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# "It's All a Blind": Scopic Economies in Henry James' *Washington Square*

Carrie L. Hill

Clemson University, [carriehill660@gmail.com](mailto:carriehill660@gmail.com)

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**"IT'S ALL A BLIND": SCOPIC ECONOMIES IN HENRY JAMES'  
*WASHINGTON SQUARE***

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Carrie L. Hill  
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Accepted by:  
Dr. Dominic Mastroianni, Committee Chair  
Dr. Susanna Ashton  
Dr. Jonathan Beecher Field

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role that Henry James' *Washington Square* plays in creating spaces of power through the medium of gazing. The first section of this paper examines the male-centric arguments of the book, namely that of the social and economic spheres, and how the two main male characters inhabit and manipulate these areas. The majority of this paper is concerned with the play of the female gaze and how certain female characters in the novel, specifically Catherine, are able to train their own gazes and then come, in turn, to manipulate the gazes of the men who seek to abuse them. This paper is a study of powerplays and offers a unique role to Catherine by allowing her own power and autonomy.

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## **“It’s All a Blind!”: How Gazing Overthrows Hegemonies in Henry James’**

### *Washington Square*

#### Introduction

Henry James did not include *Washington Square* in the New York Edition of his personal anthology in 1907. James was just eight years from gaining British citizenship, and he considered *Washington Square* far “too American” for his taste. Despite James’ own criticism of his work, the novel yet offers literary critics an arena to explore hegemonies of 1840s America, at least as far as James represents them. Up until recently, such criticism has focused mainly on financial and spatial interpretations. Any mode of power and control exercised by the characters is filtered through the lenses of European/American lifestyles, economic comparisons, and societal mores. While these interpretations certainly illuminate James’ work in *Washington Square*, they also miss other hegemonies that play out in the novel. Considering that *Washington Square* is a story about attempted marriage and turns on the archetypal plot of the wily fortune hunter, the innocent and eventually betrayed heiress, and the draconic father who rigorously opposes the match, there has been a lack of critical study on gender dynamics. Part of this dearth of scholarship comes from the fact that the heroine, Catherine, is problematic for the majority of the novel. Like her lover Morris and her aunt Penniman, the reader and critic wonder why Catherine never *acts*. Catherine’s development comes at the end of the novel and scholars such as Cynthia Ozick and Millicent Bell have noted that this is where Catherine is finally powerful. Bell writes that “although Catherine seems powerless, victimized by both father and lover, she does in the end exercise choice

...she is left free to work out her own destiny, however limited” (52). Yet, Bell points out that this show of strength filters itself through Dr. Sloper. Instead of being her own woman, Catherine turns into a cold cynic like her father. Bell’s analysis is a useful read on some of the gendered dynamics in *Washington Square*, but she examines gender mainly through Catherine and her father’s relationship. The novel presents a whole cast of characters whose interactions with one another depend on each other’s gender. More study on gendered power and the hegemonies James portrays within this power need to be explored. My goal in this thesis is to examine the various relationships through a medium James incorporates in the majority of his most well-known novels but that has not yet been applied here—that of the gaze.

Vision and, in particular, gazing are common tropes in the James *oeuvre*. Adeline Tinter writes that: “The eyes of Henry James was a sensitive organ with a consciousness all its own. . . .For James, the pleasure of sight come before any other sensation” (1). Joseph Warren Beach goes on to say that “the stories of Henry James are records of seeing rather than of doing. . . .The process of the story is always more or less what Mr. James himself calls in one case a ‘process of vision’” (145). From young Maisie absorbing the social and sexual drama of her four sets of parents in *What Maisie Knew* to Frederick Winterbourne visually gorging himself on Daisy’s physical appearance in *Daisy Miller*, gazing pervades James’ work and calls the critic to investigate exactly what James is doing by filling his novels and short stories with so many active eyes.

The gaze itself has been gendered from its genesis. In a stunningly thorough analysis of the history of the gaze, Madeline Caviness writes that all people “actively

glance, look, perceive; view, observe, inspect, spy, peek, eyeball; gaze, scrutinize, contemplate; watch, stare, glare; gawk, gape, leer; eye, ogle and hypnotize” but “a long cultural tradition has denied women the right to stare, and even denied that women were right to look, precisely because staring is understood as a dominating behavior” (18-9). Caviness shows that the history of the gaze has been dominated by patriarchal norms and thus the usual terminology associated with the gaze is that of the male gaze in which a male figure visually focuses on a female body and objectifies it for his own sexual pleasure. Caviness then traces the emergence of a female gaze in which the roles of the male gaze are flipped. The most illuminating aspect of Caviness’ study, though, is her expanding of the definition of the gaze. To her, the gaze goes beyond just sexual fantasy. She argues that “staring and being stared at are not primarily erotic or sexual, but political in the sense that they establish, maintain, or acknowledge hierarchies of power” (22). To choose to look at a physical body and then interpret that body constitutes an act of power that goes beyond just a gendered definition. These hegemonies can include social, political, religious, sexual, economic, and racial breakdowns, which Caviness explores in her study. With its broad definition that allows for these scopic economies to be explored in other literary avenues besides Caviness’ medieval focus, this definition of gazing can be used to shed light on James’ employment of the gaze.

James’ most famous portrayal of the gaze occurs in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In one of the most iconic scenes in the book, our protagonist Isabel Archer examines a series of paintings in a gallery while explaining to a potential suitor, Lord Warburton, why she will not marry him. While Isabel looks at the paintings, Warburton visually devours her,

appraising her like her body is an art piece itself. What makes this scene so titillating for the critic is that Isabel is perfectly aware of what Warburton is doing and strategically places herself so as to give him the “best picture.” Warburton’s gaze, a tool used to subjugate women, is being used to subjugate to himself. Although he is looking at Isabel, he is blind to any vision of her other than what she chooses to put on display for him. Critics are divided on whether Isabel’s manipulation of the gaze and her own gaze itself open up legitimate avenues of power for women in the James canon. I intend to argue that James does mean the gaze to function as an arena for power, at least in *Washington Square*. Following Caviness’ umbrella interpretation of gazing I intend to explore how various characters (both male and female) employ their gazes to portray various hegemonies in the novel and trace these gazes to the endings they bring their gazers. By looking at both the male and female gaze I will be able to contrast any gendered distinctions James may make between them. In examining the role of the female gaze Catherine will be able to be seen as her own woman, not as just a body to be manipulated by the men in the novel. The full scope of this thesis is to study the functions of scopic economies and how Henry James used them to portray economic, social, and gendered hegemonies.

## Chapter 1: Socioeconomic Gazing

One hegemony enforced by the gaze is one of socioeconomic distinctions. A great deal of critical research has been done on the economic structures and powerplays in *Washington Square*. Sarah Wilson, Eric Savor, Merle Williams, Hsuan Hsu, and John Carlos Rowe, to name a few, have explored the social and economic dynamics that play out in the novel. From women's bodies being used as bartered commodities, to a redefining of the "public" arena, critics have plumbed that depths of what James presents as the "American" scene. Less attention has been paid to exploring exactly how this socioeconomic hegemony is enforced. Scholarship tends to focus on Catherine's body as a commodity being speculated on and fought over by Morris and her father. In his analysis of the novel, Andrew Scheiber argues that "Sloper's attempts to master Catherine are in part an effort to preserve the purported natural linkage between biological and economic status" (27). Scheiber's analysis sees Catherine strictly as a biological body whose worth to her doctor-father is tied up in her ability to reproduce eugenically sound children. Morris is a "lesser being" (Scheiber fails to mention what, exactly, qualifies Morris as lesser being) and is thus an unsuitable suitor (12). What critics take for granted is that for Catherine to be a commodity she must first have a certain amount of worth that is visible to outside parties. This idea is usually glossed over with a casual reference to the startlingly expensive red dress Catherine wears at the party where she meets Morris. Yet *Washington Square* sits in a Jamesian *oeuvre* infamous for its emphasis on art, vision, and sight. To ignore the active looking that both Morris and

Dr. Sloper engage in is to miss a key exploration of James' use of the male gaze. In this section of this thesis I want to explore how Morris and Dr. Sloper use their gazes to sound the economic potential and social standing of Catherine and of each other.

Morris' gaze is primarily economic. More so than any other character, he reduces people down to their financial worth and pursues or rejects them according to how much wealth they possess. Catherine is his main target. Morris' gaze relegates Catherine to a strictly economic entity and he repeatedly refers to her as a "prize" to be won. His first vision of her is inundated with fiscal imagery, to make up for her personal deficiencies, Catherine wears garish garments that exaggerate her personal wealth. She dresses "as if [she] had eighty thousand a year" and Dr. Sloper ironically tells her that she looks "expensive," as if she is wearing her inheritance (28). That Morris latches onto Catherine's financial appearance is made clear by Mrs. Penniman. In the carriage ride home, she tells Catherine and Dr. Sloper that she and Morris spoke for half an hour about Catherine, but the only hint we are given as to what, exactly, they discussed is that Morris "admired Catherine's dress" (29). Dr. Sloper immediately and correctly surmises that Morris admires the dress so much because it teases Catherine's inheritance.

Katja Sarkowsky argues that Morris represents the "new man" (read: the middle class) trying to get a foothold in American society (13). However, Ian Bell sees Morris' attempted social climbing in strictly gendered terms. Morris is just a wily seducer who fails to catch his prey in the end. This view limits both Morris and Catherine to the roles of seducer/seducee and severely limits the hegemonies in which they operate and, potentially, express power in. Morris is more than just a suitor; he is a type of real estate

investor. At one point Morris' cousin Arthur tells Catherine the "secret" to moving up in New York society: "That's the way to live in New York—to move every three or four years. . . . It's because the city's growing so quick—you've got to keep up with it. . . . I guess we'll move up little by little; when we get tired of one street we'll go higher. So you see, we'll always have a new house; it's a great advantage to have a new house; you get all the latest improvements" (33). From the quote we can see that one's social and economic status depend on the house in which they live; their house visibly demonstrates their financial worth. Morris attempts to live out Arthur's idea of social movement through real estate. His present house, which is his sister's and not even his, is located on Second Street and is more associated with a dollhouse than it is an actual house. Ian Bell notes Second Street during this time sat on the border between the middle class and lower class sections of New York (53). The house is "modest" and his sister attempts to make it look grander than it is by keeping it immaculate, but no amount of scrubbing can save it from its unassuming front. This is the financial situation Morris seeks to escape. The second house he is associated with is Mrs. Almond's. While this house is a step up for Morris, it sits in "a region where the extension of the city began to assume a theoretic air, where poplars grew beside the pavement (when there was one), and mingled their shade with the steep roofs of desultory Dutch houses, and where pigs and chickens disported themselves in the gutter" (20). Although Mrs. Almond's house stands in a staunchly middle-class street, it nonetheless acts as a cite of social mixing, which Morris would never experience in his sister's house. Mrs. Almond is able to marry her daughter Marian to Arthur Townsend, a well-off stockbroker with ambitions to move into New York's

more fashionable neighborhoods. Morris attempts to play out a gender-swapped version of Marian and Arthur's story with Catherine. The real prize for Morris is the house on Washington Square. Not only is the Sloper house in the "portion of New York [which] appears to many persons the most delectable," but the house itself is "handsome, modern. . .with a big balcony before the drawing-room windows, and a flight of white marble steps ascending to a portal which was also faced with white marble" (19). The house has the full appearance of monied owners and Catherine herself dresses the part. To Morris, Catherine is attractive because she is rich, and the more he visually takes in her wealth, the more of a commodity she becomes.

One motive of his wooing Catherine in her own home is to take stock of the house and household goods he would inherit by marrying her. In his second visit to Washington Square we are told that he spends most of the visit "looking around the room a good deal, and at the objects it contained, as well as at Catherine, whom, however, he also contemplated freely" (40). This section shows a clear association between the economic worth of the house and Catherine. Dr. Sloper had sarcastically told Catherine she dressed above her means, but Morris seems not to see any discrepancies between what Catherine's dress promises economically and what her inheritance actually is. Later, Morris scopes out the house again: "Morris, left to himself, stood looking at the house. . . . And paused for a minute in front of Doctor Sloper's dwelling. His eyes traveled over it; they even rested on the ruddy windows of Mrs. Penniman's apartment. He thought it a devilish comfortable house" (117). Morris' ability to see Catherine's wealth stems both from the fronts put up by Catherine and the house and from Morris' ability to physically

see their value. Morris' gaze is the consummate speculator. His occupation is that of a fortune hunter, and his gaze is constantly assessing the economic possibilities of the women he encounters.

While Morris' gaze concerns itself with finances, Dr. Sloper's gaze works to determine one's social worth. Having married into money himself, Dr. Sloper at first seems like a type of fortune hunter. Yet James makes it clear that Sloper's wife's dowry, while an attractive asset, was not the reason he married her. Even with his wife's inheritance, Dr. Sloper continues to practice his medical profession as if he had not married into wealth. Dr. Sloper is a man of action and results; to him the supreme good is "to learn something interesting, and to do something useful" (5). Anyone who follows his philosophy earns his approval; anyone who does not meets his censure. Kari Nixon writes that Dr. Sloper's worldview represents the changing state of the middle class in 1840's New York (236). The "old way" of the world—inheriting wealth and social standing from one's family—is beginning to be threatened by the American dream. To Dr. Sloper, a man's value comes from his profession, not his family name. This distinction between the traditional idea of social worth and Dr. Sloper's new philosophy appears in a conversation he has with his sister, Mrs. Almond. When discussing Morris' life, Mrs. Almond is quick to point out his familial pedigree: "He is a distant relation to Lavinia's protégé [Morris]. The name is the same but I am given to understand that there are Townsends and Townsends. So Arthur's mother tells me; she talked about 'branches'—younger branches, elder branches, inferior branches—as if it were a royal house. Arthur, it appears, is of the reigning line, but poor Lavinia's young man is not" (43-4). Mrs.

Almond's response demonstrates the "old way" of social value. Because Morris is not from the right branch of the Townsend family tree, he is seen as inferior to his other family members. Dr. Sloper, though, immediately dismisses this information and interrogates his sister about Morris' occupation and upon learning that he has none he correctly deduces that "he is looking for it here—over there in the front parlor. The position of husband of a weak-minded woman with a large fortune would suit him to perfection!" (59). Immediately following this conversation is the dinner scene where Dr. Sloper and Morris meet for the first time. The doctor spends the evening "observing" (in his own words) Morris. The night and chapter end with Dr. Sloper announcing the results of his visual analysis to Mrs. Almond. The analysis comprises two parts: physicality and social worth. Physically, Dr. Sloper sees Morris as an ideal organic body. He states that "as an anatomist it is a pleasure to me to see such a beautiful structure" (51). Socially, though, Morris is a failure to Dr. Sloper. He claims to Morris is not a gentleman, at least not what he qualifies as what a gentleman should be (a man with an active occupation). Mrs. Almond reminds Sloper that Morris is technically a gentleman—"Remember that he is a branch of the Townsends" (52). Dr. Sloper again dismisses this idea of social standing. He sees Morris, his attractiveness and his social position, as nothing as a façade. "I saw right through him in a minute" Sloper boasts (52). Morris Townsends' potential as a son-in-law depends entirely on Dr. Sloper's vision of what makes a man a gentleman. In a confrontation between the two men, Dr. Sloper explicitly states that Morris' "absence of *means*, of a *profession*, of visible resources or prospects, places you in a category from which it would be imprudent for me to select a husband for my daughter"

(83, emphasis mine). The be all and end all of Dr. Sloper is one's profession. Morris' connections to the Townsends means nothing. In Dr. Sloper's eyes, Morris' unemployment makes him a failure and an unworthy suitor for Catherine.

The examination of the passages above suggests an additional depth to James' portrayal of gazing. The traditional idea of the gaze is that of the male gaze, in which a male figure sexually objectifies a female figure for his viewing pleasure. This version of the male gaze in *Washington Square*, however, is surprisingly absent in the male characters. James explores the male gaze from a purely nonsexual point of view and seems to suggest that it is more scientifically/economically objectifying than it is sexually. Morris and Dr. Sloper use their gazes to scope out socioeconomic worth; there is no mention of either of them being physically attracted to the women they gaze at. Their gazes instead seem to redefine social norms. Instead of Dr. Sloper trying to shield Catherine from a "lesser" (read: socially and economically inferior) man like critics such as Andrew Scheiber argues, Sloper and Morris' conflict instead redefines what it means to be a successful gentleman in 1840s New York. Dr. Sloper repeatedly disregards the "traditional" view of a gentleman in favor of his vision of a passionate workaholic. This man is the standard, the kind of man that is worth marrying. His predetermined birth into a "proper" social position and economic standing are inconsequential.

However, a sexualized version of the gaze is employed in *Washington Square*. Instead of a sexualized male gaze, Henry James incorporates a sexual female gaze to explore how female attraction to male bodies can serve both as a weakness to and as a catalyst for female empowerment.

## Chapter 2: The Female Gaze

Most scholarship has focused primarily on Catherine as a body that is manipulated. Whether a game piece in Morris' scheme to marry into money or a scientific curiosity for her father to observe, Catherine is often seen as a character who is moved, not a character who does any moving of her own accord. Such limited interpretations naturally downplay any power and agency Catherine has and, on a larger scale, reduce the novel to a purely masculine powerplay. I intend to argue, however, that *Washington Square* provides a ground for female empowerment through James' use of the female gaze. While Catherine's gaze is initially a thing to be manipulated, by the end of the novel she emerges as a powerful character because her gaze is the clearest.

In *Washington Square*, Catherine's development of her gaze leads to an emancipation from oppressive male figures. At the beginning of the novel Catherine, despite being in her early twenties, is child-like and possesses an intense devotion to her father. Her entire life revolves around her father—"her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him" (13). Dr. Sloper represents the central, dominating figure in Catherine's life, and their relationship parallels that of a disinterested deity and its worshiper more than a father-daughter relationship. Catherine's devotion to her father is described as "worship" on several occasions, but her filial love is not reciprocated. Dr. Sloper views her as nothing but a "disappointment," an "inadequate substitute for his lamented firstborn" and a cruel mockery of the perfect mother he loses after Catherine's birth (6).

Catherine, despite being an heiress, has no suitors. Her experience with the male sex is limited to the familial circle, that of her father, her young nephews, and her cousins' husbands. In this way, Catherine's gaze is undeveloped. She has had no male presence which awakens sexual attraction within her and so her own sexual awareness is stunted. When Morris Townsend enters the novel, however, Catherine's gaze forcefully awakens.

Upon meeting Morris for the first time, Catherine quite literally stares at him in silence for an extended period of time. Her first look at him dazzles her; she finds him "remarkably handsome" and "beautiful" (23). Not only is Morris attractive, but his masculine beauty is completely different from anything Catherine has ever experienced in her social circle. Morris "had features like young men in pictures; Catherine had never seen such features—so delicate, so chiseled and finished—among the young New Yorkers" (24). In the face of this new, unfilial male beauty, the only reaction Catherine musters is to stare. While Morris attempts to engage her in conversation, Catherine "answered nothing; she only listened and looked at him" (23). Throughout their entire (mostly one-sided) exchange, the phrases "looked at him" (23) and "with her eyes fixed upon him" (24) substitute for any verbal response Catherine could have made. Catherine's gaze has been shaken awake, and she finds herself unable to do anything but look at the physical beauty before her.

Such a blatant stare seems in bad taste but Catherine, however, sees no shame or embarrassment in her behavior. To her, "it seemed proper that he should talk, and that she should simply look at him. What made it natural was that he was so handsome, or, rather,

as she phrased it to herself, so beautiful” (23). In this instance, Morris transforms from a person into a visually pleasing thing for Catherine to devour with her eyes. Because Morris possesses beauty that he showcases to the world, Catherine assumes that her natural role is that of a consumer; she never even considers that she should do anything besides stare at him and appreciate his beauty. This idea of Morris as an object to be devoured receives further credence through the metaphors Catherine uses to describe him. In her mind, Catherine turns Morris into a piece of art. She first describes him as a picture and a statue. This imagery fails to satisfy Catherine and she admits that “a statue would not talk like that, and, above all, would not have eyes of so rare of a color” (24). Morris is not dead art; he is active, living, and interacting with the viewer, and Catherine likens him to a theater performance. Morris’s conversation “was the way a young man might talk in a novel, or, better still, in a play, on the stage, close before the footlights, looking at the audience, and with everyone looking at him, so that you wondered at his presence of mind” (25). In the face of Morris’s performance Catherine plays the part of the enraptured viewer. Morris is center stage, and his handsome face holds Catherine’s gaze. Despite this visual hold over Catherine, Morris himself is still just a piece of art in Catherine’s mind. While he might move about and speak with his own voice, Catherine’s gaze has chained him into a showing for her own pleasure.

Catherine’s gaze, however, is unrefined. Having just been stirred to awakening through Morris Townsend, Catherine lacks any experience (sexual and nonsexual) with non-familial men and she has no distinct female presence in her life to offer her guidance. With her mother dead, Catherine’s only female companion is her Aunt Penniman. Mrs.

Penniman acts as the equivalent of a comic relief character in the novel; James describes her as “romantic . . . sentimental; she had a passion for little secrets and mysteries” (11). She consistently offers bad and contradictory advice and cares more for satisfying her romantic sensibilities than helping Catherine. The lack of a guiding female figure forces Catherine to develop her gaze on her own, something which does not occur until much later in the novel. Her ignorance causes her to be unable to discern Morris’s true character from his physical attractiveness. Because he is beautiful, Catherine assumes that he must also be good.

This difference between who Morris is and the face he presents to Catherine suggests a weakness in the female gaze. While James’ version of the female gaze seems to empower women by giving them a “natural” agency to both look at and enjoy male beauty, this gaze also is a tool for manipulation used by men to take advantage of women. Namely, Morris uses his physical attractiveness to hide his mercenary motives. Catherine’s use of stage imagery to describe Morris works on a deeper level than she initially realizes. Morris is indeed an actor—he is not a “natural man” like he claims to be but a fortune hunter trying to trick Catherine into marrying him for her dowry (41). Morris once owned a fair sum of money but squandered it all in years previous. At the time when he meets Catherine he lives as a type of boarder in his sister’s lower-class home with no real income of his own. His “occupation” can hardly be called such—he acts as a tutor but he teaches but one subject (Spanish) and his only students are his nephews and nieces. Always on the lookout for a way to set himself up comfortably without having to do any work, Morris picks Catherine Sloper, set to inherit \$30,000 as

his target for marriage, and he knowingly uses his physical attractiveness to blind her to his true intentions.

The first character to see through Morris' façade is a man, Dr. Sloper. While an unlikeable man, Dr. Sloper spends most of the novel in the right in his impressions of people. He knows that Mrs. Penniman will never inspire Catherine to become a great woman, he knows that Catherine will not actually elope with Morris, and he correctly deduces that Morris is a fortune hunter. In his first meeting with Morris, Dr. Sloper is able to see straight through him. It is of note that Dr. Sloper describes himself as "something of a physiognomist," someone who reads a person's face to get a full scope of their character, on multiple occasions. Where Catherine is dazzled by Morris's beauty, Dr. Sloper, after one dinner of letting Morris talk while he sits quietly and both watches and listens to him, discerns his "powers of invention" that he tries so hard to conceal (49). Dr. Sloper admits that Morris seems a gentleman because he is "uncommonly well set up," but sees past the façade he puts up. By failing to fall for Morris' outward charms, Dr. Sloper establishes himself as a superior gazer to Catherine and Mrs. Penniman. He himself derides the female gaze as weak and undiscerning:

You women are all the same! But the type to which your brother belongs was made to be the ruin of you, and you were made to be its handmaids and victims. The sign of the type in question is the determination—sometimes terrible in its quiet intensity—to accept nothing of life but its pleasures, and to secure these pleasures chiefly by the aid of your complaisant sex. Young men of this class never do anything for themselves that they can get other people to do for them,

and it is the infatuation, the devotion, the superstition of others that keeps them going. These others, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, are women (98).

This quote embodies the main conflict of the novel—that of women who possess undeveloped, romanticized gazes and the men who exploit this gaze to their own advantage. Dr. Sloper’s contemptuous view of the female gaze stems from his own misogynistic view of women. To him most women are sentimental fools and his idea of reason “was meagerly gratified by what he observed in his female patients” (10). Women can only ever be the victims of male manipulation. The world, according to Dr. Sloper, is filled with handsome men who want to breeze through life without working and who can make themselves appear pathetic yet noble so that women flock to “save” them. Women, in these cases, are complaisant, willing to accept the picture the man presents so that they can play the part of a romantic heroine who suffers for the sake of a man. As creatures deprived of reason, women are emotionally-driven martyrs-in-waiting willing to be used and abused by handsome actors like Morris Townsend.

One woman, however, challenges Dr. Sloper’s female stereotype, his wife, the deceased Catherine Harrington. Little is mentioned in the novel of the former Mrs. Sloper but her ghost haunts the characters, especially Dr. Sloper. Described as “amiable, graceful, accomplished, elegant,” and “pretty,” Catherine Harrington seems a typical New York socialite (4). Yet she dazzles a young Dr. Sloper and secures his love despite him never having “been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever” (9). So enamored is Dr. Sloper with his wife that he pays her the highest compliment a

scientific man such as himself can offer—she was a “reasonable woman” (10). Where other women are sentimental fools, his wife possesses reason and rationality and thus is worthy of marriage. She is the only woman he ever describes as reasonable and the memory of her reasonableness keeps Dr. Sloper from ever marrying again.

It is of note that the only specific characteristic of Catherine Harrington that is mentioned in attracting Austin Sloper is her “charming eyes” (5). The allure of her eyes is mentioned twice in the relatively short (for James) paragraph describing her, first as what catches Dr. Sloper’s attention and then as the only window into their married life. Catherine Harrington herself is never described in her married life; instead, the reader’s view into the Slopers’ nuptials comes through physical description—“[Catherine’s] eyes, and some of their accompaniments, were for about five years a source of extreme satisfaction to the young physician, who was both a devoted and a very happy husband” (5). Her eyes serve as the hooks that draw Dr. Sloper to her and help craft his exalted opinion of her, and so powerful are their allure that the rest of Catherine is described as mere “accompaniments.” This fixation on Catherine Harrington’s eyes is especially poignant when one considers that her daughter undergoes a similar experience with Morris. In her first encounter with Morris, Catherine stares into his eyes and he stares back at her. Like Dr. Sloper being charmed by Catherine Harrington’s eyes, Catherine is dazzled by Morris’ eyes. James cements the parallel mesmerization by using the exact same language to describe the force of Catherine Harrington’s and Morris’ gazes. Dr. Sloper and Catherine are “charmed” and “dazzled” by the “bright” and “brilliant” eyes of

their respective lovers (5, 23, 24). The difference is that Dr. Sloper gets to marry his charmer while Catherine is denied hers.

So captivated is Dr. Sloper by his wife and her reasonableness that he continually puts her at odds with the other women in the novel. She is the “bright exception” to which Dr. Sloper compares other women (10). After she dies, Dr. Sloper tries to reanimate her in their newborn daughter. He names the baby after her mother and always calls her by Catherine. There are no nicknames or shortening of the mother’s name; Catherine *is* Catherine. At least, this is what Dr. Sloper hopes will happen. As young Catherine grows up, Dr. Sloper allows Mrs. Penniman to move in with him because “it was of importance that the poor motherless girl should have a brilliant woman near her” (9). The use of the word “brilliant” recalls the description of Catherine Harrington; she is the only woman described as “brilliant” in the whole novel. The point of having a brilliant woman around Catherine is that Catherine would hopefully model herself after this role model and become brilliant. One might rightfully question why, then, Dr. Sloper would allow someone like Mrs. Penniman to take charge of his daughter’s upbringing when he wants her to be clever like himself. The answer is that since Catherine Harrington was such an anomaly among woman, Dr. Sloper cannot conceive of finding another woman like her. It does not matter that it is weak, sentimental Mrs. Penniman who raises Catherine because to Dr. Sloper all women are like this. His wife was the singular exception, and now that she is dead there is no proper, female role model to teach Catherine how to be brilliant. Here, one can see the double impossible standard Dr. Sloper holds Catherine to. He expects her to be a clever, brilliant, reasonable daughter

worthy of being called his child but makes it impossible for her to reach this standard due to her gender. Because Catherine is both a woman and not her mother, she will never satisfy her father. Dr. Sloper wants Catherine to be “pretty and graceful, intelligent and distinguished,” and “charming” (13). These are the exact same words used to describe Catherine Harrington. What Dr. Sloper wants is not necessarily a clever daughter he can be proud of but a clone of his late wife. If young Catherine were more like her mother, that is, worthy of being called reasonable, then Dr. Sloper would take pride in her. As Catherine is, though, she fails to inspire any love in her father. Catherine herself acknowledges this in a conversation with Morris. When she realizes that her father never loved her, she explains it by comparing herself with her mother. She states that: “He can’t help it; we can’t govern our affections. Do I govern mine? Mightn’t he say that to me? It’s because he is so fond of my mother, whom we lost so long ago. She was beautiful, and very, very, brilliant; he is always thinking of her. I am not at all like her. . . . All I mean is, it’s true; and it’s a stronger reason for his never being reconciled” (180). Dr. Sloper refuses to see any worth in women, including his daughter, because he continually holds them up to his idealized image of his wife. That the most brilliant woman in the world dies giving birth to a “dull” childlike Catherine only embitters him to his daughter. In one of the cruelest moments of the book, Dr. Sloper admits to “tak[ing] a certain satisfaction in the thought that his wife had not lived to find [Catherine] out” (13). Catherine Harrington was the “bright exception” among women, and, to Dr. Sloper, if a woman is not Catherine Harrington then she is nothing more than a sentimental, abusee-in-waiting, ripe for certain types of men to take advantage of.

Indeed, both Catherine and Mrs. Penniman fall into this category. Mrs. Penniman uses her gaze to indulge in sentimental, dramatic fantasies that make her life seem more romantic than it is. From the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Penniman is portrayed as a ridiculous character, almost a kind of comic relief with her overdramatic reactions and contradictory advice. She embodies Dr. Sloper's description of the most despicable feminine qualities; she is described as "romantic; she was sentimental; she had a passion for little secrets and mysteries" (11). She is the exact opposite of her brother and is thus his worst nightmare. She has a "taste for light literature" and actively looks for opportunities to see these romantic, fictional stories unfold in real life (11). Mrs. Penniman herself has no romantic interest to play out these stories with (she lacks a lover and her husband is dead) and so latches onto the romantic drama in Catherine's life. Mrs. Penniman's rabid romanticism makes her an easy target for Morris Townsend to seduce to his side. More so than Catherine, Mrs. Penniman lives out Dr. Sloper's critique on women with her relationship to Morris. During the part where Catherine meets Morris, she at one point sees him with Mrs. Penniman. Mrs. Penniman "[sat] in the embrasure of a window, with her head a little on one side, and her gold eyeglass raised to her eyes, which were wandering around the room" while Morris talks to her (26). This tête-à-tête between the two recalls an earlier scene with Morris and Catherine just a few pages before. At one point during Morris and Catherine's first "conversation," Morris singles out several persons and gives his thoughts on and critiques who they are and what their character is like, all of which Catherine agrees with even when Morris is wrong. Like as he did with Catherine, Morris is filtering Mrs. Penniman's view of other people, people

whom she knows better than him, through his own eyes. Catherine herself notes the similarity when she observes that “Morris Townsend was giving his impressions of the company to her aunt, as he had done to herself; he was saying clever things, and Mrs. Penniman was smiling, as if she approved of them” (27). This idea receives further credence with the inclusion of Mrs. Penniman’s eyeglasses. This scene is the only time in the novel where they are mentioned, and that Mrs. Penniman actively puts them on to see better for Morris’ sake suggests that she believes that Morris prompts her to see more clearly. The glasses are not a part of her normal wardrobe; she has to take them out and put them in this moment. In this way, Morris symbolically controls Mrs. Penniman’s gaze and he uses this control to make her his ally in winning Catherine.

Mrs. Penniman sees Morris as her long-awaited romantic hero. At one point, Catherine describes Morris as “an object on which she found that her imagination could exercise itself indefinitely” (32). Mrs. Penniman, as a woman “whom everyone knew to be a woman of powerful imagination,” embraces this view of Morris (37). She never actually sees Morris’ true character. Instead, she dreams up a romantic drama and shoves Catherine and Morris into the roles she fantasizes about for them. In several passages given from Mrs. Penniman’s perspective, the reader can track the growing infatuation she develops over Catherine and Morris’ romance. When the affair is just the two young people who love each other, Mrs. Penniman creates a dramatic, but vague scene for them to act out. She falls back on a vocabulary of stage imagery to create her fantasy:

Catherine and Morris are a “heroine” and “hero” and their love story is a “drama” that is “enacted” in various “scenes” that Mrs. Penniman, as a “spectator,” “pulls up the curtain

to” (69). While at first Mrs. Penniman sees herself as an audience member, she soon instates herself as an actor, a “promoter,” and the “chorus to speak the epilogue” (69). She gets so lost in her fantasy that Catherine and Morris become background characters to her dramatic soliloquies. By the time Morris and Catherine become engaged, Mrs. Penniman has reimagined the drama with herself at the center. The fantasy is now that:

The girl would make a secret marriage, at which she [Mrs. Penniman] should officiate as brideswoman or duenna. She had a *vision* of this ceremony being performed in some subterranean chapel- subterranean chapels in New York were not frequent, but Mrs. Penniman’s imagination was not chilled by trifles- and of the guilty couple- she liked to think of poor Catherine and her suitor as the guilty couple- being shuffled away in a fast-whirling vehicle to some obscure lodging in the suburbs, where she would pay them (in a thick veil) clandestine visits; where they would endure a period of romantic privation; and when ultimately, after she should have been their earthly providence, their intercessor, their advocate, and their medium of communication with the world, they would be reconciled to her brother in an artistic tableau, in which she herself should be somehow the central figure (107).

This “vision” of Mrs. Penniman’s plays out before her eyes constantly. Catherine and Morris’ real-life situation is nothing but romanticized wish-fulfillment to her.

As ridiculously overdramatic as Mrs. Penniman’s visions of Catherine and Morris are, they are not harmful initially. It is only when Mrs. Penniman allows her romantic

vision of Morris to bleed into real life that her fantasizing gaze turns dangerous. When the Slopers leave for New York to travel Europe, Mrs. Penniman's sentimental attraction to Morris grows so devout that she abandons Catherine in favor of him. In the twelve months that the Slopers are absent, Morris visits Washington Square almost every day and Mrs. Penniman allows him to treat the house as if it was his own. She imagines herself as his mother or his sister. Seeing how Morris leeches off his real sister, Mrs. Penniman's instating herself as his familial relation is more appropriate than she realizes. In doing so, she literally lives out Dr. Sloper's stereotype of women mentioned earlier. The "type" of man that Dr. Sloper describes is Morris Townsend, a "handsome and tyrannical son" who nevertheless draws women to him with his "delicate and calculated deference" and then makes the women feel as if they are his one friend and advocate (187). This type of man, James informs us, is a "sort of exhibition to which Mrs. Penniman was particularly sensitive" (187). She is completely taken in by the façade Morris presents her with and is never able to see underneath his mask. Because Morris fits in so perfectly with her visions of romantic dramas, Mrs. Penniman favors him over Catherine, who acts nothing like the sentimental heroine Mrs. Penniman imagines her to be. Despite having raised Catherine since she was ten and being an actual blood relation (instead of a self-proclaimed relation), Mrs. Penniman figuratively abandons Catherine and "adopts" Morris. She allows him to completely supplant any affection she has for Catherine and makes the conscious choice to promote his interests at Catherine's expense. Even though she guesses at Morris' mercenary intentions, she still encourages Catherine to marry him and even defends his actions after he abandons Catherine. As the

hero to her romantic drama, Morris can do no wrong. Even twenty years after Morris abandons Catherine, Mrs. Penniman still champions him as a perfect gentleman and goes behind Catherine's back to force a meeting between them. This betrayal is even more appalling when we apprehend that Mrs. Penniman has been living on Catherine's goodwill for the last twenty years. As her father's heiress, Catherine has control of his house on Washington Square and a tidy fortune. All of this she willingly shares with her aunt and asks for nothing in return. Yet Mrs. Penniman easily turns Catherine to Morris even after Catherine explicitly tells her not to. Mrs. Penniman's gaze never develops; she never outgrows her gross romanticism and ends the novel looking at the world through her Morris-prescribed eyeglasses, donned in response to Morris' handsome face and "tragic" backstory.

Catherine, however, while initially playing into the role of the victim of an undeveloped gaze, learns discernment and breaks free from her father's stereotype. Before meeting Morris, Catherine lives the life of a perfectly demure, submissive young woman who "was excellently, imperturbably good; affectionate, docile, obedient, and much addicted to speaking the truth" (12). Upon awakening her own gaze, Catherine undergoes a slow but definite metamorphosis. When questioned by her cousin about her first impression of Morris at the party, Catherine lies and James writes that she "dissembled for the first time in her life" (24). During this same party Catherine proceeds to lie two more times, once to her Aunt Penniman and, surprisingly, to her father. As her interaction with and eventual engagement to Morris continues, Catherine's relationship with her father turns hostile. She continually sets up private meetings with Morris even

after Dr. Sloper expresses his dislike for him, agrees to marry Morris even though her father forbids it, and “sticks” to the engagement despite Dr. Sloper ordering her to break it off. One could argue that Catherine’s refusal to leave Morris fails to count as a rebellion against her father because Catherine refuses to take any real action against him. Instead of immediately running off and marrying Morris, Catherine sits around and hopes that situation will magically resolve itself. However passive Catherine’s lack of action seems, though, she still is actively rebelling against her father by staying engaged to Morris. If she were the same Catherine from the beginning of the novel then she would immediately shake off Morris without questioning her father’s judgment just so she could please him. But she does not do this. Even though her gaze has deceived her about Morris, she still holds to her conviction that they are in love and she resolves to stay with him even when Dr. Sloper threatens to disinherit her and later abandon her in the Alps at night.

After Morris leaves her, Catherine’s gaze sees clearly for the first time and she transcends the limiting role ascribed by her father. No longer a “handmaid and a victim,” Catherine is able to see men clearly (98). She sees Morris not as a loving, handsome fiancée but as the uncaring fortune hunter that hides behind his charm and physical attractiveness to lure in rich women. In their last meeting before Morris flees to New Orleans, Catherine realizes that “a mask had suddenly fallen from his face” (203). Here, James externalizes Catherine’s point of view to illustrate the dynamic theater imagery associated with Morris. Morris, as the player, has broken character and Catherine, as the audience, is not deceived when the player tries to refit his mask for the next act. Again,

using the theater imagery, Catherine realizes that Morris has deceived her. Despite his protests that he leaves to protect her from being disinherited and Mrs. Penniman's passionate claims that he acts like a true hero in a novel, Catherine can see to the heart of the matter—if she does not have money then she does not have Morris.

This insight extends to her father as well. Where once she worshipped him and always sought to earn his favor and love, she now perceives that he “despises” her (181). After this revelation, Catherine emotionally distances herself from her father. While she continues to live with him she determines to “never ask him for anything, or expect anything from him” (181) and this resolution lasts for the rest of her father's life. Catherine openly admits that “nothing could ever make her feel toward her father as she felt in her younger years” (227). Her father has had his own mask stripped away—instead of the distant parent who could love Catherine if she tried hard enough, his true, sarcastic, cruel self is bared to Catherine. She is burned by “his contempt” (156) for her and realizes that he “take[s] advantage of her by dread,” that he is “dangerous” and could go as far as to physically hurt her by “fasten[ing] his hand in her throat” (165). In learning to see her father's true character, Catherine refuses to return to the role of the loving daughter who once idolized him. Their relationship irrevocably changes; where once Dr. Sloper had a daughter who lived to please him he now has a one who holds no affection for him and who stays only out of a sense of filial duty.

## Critical Conclusion

The major test of Catherine's developed gaze comes during her last meeting with Morris, twenty years after he leaves her. All the old baits are there. Despite the passing of two decades, Morris "was still remarkably handsome" with "a very fine presence" (243). His life story is more romantic and tragic than ever—a brief but unhappy marriage with a European woman when all he longed for was Catherine, the failures of his business ventures, his inability to settle in one place due to his debts. Even Mrs. Penniman still jumps at the chance to play his advocate; after twenty years her gaze is still as sentimental and romantic as when she moved into the Sloper's house. But Catherine's gaze is discerning. She "had lived" and every experience she had since Morris abandoned her only sharpened her eyes (243). Following her father's example she becomes a physiognomist of Morris: "As Catherine looked at him, the story of his life defined itself in his eyes; he had made himself comfortable, and he had never been caught. But even while her perception opened itself to this, she had no desire to catch him; his presence was painful to her, and she only wished that he would go" (244). Yet, Catherine is not just a mirror of her father in this scene. Dr. Sloper ends the novel with a diluted gaze. He believes that Catherine and Morris are pulling a "blind" on him and waiting for him to die so that they can be married (224). He spends the rest of his life in a state of paranoia—"the doctor's idea that the thing was a 'blind' had its intermissions and revivals; but it may be said, on the whole, to have increased as he grew older" (225). Dr. Sloper's gaze, which was once so clear, cannot see past his conspiracy theory that Catherine is just playing him for a fool. He can no longer read Catherine's face and uncover her true

intentions. Catherine's gaze, on the other hand, remains clear, and the use of sight imagery in her reunion with Morris recalls the cliché of the eyes being windows to the soul. For the first time, all of Morris' life is laid bare to Catherine through the power of her own gaze. She sees him as a beautiful prize to be caught (a reversal of their situation in the past where she was his prize to be won), one that no one else has ever had. But she sees no satisfaction in catching the trophy. Despite his good looks, despite his tragic backstory, Catherine has no desire to play the part of his victim again. Her gaze gives her power over Morris and over her father, both of whom she can see clearly. She has broken free from her father's stereotype and sustained an autonomous existence for herself. She sends Morris away and settles down to be the mistress of her own house, her own fortune, and her own self.

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