

Money and the Question of Materialism in Henry James's Washington Square

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Abstract: This paper discusses the materialism conflict in Washington Square as Henry James complains the materialistic, capitalist American society. He portrays materialistic characters in order to show the conflict between money and love. The main conflict in the novel is between the unemotional Dr. Sloper and his only daughter Catherine who urges to marry Townsend .Dr. Sloper thinks that Townsend's motives are for Catherine's money that she is likely to inherit. There are many clues that support my opinion about the materialistic conflict in this novel such as, the motives of Morris Townsend, and the fact that money plays an essential role in the relationship between the main characters.It seems that Materialism dominates a great part of the novel. James represents characters to help him elaborate the idea of a materialistic and capitalist American society in the 19th century. The conflict between Dr. Sloper and Morris Townsend is controlled by the desire of money. Washington Square ends as it begins. Achieving and maintaining a strong financial status remains a powerful motivator for each of the novel characters.

Keywords: Materialism, Money, Society, Washington Square, Catherine, Dr. Sloper



1. Introduction

Materialism in literature is highly known as a way of thinking that gives much importance to material possession than to spiritual or intellectual things. The materialistic, capitalist tendency started to establish itself in many works in the 19th century American literature. A time in which Americans start to write an end to the agrarian society, and turn to be industrial, materialist community. Writers have begun to give light on a real world and not hide under romantic concepts that might not exist. They wished to depict life honestly in order to see improvement over people's daily life. As result, they focus on ordinary average people in their novels and works.

Henry James portrays in Washington Square is an American capitalist and materialistic society by projecting Catherine as a commodity in the hands of two commercial deals –Dr. Sloper and Morris Townsend. The paper explains this point and highlights the materialistic conflict in the novel. James concerns in his novel to present materialistic characters to reflect true concepts about American society during that time. At that time in order to play a social part, you need to earn your income or make believe you will earn it. The author uses Dr. Sloper who deals with his only daughter as a commodity. He slightly had control over her decisions by not letting her marry Morris Townsend Money and the materialism concept is a central and an important issue throughout Washington Square. Townsend and Dr. Sloper's lives are controlled by money and what to do with. Readers can explore through many situations this idea, for example, Townsend explains the importance of money to Catherine then she said: "you only think about money "(James ,1880). The question that a person has to marry for love or money, or both, are evident in this work. The answer remains uncertain as Mrs. Penniman and Morris are existing to persuade the readers that marriage is desirable. Morris and Mrs. Penniman have been influential in Catherine's early adulthood, it is understandable that she goes on to remain single for the end of her life because of their materialistic conflict, they lost her forever, and she will never accept others.

2. Literature Review

Many writers discuss the materialistic conflict in *Washington Square*, Arthur Marotti in his book *Reading with a Difference*, he elaborates that: "on his American tour James figure out unrestricted imagination industrialization, racial unrest and economic materialism inside the society of united state:" (Marotti,1993). The novelist began to write where America is still a new country that looks for European standards, models, and culture. James was very concerned, then, in his novels with the presentation of the dramatic scene. He felt that a fiction is a house with a lot of windows to let people look through. Wherefore, from it allows people to see things different angles.

In *Washington Square*, James reflects and illustrates the society of the old New York where he was born. That starts to have a serious change in 1880. Buildings and houses, counting the old home of James's childhood were ruined and a factory held instead of it. This happening is significant to James and he proves and documents it in this novel. *Washington Square* is located at the bottom of Fifth Avenue, it is now a small park in the heart of fashionably residential Greenwich Village. Ian Bell believes that James reassures his interest to show the human industry Paralysis in the United States of America in 1830 and 1840 (Bell,1991). He contends that : "James is concerned diagnose in the balanced, rational discourse of Dr. Sloper and the vacuous jangle of Mrs. Penniman impoverished imagination in company with Townsend who competes for commoditized Catherine "(Bell,1991).Mrs. Penniman was too close to Morris Townsend, she stands by her behaviors to be like a mother to Townsend. She tries to unite Townsend and Catherine again, she convinced Catherine to marry Townsend in secret. She thinks by doing this Townsend will prove to Dr. Sloper that he is not interested in Catherine's money.

Money is shown permanently through many scenes of the novel, it has a great part in it, and James exploits the word money many times, for illustration, Townsend admits to Mrs. Penniman that he loves Catherine for her money. Mrs. Penniman was surprised that " a man could be so terrible to play tricks with people's money" (James ,1880). As well as, this quotation indicates the materialistic reality of Townsend when the narrator says: "It became for him a club with a single member." (James ,1880). This point highlights how Morris Townsend enjoys the pleasures of Dr. Sloper's house at *Washington Square* while the Doctor and Catherine travel around Europe. This also gives a clear picture of Morris Townsend as a man who is eager to take advantage of a generosity. Moreover, money had a great outcome on Catherine and turned her to be naïve and to be a young lady with a taste for expensive dresses. She has fed up with the life of rich people and she looks for a new experience with someone who fails to save money and finds him a job for a living. Morris Townsend was her escape from a sick wealthy life. When she first introduced to Morris Townsend at Mrs. Almond's party, she was charmed and attracted to Townsend's wit and physical beauty. Many critics believe that Morris Townsend is the first man that she met after her cruel, cold-hearted father so that, she loves him from the first sight without knowledge of his social and cultural status.

Dana Morency in her essay in "*Pensacola Magazine*" tries to prove that James resorts to materialistic character in order to make comic scenes and laugh at the silliness of sentiment and the foolishness of materialism (Morency,2012). She thinks that:" both Mrs. Penniman and Catherine is blinded by their own sentiment and dream of Romance, Mrs. Penniman was trapped by the motives of Townsend who uses her as a meddling tool between him and Catherine "(Morency,2012).In the party, Catherine sees Morris Townsend involved in a conversation with Mrs. Penniman who also seems to approve of him. After the party, Dr. Sloper asks Mrs. Penniman about this young man and suspects that he is interested in Catherine's money. They defend Townsend and refused Dr. Sloper allegations. Mrs. Penniman already knew from Mrs. Almond the truth of Townsend that he has no employment and spent all the money inherited while traveling abroad, he lives and shares the income of his own sister Mrs. Montgomery. It is believed that Mrs. Penniman tries to be as a mother like to Townsend since she is unmarried and has no children. She encourages Catherine to marry Townsend to let him be close to her .Dr. Sloper waits for Mrs. Penniman helping hand, but she was completely

charmed by Townsend, she says: Although he has had disreputable past he now repents it and that his interest in Catherine is sincere (James,1880).

On the other hand, Dr. Sloper shows no concern over his own daughter feelings and emotions, his big concern was where her money will go. He used a sarcastic, metaphorical language to make fun of her and her suitor, for instance, after Mrs. Almond's party, he ironically says to Catherine, "who was the young man that was making love to you?(James,1880). He was entirely disappointed by his only daughter, he feels that she caused his wife's death ."His wife was the only woman who had the beauty of reason"(James,1880). Then, he thinks that she doesn't inherit her mother intelligence and reason. He fails to appreciate her fine heart and moral value.

He always addresses her using the implied meaning, instead of telling her that she is overdressed he says: "Is it possible that this magnificent person is my child?"(James,1880). However, Dr. Sloper enters a materialist conflict with the foreigner Townsend who looks to take over Catherine's inheritance, they both want to dominate Catherine's life for selfish materialist motives. Dr. Sloper seeks to win the war against Townsend by traveling to Europe with Catherine, but the plan didn't go as he wished. He reflects in the novel that Catherine was pathetic, now she is stronger and able to answer her father in violence. Subsequently, Dr. Sloper says after the European trip with Catherine, "We have fattened the sheep before he kills it "(James,1880). In spite of the death of one of the main characters, Dr. Sloper continues to lie and never change minds, Townsend returns after twenty years to Catherine, but she refused him. Thus, Money plays an essential role to break down relations in *Washington Square*.

Prof. Hasan Al-Zubi explains in his article " Zolaesque Naturalistic Shadows and European Discourses in James's Fiction:" Americans are pictured in the fiction as innocent and ethical, situated and estranged in European environments, and deceived/victimized by the immoral and destructive European spheres of life..."(Al-Zubi,2017). If we take this view seriously in *Washington Square*, in particular, the final chapters, we can discover Catherine's pride in contrast with Townsend 'and her father's greediness. Catherine might have been a loyal wife to Morris Townsend if she had not been forced to give him up. At the end of the novel, she buried her emotions and passions under the soil. The third person narration has an essential role, which allows the readers to understand the motives and desires of the characters. Readers find out this reality in chapter 20 when Morris and Catherine discuss the conflict with her father. These actions show that she was pathetic to defend two greedy people. The third Person allows the author the freedom to get out of the "claustrophobia" of a single and expand our scope. It is able to get inside the minds of multiple characters and deliver deeper into emotions and relationships. Everyone will tell the events of a story differently and are able to see how multiple characters react, interpret the events. In James's *Washington Square*, this technique of narration helped the readers to get closer to the main characters and enters their minds.

Psychology is extremely important in James's *Washington Square* since his brother, William was a well-known psychologist so he was interested in entering the psychology of his characters like Catherine who was naïve, and a doll in the hands of materialistic patients. Both of them understand themselves very well and failed to gain their deal from their conflict. James needs to prove that materialism in *Washington Square* had a goal of showing the psychology of the American people at the time he lived there. Elsie B. Michie in her book *The Vulgar Question of Money* claims that: Victorians separated economic and non -economic values, and how the nineteenth century constituted aesthetic and moral value by distinguishing it from the economic. Michie central contention in the book is, " the novel's representation of vulgarity responded to broader cultural anxieties regarding the impact of money on moral sentiments by engendering prurient forms of materialism in the figure of here" (Michie,2011).Dr. Sloper was afraid to lose his money and Catherine refused a proposal from Townsend even though she liked him at the beginning. As the novel progress, Catherine slowly begins to gain the power of observation and intellect, she realized the selfish reality of her aunt Mrs. Penniman. She starts to find faults in her father and to step him down as godlike to her.

The settings of the novel *New York*, which is strict and tough to accept anybody from outside as Townsend, who refused by Dr. Sloper and real American people refuse participation from others if considering the clashes between black and white in the United States. Large numbers of things appear to encourage people to realize the reason why Townsend goes after her. In addition, Mona Simpson who writes an essay about the novel adds that, "Catherine loves cream cakes and that she spends too much money on clothes, Catherine's father uses her harshest critic, he thinks that a child of his should be ugly and overdressed". (Simpson,2013). For these reasons, Morris Townsend saw her as his prey that he will never find resistance from her father. The article raises a number of questions about the novel, "can one love and seek gain from it?"(Simpson,2013). The writer of this article mixes the romantic plot with materialistic issues.

3. Discussion

Materialism in *Washington Square* is significant in elaborating inequality between male and female in American society. Women were dominated by men in the nineteenth century. A patriarchal American family, the father controls the important decisions about the child, particularly in marriage cases. Catherine is a clear example of the patriarchal effect in America.

Christopher Beha believes that: "regarding the style Henry James sentences were very simple and do not waste the reader time every sentence has a purpose, every scene has a place in the whole"(Beha,2014). This indicates that James has been affected by the materialism issue in the environment that he lives in even in his writing style.

The novel imitates a social position or a moment of success to the character of Dr. Sloper and a moment of sadness for Catherine. When she told her father that she couldn't marry Townsend, a great number of readers wants to thank the positivity of materialism issue in the developing phases of the character of Catherine. In the beginning, she was naïve, commodity, a dull among two greedy merchants, at the end when Townsend returns she has the power to stand on his face and refuses her. It is not difficult to roughly figure out when Dr. Sloper was born and married, and when Catherine was born and when she became engaged. Most of the novel's drama occurs during the early 1840s when Dr. Sloper is around fifty years old and Catherine is about twenty years old. By the end of the novel, and Dr. Sloper's death, it is the early 1850s. Henry James and his heroine are both well-removed from the real world of actual events. Just as Henry James has removed himself from American politics and society. This novel is about *Washington Square*, but it is surprisingly insulated from larger national themes.

All of the objective characters are defined in large part by their social and economic situation, and it is here where problems arise. Dr. Sloper "easy domestic situation saved him a good deal of drudgery" (James,1880).but his son and wife's deaths have made him an unhappy widower; Catherine's expected inheritance leaves her open to Morris Townsend, Aunt Penniman is financially dependent upon Dr. Sloper, Aunt Almond explains to Dr. Sloper Morris Townsend's social standing. In this novel direct American and tradition in dealing with a female in 1880 which gives the reasons why he didn't like the novel. He wants to show a fact about America and he doesn't want to reflect a false picture about it.

Another critical point of view to *Washington Square* is by Reshmi Hebbler who thinks that: "feminine propriety and social mobility are two dominant themes in the nineteenth century Anglo women's fiction " (Hebbler,2005). This is an important issue to talk about. Readers may assume that the theme of feminism is the dominating theme in the novel. We see that Catherine's father is harsh and strict. Dr. Sloper looks at his daughter as disappointing, dull, and not clever enough. He calls her by "poor Catherine". As well as, enforcing her to obey his law if she wants to stay with him. In spite of that, Dr. Sloper still loves his daughter and wants to make her a good woman. So when they get across all of these actions being practiced upon a weak daughter. Readers get to think that it is not justice on her. She is more than that she is a daughter who has lost her mother, who on the other hand, if she was still alive, the plot of the novel would change as a whole. the novel sheds light on

the idea that society in the 19th century was a patriarchal community by means of highlighting the notion of fatherhood. The novel then attempts at showing the gap which existed and still, unfortunately, exists between male and female. The role of women in the nineteenth-century society was controlled by males, and to the person who is responsible on the house. The perfect woman who was devoted to the care and attention of her husband and children, but the unmarried woman was devoted to serving the community. They couldn't vote or take part in politics or argue with their husband, they had no legal rights for possessions even when they get divorced.

Henry James has revolved many of his books around money as he went to many parties and events throughout his life. This may have inspired him to make money an important theme in his novels. He is concerned with what might happen when people and money are present in the same situation. *Washington Square* is centered on money, for if Catherine has no money there would simply be no story, no relationship would have started between Catherine and Morris, no matter how hard Mrs. Penniman tried. Without her money, Morris would not have had any interest in her and there cannot be a story just about Catherine, Dr. Sloper, and Mrs. Penniman's relationship. James just wanted to test how far people would go to acquire money. His story revealed a situation in which a man falsely leads on a woman and her family for years at the possibility of one day inheriting her father's money. James was able to show the reader that money is a powerful thing, but it can make people do crazy things. It is able to reveal characteristics about people that may otherwise be hidden and this allows for a deeper more dramatic story.

James has many books talking about money and what to do with it and one of them is *Washington Square*. It is part of his life as he went to many events through his life, this may inspire him to write a novel which revolves about money by using materialistic characters. This point was evident in many lines of the novel as Townsend explains to Catherine the importance of money then she answers him "You think too much about money" (James, 1880). Therefore, Dr. Sloper tries lots of times to cut her relationship with him.

4. Conclusion

Furthermore, in the conference that held at the University of Aberdeen "The Real thing: Henry James and the Material World". The conference discusses the works of Henry James and "that he lived in an increasing materialist culture during his lifetime. Mass production of books, magazines, cheap art and objects and literature readily available to wider audience" (Hadley, 2014). The conference looks at James in the context of the very material world in which novels were written, published and read (Hadley, 2014). It also examines how James thought about and wrote about the relationships between the material and the abstract.

In portraying the contrasts between America and Europe or in other words in practicing his famous theme of 'America versus Europe' in most or all of his international novels, James mostly was in the belief that Europe is the place of culture while America is the place of morality. In *Washington Square* characters' like Dr. Sloper and Townsend through them, readers can find the class conflict between Townsend who presents the lower class and Dr. Sloper presents the aristocratic class. They both contributed to damaging and ruining the life of an innocent girl. In the beginning, Catherine revealed to her father her love to Townsend and she wants to marry him. The father explained to her that Townsend has no enough money and he wants to take her money which shows that in the American society marriage is not to marry, but it is only based on materialism and money. It is clear that Townsend wouldn't be a great husband because of his attitudes and his love for money. Families search for a man with a wealth, position and to be socially acceptable. The materialism of American society is more obvious in the relationship between Catherine and Townsend. Dr. Sloper believed that Catherine is disqualified to marry especially a man like Townsend. James by showing the materialism and moral of the society of America maybe is showing that how dangerous this society is for the innocent females with a big amount of money, he proves that at the end of the novel when she sits alone in her house and refused to marry despite all proposals that she refused.

Noteworthy, Henry James in *Washington Square*, the characters and the settings he is presenting a materialistic and capitalist society in the nineteenth century. When Catherine insists to marry Townsend; she thinks that she chooses love.

To conclude, materialism has played an important factor on shaping the plot of the novel, and produced a capitalist clash between two different class. The novel gives a scope to the social illnesses of American community. In short, short, the novel ends as it begins. achieving and maintaining strong financial status remains a powerful motivator for each of the novel characters.

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