to see Morris so that she can explain and ask him to wait until Dr. Sloper has a chance to know him better. She adds that they can wait "a long time," and Dr. Sloper says that they can wait until he dies, if they like. Catherine is horrified. Dr. Sloper's words are so authoritative for Catherine "that her very thoughts were capable of obeying him," but she tells him that if she doesn't marry before his death, she won't after.

Catherine's attempts to reason with her father are not going as she had hoped. Dr. Sloper's uncharacteristic warmth throws her off her guard, and he effectively pits his own happiness against Catherine's and asks her to choose, manipulating her gentle nature. Going against his wishes in any way feels completely unnatural to Catherine.

Catherine tries not to show emotion, since her goal is "to effect some gentle, gradual change in [her father's] intellectual perception" of Morris's character, but she has exhausted her arguments. She says she will see Morris once, and Dr. Sloper tells her that will make her "an ungrateful, cruel child" who will have given "your old father the greatest pain of his life." Catherine weeps as he guides her out of his study. He feels sorry for Catherine, "but he [is] so sure he [is] right." After Catherine leaves, Dr. Sloper thinks, "I believe she will stick!" and resolves to see it through, as the scenario promises "entertainment."

Catherine is trying to meet Dr. Sloper on his own ground, appealing to his reason, yet, ironically, her father responds by manipulating her emotions and exploiting her deep sense of duty and loyalty. He's not without pity for Catherine, but his belief in his own rightness trumps all else. Moreover, he finds his daughter's uncharacteristic determination "entertain[ing]," suggesting that his compassion for her doesn't run very deep.

CHAPTER 19

The next day Dr. Sloper speaks with Aunt Penniman, saying that anything she does by way of "giving [Catherine] aid and comfort" in her efforts to see Morris will be "treasonable," which is "a capital offense." Aunt Penniman is offended by her brother's autocratic air. She tries to convince Catherine to stay in bed for several days, knowing that Catherine laid awake grieving all night, but Catherine "[is] really too modest for consistent pathos," even though she is heartbroken. She writes to Morris and asks to see him the next day.

Though Dr. Sloper tends to use language like "treason" ironically, there's nevertheless a threat hovering in his words. However, Aunt Penniman isn't cowed by her brother. She tries to get Catherine to play the part of the heartsick maiden, but that doesn't fit Catherine's personality, and she knows it won't soften her father anyway, showing she's more perceptive in these matters than her aunt. Despite her sleeplessness and heartbreak, she follows through on her resolution to see Morris again.

CHAPTER 20

Morris visits the next day and tells Catherine she has been "cruel" to keep him waiting for so long. He asks Catherine if she will marry him at once, and Catherine haltingly hopes that Dr. Sloper might yet come around to accepting Morris. Morris suggests that Catherine's fear of Dr. Sloper is stronger than her love for him. They talk about the probability that Catherine will be disinherited if they get married. Catherine, overwhelmed, finally promises to marry Morris as soon as he likes.

If Catherine had hoped to find Morris comforting and understanding, she is disappointed. He doesn't show sympathy for the impossible conundrum in which Catherine finds herself; he is mainly focused on how Catherine's dilemma affects him, confirming Dr. Sloper's perception of him as selfish. Nevertheless, Catherine clings to Morris as her lifeline, weary from standing up for herself against her father and at a loss for what else to do.

CHAPTER 21

Aunt Almond finds Dr. Sloper cold-blooded in his amusement at Catherine's determination to "stick." Dr. Sloper says that he has never expected Catherine to provide him with this kind of excitement. Aunt Almond, on the other hand, says that simple natures like Catherine's always "cling." Catherine, she says, "doesn't take many impressions; but when she takes one she keeps it. She is like a copper kettle that receives a dent; you may polish up the kettle, but you can't efface the mark." Dr. Sloper says that he will try to "polish" Catherine with a trip to Europe, in the hope that Morris will forget her.

Aunt Almond again has a better read of Catherine's character, and her brother's, than anyone else does. Aunt Almond rightly perceives Catherine's loyalty, and also anticipates the long-lasting effects that these events are likely to have on her gentle nature. Dr. Sloper, however, believes that bribery, travel, and temporary distance will suffice to distract Catherine and Morris from one another.

Aunt Penniman meets with Morris again in secret with the advice that, in light of Dr. Sloper's narrow-mindedness, Morris should "watch and wait" instead of marrying immediately. Morris wryly observes that Mrs. Penniman is inconsistent, and that it would be awkward to back out now, as Catherine has already agreed to a private marriage. Aunt Penniman is pleased at this news and tells Morris that Catherine loves him so much, she will agree to anything.

Aunt Penniman is characteristically caught up in the suspense and romance of the situation for their own sake and is only secondarily concerned with helping Catherine, a fact that Morris picks up on.

CHAPTER 22

Morris avoids setting a date for a private wedding. He doesn't want to risk losing Catherine and her possible fortune from Dr. Sloper altogether, but he also doesn't want to act too quickly and find that there's no fortune to be had (he doesn't think Catherine's $10,000 fortune from her late mother, Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper, to be adequate to his station).

Regardless of the genuineness and depth of his feelings for Catherine, Morris clearly does have "mercenary" motives: even the substantial fortune Catherine is guaranteed from her mother isn't enough for him. This poses the question of whether he is devious and grasping (as Dr. Sloper believes) or truly loves Catherine and sees her fortune as an added perk.

Catherine, meanwhile, trusts Morris so completely "that she [is] incapable of suspecting that he [is] playing with her." Catherine's conscience is also stricken by the fact that she continues to live under Dr. Sloper's roof while violating his wishes. Catherine's attitude is mixed with "a merely instinctive penitence."

Catherine remains painfully innocent of Morris's mixed motives. She also feels guilty about contradicting her father, to the point that she feels undeserving of his shelter and care as long as she continues to go against him. Catherine has a much more tender conscience than anyone else in the story, which is why having such divided loyalties is so painful for her.


After a period of tension in the Slopers' home, Dr. Sloper tells Catherine to put off her marriage for six months; he would like to take her to Europe. Though his manner seems warmer, he is displeased when Catherine mentions taking leave of Morris. Catherine expresses her discomfort at living with Dr. Sloper while disobeying him. Dr. Sloper, while impressed with Catherine's reasoning, is dismayed by its implication, telling her that such a claim is in bad taste. When Catherine asserts that the argument is her own, not Morris's, Dr. Sloper tells her to keep it to herself.

Dr. Sloper seems insulted by Catherine's reasoning that she should not benefit from Dr. Sloper's care while violating his wishes at the same time. Perhaps it undercuts his sense of authority over his daughter's life, though it probably also serves as an uncomfortable reminder that she's still serious about marrying Morris. In any case, he harshly quashes this expression of moral independence on Catherine's part.


CHAPTER 23

Dr. Sloper's contemptuous dismissal of Catherine's words cause, for the first time, "a spark of anger in her grief." She begins to feel that she is "absolved from penance," and she decides that she will meet with Morris despite her father's feelings. When she and Morris take a walk, Catherine expresses no interest in seeing the sights of Europe, and Morris thinks, "Gracious heaven, what a dull woman!" Catherine is concerned that there is something deceptive about her going along with the trip, but Morris tells her that perhaps Dr. Sloper will be softened by their time abroad together.

Catherine is stung by her father's rejection of her independent thought, and, accordingly, she is less restrained by a sense of guilt and begins to take bolder steps toward independence. When she shows little interest in Europe, Catherine means that Morris doesn't need to worry that she will forget him while she's abroad. Instead of being grateful to Catherine for her commitment to him, though, it seems Morris can't believe that Catherine would pass up a free trip to Europe, yet again suggesting that Morris is interested in riding on the coattails of other people's wealth. He also privately degrades her just like her father does, deeming her a "dull woman," which casts further doubt on if he truly loves her.

The Slopers end up spending an entire year in Europe. In their absence, Aunt Penniman frequently hosts Morris at Washington Square. He enjoys a favorite chair by the fireside and smokes Dr. Sloper's good cigars; "as a young man of luxurious tastes and scanty resources, he found the house a perfect castle of indolence." Aunt Almond disapproves of her sister's friendship with Morris, and Aunt Penniman makes no effort to befriend Mrs. Montgomery. She becomes increasingly convinced that Morris ought to enjoy Catherine's inheritance.

Aunt Penniman only becomes more taken with Morris and more approving of his entitlement to the Sloper fortune. She takes the liberty of inviting him often into the Slopers' house in the doctor's absence, and Morris has no qualms about taking full advantage of the comforts this affords him. Meanwhile, Aunt Penniman isolates herself from anyone who might second-guess her views of the situation; she prefers to stay caught up in the fantasy of her choosing.

CHAPTER 24

During their first six months abroad, Dr. Sloper says nothing about his daughter's engagement, and she is his "docile and reasonable associate" throughout their sightseeing. Catherine continues to secretly correspond with Morris behind her father's back; still stung by his response to her attempts to be honorable, she no longer worries about pleasing him to the same degree.

Catherine has been deeply hurt by her father's rejection of her attempts to reason with him; it feels like a rejection of herself on a deep level. As a result, she closes herself off from him even more. She doesn't provoke him, but she's not willing to guiltily refrain from contact with Morris, either.

One day, toward the end of the summer, Dr. Sloper and Catherine are hiking in a remote **Alpine** pass and lose their way. Abruptly, Dr. Sloper asks Catherine if she has given Morris up. She admits that she still writes to Morris. Dr. Sloper replies that he is "very angry." He tells Catherine that, though he is outwardly smooth, "at bottom I am very passionate, and I assure you I can be very hard."

The remoteness of the desolate Alpine valley symbolizes how alone Catherine is as she summons her independence in facing her father, and the consequent danger to their relationship. Her father warns her that he's more fearful than he might seem from the outside. It's a crack in his "reasonable" façade for the first time.

Catherine wonders if Dr. Sloper has had some plan in bringing her here—either to frighten her by the remote **Alpine** surroundings (though she knows the place can't harm her), or even to intimidate her by his person (though she doesn't believe he would really fasten his "fine, supple hand" around her throat). Catherine replies that she's sure her father "can be anything you please."

Though the circumstances are quite intimidating, Catherine reasons with herself despite the fear—neither the place nor (probably) her father can do her actual harm. She doesn't shrink from her father and tells him it's up to him what he wants to be, implying that he has the choice to either be a loving and supportive father or a hardened antagonist.

Dr. Sloper reiterates that he is furious. He says that if Catherine marries Morris, she will be left to starve in a place as desolate as **the Alps**. The insult to Morris angers Catherine, and she protests that it's untrue. He repeats that it is true, regardless of what she believes, and returns to the carriage. Catherine's heart pounds as she follows him back to the road, and she almost loses her path, but she finally rejoins him in the carriage.

Dr. Sloper's threats and insults to Catherine don't shake her, but an insult to Morris makes her furious. Catherine's heart pounds as much from the fact that she has heatedly contradicted her father for the first time in her life as from the confrontation itself. She is left to find her way back to the carriage in the semidarkness by herself, and she succeeds, symbolizing the confidence and independence she's gained.

Dr. Sloper says nothing more of the incident for another six months, until they're in Liverpool, the night before they embark for New York. He asks Catherine to give him three days' warning before she "goes off" with Morris to marry him. He says that Morris ought to be grateful to him for taking Catherine abroad to gain some culture before their marriage; he has "fattened the sheep for him before he kills it."

Dr. Sloper has become somewhat resigned to Catherine's determination to marry Morris, but he is not happy about it. He views Morris's marriage to Catherine as his own inevitable loss of her, making her independence a zero-sum game. Accordingly, he speaks of the eventuality of her marriage in crass, fatalistic terms.

CHAPTER 25

The night they arrive back in New York, Aunt Penniman chatters away to Catherine about how well she has gotten to know Morris in the past year. Catherine is ambivalent, glad to speak freely of Morris but unhappy to hear Lavinia boast of her superior knowledge of her fiancé, and to hear that Morris used to sit in Dr. Sloper's study. She is delighted, however, to learn that Morris has just gotten a job as a commission-merchant (trader).

Catherine's homecoming is a mixed pleasure, as Aunt Penniman's meddlesomeness flares up once again, and Catherine is disturbed by her aunt's presumption in letting Morris spend time in Dr. Sloper's study in his absence. It is also somewhat suspect that Morris spent most of the past year unemployed and only found a position days before the Slopers' return.

Aunt Penniman asks whether Catherine succeeded in her efforts to sway Dr. Sloper while they were abroad, and Catherine explains that although this had been Morris's plan, she had always known it wouldn't work. She tells Aunt Penniman that she is much braver than before she left, and Aunt Penniman is struck by Catherine's brightness and maturity as she talks of the future.

Catherine has changed in Europe, and after a year's separation, this is clear to Aunt Penniman—Catherine speaks much more confidently about her opinions and plans and isn't so readily swayed by what others think she should do.

Catherine abruptly asks why Aunt Penniman seems to change her mind so much, at one time telling Catherine to defy her father, but now suggesting that she placate him. Catherine explains that she has been as good as she could be, and it has made no difference; she will no longer strive to please Dr. Sloper. This is "a more authoritative speech" than Aunt Penniman has ever heard from Catherine, and she is "proportionately startled."

Catherine sees through Aunt Penniman's fickle nature, which has always been more concerned with satisfying her longing for romance and drama than with what's best for Catherine. The crux of Catherine's transformation is that she's learned that her efforts to please both her father and herself will never work. Aunt Penniman doesn't know what to make of her newly confident niece.

CHAPTER 26

Catherine and Morris are reunited the next day. Catherine is excited and imagines that their troubles are over, though she tells Morris that they must expect for her to be disinherited. Morris suggests that he try persuading Dr. Sloper, as he has developed "more tact" over the past year. He explains that it's not about the financial question alone, since of course they'll be very comfortable without Sloper's money, but it's about the "moral comfort." Catherine replies that she has plenty of "moral comfort."

Morris, too, is not quite prepared for the more confident Catherine who has returned to Washington Square. He doesn't recognize the independence Catherine has won or appreciate that she has indeed managed a moral victory since he last saw her, as shown by the fact that he reflexively offers to step in. Despite his claims that it's about the principle of the thing, Morris still appears to be hung up on the money, too.

When Morris continues to press the issue, Catherine calmly dissuades him, explaining that it's now clear to her that her father isn't fond of her, and that he can't help it: "we can't govern our affections [...] it's because he is so fond of my mother [...] I am not at all like her." She adds that she feels "separated" from Dr. Sloper and no longer minds his antipathy toward her or Morris so much.

Catherine's greater perspective and maturity continue to be on display. She even has fresh insight into the conflict with her father: it's rooted in his lifelong grief over the loss of his wife, next to whom Catherine has been such a disappointment. His wry detachment and obsession with "reason" have actually masked heartbreak.

Catherine entreats Morris to be kind to her because of how much she's given up for him. Rather glibly, he acknowledges this. With greater emotion, Catherine describes the unhappiness of being estranged from her father in this way, after having "worshipped" him before. She will never ask or expect anything from Dr. Sloper again.

Morris doesn't really seem to understand or appreciate the magnitude of what Catherine has sacrificed for his sake—that she has been completely disillusioned of her once unflinching loyalty to her father and can never relate to him as a beloved daughter again, much less idealize him anymore.

CHAPTER 27

Dr. Sloper complains to Aunt Almond that Catherine has come home as immovable as he is on the subject of Morris; Aunt Almond is touched by the fact and takes care to show "motherly kindness" to her niece. Aunt Penniman, meanwhile, writes to Morris to warn him that Dr. Sloper hasn't budged. She has "adopted" Morris like a mother over the past year, having never had a child of her own and found Catherine lacking as a surrogate Penniman.

The contrast between Aunt Almond's and Aunt Penniman's "motherly" instincts is pronounced. Aunt Almond, again, understands Catherine better than her father does and perceives how much she's suffered. Aunt Penniman, on the other hand, only sees the ways Catherine has been a disappointment to her and looks to Morris to satisfy the perceived lack.

CHAPTER 28

When Aunt Penniman meets with Morris again, Morris says that, in light of Dr. Sloper's immovable attitude, he must "know when he is beaten" and give Catherine up. Aunt Penniman is not shocked, as she had already concluded that Morris must not marry Catherine without the inheritance. She reasons that if Morris had actually been her son, she would have wanted him to "find something better."

Given his anticlimactic response, it seems that Morris has had little intention of still marrying Catherine, but has been hanging around the Slopers anyway in order to gain what he can from them in the meantime. Aunt Penniman has come to identify so strongly with Morris's side of things that she sympathizes more with his dilemma than with Catherine's prolonged suffering.

Morris, however, is ashamed. He asks Aunt Penniman to let Catherine down easily, explaining that he's acting this way because he can't bear to step between her and Dr. Sloper. Aunt Penniman urges him nevertheless to come back for a last parting, though Morris is resistant because "a woman should never keep a man dangling."

Morris at least has enough grace to realize he's acting poorly, though he's too cowardly to tell Catherine he's jilting her himself. The irony of his comment is that he *is the one who's been leaving Catherine "dangling" all this time.*

CHAPTER 29

As it turns out, Aunt Penniman shrinks from the task of telling Catherine of Morris's plan, which means that Morris finds himself paying numerous uncomfortable visits to Washington Square while Catherine, trustingly, waits for him to name their wedding day. At one point, Morris tries to provoke a quarrel with Catherine. He tells her he needs to go to New Orleans to make $6,000 selling cotton. Catherine protests that they have waited too long already, and Morris shouldn't be thinking about business, but about their marriage. They argue about when Morris should visit again, and Catherine becomes agitated, suspecting that Morris is leaving for good. She reminds him how much she has given up for him, but he just promises to write her, and leaves.

Morris's cowardly solution is to pick a fight with Catherine so that he has an excuse to leave her. He can't squarely face up to how cruel he's being. Notably, when Morris gives her a transparently flimsy story about a business trip, Catherine asserts that she deserves to be his first priority—a bold claim she wouldn't have made earlier in the story. By this time, she suspects the truth, but Morris leaves without clearly breaking things off between them. Once again, he *is the one leaving her "dangling."*

CHAPTER 30

Catherine gives herself over to her grief; "it seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen" from Morris's face. Nevertheless, she maintains her composure in front of the household, and she coldly refuses Aunt Penniman's offers of explanation and help. Eventually Aunt Penniman bursts in on Catherine at an unexpected moment and tells her niece that she must be resigned to Morris's "change of plans." Catherine begs to know where Morris has gone, as he seems to have left town.

In light of these latest developments, Catherine finally sees Morris for what he really is—a flighty and unreliable coward who was preoccupied with her inheritance, not her well-being—and she is heartbroken. She no longer trusts Aunt Penniman, but she's desperate to know where Morris has gone, and Aunt Penniman can't long resist the temptation to be involved in Catherine's affairs.

When Aunt Penniman mentions something about a "separation," Catherine suddenly realizes the full extent of her aunt's "meddlesome folly," and she unleashes her anger on Lavinia for coming between herself and Morris and spoiling everything. Not wanting to stay angry forever, she finally listens to her startled aunt's explanations that Morris lacks the courage to hurt her and has only broken things off "for the present."

While it's difficult to guess whether Morris would have proven a more faithful suitor without Aunt Penniman's interference, it's also hard not to see Catherine's cathartic outburst as justified. Aunt Penniman tries to cast Morris in the best possible light, again showing how much she's come to identify with him over her own niece.

CHAPTER 31

A few days later, Catherine receives an eloquent letter from Morris, explaining that he doesn't want to come between her and her father, that professional pursuits will take him away from New York indefinitely, and expressing a hope that they can remain friends. Catherine says nothing to her father about these developments. A week later, Dr. Sloper finally confronts Catherine, wanting to know when she will be married. Catherine explains that she's broken off the engagement. The doctor "has his revenge," telling Catherine, "you are rather cruel, after encouraging him and playing with him for so long!"

Morris finally breaks things off between the two of them unequivocally. When Dr. Sloper learns what's happened, he can't resist making a heartless remark, suggesting that Morris is the one who's been strung along and toyed with, not Catherine. This is reminiscent of Morris' earlier comment that it's not proper for women to leave men "dangling," even though it was Morris, not Catherine, who was stringing the other along. Ultimately, Dr. Sloper's capacity for cruelty toward his daughter is on clear display in this passage, even though he's finally gotten what he wanted all along.

CHAPTER 32

As time goes on, Catherine remains "deeply and incurably wounded," but Dr. Sloper has no way of knowing this—"his punishment [...] for the abuse of sarcasm in his relations with his daughter." Aunt Almond suspects the truth that Catherine has been "cruelly jilted" and continues to show her maternal kindness; Dr. Sloper only sees that Catherine has had a "blessed escape" and that he's done his duty by her. He even suspects that she and Morris might marry after he is dead.

Catherine's pain from the ordeal with Morris is permanent, but thanks to her father's cruelty, she remains a closed book around him, and he can only speculate as to what's happened. He maintains that he's acted rightly as a father and doesn't trust that the two might not be planning to unite eventually, showing that he really doesn't know Catherine.

In the coming years, Catherine "[recovers] her self-possession," but she chooses never to marry again, even though she has opportunities: she receives offers from a kind, wealthy widower and a promising young lawyer. Catherine is in her thirties by this time and comfortably established as an "old maid"—she "regulated her days upon a system of her own, [and] interested herself in charitable institutions."

Catherine has no trouble attracting other suitors in later years, thus revealing how unfair Dr. Sloper's assessment of his daughter was. However, by this time, she's not interested in marriage. The pain of her jilting by Morris is too scarring in its effects, and anyway, she has found freedom in ordering her life around purposes of her own. At great cost, she has found a lasting measure of independence.

As far as Catherine is concerned, the two major events of her life are that "Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring." Nothing can undo the pain of the former, and nothing can restore her admiration for Dr. Sloper; it's up to Catherine to "fill the void" in her life. She readily does this, becoming "a sort of kindly maiden-aunt" to younger women in society.

Catherine doesn't waste time moping or pining away over what has happened to her. She matter-of-factly accepts the painful circumstances and proactively seeks out ways to conduct her life according to her own liking. Her kindliness to younger women contrasts with Aunt Penniman's calculating, self-serving ways toward Catherine.

CHAPTER 33

Dr. Sloper eventually retires, and one day, to Catherine's surprise, he asks her to promise that she won't marry Morris—who has apparently been in New York, and has grown "fat and bald"—after he dies. Catherine seldom thinks of Morris anymore, but she explains that she can't promise such a thing, to Dr. Sloper's irritation. Catherine knew "that she was obstinate, and it gave her a certain joy."

Dr. Sloper is still disproportionately obsessed with Morris, in contrast to Catherine herself, whose life has ceased to be defined by past heartbreak. She resists her father's request not because of any lingering romantic feelings, but because she refuses to be ordered around as she was in her youth.

Dr. Sloper later catches a severe cold and dies of congestion of the lungs when he's about 70 years old. After he dies, it's discovered that his will consists of two parts—a first part leaving most of his wealth to Catherine, and a second, more recent addendum, reducing Catherine's inheritance to one-fifth of what it had formerly been. The will explains that Catherine already has more than enough money to attract unscrupulous fortune-hunters. Catherine takes this final insult in stride and doesn't dispute the will.

Dr. Sloper's final will adds insult to injury, showing that he still sees Catherine in fundamentally the same position as she was in as a young woman, but Catherine is unperturbed. She has never used much of her substantial fortune and has already come to terms with her father's feelings about her.

CHAPTER 34

One summer evening some years later, Aunt Penniman surprises Catherine with the news that she's lately seen Morris at Marian's house. She says that Morris is much changed and has not been successful in life; his "evil star was against him," he claims. He had been briefly married to a European lady and is now a widower. He wishes to see Catherine again, calling her "the real romance of his life." Catherine is shocked by this and weeps silently, surprised at the force of emotions she had thought were long buried.

Aunt Penniman stirs up the two ladies' comfortable spinsterhood with news of Morris. Morris seems to avoid blaming himself for any misfortunes in his life. If Aunt Penniman reports his words accurately—though it's possible she infuses them with extra romance and drama—he also still has some feelings for Catherine after all these years. Though Catherine has happily moved on, the stirred-up emotions take her by surprise.

CHAPTER 35

A week later, Aunt Penniman again asks if Catherine is willing to see Morris. Though Catherine has long since forgiven her aunt's meddling, she now "[senses] that her companion was a dangerous woman." Though Aunt Penniman insists that Morris's happiness depends on seeing her, Catherine retorts, "My happiness does not." She has no interest in whatever Morris wishes to say to her and would rather be left alone.

Catherine senses that her aunt still has the ability to shake up circumstances in an unwelcome way. Nowadays, Catherine is far more prepared to shut down such meddling at the source, and she knows exactly what she wants.

Just then, the doorbell rings, and before Catherine can leave the room, Morris Townsend is announced. When Catherine finally turns to look at him, she is shocked; she would never have recognized the 45-year-old Morris. He is deferential and awkward, struggling for words. Yet Catherine offers him no help; she can tell that Morris "had made himself comfortable, and he had never been caught."

Aunt Penniman has meddled once again, presuming to manufacture a meeting between Catherine and Morris some 20 years later. Catherine sees that Morris has never failed to secure comforts for himself over all these years, and that, in contrast to her pain, it's cost him nothing.

Morris asks if they can be friends again and says that he has never ceased to think of Catherine. Catherine tells him that although she's forgiven him, she will not consent to be friends again; he hurt her too badly. She asks him to leave. Morris doesn't understand why she's remained unmarried, given that she had nothing to gain, and had hoped they might forget the past and still have a future together. Finally he leaves, speaking snidely of Aunt Penniman's "precious plan." Meanwhile, Catherine picks up her sewing again and "seat[s] herself with it […] for life, as it were."

Morris shows that, however genuine his feelings for Catherine might be, he still doesn't understand the magnitude of suffering he caused her. His statement about marriage is ironic and revealing; he looks at marriage in terms of what can be "gained," which has always been the opposite of Catherine's view. It's obvious that Aunt Penniman had a strong hand in this meeting, having hoped to orchestrate romance for a final time. But, in contrast to those around her, Catherine is content with her life and intends to go on as she has always done.

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