

# **Washington Square Study Guide**

## **Washington Square by Henry James**

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## Plot Summary

Washington Square is a novel by Henry James. In this novel, Catherine Sloper is a simple, unattractive girl whose father fears her fiancé is interested in her only because of the money she has inherited from her mother and will inherit upon her father's death. Dr. Sloper convinces his daughter of this fact and encourages her to break off the engagement, but she refuses. However, when Catherine has a falling out with her fiancé and he disappears within days of telling Catherine's aunt he intends to end their relationship, Catherine believes she has been jilted by a coward. Catherine draws in upon herself, refusing to marry anyone else and refusing to forgive her father for his role in the breakup as well. Washington Square is a romance that is more tragic than inspiring, a story of the dangers of a man's influence on the opinions of the woman in his life.

Dr. Sloper married a woman with her own money out of love. Together they have a perfect life that is made richer when a son is born. However, tragedy strikes when that son dies a few years later. Dr. Sloper's wife gives birth again, but he is disappointed when this child is born a girl. Not only this, but Dr. Sloper's wife dies a week later, leaving him alone to raise this child.

Dr. Sloper's sister, Mrs. Penniman, moves into his house to help care for the child for a short time and ends up staying indefinitely. As Dr. Sloper's daughter, Catherine, grows older, he begins to fear that his romantic sister will push her into romances that are inappropriate for her. This fear grows as Dr. Sloper becomes aware that his daughter is not only unattractive, but that she lacks the intelligence of her mother and himself. Therefore when Catherine meets Morris Townsend at a party for his niece's upcoming nuptials, Dr. Sloper is not surprised by Mrs. Penniman's excitement and encouragement of the relationship.

For several weeks Morris Townsend comes to the Sloper home to visit Catherine. Catherine falls deeply in love with Mr. Townsend and is therefore pleased when he expresses a desire to marry her. However, this happiness begins to wane when Catherine becomes aware that her father dislikes Mr. Townsend and has no intention of giving his blessing to their nuptials. Mrs. Penniman suggests to Mr. Townsend that he prove his devotion to Catherine by eloping with her. Mrs. Penniman insists this will prove he does not care for Dr. Sloper's money, therefore causing the doctor to like Mr. Townsend and give his consent to the union.

Mr. Townsend suggests eloping to Catherine and is surprised when she quickly agrees. Mr. Townsend worries, however, that by eloping he will be forced to accept Catherine with only the inheritance from her mother and nothing more. As Mr. Townsend waffles in his promises, Dr. Sloper suggests that he take Catherine to Europe for six months before she elope. Catherine agrees. The trip, which is extending to a year, does nothing to change Catherine's determination to marry Mr. Townsend.



Mr. Townsend, however, comes to the conclusion that Dr. Sloper will never give his consent to his union with his daughter and will cut her out of his will. This makes Mr. Townsend come to the conclusion that he should break off the engagement. Before he can do this, Mr. Townsend and Catherine argue over a trip to New Orleans he plans to make. In Catherine's depression over this argument, Mrs. Penniman assumed Mr. Townsend ended the engagement and she tells Catherine of his intentions. A short time later, Catherine receives a letter from Mr. Townsend that officially ends the engagement.

Seventeen years pass and Dr. Sloper becomes ill, dying from pneumonia. Catherine learns that Dr. Sloper has cut her inheritance to nearly nothing because she refused to promise she would not marry Morris Townsend. However, when Mr. Townsend comes to her two years later, at Mrs. Penniman's suggestion, Catherine refuses to even consider a friendship with him.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

Henry James wrote this novel in the late 1890's. It is rumored that it is based on an anecdote he once heard at a dinner.

Chapter 1. Dr. Sloper is a fifty year old doctor when this novel begins. In the 1820s Dr. Sloper married on Miss Catherine Harrington, a young woman who had an income of ten thousand dollars a year. Dr. Sloper could have married her for her money, but in truth he married her for her money. They had a son together and were quite happy, but the child died at the age of three. Two years later Mrs. Sloper had a daughter and died a week later. Very disappointed not only in the death of his wife, but to be left with a daughter, Dr. Sloper none the less takes on the responsibility of raising his daughter.

Chapter 2. When his daughter, Catherine, is ten, Dr. Sloper invites his widowed sister, Mrs. Penniman, to come live with him for a time. This invitation is meant to be temporary until Mrs. Penniman can find a more permanent situation, but she takes such control over the raising of Catherine that Dr. Sloper eventually accepts that she is there to stay. The only thing Dr. Sloper asks of his sister is to be sure his daughter grows to be clever. This does not happen. To add to insult, Dr. Sloper becomes concerned that his romantic sister will influence his daughter to the romantic, causing her to believe she sees romance where there is none. The fact that Catherine has grown up to be plain and somewhat stout only makes the situation worse in Dr. Sloper's mind.

Chapter 3. Dr. Sloper moves his family to Washington Square when the house he shared with his wife becomes surrounded by businesses. It is a nice home, with marble steps, that Catherine turns into a lovely home. Mrs. Almond, Dr. Sloper's youngest sister, lives across town with her husband and seven children. Catherine is a frequent visitor to that home and is quite close with the children despite her shyness with others.

Chapter 4. It is at a party at Mrs. Almond's where Catherine meets her first beau at the age of twenty. Marian, the youngest of Mrs. Almond's two daughters, is to be married to a stock broker and the party is to celebrate the engagement. Marian introduces Catherine to her fiancé's cousin, Morris Townsend. Mr. Townsend speaks to Catherine for several minutes despite the shyness that keeps her from answering. They dance, but Catherine becomes dizzy from his closeness. Marian comes and steals him away a short time later. A short time Catherine sees Mr. Townsend speaking to her aunt, Mrs. Penniman. Catherine backs away, unwilling to meet Mr. Townsend face to face again. Later, however, Catherine's father remarks on a change in her, teasing her about her sudden beauty. On the way home, Mrs. Penniman tells Dr. Sloper about Mr. Townsend and he finds himself thinking that the time has finally come for Mrs. Penniman's romantic games.



## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In these early chapters the author lays out the major players in the drama, beginning with Dr. Sloper. Dr. Sloper is a man who married a rich woman and points out it could be said he married her for her dowry rather than her great beauty. However, he claims Dr. Sloper married for love only. This makes a point to the reader that money is a strong motivator for marriage in this time period and that Dr. Sloper could face this problem with his own child when she grows up.

Catherine is introduced as a quiet, plain girl who is deeply shy and not very smart. This girl is a disappointment to her father in everything from her sex to her lack of intelligence. However, there seems to be some warmth in her feelings for him even if he lacks affection for her. Dr. Sloper is concerned about his daughter's future, especially where he believes his sister might cause her to suffer heartbreak with her own romantic thoughts. In fact, when he learns that Catherine has met a man at his other sister's house, Dr. Sloper worries that the time has come for his daughter's first heartbreak.

Mrs. Penniman plays an important role in this novel. At this point the reader only knows her as a surrogate mother for her niece, but the author points out that she is a romantic sort of person who will more than likely live precariously through the love affairs of her niece. This suggests that Mrs. Penniman could cause trouble for Catherine as she becomes involved in her first love affair.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5. Mr. Townsend comes to visit Catherine and her aunt at the house on Washington Square a few days later in the company of his cousin. Mr. Townsend spends the visit speaking of Catherine with Mrs. Penniman while Catherine entertains her cousin's fiancé. During this visit Catherine learns that Mr. Townsend has been away from New York for a long time traveling, but that he has recently lost his small fortune and is looking for work. The only relative Mr. Townsend has to rely on is a sister and she is trying to raise five children alone. Later, Catherine learns from Mrs. Penniman that Mr. Townsend wishes to court her.

Chapter 6. Dr. Sloper teases his sister that night when he learns of Mr. Townsend's visit and suggests that he might propose to Catherine on his next visit. Mrs. Penniman brushes this joking off and encourages Mr. Townsend to continue to visit under her supervision. The next time he comes Catherine meets with him alone. When the doctor learns of this, he teases Catherine about his intention to propose, hurting his daughter's feelings. However, the doctor decides he must learn more about Mr. Townsend; therefore he visits his younger sister, Mrs. Almond. Mrs. Almond tells him all she knows about Mr. Townsend, which is very little and suggests Dr. Sloper speak to Mr. Townsend's sister, Mrs. Montgomery.

Chapter 7. Mr. Townsend is a guest at Washington Square for dinner. After dinner Dr. Sloper questions Mr. Townsend about his job prospects and accuses him of living off of his widowed sister. Mr. Townsend is offended and tells Catherine that her father dislikes him. Mr. Townsend does not get the sympathy he hoped for from Catherine, but receives it from Mrs. Penniman. At the same time, Dr. Sloper tells Mrs. Almond that he will never consent to a union between his daughter and Mr. Townsend.

Chapter 8. Dr. Sloper speaks with Mrs. Penniman about Mr. Townsend and learns that the relationship between he and Catherine has grown. Mr. Townsend expresses his dislike of Mr. Townsend and suggests that he lives off of his sister. This causes Mrs. Penniman some distress as she continues to defend him to her brother.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

It is clear in the early chapters that Dr. Sloper does not take Mr. Townsend as an honest candidate for his daughter's hand in marriage because he is a beautiful man and Catherine is so plain to look at. Dr. Sloper teases his daughter and refuses to take Mrs. Penniman's assumptions of romance seriously. However, as Mr. Townsend becomes a regular visitor at Washington Square, he begins asking for information about him. Dr. Sloper quickly comes to the conclusion that Mr. Townsend is only interested in Catherine because of her expected inheritance.



Mrs. Penniman has become a champion in Catherine's corner as resistance appears from Dr. Sloper in Catherine's courtship with Mr. Townsend. This appears to be a good thing for Catherine, to have someone to support her, but it could also prove to be a distraction. The reader does not know what conclusion to come to at this point, but it appears that Catherine is quickly becoming a pawn in a game between Dr. Sloper, Mr. Townsend, and Mrs. Penniman.





# Chapters 9-12

## Chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9. On their regular visit to the Almond household on Sunday, Dr. Sloper slips away to speak with his brother-in-law only to find Mr. Townsend has come into the room. Dr. Sloper decides to attempt to speak to him again. This time Dr. Sloper asks Mr. Townsend about his attempts to find work. Mr. Townsend is again offended and finds Dr. Sloper's questions to be something of an insult. Mr. Townsend insists he is not living off of his sister, but has taken charge of his nieces and nephew's education. When their conversation is over, Mr. Townsend tells Catherine that her father has so deeply wounded him that he does not want to cross his threshold again. Mr. Townsend insists that when they meet again it be somewhere else, such as the square.

Chapter 10. Despite her fear of upsetting her father, Catherine meets Mr. Townsend in the garden of her home and agrees to marry him. Catherine insists on speaking to Dr. Sloper on behalf of her love in hopes of softening his reaction to their engagement.

Chapter 11. Catherine speaks with her father that very night about her engagement. Dr. Sloper insists that Mr. Townsend wants to marry her only because of the money she has inherited from her mother and will inherit from her father upon his death. Dr. Sloper refuses to give consent to the marriage. Catherine argues the point, but her father refuses to bend.

Chapter 12. The following day, Mr. Townsend comes to speak with Dr. Sloper. Dr. Sloper has remained home all day to accept his visit. Mr. Townsend claims his deep love for Catherine and suggests he would work a lowly job if that would impress Dr. Sloper. However, Dr. Sloper insists that Mr. Townsend would spend all his daughter's money and force her to live in poverty. For this reason, Dr. Sloper refuses to give consent to their nuptials.

## Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Dr. Sloper continues to question Mr. Townsend's motives in marrying his daughter. The reader comes to the conclusion that Dr. Sloper bases his opinions not on fact, but on the idea that someone so handsome and charming could not possibly love a girl such as his daughter. It helps that Dr. Sloper has found proof of Mr. Townsend's irresponsibility with money, beginning with the fact that he has already burned through his own small property and that he has no qualms against living off of his poor, widowed sister.

Catherine, on the other side of the card, is deeply in love with Mr. Townsend and does not care if he wants to spend all her money. Catherine uses little of her own money and she sees nothing wrong with sharing it with the man she loves. In fact, Catherine believes that she and Mr. Townsend can live happily off of the money her mother has

left her without the addition of the money her father plans to leave her upon his death. Catherine is young and idyllic. It seems to the reader that Dr. Sloper and his daughter are on opposite sides of the extreme and truth lies somewhere in the middle.



# Chapters 13-17

## Chapters 13-17 Summary

Chapter 13. Dr. Sloper visits his sister again and asks for her to set up a meeting between him and Mrs. Montgomery so he might learn more of Mr. Townsend.

Chapter 14. Dr. Sloper writes to Mrs. Montgomery himself and is invited to her small, modest home. When Dr. Sloper asks Mrs. Montgomery about her brother she is hesitant to say anything. After some careful questioning, Dr. Sloper manages to get Mrs. Montgomery to admit that not only is her brother selfish, but that he has borrowed money from her and that he does not provide for her children's education except to instruct them in Spanish. Dr. Sloper assures Mrs. Montgomery that he has no intention of allowing his daughter to marry Mr. Townsend. Not only this, but Dr. Sloper pledges some money to Mrs. Montgomery to help her in the burden of caring for her brother.

Chapter 15. Dr. Sloper becomes annoyed with his daughter's continued commitment to Mr. Townsend and asks his daughter to tell him should she have anything to discuss in relation to him. Mr. Townsend stops coming to Washington Square, but corresponds to both Mrs. Penniman and Catherine regularly. Catherine accepts that they will have to wait her father out, but Mrs. Penniman has other ideas. Mrs. Penniman arranges to meet Mr. Townsend in secret.

Chapter 16. When they meet, Mrs. Penniman suggests to Mr. Townsend that if he and Catherine marry in secret that it will appear to Dr. Sloper that he has no interest in the money Catherine could inherit from him and cause him to accept their union. Mr. Townsend worries that this will only cause Dr. Sloper to cut Catherine off completely.

Chapter 17. Catherine is annoyed when she learns Mrs. Penniman has met with Mr. Townsend in secret, but insists on knowing what happened. Mrs. Penniman tells her that Mr. Townsend is still determined to marry her. Mrs. Penniman encourages Catherine to continue seeing Mr. Townsend despite her father's wishes.

## Chapters 13-17 Analysis

Dr. Sloper meets with Mrs. Montgomery, Mr. Townsend's widowed sister, and she backs up what Dr. Sloper has thought he knew all along. Mrs. Montgomery is clearly a poor woman who is trying to raise five children on her own. Dr. Sloper gives her money to help her out since she will have to continue to provide for Mr. Townsend after Dr. Sloper's refusal to allow him to marry his daughter. This seems like an ironic twist to the reader because Dr. Sloper is determined to keep Mr. Townsend from his money, but he is more than happy to share it with his attractive sister.

Mrs. Penniman interferes, as Dr. Sloper has feared she would since the beginning of her time in their home. Mrs. Penniman convinces Mr. Townsend it would be to his

advantage to marry Catherine in secret. However, Mr. Townsend makes it clear that the money Catherine will inherit from her father is of great concern to him and he does not want to risk her losing it. This causes a conundrum for Mr. Townsend as he struggles to decide what his next act should be. At the same time, Catherine becomes annoyed with her aunt's interference even as she accepts her advice to see Mr. Townsend in secret.



# Chapters 18-22

## Chapters 18-22 Summary

Chapter 18. Catherine thinks on her aunt's advice for a long time and finally goes to speak to her father. Catherine tells her father that she is continuing to see Mr. Townsend despite her father's strong opinion against this. It is then that Dr. Sloper tells Catherine that she will look forward to his death so that it might free her to marry Mr. Townsend. Catherine is deeply offended by this, but more so when her father pushes her out of his study as she cries.

Chapter 19. Mrs. Penniman is told the next day by Dr. Sloper that she is forbidden to visit Mr. Townsend or to otherwise interfere. Mrs. Penniman is aware of the argument between Dr. Sloper and his daughter the night before and feels that Catherine is being too easy on Dr. Sloper by refusing to allow him to see how hurt she is by his actions. However, Catherine feels she is being defiant enough by agreeing to see Mr. Townsend in secret.

Chapter 20. Catherine meets with Mr. Townsend the following day and tells him that she still wants to marry him. Catherine repeatedly tells Mr. Townsend they can survive on her mother's money alone, but Mr. Townsend suggests that he does not want Catherine to suffer the indignity of being overlooked in her father's will. Mr. Townsend suggests they elope and Catherine quickly agrees.

Chapter 21. Dr. Sloper tells his sister, Mrs. Almond, that he believes Catherine will continue to see Mr. Townsend despite his arguments against it. Dr. Sloper tells her that he feels he should take Catherine to Europe where she will be away from Mr. Townsend and she will gain some much needed intelligence that could help her find a better mate. At the same time, Mrs. Penniman warns Mr. Townsend that she might have been hasty in suggesting they elope and that he might want to wait. However, Mr. Townsend is afraid he has already played his card by suggesting elopement to Catherine.

Chapter 22. Despite Mr. Townsend's refusal to set a date, Catherine remains committed to him. In fact, Catherine announces to her father that she plans to marry Mr. Townsend soon and that she feels she should move out of his house since she has no intention of following his rules anymore. Dr. Sloper asks Catherine to put off her marriage for six months so that she might accompany him to Europe.

## Chapters 18-22 Analysis

Catherine tries again to get her father to understand her side of the matter and begs him to give consent to her marriage. Dr. Sloper refuses, even insulting Catherine by suggesting that she only wants him to die so she can have his money. This causes Catherine to defy her father by agreeing to elope with Mr. Townsend. However, Mr.



Townsend has second thoughts when Mrs. Penniman tells him she might have underestimated Dr. Sloper's depth of unhappiness with the engagement.

As Catherine grows and begins to fight for her own life and desires, Dr. Sloper continues to find a way to stop her engagement while her fiancé worries about losing out on her money. The only true loser in this game is Catherine, a young girl who desperately wants to be loved, but finds herself repeatedly defeated in favor of a need to be right, or a desire for money, or the simple desire for a little adventure and romance. Catherine is a pawn who is simply learning how to assert herself, nothing more.



# Chapters 23-27

## Chapters 23-27 Summary

Chapter 23. Mrs. Penniman is deeply disappointed when she learns she is not invited to go to Europe with her brother and Catherine. Catherine is equally disappointed to learn Mr. Townsend is not invited, even to the point of refusing to go until Mr. Townsend tells her how important this opportunity is for her.

Chapter 24. Catherine and her father go to Europe where they spend six months together in companionable silence. After six months, while walking in a valley in the Alps, Dr. Sloper announces that he is angry with Catherine for continuing to be devoted to Mr. Townsend against his wishes. Dr. Sloper extends their trip another six months. On the night before they are to return to New York, Dr. Sloper again questions her about Mr. Townsend and, finding her of the same opinion, becomes very angry with her once again.

Chapter 25. When Catherine returns home and learns that Mrs. Penniman had Mr. Townsend to the house quite often during her absence, she becomes angry and somewhat jealous. However, Catherine is very happy to learn that Mr. Townsend has entered into a business partnership with another man. Catherine again becomes angry with Mrs. Penniman when she suggests that Catherine not elope with Mr. Townsend, but continue to attempt to change her father's mind.

Chapter 26. Catherine meets with Mr. Townsend and tells him that her father has not changed his mind. Catherine suggests that they elope, but Mr. Townsend is reluctant because he is afraid it will make her father dislike him even more.

Chapter 27. Dr. Sloper argues with Mrs. Penniman over Mr. Townsend, she defending the young man and Dr. Sloper continuing to argue that Mr. Townsend is only interested in money. Mrs. Almond, who has always supported her brother, suggests that he relent now because Catherine will never relent in her desire to marry Mr. Townsend.

## Chapters 23-27 Analysis

Catherine and her father spend a year in Europe, but they are unable to come to terms on Mr. Townsend. Catherine arrives home determined as ever to marry Mr. Townsend even if it means defying her father. Mr. Townsend, however, is reluctant to marry her because he knows that Dr. Sloper will not back away from his desire to cut her out if such a marriage should take place. Catherine does not see that money is his only motive, but believes his claims that it is her emotional well being that he cares for, but the reader can see the truth.

Dr. Sloper is a stubborn man who would rather his daughter believe that he hate her than to see her in an unhappy marriage. The reader suspects that this comes in part



from his need to always be right, but there is also some affection in his concerns with his daughter that makes the reader think he might also care about what becomes of his plain, unintelligent daughter. It is a complicated relationship that is bound to only become more so as the plot rushes to its conclusion.





# Chapters 28-31

## Chapters 28-31 Summary

Chapter 28. Mrs. Penniman writes to Mr. Townsend, based on their new mother-son like relationship, and asks to meet with him. Mr. Townsend suggests that it might be best to end his relationship with Catherine because her father will clearly never allow them to marry. Mr. Townsend asks Mrs. Penniman to pave the way for a break, but she refuses.

Chapter 29. Mr. Townsend goes to visit Catherine and tells her that he is going to New Orleans. Catherine insists that she should go too, but Mr. Townsend tells her she will expose herself to yellow fever if she goes. They argue and Mr. Townsend claims he will not return as long as she is so argumentative with him.

Chapter 30. Catherine is saddened by their argument, spending a sleepless night and refusing to share her misery with Mrs. Penniman. Mrs. Penniman assumes from Catherine's behavior that Mr. Townsend has ended their engagement and tells Dr. Sloper as much when they dine alone together the following morning. On Sunday, Catherine begs out of afternoon services with her aunt. However, when Mrs. Penniman returns to the house rather than attend services herself, she finds Catherine gone. When she returns, Mrs. Penniman confronts Catherine and tells her what she knows of Mr. Townsend's plan to end their engagement. Catherine denies this is the case and Mrs. Penniman feels some regret in breaking the news so unceremoniously.

Chapter 31. At dinner Catherine's situation is widely discussed with Mrs. Penniman claiming innocence in it all. A short time later, Catherine receives a note from Mr. Townsend formally ending their engagement. When Dr. Sloper comes to Catherine for a direct explanation of her future plans with Mr. Townsend she claims that it was she who ended the engagement to please her father.

## Chapters 28-31 Analysis

Mr. Townsend tells Mrs. Penniman of his decision to end his engagement to Catherine because of her father's continued reluctance to give them consent. When Catherine and Mr. Townsend argue about something different, Mrs. Penniman takes this as the break and announces to Catherine the truth. Catherine is heartbroken since up to this point she continued to believe that she was to run off with Mr. Townsend. Catherine suddenly finds that her defiance of her father has all been for nothing and that even her aunt has betrayed her.

Catherine is stronger and cleverer than her father ever gave her credit for and now she faces a life alone in a world filled with people she can no longer trust or adore in the way she once did. Catherine does not trust her father because of his behavior in working unkindly against her and cannot trust men because of Mr. Townsend's treatment of her. The reader wonders now what the future might hold for young Catherine.



# Chapters 32-35

## Chapters 32-35 Summary

Chapter 32. Several years pass. Catherine receives two more marriage proposals, one from a widower with children and one from a young lawyer who is in love with her, but she turns them both down. Catherine spends the next seventeen years quietly, devoting herself to charities and her embroidery. Catherine has two letters from Mr. Townsend, but nothing else. Mrs. Penniman, however, continues to hear from him.

Chapter 33. When Dr. Sloper is sixty-eight, he asks his daughter to promise she will not marry Mr. Townsend upon his death. Catherine refuses to make that promise. When Dr. Sloper dies a year later, he has changed his will leaving the majority of his money to various hospitals and asylums. Mrs. Penniman urges Catherine to protest the will, but she refuses.

Chapter 34. Two more years pass. Catherine and her aunt are sharing a hot July evening in the Washington Square house when Mrs. Penniman tells Catherine that she has seen Mr. Townsend at Marian's house. Mrs. Penniman tells her that although Mr. Townsend was married in Europe, his wife has since died. Mrs. Penniman says that Mr. Townsend often asks about Catherine and wishes very much to see her. Catherine asks her to not mention him again.

Chapter 35. A week has passed. Mrs. Penniman again tells Catherine that she has seen Mr. Townsend and that he would like to see her. Catherine refuses, but just then Mr. Townsend arrives at the house. Catherine meets with him, but refuses to accept his desire that they become friends. In fact, Catherine sends him quickly away. On his way out, Mr. Townsend speaks with Mrs. Penniman, angry that she has fooled him into believing that Catherine still wanted to marry him.

## Chapters 32-35 Analysis

Catherine spends the next twenty years alone with her father and Mrs. Penniman, making the conscious choice not to marry, although her act of defiance against her father has made her shyness vanish and she has made a great many friends. Catherine is irrevocably injured by Mr. Townsend's actions and still mourns his loss. In fact, the reader suspects that Catherine might still be in love with him when she refuses to promise her father she will not marry him after her father's death.

Catherine proves to be much more intelligent and defiant than anyone thought, however. When confronted with Mr. Townsend again, Catherine is clearly hurt by his appearance and her desire to still be with him. Catherine turns down his offer of friendship, however, because she can clearly see through it to the truth in a way the reader had not suspected up to this point. Catherine knew all along that her father was

right, she simply thought love would win out. When it did not, Catherine did not want to risk the life her father knew she would have with Mr. Townsend.



# Characters

## Catherine Sloper

Catherine Sloper is a twenty year old girl when the novel begins. Catherine is the daughter of Dr. Sloper, a man who was terribly disappointed to be left with a female child instead of the son he had once and lost. However, Dr. Sloper believes he has done his best by his daughter despite his disappointment that she is not as beautiful or as clever as his wife was.

Catherine is not attractive and leans toward the overweight, therefore she does not have a great many beaux. When Mr. Morris Townsend begins courting her, it is the general consensus that he is after her money. Catherine does not care, however, determined to marry him anyway. When he breaks her heart, Catherine refuses to ever take another beau, and instead spends her life alone with her aunt.

## Dr. Austin Sloper

Dr. Austin Sloper is a strong, intelligent man who believes he is always right. When a gorgeous young man begins courting his simple, plain daughter, he jumps to the conclusion that the man is after her money. Dr. Sloper refuses to consent to a wedding and forces his daughter to choose between himself and her new lover.

Dr. Sloper takes his daughter to Europe in the hopes of both educating her and causing her to forget her fiancé. When Dr. Sloper fails on both ends, he expects his daughter to elope. However, Dr. Sloper is thrilled when he learns that the engagement has ended. Dr. Sloper believes this is proof that he was right.

When Dr. Sloper becomes an old man, he asks his daughter to promise she will not marry her former beau upon his death. When she refuses, Dr. Sloper cuts her inheritance to a fifth of what it once was. Dr. Sloper dies believing that his daughter is still in love with her beau. Therefore it is ironic when Catherine refuses even friendship with this ex-fiancé.

## Mrs. Lavinia Penniman

Mrs. Lavinia Penniman is the older of Dr. Sloper's two sisters. Mrs. Penniman comes to live with Dr. Sloper when his wife dies, leaving him with a small child. Mrs. Penniman places herself in charge of Catherine's education, but fails to make her clever as Dr. Sloper desired for her to be. When Catherine becomes of an age when she begins having beaux, Mrs. Penniman gets involved, living precariously through her niece's romance. In fact, Mrs. Penniman becomes too involved, causing trouble between herself and her niece. In the end, Mrs. Penniman continues to adore Mr. Townsend and pushes him to reunite with Catherine, even twenty years after the fact. Mrs. Penniman



means well, but she refuses to see the damage she is causing her niece in her idyllic pursuits.

## **Mrs. Elizabeth Almond**

Mrs. Almond is Dr. Sloper's younger sister. Mrs. Almond is in part responsible for introducing Catherine to Mr. Townsend because it is at a party at her house in which they meet. Mrs. Almond acts as confidante to her brother throughout the romance, helping her brother learn more about Mr. Townsend and acting as devil's advocate throughout the novel. Mrs. Almond predicts that Catherine will remain forever in love with Mr. Townsend, but she is proven wrong in the end.

## **Marian Almond Townsend**

Marian Almond is Catherine's cousin. When Marian is to be married, her mother throws a party for her engagement. It is at this party that Marian introduces Catherine to her fiancé's cousin, Mr. Morris Townsend. This is the beginning of a romance between Catherine and Mr. Townsend. In the end of the novel, it is at Marian's home where Mrs. Penniman often sees Mr. Townsend.

## **Mr. Morris Townsend**

Mr. Morris Townsend is a young gentleman who has recently returned to New York after traveling the world, spending what little property he has. Mr. Townsend begins courting Catherine Sloper and it soon becomes the consensus that he is only after her money. Mr. Townsend waits nearly two years for Catherine before he finally gives in and ends their engagement. Twenty years later Mr. Townsend returns at Mrs. Penniman's encouragement to seek out Catherine's affections again, but she turns him down.

## **Mrs. Montgomery**

Mrs. Montgomery is Mr. Townsend's sister. Mrs. Montgomery is a widow who is trying to raise five children on her own. Mrs. Montgomery meets with Dr. Sloper and tells him that her brother has been living off of her and that he lied about providing an education to her children. For this reason, Dr. Sloper pledges some money to help Mrs. Montgomery financially.

## **Mr. Penniman**

Mr. Penniman was a reverend. During their marriage, Mrs. Penniman tells Mr. Townsend that her husband married a young couple who had run away because the father of the young woman refused to give his consent. However, after they were



married, the young woman's father came around and forgave them. Based on this story, Mrs. Penniman encourages Mr. Townsend to elope with Catherine.

## **Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper**

Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper is Catherine's mother. When Dr. Sloper married his wife, she was receiving ten thousand dollars a year, a dowry that made it appear that Dr. Sloper had married her for her money, but he really married her for love. Mrs. Sloper later died after the birth of her daughter.

## **Mrs. Montgomery's Children**

Mrs. Montgomery is raising five children on her own, two of whom are girls. Mr. Townsend claims to be educating the children to spare his sister the cost of school, but in reality he is only teaching them Spanish.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Clothing**

Catherine has a habit of buying expensive clothing and trinkets before she meets Mr. Townsend.

### **Letters**

Catherine and Mr. Townsend correspond quite often in letters during their courtship and while Catherine is in Europe with her father.

### **Sweetcakes**

Catherine has a habit of buying and eating sweetcakes before meeting Mr. Townsend.

### **Wine**

Mr. Townsend finds that he really likes the wine that Dr. Sloper has collected in his wine cellar.

### **Oyster House**

Mrs. Penniman meets Mr. Townsend in secret at an oyster house in order to suggest he elope with Catherine.

### **Dr. Sloper's Study**

While Dr. Sloper is in Europe, Mr. Townsend makes himself at home in his study, looking at his expensive collections.

### **Mrs. Montgomery's House**

Mrs. Montgomery lives in a modest red brick home that is a sample of her near poverty.

### **Mrs. Almond's Home**

Mrs. Almond lives in a modest home uptown from her brother, Dr. Sloper.



## **Washington Square**

Washington Square is an affluent section of New York City during the time in which the novel is set.

## **New York City**

The novel is set in New York City in the mid to late 1800s.





# Themes

## Father-Daughter Relationships

The relationship between Dr. Sloper and Catherine is a central theme to this novel. Dr. Sloper is ambivalent about his daughter in the beginning of the novel. Dr. Sloper is disappointed not to have a son and he finds his daughter simple and plain. This causes him great sadness, but he commits himself to her happiness anyway.

When Dr. Sloper learns that Mr. Townsend wants to court his daughter, he automatically assumes the handsome man only wants the money Catherine will one day inherit. Dr. Sloper investigates this possibility and quickly finds evidence that makes it so. Dr. Sloper expects his daughter to end the courtship when he informs her of this evidence, but she refuses. Catherine's defiance surprises Dr. Sloper and makes him feel that his daughter does not respect his opinions.

Dr. Sloper finds happiness in his daughter's sadness after he learns that the engagement has ended. However, Catherine continues to defy her father by refusing to promise not to marry Mr. Townsend after her father's death. Catherine has no intention of marrying Mr. Townsend, she simply does not want to make this promise and make her father feel as though he has won out once and for all. It is a difficult relationship that leaves them both frustrated and unhappy to the end.

## Romance

Mrs. Penniman is obsessed with romance. Mrs. Penniman did not have much romance in her youth, therefore she looks to Catherine to give her the experience at romance that she never had. When Mr. Townsend shows interest in Catherine, Mrs. Penniman immediately places herself in the middle of it and tries to influence his feelings. In fact, it is Mrs. Penniman who suggests eloping and convinces Mr. Townsend it is the thing to do, then changes her opinion much to his confusion.

There is little romance between Catherine and Mr. Townsend except for the restrained discussions at the beginning of their relationship. Most of the romance is implied and encouraged by Mrs. Penniman. If not for Mrs. Penniman, the relationship might not have gone as far as it did and Catherine might have not become the defiant, confident young woman she eventually grows into during and after her engagement to Mr. Townsend.

## Greed

Dr. Sloper assumes from the beginning that a handsome man like Morris Townsend could not possibly love his daughter and only wants her for her money. This greed is



proven when Dr. Sloper begins to investigate Mr. Townsend's background and learns that he burned through his own property and now lives off of his poor, widowed sister.

Mr. Townsend proves to the reader his own greed when he repeatedly refuses to elope with Catherine because her father will disinherit her. Mr. Townsend cannot imagine living off of ten thousand a year when it could be thirty thousand a year. It is this greed that causes Mr. Townsend to end his relationship with Catherine and causes him to come back to her twenty years later with the hope of a reconciliation.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is a third person omniscient point of view that includes the intrusion of the authorial voice. The author of this novel, as is typical of such Victorian novels, inserts his own voice and opinions in the novel from the first chapter by addressing the reader directly. The author often makes statements that inform the reader of what is to come or by suggesting that an action previously described will impact the plot in a specific way.

The point of view of this novel is typical of novels written in the time period in which this novel was written. The author writes the novel as though talking directly to the reader in a conversational way, having a nice conversation. This adds a tone to the novel that is informal and at times humorous. However, it moves the action away from the main characters and does not create the same intimacy between reader and character that modern novels tend to nourish.

## Setting

The novel is set in New York City in the mid to late 1800s. The novel is set mostly in Dr. Sloper's house in Washington Square, a luxurious house with marble stairs that is at the height of fashion at the time in which the doctor buys the house. Most of the scenes between Catherine and Mr. Townsend take place in the parlor of this luxurious house, a location that causes Mr. Townsend to grow even more affectionate toward Catherine because of the obvious riches in the room.

The setting of the novel is contemporary to the writer and important to the plot. The time period in which the novel is set is a time in which women rarely married without the consent of their fathers, the main obstacle between Catherine and Mr. Townsend in this novel. The time period also sets up the desire for a gentleman to marry a woman of wealth in order to pay for his lifestyle, something that is still common, but not nearly as it was at the time.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel reflects the Victorian age in which the novel is set. The language is somewhat formal, more formal than many modern readers are accustomed to. However, the language is not so formal that the reader will not recognize most of the words and enjoy the overall story.

The language of the novel reflects the setting of the novel and the education level of the main characters. Although Dr. Sloper believes his daughter is not clever, she is intelligent enough that she converses with him in the same language he uses on a daily



basis. Catherine and her family are all well educated as is proper in their position in society. Mr. Townsend also displays a certain amount of education in his speech, showing the reader that although he is essentially poor, he is well educated and would be a proper husband for Catherine if not for his past misuse of money.

## Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-five chapters, each differing in length from the extremely short to the surprisingly long. The novel is told in a basic linear time line, though it does skip many years first at the beginning when the author describes Dr. Sloper's marriage, and at the end when seventeen years pass between Catherine's ended relationship and her father's death. The novel is told both in exposition and dialogue, but the majority of the novel is told in a narrative that is heavily laced with the author's voice.

The novel contains one main plot and a few subplots. The main plot follows the courtship of Catherine Sloper by Mr. Morris Townsend. One subplot follows Mrs. Penniman's interference in that relationship and her attempts to live vicariously through her niece's romance. Another subplot follows Dr. Sloper's attempts to learn about Mr. Townsend and end the courtship. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



## Quotes

"He was an observer, even a philosopher, and to be bright was so natural to him, and (as popular voice said) came so easily, that he never aimed at mere effect, and had none of the little tricks and pretensions of second-rate reputations." Chapter 1, pg. 5

"He nevertheless, at the end of six months, accepted his sister's permanent presence as an accomplished fact, and as Catherine grew older, perceived that there were in effect good reasons why she should have a companion of her own imperfect sex." Chapter 2, pg. 11

"People who expressed themselves roughly called her stolid. But she was irresponsive because she was shy, uncomfortably, painfully shy. This was not always understood, and she sometimes produced an impression of insensibility. In reality, she was the softest creature in the world." Chapter 3, pg. 17

"But that this brilliant stranger—this sudden apparition, who had barely heard the sound of her voice—took that sort of interest in her that was expressed by the romantic phrase of which Mrs. Penniman had just made use—this could only be a figment of the restless brain of Aunt Lavinia, whom everyone knew to be a woman of powerful imagination." Chapter 5, pg. 44

"He remembered that fortune favors the brave, and even if he had forgotten it, Mrs. Penniman delighted of all things in a drama, and she flattered herself that a drama would now be enacted." Chapter 10, pg. 81

"He had passed his life in estimating people (it was part of the medical trade), and in nineteen cases out of twenty he was right." Chapter 13, pg. 104

"He was perhaps right, after all, to think as he did by which Catherine meant not in the least that his judgment of Morris' motives in seeking to marry her was perhaps a just one, but that it was probably natural and proper that conscientious parents should be suspicious and even unjust." Chapter 15, pg. 125

"And this idea of Catherine 'sticking' appeared to have a comical side, and to offer a prospect of entertainment. He determined, as he said to himself, to see it out." Chapter 18, pg. 153

"It was idle to attempt to ascertain the state of her affections without direct inquiry, because if she had not had an expressive manner among the familiar influences of home, she failed to gather animation from the mountain of Switzerland or the monuments of Italy." Chapter 24, pg. 191



"It was devilish awkward, as he said, and he felt a lively animosity for Catherine's aunt, who, as he had now quite formed the habit of saying to himself, had dragged him into the mess, and was bound in common charity to get him out of it." Chapter 29, pg. 231

"Catherine was grateful to her, but this consistent silence, so little in accord with her aunt's character, gave her a certain alarm, and she could never wholly rid herself of a suspicion that Mrs. Penniman sometimes had news of him." Chapter 32, pg. 269

"Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlor, picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again—for life, as it were." Chapter 35, pg. 291



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Dr. Sloper? What is important about his marriage? How has that marriage impacted his view of the world? How does Dr. Sloper feel about his only child, a daughter? Who comes to help Dr. Sloper raise his child? How does Dr. Sloper feel about this situation? What is Dr. Sloper's main disappointment in regards to his daughter? How does he try to remedy this?

Who is Catherine Sloper? What does she look like? What are her favorite pastimes? What does her father think of this? Who does Catherine meet at a party for her cousin Marian? How does she feel about this meeting? Who does Catherine later see talking to this person? How does she feel about this? What does this reveal to the reader about Catherine?

Who is Mrs. Penniman? Why does she come to live with the Slopers? How long is she supposed to stay? How long does she stay? For what reason? Why does she take Catherine's care into her hands? What does she do with it? How does she fail Dr. Sloper's one request of her? Is Mrs. Penniman a likeable character?

Who is Morris Townsend? Why does he begin speaking with Catherine at the Almond's party? Why does he speak with Mrs. Penniman? Why does Mr. Townsend later come to visit Catherine and Mrs. Penniman? What does he tell Mrs. Penniman? How does Catherine feel about this? Is she happy about Mr. Townsend's attentions? Why or why not?

Who is Mrs. Montgomery? Why does she tell Dr. Sloper that her brother is selfish? Is he? Why does she tell Dr. Sloper Mr. Townsend is only teaching her children Spanish? Is this true? Why does Dr. Sloper promise to give Mrs. Montgomery money? How is this ironic in the overall plot? Might Dr. Sloper have changed his mind about Mr. Townsend if Mrs. Montgomery had something different to say about her brother?

Who is Mrs. Almond? How is she related to the Slopers? What is her opinion of Mr. Townsend at the beginning of the novel? Does her opinion change as the novel progresses? Why does she tell Dr. Sloper that Catherine will stick to her feelings for Mr. Townsend when the relationship ends? Is she right? How does Catherine respond to Mr. Townsend at the end of the novel?

What causes the split between Catherine and Mr. Townsend at the end of their relationship? What was Mrs. Penniman's role in this split? Would things have turned out differently if Mrs. Penniman had not gotten involved? Explain. Why does Catherine never marry? Why does she refuse Mr. Townsend when he comes to her twenty years later? What does this say about Catherine?