



Washington Square Reader's Guide

BY HENRY JAMES

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READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. 1. Henry James creates an atypical heroine in the plain-faced, dull-witted Catherine Sloper. Endeavoring to be a dutiful daughter, Catherine bears her predicament with an almost unbelievable passivity. Compare her strategy of obedience and patience with her aunt's advice to her: "You must act my dear; in your situation, the great thing is to act." Describe how Catherine both contradicts and coincides with your perception of a literary heroine.
2. 2. Dr. Sloper controls Catherine largely with his ironic tongue and cold sense of humor. Discuss Dr. Sloper's reason for disliking Morris Townsend and his motive for continually objecting to Catherine's engagement—are they one and the same, or does Dr. Sloper have another aim in seeing if Catherine "will stick." Consider his belief that life had "played him a trick" in giving him a plain daughter, and also the language of gaming that he constantly uses when drolly referring to Catherine's predicament.
3. 3. Examine James's use of setting as the plot progresses and its effect upon his characters' behavior. Compare specifically the quaintly upholstered sitting room at Washington Square, the seedy oyster bar, and the dark precipice in the Alps. Why does Dr. Sloper "flare out" in the ungoverned setting and admit that he is "not a very good man"?
4. 4. Cynthia Ozick refers to the theme of impersonation in the novel. Explain how Catherine, Dr. Sloper, Aunt Lavinia, and Morris Townsend figure as imposters. Who in the novel is the opposite: straightforward and real?

5. Aunt Lavinia's meddling goes from innocent prying to treachery. Describe her attitude toward Morris Townsend and her refusal to admit his shortcomings. Is her love for him romantic, friendly, motherly? Consider whether she could ever have been happy in her own marriage to the reverend.

6. Determine who is the greater villain in the novel: Dr. Sloper or Morris Townsend. Do you think Catherine is better off as a coldly dignified spinster, or could she have found happiness as Morris Townsend's wife? As Cynthia Ozick asks in her Introduction, "Will a wrong motive always do harm?"
