

INTRODUCTION

Washington Square (1880) continues to be one of Henry James's most popular fictions. This is doubtless due, at least in part, to its manageable length and early approachable style, both of which make the novel a good introduction to Henry James's writing and a favoured classroom text. But *Washington Square* also offers a vivid historical picture of New York City during the 1830s and 1840s while introducing a memorable cast of characters presented with both irony and affection. Looking back at the New York of his boyhood, Henry James put himself into *Washington Square* in a way that is almost unique among his fictions. Recalling, observing and creating the Square, James worked himself into the fabric of the novel. Its narrator, often conspicuously present, speaks as both an outside observer and a knowledgeable insider. *Washington Square* is what Nancy Bentley has called an 'ethnography of manners',¹ charting in detail the subjects, objects and practices of antebellum Manhattan. But its 'backward glance', to use Edith Wharton's phrase, not only reveals a changing New York but also resists settled judgements.

As is often the case with Henry James's fiction, the origin of *Washington Square* lies in an anecdote he heard and remembered. In a *Notebook* entry of 21 February 1879, James is explicit in describing the 'germ' of the novel. Although lengthy (and unusually so for James), the entry is worth quoting in full:

Mrs. Kemble² told me last evening the history of her brother H.'s engagement to Miss T. H.K. was a young ensign in a marching regiment, very handsome ('beautiful,') said Mrs. K., but very luxurious & selfish, and without a penny to his name.

1 Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2 Frances Anne (Fanny) Kemble, a celebrated British actress, and, later, writer, whose best-known work was *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* (1863). Kemble and her daughter Sarah Butler Wister were friends and frequent correspondents of James. Henry Kemble was suitor to Mary Ann Thackeray, only daughter of George Thackeray (1777–1850), a noted book-collector as well as Provost of King's, who opposed the marriage, threatening to disinherit her, as a result of which the relationship was broken off.

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Miss T. was a dull, plain, common-place girl, only daughter of the Master of King's Coll., Cambridge, who had a handsome private fortune (£4000 a year). She was very much in love with H.K., & was of that slow, sober, dutiful nature that an impression once made upon her, was made for ever. Her father disapproved strongly (& justly) of the engagement & informed her that if she married young K. he would not leave her a penny of his money. It was only in her money that H. was interested; he wanted a rich wife who would enable him to live at his ease and pursue his pleasures. Miss T. was in much tribulation & she asked Mrs. K. what she would advise her to do—Henry K. having taken the ground that if she would hold on and marry him the old Doctor would after a while relent and they should get the money. (It was in this belief that he was holding on to her.) Mrs. K. advised the young girl by *no means* to marry her brother. 'If your father does relent & you are well off, he will make you a kindly enough husband, so long as all goes well. But if he should not, & you were to be poor, your lot would be miserable. *Then* my brother would be a very uncomfortable companion—*then* he would visit upon you his disappointment & discontent.' Miss T. reflected awhile; but then, as she was much in love with [him], she determined to disobey her father & take the consequences. Meanwhile H.K., however, had come to the conclusion that the father's forgiveness was not to be counted upon—that his attitude was very firm, and that if they should marry, he would never see the money. *Then* all his effort was to disentangle himself. He cooled off, shook himself free of the engagement, let the girl go. She was deeply wounded—they separated. Some few years elapsed—her father died and she came in to his fortune. She never received the addresses of another man—she always cared in secret for Henry K.—but she was determined to remain unmarried. K. lived about the world in different military stations, and at last, at the end of 10 years (or more) came back to England—still a handsome, selfish, impecunious soldier. One of his other sisters (Mrs. S.) then attempted to bring on the engagement again—knowing that Miss T. still cared for him. She tried to make Mrs. K. join her in this undertaking, but the latter refused, saying that it was an ignoble speculation & that her brother had forfeited every claim to being thought well of by Miss T. But K. again, on his own responsibility, paid his addresses to Miss T. She refused him—it was too late. And yet, said Mrs. K., she cared for him—and she would have married no other man. But H.K.'s selfishness had over-reached itself and this was the retribution of time.³

3 *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, eds. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 11–12; hereafter *CN*. The text of quotations from James's notebooks draws on that prepared, with essential annotations, by Philip Horne, to be published in the *Cambridge Edition of the Complete Fiction of Henry James*, vol. 34; hereafter *CFHJ*34. Page references for the same passages in *CN* are supplied for the reader's convenience.

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Although James changes details and setting, adding characters and plot-lines, the influence of Fanny Kemble's story on *Washington Square*, both in terms of plot and character, is clear: a plain, dull heiress-to-be is wooed by a handsome young man. When her disapproving father threatens disinheritance, the young woman, despite warnings from the suitor's sister, stays faithful. But the money-hungry lover absconds. The woman remains unmarried, yet, when the suitor returns years later, she refuses him.

But the novel, as noted earlier, also has strong autobiographical resonances. At moments the narrative becomes intensely (and almost anomalously for James's fiction) personal. Describing Washington Square itself, the narrator lapses into reminiscence, engaging the reader directly:

I know not whether it is owing to the tenderness of early associations, but this portion of New York appears to many persons the most delectable. It has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long, shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honourable look than any of the upper ramifications of the great longitudinal thoroughfare—the look of having had something of a social history. It was here, as you might have been informed on good authority, that you had come into a world which appeared to offer a variety of sources of interest; it was here that your grandmother lived, in venerable solitude, and dispensed a hospitality which commended itself alike to the infant imagination and the infant palate; it was here that you took your first walks abroad, following the nursery-maid with unequal step and sniffing up the strange odour of the ailantus-trees which at that time formed the principal umbrage of the square, and diffused an aroma that you were not yet critical enough to dislike as it deserved; it was here, finally, that your first school, kept by a broad-bosomed, broad-based old lady with a ferule, who was always having tea in a blue cup, with a saucer that didn't match, enlarged the circle both of your observations and your sensations. It was here, at any rate, that my heroine spent many years of her life; which is my excuse for this topographical parenthesis. (p. 14)

While this 'topographical parenthesis' undoubtedly introduces us to Catherine Sloper's milieu, what it does even more vividly and directly is conjure Henry James's childhood. The novel is set some thirty to forty years before the time of its composition and publication, set, that is, in the years of Henry James's youth, or even shortly before it, and in what Americans came to regard as their country's more innocent age, before the American Civil War. James's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Robertson Walsh, lived

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on Washington Square; the family resided nearby at 21 Washington Place, where Henry was born; William and Henry attended a neighbourhood dame school. The sights, smells and tastes that he describes in this passage reappear over thirty years later in his autobiographical writings. In *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), James recalls that one of the schools he and William attended was across the street from his grandmother's house.⁴ A teacher, Miss Rogers, 'beat time with a long black ferule' (*SBOC* 12). Going to play after instruction at still another dame school, 'what I best recover in the connection is a sense and smell of perpetual autumn, with the ground so muffled in the leaves and twigs of the now long defunct ailanthus-tree that most of our own motions were a kicking of these up—the semi-sweet rankness of the plant was all in the air' (*SBOC* 84). As a result of these resonances, some critics have suggested that the narratorial reminiscences (uncharacteristic for James) warrant our reading the character of Catherine Sloper as some version or aspects of Henry James himself, or at least of a self that he feared he might be: despite his increasing professional and social success, perhaps James could still, at times, picture himself as an unmarried, overweight, provincial adult whose parents remained involved with his finances.⁵

There is also a different sort of connection to James's autobiography, that is, to the American women among his family and friends whom he knew best. Adrian Poole reminds us that in the 1830s James's mother, Aunt Kate and sister, Alice, all shared the unmarried Catherine Sloper's limited options.⁶ Colm Tóibín, among others, argues that in *Washington Square* James draws directly on a father–daughter–suitor triangle with which he was intimately familiar, that of the widower Francis Boott, his daughter

4 *A Small Boy and Others: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Collister (1913; rpt Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 8; hereafter *SBOC*.

5 First among these, Leon Edel, *The Conquest of London, 1870–1881. Henry James, A Life*, 5 vols. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), 11: 398–400.

6 'Introduction', *Washington Square* by Henry James (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xv. Poole explains that both Mary and Kate Walsh married later than was typical at the time. It has also been suggested by Philip Horne, among others, that Kate Walsh's short disastrous marriage may have indirectly informed James's narrative: 'Making Sentences', *London Review of Books* 13.22 (21 November 1991): 11–12.

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Lizzie and her fiancé, Frank Duveneck.⁷ James met the wealthy, highly cultivated Boots in Boston in 1865 and carried on a long friendship with both, corresponding chiefly with Lizzie. After years of living, studying and traveling with her father, Lizzie met and eventually married Duveneck, a rough, impoverished Cincinnati painter. James was among those who noted the dissonance between the two men who became intimately connected solely through their relationships with Lizzie.

Washington Square was begun in the autumn of 1879, in Paris, and completed in London in March 1880. James left his residence at 3 Bolton Street in London for Paris in late August 1879, hoping both to enjoy some travel and to find respite from the time-consuming social demands of London. From 42 rue Cambon, just north of the Jardin des Tuileries, he wrote to William Dean Howells concerning his plans for *Washington Square*, which was originally meant to be a short story of about twenty-five pages, predicting that he would be able to send the tale to him, for publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, ‘within two or three weeks’ (31 October 1879).⁸ As usual, James underestimated both the length of the fiction and the time it would take to write it.

One reason for this may have been that James had not fully escaped his social obligations and inclinations in moving to the French capital. Although not quite the crush of London, Paris in autumn meant socialising with American and English visitors. James knew his Paris well; having visited often and lived there for a year in 1875–6, he had considered making the French city his home before finally deciding upon London. Now, during this sojourn, when Henry and Clover Adams were also in town, James saw them almost daily. With the Andrew Langs, who were new to Paris, he acted as ‘nursing mother’ (11 October 1879, *CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:19). Sara Darwin, whom James knew both because her sister had married Charles Eliot Norton and because her brother Arthur G. Sedgwick was his friend, arrived with her husband, William Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin’s son). James’s great

7 Colm Tóibín, ‘Henry James: Shadow and Substance’, in Colm Tóibín, Marc Simpson and Declan Kiely (eds.), *Henry James and American Painting* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press; New York: The Morgan Library and Museum, 2017), pp. 1–47.

8 *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, eds. Michael Anesko, Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006–), vol. 1878–80, part 2, pp. 30–1; hereafter *CLHJ*.

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friend Lady Wolseley, wife of Sir Garnet, came to stay as well, and he travelled to Varennes to spend time with the Edward Lee Childes at their chateau.

Nor was James's circle of acquaintance solely Anglo-American. He visited several times with Ivan Turgenev, whose writing James greatly admired and whose company he always found 'delectable' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:19).⁹ He attended Princess Ourousov's literary salon and spent time with the painter Paul Zhukovsky. As always when he was in Paris, James, who judged French drama the highest theatrical form, went often to the theatre. In contrast, he found the French literary scene 'pitiably thin' and claimed that he could find nothing worth buying in the Parisian bookstores (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:19).

After moving to 51 rue Neuve Saint-Augustin just south of the Opéra in early November, James remained in Paris for another month, foregoing a planned trip to Italy because of cold weather and snow-blocked roads. Returning to London at the end of that period meant returning home, as he explained on 19 December 1879 to Sarah Butler Wister:

I have told you sufficiently before, what a good Londoner I am; & it is a comfortable thing to have a place where, more than elsewhere, one feels at home. This is my sensation here, & in it are merged all sorts of feelings of detail about London life & things—some of them very friendly of course, & others not all so.

(*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:61)

Two days later, James mused to Grace Norton: 'Strange as it may seem, this dark, crepuscular [sic] midwinter, with its greasy fogs & eternal candle-light, is the part of the year I most enjoy here. It is the place in the world (not excluding Cambridge) in which I feel most at home' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:69). In the familiar damp dark of London he continued to work on the lengthening *Washington Square*. James repeatedly told his correspondents that he was turning out this shorter novel quickly in order to free himself for more momentous work on *The Portrait of a Lady*, the 'big' novel on which he had set his ambitions.¹⁰ However, even with this incentive, James

9 6 July 1879 to Mary Walsh James: 'His simplicity & sweetness are as great as his wit & intelligence, & his conversational powers are flavored (excuse the culinary expression) by the most captivating bonhomie' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 1:229).

10 17 January 1880 to Thomas Sergeant Perry: 'It is from that [*The Portrait of a Lady*] I myself shall pretend to date—on that I shall take my stand' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:100).

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could not keep himself from exceeding his page limit, as will be discussed in more detail when we turn to the publication history.

The period in which *Washington Square* was written was also that of James's first real transatlantic literary success. After settling in London in December 1876, in his mid-thirties, and, especially after the recognition that 'Daisy Miller: A Study' (1878) brought him, James had developed a wide acquaintance. His letters show him fielding invitations to lunches, dinners and country house visits. 'Henry James is an American who may be said to have thoroughly domesticated himself in London Society [...] No man is more popular in London dining-rooms and drawing-rooms than Henry James', recalled the politician and writer Justin McCarthy a couple of decades later. Indeed, James seemed to be everywhere in London society: not only would an opening night at the theatre seem incomplete without his presence, but 'Henry James, too, has an interest in the political life, and dines with the leading public men in the London clubs.'¹¹ Professionally, James had commenced what Michael Anesko, using James's own language, calls 'The Real Career, the Larger Success' (*CLHJ 1878–1880* 1:xix). Starting with the sensational 'Daisy Miller', the first of James's works to appear in a British periodical (*Cornhill Magazine*, June–July 1878), he published *An International Episode* (1879), *The Madonna of the Future and Other Tales* (1879), *Confidence* (1879), *Hawthorne* (1879) and *The Diary of a Man of Fifty and A Bundle of Letters* (1880), as well as nearly fifty contributions to periodicals in the form of travel essays, reviews and short stories between 1878 and 1880. In fact, James's rate of production was such that he needed to diversify the venues for his publications and stagger their appearances.¹²

11 Justin McCarthy, *Reminiscences*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), vol. 2, p. 64.

12 For example, 18 April 1880 to George Grove:

I hope I shall not startle, discompose or incommode you very much by saying I should find it a great convenience that you should suffer me to postpone my promised serial for *Macmillan* from August to October [...] I have lately finished a short novel for the *Cornhill* which turns out longer by the editor's appreciation than it did by my own; so that instead of running through four parts as was intended, it stretches to six, and will terminate in November instead of September. It will be pleasanter, and more advantageous to me that the *Macmillan* fiction should not begin until the thing in the *Cornhill* shall have begun to drop from the public eye. As I [am?] already accused of crowding my productions too much, I don't wish to appear to crowd them more. (CLHJ 1878–1880 2:165–6)

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In general, as Anesko has shown, James is becoming more astute at business aspects of his profession in this phase of his career.¹³ James's negotiations with publishers, as far as they can be reconstructed, show that by the late 1870s he is becoming keenly aware of the impact of his choices on the income he could expect to earn. 'I am getting to perceive', he writes to his mother on 2 February 1880, 'that I *can* make money, very considerably, if I omly [sic] set about it right' (*CLHJ 1878–1880* 2:112–13.) 'Set[ting] about it right' meant for one thing selling his stories both to American periodicals and British ones. 'If I publish in *Macmillan* or the *Cornhill* I can double my profits by appearing also in *Harper*', he writes to Howells c. 18 July 1879 (*CLHJ 1878–1880* 1:238). Over the course of summer 1879, we see James insist with William Dean Howells that his planned novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, appear not exclusively in the *Atlantic Monthly* (which Howells was editing) but that he may also sell it to a British periodical, thus 'escap[ing] the bad economy of lavishing a valuable fiction upon a single public' (*CLHJ 1878–1880* 1:255, 19 August [1879]). On 23 [August 1879] he writes Howells that he is glad to hear 'the idea of simultaneity' may be acceptable but that 'in case the simultaneous business doesn't suit you I fear I should have to postpone writing a novel for the *Atlantic* alone' (*CLHJ 1878–1880* 1:262–3). 'Set[ting] about it right' also meant securing the copyright for his work, whether in book or short story form, on both sides of the Atlantic. This required, as James was finding out only in February 1880, when a story of his was pirated in America,¹⁴ not only bringing it out first in England (for the UK copyright) but ensuring that it was printed fast in America, too, by a publisher who would pay him and, to be truly safe, making certain that the English publication carry an American copyright notice. As he instructs Howells, with regard to *The Portrait of a Lady*, on 20 July 1880: 'It is only by publishing [in the *Atlantic*] a fortnight after Macmillan, rather than a

13 Michael Anesko, *'Friction with the Market': Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); hereafter Anesko.

14 James's story 'A Bundle of Letters', published in the *Parisian* (an English-language weekly) on 18 December 1879, was brought out as an unauthorised pamphlet on 24 January 1880 by the Boston publisher A. K. Loring, earning James no money at all. In letters to his parents of 2 and 15 February 1880, James first insists Loring had no legal right to bring out his work in this way, but he soon learns the mistake was his own in not protecting his copyright. See *CLHJ 1878–1880* 2:112–13 and 2:122–3.

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fortnight before, that I can secure the English copyright: an indispensable boon. This is what Harper is doing with my little *Washington Square*, which beginning in the *Cornhill* in June, began in Harper in July' (*CLHJ* 1880–1883 1:16).

This background makes it possible to make sense of James's change of heart regarding the American periodical that should carry *Washington Square*. Initially, James had wanted the work – envisaged as a one-issue piece – to appear in the *Atlantic*. 'I hope very much to send you in the autumn a *short* story (size of the *Pension B*);', he writes to Howells on 17 June [1879]; 'I don't see my way just now to promising anything larger, & for such a purpose I have a very good subject—a real subject—not a mere pretext like the P. B.—*en tête*' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 1:217).¹⁵ A month later, he writes to Howells:

Your letter of June 29th, asking me for a novel for next year came to me three days since, & I have been thinking over your proposal. I am under certain pledges to the *Cornhill* & *Macmillan*; but having sifted them out & boiled them down, I have come to the conclusion that I may properly undertake to furnish you a glowing romance about the time you propose. That is if my conditions suit you [...] I have a desire that the next *long* story I write will be *really* a long one—i.e. as long as the *American* at least [...] I shall also feel inspired, probably, to ask more for my tale than I have done for any of its predecessors. If I publish in *Macmillan* or the *Cornhill* I can double my profits by appearing also in *Harper*, & I shall have, to a certain extent, to remember this in arranging to appear in one periodical exclusively.

(c. 18 July 1879, *CLHJ* 1878–1880 1:238)

As the editors of *CLHJ* gloss this letter, the pledge to the *Cornhill* and the simultaneous appearance in *Harper* must be linked to *Washington Square*, while the 'glowing romance' and 'really [...] long' story would become *The Portrait of a Lady*, serialised simultaneously in *Macmillan's Magazine* and Howells' *Atlantic* (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 1:239). In his letter of 31 October 1879 to Howells, quoted above, in which, referring to *Washington Square*, James tells his editor-friend that he should be able to send 'the story in question [...] within two or three weeks' (*CLHJ* 1878–1880 2:31), he adds: 'I hope the fact of my appearing later [in the *Atlantic*] on a larger scale will not render

¹⁵ The reference is to 'The Pension Beaurepas', published in *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1879.

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it superfluous', a reference to the projected publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* near-simultaneously with that novel's English serial publication.¹⁶ We do not know what Howells answered in response to this proviso, but by 3 January 1880 James is explaining to him that

my short story has perforce stretched itself in to [sic] a long one—three nos.—& I have (virtually) sold it to the persuasive *Scribner*, who will probably not publish it for a year. I tried to squeeze it down for you, but it was no use. It seemed to me absurd to offer you anything in more than one instalment—when I am to give you so many instalments later in the year. (CLHJ 1878–1880 2:80)

Curiously, later that same month, James writes to Howells as if he had never mentioned *Washington Square* to him before: 'What is your *Cornhill* novel about? I am to precede it with a poorish story in three numbers—a tale purely American, the writing of which made me feel acutely the want of the "paraphernalia"' – the authenticating details that he considers Howells's novel (*The Undiscovered Country*) to describe so fully (31 January, CLHJ 1878–1880 2:110).

On 3 February James responds to an invitation from Helena de Kay Gilder, wife of the managing editor of *Scribner's Monthly*, Richard Watson Gilder; his letter affirms that he will soon visit the Gilders at their London abode, on which occasion he 'will explain to your husband the state of affairs with regard to my Scribner tale' (glossed as *Washington Square* by CLHJ). Although James adds that he is 'charmed & flattered by Du Maurier's wish' (presumably his wish to illustrate this tale) and is 'glad he is in the way of working for Scribner', it is possible that 'the state of affairs' he intends to communicate is his decision to take the story elsewhere (CLHJ 1878–1880 2:115, 3 [February 1880]). Du Maurier would indeed go on to illustrate *Washington Square*, but for the *Cornhill* and *Harper's New Monthly*. From a later letter, though, it would seem that James did not let Gilder know *Washington Square* would not be appearing in *Scribner's* at this time. On 22 April 1880, James responds to what appears to be a 31 March challenge from *Scribner's* (of which Gilder would still have been managing editor, Josiah Holland editor) regarding his intention to publish elsewhere; he explains

¹⁶ *The Portrait of a Lady* was published in *Macmillan's Magazine* between October 1880 and November 1881; in *Atlantic Monthly* between November 1880 and December 1881.