**Washington Square**

by [Henry James](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/henry-james/)

**Washington Square Summary**

This novel takes place in the Manhattan neighborhood of [Washington Square](http://www.gradesaver.com/washington-square/) in the mid-nineteenth century. Washington Square begins with a portrait of [Dr. Austin Sloper](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=14923), a respectable physician. His wife, Catherine, gives birth to as on who dies at the age of three. Two years later, Catherine gives birth to a daughter named Catherine - but the childbirth is difficulty and the mother dies. The daughter, Catherine, is the heroine of the novel.

Dr. Sloper is almost immediately disappointed in Catherine. From the start, he views his daughter as a strange genetic twist of fate: she is not a boy; she is not beautiful like her mother; she is not clever like her father.

Dr. Sloper has two sister, both younger and both very different from each other. Dr. Sloper's favorite is Elizabeth who has married a merchant named Almond. Mrs. Almond is prudent and kind and throughout the novel she gives Dr. Sloper some good advice that he unfortunately discards. The other sister is Lavinia, a widow once married to an impoverished clergyman named Penniman. When Catherine is a few years old, Aunt Penniman comes to live in the Sloper household. Dr. Sloper finds his sister Lavinia to be excessively imaginative, unrealistic, and melodramatic. Nonetheless, Dr. Sloper thinks that Lavinia - as she is the girl's aunt - would be a good surrogate mother for Catherine.

Quickly, the novel moves forward to Catherine's late adolescence and early adulthood. Dr. Sloper remains decidedly disappointed in his dull, boring, plain-faced daughter. Though Sloper never explicitly says this to Catherine., Sloper's dismissive and sarcastic air really stunts Catherine's intellectual and emotional growth. Sloper expects little form Catherine and, for the most part, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

[Marian](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=14929), one of Aunt Almond's daughters, has become engaged to a man named [Arthur Townsend](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=14930). At Marian's engagement party, Catherine meets [Morris Townsend](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=14926), a smooth-talking and very good looking young man. He is a far-flung cousin of Arthur's, and has been traveling the world. Hence, Morris is a stranger in polite New York society.

At this same party, Morris meets aunt Lavinia and, seizing the opportunity, he tells her that he very much enjoyed his conversation with Catherine. In the days that follow, Aunt Lavinia plays the role of a meddling middleman. In his successive visits to the Sloper home, Morris becomes a cause of concern for Dr. Sloper. The doctor sees through Morris: a lazy charmer who has identified Catherine as the source of his fortune. At the same time, Aunt Lavinia does such a good job of sparking up a romance between Catherine and Morris that Catherine comes to believe that Morris does love her. Though Morris' primary motivation is economic, he is kind to Catherine and he treats her with far more love and consideration than Dr. Sloper does. Consequently, Dr. Sloper finds it difficult to pry Catherine away from Morris.

Dr. Sloper realizes that he cannot literally impose his will on Catherine and enforce any sort of restriction. Dr. Sloper can rely upon fear and threats, however. Sloper cannot withhold Catherine's inheritance left to her from her mother, but the doctor vows that if Catherine marries Morris, he will disown her as his daughter. This poses a concern form Morris because Catherine is only half as attractive if she comes with only her maternal fortune and not Dr. Sloper's.

When it seems that Catherine will remain defiant, Dr. Sloper asks her to postpone her plans and accompany him on a trip to Europe. Sloper hopes that he separation will split the couple. After six months, Catherine remains firm in her intent, so the doctor extends the trip for another six months, but this proves ineffective. Left at home alone, Lavinia develops her own social circle and Morris Townsend is a regular guest at the Sloper home. Morris has not spent this time finding gainful employment, though he does concoct a story about suddenly becoming co-partner of a commodities firm. Catherine takes this as good news and she is eager to get married.

Realizing that Catherine will arrive with a seriously diminished fortune, Morris backs out of the marriage, cowardly. After a string of awkward encounters, Morris leaves town. Weeks later, he mails a five page letter from Philadelphia. Catherine reveals these details to no one, although it is not difficult to see that her heart has been broken. Dr. Sloper remains suspicious that Catherine is simply waiting for him to die so that she can marry Morris. When he is near death, Dr. Sloper asks Catherine to promise that she won't marry Morris but Catherine is so offended by the doctor's audacity that she stubbornly refuses to make any vow or commitment. In the end, Dr. Sloper dies in his folly, believing Catherine to be treacherous. He gives most of her inheritance to charity.

A few years after Sloper's death, Morris Townsend returns, having learned that Catherine has never married. Aunt Lavinia lets him into the house to meet Catherine and Catherine is visibly upset. She dismisses Townsend after a few minutes - it is clear that she does not love him at all. Morris thought that Catherine had been waiting for him all of these years - but he never made any contact with her, so why would she be waiting for him now? Catherine continues to live a spinster life and she is able to find value and take pleasure in her own personal hobbies and interests.

**Character List**

**Dr. Austin Sloper**

Doctor Austin Sloper is among Henry James' most complex characters. Certainly, he treats his daughter, Catherine, harshly. But Dr. Sloper's clever mind and admittedly accurate criticism of Catherine's suitor, Morris Townsend, make it difficult to write the doctor off as a simple villain. Throughout the novel, Dr. Sloper becomes a largely symbolic father figure. Even in his interactions with his two sisters, Lavinia Penniman and Elizabeth Almond, Dr. Sloper often neglects to credit these two (adult) individuals with their due respect. Dr. Sloper is a great man of society, a local celebrity in Washington Square. Because Dr. Sloper is so renowned, because Dr. Sloper is so intelligent - and especially because Dr. Sloper knows both of these facts so well - the contrast between his highs and lows is significant. A famous doctor, Sloper cannot save his wife or son from death once they take ill. And Sloper's celebrity is of little use in swaying Catherine to obey his wishes. When it counts most - in his family - the doctor's skills are judged and are found wanting.

**Catherine Sloper**

Catherine is the heroine of the novel and for most of the novel, Catherine is surrounded by dominating individuals who seek to make decisions for her. As a young girl and even as a young woman, Catherine finds herself unable to live up to her father's paradigm of what a good daughter would be. It is not at all difficult for Catherine to be "good," but Dr. Sloper would prefer a daughter who was "clever" and for all of Aunt Penniman's instruction, Catherine has remained not-so-clever in her father's eyes. As the novel progresses, Catherine discovers that she is intelligent and she gains the courage to defy her father. Between Morris Townsend's betrayal and her father's cruelty, Catherine gets more than her fair share of suffering.

**Lavinia Penniman**

Lavinia is one of Dr. Sloper's two younger sisters. The widow of a penniless clergyman, the eccentric and overly dramatic Lavinia comes to live with Dr. Sloper and his daughter Catherine not long after Dr. Sloper becomes a widower. Aunt Penniman functions as Catherine's mother and when Catherine reaches late adolescence, Aunt Penniman beings entertaining notions of Catherine meeting a young man and embarking upon some form of romantic adventure. Catherine is not at all romantic but Aunt Penniman works hard to bring Morris Townsend and Catherine together. In the face of many good and rational reasons why Morris and Catherine do not belong together, Lavinia hopefully persists. She even waits 17 years for another chance to bring the two former lovers back together again. All efforts fail. Despite her meddlesome inquisitiveness and her unwillingness to accept reality, Aunt Penniman remains an individual with only good intentions.

**Morris Townsend**

Morris is a young man who has blown into town, having been around the world and blow his own small fortune in a mater of a few years. Morris is a distant cousin of Arthur Townsend and Arthur is marrying Marian Almond (Catherine's cousin). We soon learn that Morris is not intentionally hurtful, but he is irredeemably selfish. He lives off his impoverished widowed sister, Mrs. Montgomery, because he refuses to work. Morris intends to marry Catherine and enjoy her fortune, but when Dr. Sloper makes it clear that he will disinherit Catherine (should she marry Morris), Morris has no alternative but to abandon Catherine. He flees to Philadelphia. Nearly twenty years later, Dr. Sloper goes to his deathbed believing that Catherine intends to marry Morris. Shortly after Dr. Sloper dies, Morris returns to Catherine hoping to court her. She rejects him outright.

**Mrs. Elizabeth Almond**

Mrs. Almond is Catherine's "Aunt Almond" and Dr. Sloper's favorite of his two sisters. Unlike Lavinia, Elizabeth has a rational temperament. At the same time, she is kind and sympathetic towards Catherine, especially when it becomes clear that Morris has less than noble reasons for becoming engaged to Catherine. Because Dr. Sloper disregards Catherine's feelings, Elizabeth criticizes him as "shockingly cold-hearted."

**Mrs. Montgomery**

Morris Townsend's sister. Mrs. Montgomery is a widow with a very small income, though she maintains a respectable and tidy home. Morris lives with her and regularly borrows money. Morris also tutors her five children in Spanish, as a means of earning his keep. Dr. Sloper visits Mrs. Montgomery when Morris is not there and pressures her to admit that her brother (Morris) is selfish and that Catherine would be happier in the long run if she did not marry Morris.

**Marian**

Elizabeth Almond's daughter. She marries Arthur Townsend, a stockbroker. Catherine and Morris first meet at Marian's engagement party.

**Arthur Townsend**

a distant cousin of Morris Townsend, he marries Marian Almond. Arthur is an ambitious and respectable stockbroker who typifies New York's commercial spirit. Arthur is an industrious young man, very much unlike Morris, who apparently comes from the bad side of the Townsend family. Arthur accompanies Morris on his first visits to the parlor of the Sloper home.

**Mrs. Catherine Harrington Sloper**

As a young, wealthy socialite, Catherine married Austin Sloper, a respectable young physician whose intellect and promise forgave his lack of inherited wealth. Catherine gave birth to a son who died at an early age; a few years later, she died soon after giving birth to her daughter, Catherine. Dr. Sloper remembers his wife as a uniquely intelligent and beautiful woman; he mourns the perceived lack of these same qualities in his daughter.

## Major Themes

**Family and Betrayal**

Betrayal is perhaps the most dominant theme of the novel. Some characters fear betrayal, others astonished to find themselves betrayed. If we look at the four major characters of the novel, we find betrayals ranging from failed expectations to deliberately broken promises. In some cases, the over-sensitive individual perceives a betrayal when no true betrayal has actually occurred.

Dr. Sloper feels betrayed by Catherine, because she is unwilling to follow his advice regarding her engagement to Morris. Dr. Sloper uses exceedingly harsh language and vows to disown Catherine for breaking his heart. Sloper's behavior likens him to Shakespeare's King Lear, a similarly paranoid father who causes great harm to innocent people. Dr. Sloper's efforts to circumvent Catherine's perceived betrayal actually push Catherine to limit the deference and respect she gives her father. Dr. Sloper becomes so hostile that he pushes Catherine towards the very betrayal of which he accused her.

Dr. Sloper has been betrayed by his family. His wife and son have died and left him. Indeed, the reader should recall that after Catherine was born, her mother "betrayed alarming symptoms" even though she had been in good health. This has been a betrayal of expectations. Catherine has similarly betrayed Dr. Sloper because she is plain and ordinary - she is no daughter of his. Dr. Sloper goes so far as to accuse his sister Lavinia of "treason" because she advocates for Catherine and Morris' wedding despite Dr. Sloper's most strenuous objections. Dr. Sloper's betrayals have come from his family, then. Ironically, Dr. Sloper does not seem to value family bonds, for he interrogates Mrs. Montgomery with the intention of provoking her to betray her own brother, Morris. The novel tells us explicitly that Dr. Sloper takes special pleasure in the fact that Mrs. Montgomery's confession has come at the dear price of her "family pride."

Dr. Sloper has done all of this on Catherine's behalf. Despite his cruelty, Dr. Sloper is correct in predicting that Morris will prove himself a man of low character and low means. The most dramatic betrayal of the novel is Morris' abandonment of Catherine, after Catherine has sacrificed so much for Morris' sake. This is not the traditional story of unrequited love because Morris' original intentions were always mercenary and Catherine had to struggle to convince herself to fall in love with Morris. Catherine is also somewhat betrayed by Lavinia. In one sense, Aunt Lavinia has painted the picture of romance and led Catherine into a pit of thorns. Catherine has suffered on account of her aunt's very poor counsel. Perhaps more significant, Lavinia is working on Morris' behalf as well as Catherine's. Indeed, Lavinia comes to see Morris as a son, though she also harbors thoughts of Morris being the sort of "imperious" man that she ought to have mattered. Lavinia does not place her family obligations as foremost and principal. She has created a fictitious family with Morris and, to be honest, Lavinia looks out for Morris' interests more than she looks out for Catherine's. Lavinia realizes that Catherine will be hurt by Morris' abandonment, but Lavinia is so enthralled with Morris that she fails to chastise him or even perceive the true extent of the young man's depravity.

Morris feels betrayed by Lavinia. Towards the end of the novel, Dr. Sloper warns Lavinia that Morris will become angry with her when he realizes that he is simply a "deluded fortune-hunter." Just as Lavinia has pushed Catherine into a romantic engagement, Lavinia has lured Morris into a financial prospect that has soured.

**Truth, Deception, and Imagination**

Dr. Sloper is very interested in pursuing and uncovering the truth. Dr. Sloper aims to prevent Catherine from marrying Morris but at the same time, he is interested in finding out whether Catherine will stick with her plans. When Dr. Sloper realizes that Morris is a charlatan, he believes that Catherine must be informed and convinced to change her mind. Dr. Sloper hurts Catherine in the process and his behavior raises the question of whether truth should always be pursued to the fullest extent. Even in moral terms, it may sometimes be better to leave certain truths unsaid.

Morris and Lavinia are both characters who prefer to leave a good deal of truth unsaid, though for very different reasons. Though Morris did not have good intentions, he did not intend to hurt Catherine. He lied with the expectation of gaining money without causing any harm to Catherine. When Morris decides to end his engagement, he feels guilty about the pain he will cause Catherine. He does not look forward to speaking this truth to Catherine. Dr. Sloper relishes his opportunities to speak the bitter truth to Catherine.

Of course, Morris has several reasons to avoid speaking the bitter truth, but the main reason is because he's a liar. We can separate Morris' hesitant and incomplete confession to Catherine from his energetic voluble self-advertisements at the beginning of the novel. Morris lied so much that gullible Catherine couldn't help but consider him "artistic," as Aunt Penniman considered him "imperious." Morris is a fictional character who fictionalizes himself into a hero. His rakish poverty is redone as a moral tableau, some youthful excess from which Morris has drawn a lesson. Morris styles himself as a Spanish teacher, a stranger who has been around the world, and a commodities merchant who works downtown and most suddenly leave for New Orleans (Philadelphia) to speculate on cotton.

Lavinia Penniman also has a tenuous grip on truth and reality. Like Dr. Sloper, Lavinia seeks to counsel and advice others. If Dr. Sloper gives the right advice in the worst way, Lavinia has a "genius for consolation." Her imaginative powers are incredible and she can uncover a glimmer of hope or possibility in any scenario. At times, her character resembles Polonius from Hamlet, because she is often spouting commonplace phrases and platitudes that contradict each other: "The important thing is to act" a few scenes after Lavinia warns the young ones to be patient.

Lavinia is a romantic. Just as Morris has become "artistic" and sculpted a new self for himself, Lavinia has invented the idea of Morris and Catherine falling in love and realized this as best she could, all the while imagining herself as the "manager" or director of a "drama." In Lavinia's world, truth is beauty and beauty is relative. Lavinia does not distinguish between shades of possibility or desirability. She prefers "first meetings" and "last partings" and, once the end of the engagement is inevitable, Lavinia looks forward to this as well - so long as there is drama. This beautiful dramatic quality is what Lavinia interprets as true. Whenever Catherine is not visibly depressed, she is hiding something; for seventeen years, Catherine does not speak of Morris, she must have unresolved feelings for him. These are Lavinia's erroneous interpretations. Consistently, Lavinia looks at Catherine's deficits of emotion and romanticizes them as hidden spaces. At the end of the novel, Lavinia is surely disappointed that Catherine has dispensed with Morris so permanently and without fanfare.

Lavinia's artistic idea of truth as beauty is a contrast to Dr. Sloper's ideas of science and logic. But just as Lavinia's actions are a corruption of artistic ideals, Dr. Sloper's idea of truth is a corruption of science and logic. Sloper describes himself as an "anatomist" and argues that just as he is accustomed to assessing and looking into human beings (as a doctor) he can see through Morris' surface games and identify the man as a swindler. Sloper is entirely right in fearing Morris' greedy intentions, but Sloper uses false logic and abuses rules and conventions in order to have his way. Having identified Morris as guilty, Sloper does not take the time to prove his case logically. Having satisfied his own need for truth, he requests of Catherine: "I don't ask you to believe it, but to take it on trust." The narrator identifies this as "an ingenious sophism" ( a sophism" is an argument apparently correct in form but actually invalid). And Dr. Sloper's interrogative methods undermines the values and truths he aims to support. He abuses the trust that Catherine has in him, as her father. As a great man of society, he bullies a widow into speaking ill of her brother, as a means of protecting his own family. Once Sloper has his "revenge" on Catherine and allows her to suffer, he is unable to undo the consequences of the truth. He cannot make Catherine forget the betrayal; he cannot coax her into marriage with a different man. Dr. Sloper's accusations of treason and betrayal are ultimately documented in the codicil to his will - but that does not make the arguments, though legally binding, any more valid.