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The Modernity of Henry James and Agnieszka Holland’s Washington Square

Prose and film have different narrative strengths and weaknesses. Although the story presented by Henry James and Agnieszka Holland is quite similar, of necessity it “unfolds” differently in each medium, striking different chords in the reader and viewer. James W. Gargano observes that in Washington Square “James undertakes the difficult art of making the undemonstrative, psychic unfolding of his heroine arresting and interesting” (357). Catherine’s psyche is likewise a major concern for the filmmaker. Nevertheless, where the verbal art allows the reader a virtual ringside seat at the internal springs of the conscience and consciousness of the protagonist, the audio-visual art must present gestures, facial expressions and a symbolically suggestive mise-en-scène in order to prompt the viewer with clues of her “psychic unfolding.” Even with such a subtle master of film art as Holland, the clues inevitably tend to be exaggerated and the story spiced up at several junctures. Yet these differences constitute a form of dialogue that bring out various complimentary textures in the story.

At a conceptual level, both tales share the fact that the artists “remove” the narratives from their respective addressees. James places his story approximately half a century in the past, thus effectively writing a quasi historical novel. In being largely faithful to James, Holland had little choice but to film a costume drama of the period in question, with the consequence of distancing which the viewer experiences watching a story set in such a palpably different time. Paradoxically, the more accurate the historical detail, the more exotic the mise-en-scène of the film. Contemporary Hollywood does its homework well, and early nineteenth century New York is quite palpable on the screen at times.

I mention the fairly obvious, since hypothetically at least the story could have been updated. Holland herself claims that “James sounds very modern today” and offers primarily artistic reasons for her “choice”: “I prefer to do [the story] in the period because it is visually more fascinating, also it gives a bigger freedom” (Crnković 4).
Holland has her own comprehension of James’ story sounding “modern”: “it’s about money and relationships. And today everything is about money” (ibid.). Her points are basically sound, but they miss out on much the author and the filmmaker have to offer. For my analysis I will make use of the arguments Charles Taylor presents in Sources of the Self of 1989 concerning the modernity of the “Victorians.” Taylor contends that culturally, in the conceptions that shape our sense of self, and in our moral perspective we continue to bear the imprint of the rationalism of the Enlightenment and what he calls the expressivism, basically expressive individualism, of Romanticism (Sources 393). These are elements that are crucial to any contemporary examination of what makes up the good life (3), or human flourishing, for us. Another good that cannot be overlooked is the Kantian other-directedness, with its Christian roots. Since we develop dialogically (Authenticity 32-34), these goods can be said to interact dynamically within us, each staking a claim on our modern sense of self.

Also worth considering as well is that the whole idea of looking at history as moral progress and the concomitant feeling each new generation acquires of its “moral exceptionalism,” Taylor reminds us, “is very much a Victorian idea” (Sources 394). Hence, for instance, in the contemporary critics’ curiosity as to whether Holland renders a feminist reading of Washington Square or not it is visible we are still children of the nineteenth century.

What would evoke this sense of moral exceptionalism in James’ nineteenth-century readers? The clash of sensibilities in the novel is evident enough. The earlier Enlightenment rationality is confronted with the emergent Romantic expressivism—from this perspective the “historical” epoch of the first half of the century seems well chosen. At a certain level there is an exciting showdown of the two moral sensibilities, with the nonetheless inevitable conclusion. Through the character of Dr. Sloper, rationality is apparently given major advantages. He is initially “liberal,” i.e. he does not interfere at first with the relationship, even though he senses its direction. Cultured and witty, he is ostensibly reasonable and, most importantly, he sees through the fortune hunter quite readily. As the narrator ironically puts it, Dr. Sloper is always “right.” The Romantic Catherine is quite unpromising at the outset of the story. However, her artfully presented inner transformation throughout the novel and her father’s subsequent moral denigration would seem to herald the triumph of the new Romantic sensibility. Moreover, readers with the latter sensibility would empathize with the heroine’s exceptional fate and revel in the novel’s implied “hostility to commercial capitalist civilization” (Taylor, Sources 424) in the depiction of the doctor’s brutal usage of his fortune.

Although such a reading could possibly have appealed to a sizeable number of readers in James’ time, a fair portion of the moral subtlety would be lost. David Parker claims the great nineteenth century and early twentieth century novels were morally sophisticated enough not to allow any one good full domination over
another (69−76). James certainly favors Catherine and her Romantic sensibility, but he also seems to perceive that different goods do not necessarily succeed one another, but can possibly work in conjunction.

The drama of *Washington Square* might be described as the separate weaknesses of different types of moral vision if they work in solitude. With his highly developed rationality, Dr. Sloper sees everything clearly. When he compares his reason-based resolve on the “certainty of a geometrical proposition,” his sister, Mrs. Almond, astutely retorts that “geometry treat[s] of surfaces” (169). He sees through Morris Townsend, guesses correctly that his sister Lavinia Penniman supports the latter, but the fact that he cannot perceive below the “surface” is exposed when he turns his attention to his daughter. Even when Catherine is undergoing inner growth aided by a “transcendentalizing imagination” (Gargano 358), her father obtusely observes to himself: “She is about as intelligent as a bundle of shawls” (191).

With her “transcendentalizing imagination,” on the other hand, Catherine sees profoundly, but misses the superficial. Enriched as she is by her modest adventure and misfortune, for the longest time she is simply wrong both about her father and her lover. It is obviously Catherine’s inability to “see” that creates the moral drama of the story. One critic puts it as the “riddle” of whether or not “it is right to deny another person an experience which one supposes to be harmful” (quoted in Gargano 355). However, the conundrum might more properly be phrased as to whether it is possible to help someone merely out of a sense of duty. Dr. Sloper has been “good” to his daughter during her uneventful life basically on that deontological principle. It is not his seeing through Morris that is wrong, but the fact that he lacks real feeling for his daughter makes it virtually impossible for him to help her when she needs it most: quite the reverse, he becomes part of the problem.

The character who combines both types of vision in the novel is Mrs. Elizabeth Almond. Every bit as rational as her brother, yet genuinely caring about Catherine she is able to see the latter’s qualities right from the beginning. Before her niece’s transformation Mrs. Almond capably perceives her “style,” claiming that her externally more attractive daughter lacks such a vital quality. And when we compare the two Sloper sisters’ vision of the potential outcome of a marriage between Catherine and Morris without Dr. Sloper’s inheritance, it is not difficult to discern which is the more perspicacious. The climax of the story, then, occurs when Catherine finally “sees” at both levels. When Morris stands before her in the concluding scene, with his “cold eyes,” at long last she perceives the fortune hunter as he really is, both internally and externally. In a manner of speaking the Enlightenment and Romantic goods are thus united.

In light of the above, how does Holland explore the various goods of *Washington Square*? Due to the fact that the novel is quite rich in detail, with its
time constraints a film adaptation must of necessity select a particular focus. Moreover, a filmmaker is entitled to his or her own particular perspective, especially if the project is to attain artistic integrity. Thus an adaptation is primarily a reading of a work. As Joy Gould Boyum puts it, “The rhetoric of fiction is simply not the rhetoric of film, and it’s in finding analogous strategies whereby one achieves the effects of the other that the greatest challenge of adaptation lies” (96).

Before further discussion, it is worth mentioning how closely Holland follows James. William Wyler’s earlier version, The Heiress of 1949, although critically acclaimed, was mediated through a Broadway play and bears the stamp of a twice-removed tale. Holland adheres fairly closely to the novel. Most major incidents are maintained, although a number of scenes are conflated, occasionally shifted, etc. The dialogues are likewise close to those of James. Yet true to the nature of an ambitious adaptation, Holland’s version does contain a focus.

The opening shot establishes the fact that we will witness a historical drama. The long take leisurely traverses the title-square, after which the camera enters a handsome period house through its ground-floor window. An air of disquiet ensues: there are cries, the hustle and bustle of servants, and the bloodstained bed on which lies the just-deceased matron. This original Catherine’s ghost hovers over the film. At a couple of key junctures of the film narrative the viewer witnesses her aged husband staring at her portrait, in which she holds the son that died as an infant.

Thus the opening sequence highlights the barely hinted at Gothic element in James’ story. The theme of blood recurs. The only time the viewer is allowed to approach Dr. Sloper at his profession, when the fortune hunter pleads for his daughter’s hand, as the latter is about to enter the office-operating room a patient is wheeled out, covered in a shroud after an evidently unsuccessful operation. During her excursion to Europe, not long before her father plays his most bizarre hoax on his daughter on a lonely mountain ridge, Catherine witnesses a mock-guillotine performance in France. A Gothic tale requires a monster and Holland produces one in her rendition of Dr. Sloper. Even in the first sequence after his wife’s death, the father coolly ignores the newly born daughter when she is presented to him.

As befits a haunted house, the residence at Washington Square gives a rather claustrophobic impression. Either the colors are on the dark side, like in the parlor, or the angles are unnatural, such as in the staircase. The latter space is likewise graced with a series of identically framed pictures that gives the impression of a cool geometrical formula. Significantly, the Almond house appears far more livable exhibiting livelier colors and sparked up with its ubiquitous children. A peculiar element in the film’s spatial play is that in contrast to the novel the viewer never enters Catherine’s room. Early in the narrative we see the child

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Catherine at her window, and after a brief sequence, the eighteen-year-old heroine is introduced at the same window, holding the same cage with what seems to be the same bird: the symbolism of her entrapment could hardly be more blatant.

This Gothic slant to the film goes hand in hand with a tendency to exaggerate certain elements, such as Catherine’s initial clumsiness, and introduce greater melodramatic twists to the narrative. James avoids a sensational parting scene between Catherine and Morris: the most questionable plot augmentation in Holland’s adaptation is the inclusion of just such a scene. The break up of the pair not only degenerates to a maudlin level—Catherine in the mud with torrents of rain washing her—it also renders the concluding scene less plausible since it becomes highly improbable that Morris would return to try his luck with her again. However, on rare occasions Holland tones down James, for instance where Morris is somewhat less encouraging to Catherine’s accompaniment of her father on the European sojourn.

A point at which the drama is heightened to interesting effect is in the above-mentioned confrontation between Morris and Dr. Sloper. The contest of wills takes place in the latter’s office, identifying him with science and rationality visually, so that Dr. Sloper’s reference to these personal qualities is almost redundant. As in the novel, with his blunt use of his wealth to bully the fortune hunter, the doctor becomes a rather evident metaphor for capitalism. The metaphor takes on additional irony in the scene, since a doctor is ostensibly supposed to heal, but the proximity in time of the cadaver wheeled out of the room to the talk of money suggests the exploitative nature of the system.

At the culminating moment of the confrontation Holland visually underlines the importance of the Jamesian dialogue. True to the latter, Morris and Dr. Sloper virtually challenge one another, both claiming they possess “a fund of affection to draw upon” from Catherine. The antagonists are tellingly placed at the same level of the frame while at its bottom between them stands an odd female anatomical model. It is thus “visible” that in this duel of male egos, Catherine is reduced to a mere object.

Despite the above, the scene illustrates the difference between James’s and Holland’s Dr. Sloper. Admittedly James does not present the father in all that favorable a light, but at least he is not a monster before then; however, from this juncture on his tyranny does become more pronounced. For Holland the scene merely emphasizes the obvious. Moreover, if the Enlightenment rationalism is depicted in its degenerate state in the post-confrontation Dr. Sloper in the novel, there is still the counterweight of his sister, Mrs. Almond. In the film the sister’s role is diminished, thus the good is not redeemed in any significant way.

That Holland sees Catherine as a Romantic heroine is evident from one of the more visually stunning scenes during the European excursion. The filmmaker
could hardly resist the painterly potential of the incident between father and
dughter in the Swiss Alps. Holland quotes a significant Caspar David Friedrich
canvas, *The Wanderer Above the Mists*, in evoking Catherine as the solitary
Romantic heroine: before her father accosts her on the mountain ridge; subse-
quently when he abandons her, and her scarf flies away in the breeze against the
magnificent backdrop of misty mountains.

One of Holland’s major challenges in this regard is in presenting Catherine’s
transformation. James makes it fairly clear that aside from a few dialogues, this
event is largely internal, thus highly undramatic. Holland had little recourse but to
develop a symbolic substitute that would act as a dramatic equivalent for the
literary development. The filmmaker selected a plot device that suited the Romantic
nature of Catherine’s unfolding, i.e. granting a musical interest to the heroine.

In order to introduce the theme Holland invents a childhood scene where
Catherine attempts to sing a piece before her father that she has rehearsed a
number of times. The performance is a complete failure, since the girl experiences
a block while in front of her father, whom she wishes more that anything to
please. The scene sets up the exposition of Morris’ courtship with Catherine. The
fortune hunter gains access to the Sloper residence through the ploy of
musical practice sessions with the heiress on her piano. After a number of such
sessions Morris forces his partner to perform a Romantic aria duet before the
household. With the help of her suitor Catherine overcomes her block and gives
a splendid performance in front of her father.

The sequence culminates in a shot that captures a close-up of Morris,
Catherine and her father in a single frame. Although invented by Holland, there is
a strong Jamesian feeling to the entire scene, especially in that final shot.
Catherine’s triumphant inner vision radiates throughout the screen, yet her blind
spot is simultaneously illustrated: neither does she understand her suitor’s real
intent nor does she perceive that her father is not as happy as he pretends with
the performance. The latter is particularly telling, since up to that point the one
thing she could accurately sense was whether her father was genuinely pleased
or not.

The final shot of Catherine, a close-up, is meant to contrast with the first shot
of Catherine before her adventure, in which the viewer sees her at a distance,
through a pain of glass. She is playing the aria she performed before her father
with Morris, but we hear the version of the aria Catherine heard a diva sing solo
in Europe - she continues to make music in her solitude. The impression is of the
Romantic artist who suffers and misses out on “the ordinary satisfactions of life
in the world,” missing out even on “successful action and fulfilled relationships”
(Taylor, *Sources* 423).

Thus far it would seem that Holland’s retelling of *Washington Square* is less
morally dialogic than James’s. The Romantic sensibility largely blots out the

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Enlightenment one, with the result that Dr. Sloper is virtually a two-dimensional figure. However, we have yet to discuss the third good that Taylor proposes as contributing to the foundation of the modern self: namely the focus on other-directedness. In James’ version a remarkable thing about Catherine is that she does not despair once she is shunted by Morris and realizes how wrong she was to invest her affections on him, as her melodramatic Aunt Penniman would have her, but gets involved in the society around her. This turn is quite unexpected, since up to that juncture, i.e. the majority of the novel, the narrative had revolved around a small group of people. One might say that from the novel’s focus on Catherine’s “transcendentalizing imagination,” the reader now gets a feeling of her “self-transcendent ego.” If at the conclusion of the novel it seems as if the heroine is sequestered in the cloister of her home, James also makes it clear she now has a calling.

Holland perceives the importance of this turn and gives it her own twist. In her version Catherine is running what seems to be a nursery when Morris arrives for the last time to be rejected. It is worth remembering that Holland co-wrote the screenplay to Andrzej Wajda’s Korczak (1989), so her inclusion of children as the object of Catherine’s concern must be seen as carefully considered.

In fiction and film Catherine understands her own problems are not the only ones in the world. For James’ Dr. Sloper it was not enough that his daughter be genuinely good. For a time, when he mistreated her, she simply played at being good to him. In the end Catherine has returned to being authentically good: not for a father, who could hardly care less, nor out of any sense of compensation for her disappointments, but for its own sake. One could add from today’s perspective that this focus in Washington Square is important as a corrective for the degenerate form that Romantic expressivism has demonstrated in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the so called “culture of narcissism.”

Agnieszka Holland is correct in claiming that “James sounds very modern today.” We have seen that this quality largely stems from the author’s exploration of different sources of our identity in a relatively open-ended fashion. Although her reading does not exhaust its potential, Holland offers an enriched perspective especially on the Romanticism of Washington Square: a tradition that despite the transformations on both sides of the Atlantic continues to exert a recognizable stamp on our modern identity.

**Film Based on Henry James’s Washington Square**

Washington Square (1997) dir. Agnieszka Holland. Screenplay Carol Doyle. Perf. Jennifer Jason Leigh (Catherine Sloper), Albert Finney (Dr. Austin Sloper), Maggie Smith (Aunt Lavinia Penniman), Ben Chaplin (Morris Townsend), Judith Ivey (Aunt Elizabeth Almond), Arthur Laupus (Mr. Almond), Jennifer Garner (Marian
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Almond), Robert Stanton (Arthur Townsend), Betsy Brantley (Mrs. Montgomery),

Other Works Cited