

Material Boy: Morris Townsend and the Lure of Comfort in *Washington Square*

By Leonardo Buonomo,
University of Trieste

Describing, in a letter to his brother William (Nov. 1880), “the young man [Morris Townsend] in *Washington Square*” as “sketched from the outside merely and not fouillé” (not delved into), Henry James confessed his disappointment with a character that, at the germinal stage of the story, had appeared to provide him with promising narrative material (CL 105). This, at least, is the impression one receives upon reading the well-known extract from James’s notebooks (dated 21 Feb. 1879) containing the source of the novel (CN 11–12). As James recorded in that entry, the actress Fanny Kemble had told him the story of how her exceptionally handsome but penniless brother had courted and subsequently jilted a plain heiress. In James’s synopsis the handsome fortune hunter was every bit the protagonist of the drama as the unhappy heiress, if not more so. Undoubtedly, he was a more powerful presence than the other male “actor,” the young woman’s father who had strenuously opposed the match, suspecting (with reason) that the young man was only interested in his daughter’s money. Even allowing for the fact that the teller of the tale, Fanny Kemble, was the young man’s own sister, and as such particularly well acquainted—and concerned—with his role in the affair, James had seemed genuinely intrigued by the figure of the handsome jilter. Indeed, to borrow an expression from *Washington Square*, James appeared to have found in the young man “an object on which . . . [his] imagination could exercise itself indefinitely” (NO 25–26).

As if taking their lead from James’s assessment in his letter to his brother, critical readings of *Washington Square* for a long time tended to downplay the significance of Morris Townsend’s portrayal and his role in the story. However, in William Kenney’s 1970 essay “Doctor Sloper’s Double in *Washington Square*” Morris finally gained center stage. By delineating the parallels and interdependence between the

novel's two principal male characters and antagonists, Kenney made explicit (in his title) what earlier critics had only hinted at and in so doing set the tone for much subsequent analysis of *Washington Square*. Examining the interaction between Morris and Dr. Sloper, John Lucas notes how well the two characters read each other and understand the parts they play in mid-nineteenth century New York society. Robert Emmet Long draws attention to the two men's shared taste for the fine things in life, which render them, at times, "figures almost interchangeable" (584). A misdirected, calculating cleverness is the defining trait Millicent Bell identifies as uniting Dr. Sloper and his daughter's suitor (25). Darshan Singh Maini, for his part, highlights the two characters' highly competitive spirits, describing them as locked in "a battle of wits and wills" (93) and oblivious to its consequences. Evoking, again, the motif of the double or, at the very least, the idea of a sort of moral kinship, Ian Bell remarks on the "proximity of Townsend's features to those of Dr. Sloper" ("Money" 34). It is misogyny and, more specifically, a desire to keep women in a docile, submissive state that constitutes, according to Lauren Berlant, the common ground between the older and the younger man (454). Implicitly aligning him with Morris's materialistic propensities, Greg Zacharias has pointed out Dr. Sloper's "mercenary approach to the healing art" (207).

There are also a few critics who have mentioned or examined Morris independently of his similarities to or relationship with Dr. Sloper. For instance, Alfred Habegger sees him as a biblical Jacob type, a charming, shallow, idle, selfish man who is "a leading figure in James's repertory of characters" (111). Ian Bell, in *Washington Square: Styles of Money*, notes the insistent emphasis, throughout the novel, on Morris's outsider status and how his "social indeterminacy" is a sign of the times, marked by "intense development and change" (112). More recently, Cynthia Ozick has intriguingly characterized both Morris and his creator as jilters (respectively of Dr. Sloper's daughter Catherine and the United States). She has also observed that, while Morris is undoubtedly portrayed as a work of art he is also an artist, in the sense that by awakening Catherine to the possibility of romantic love he creates "a young woman who before never existed" (57). According to Michèle Mendelssohn, the characterization of Morris as an indolent, parasitical votary of beauty and pleasure identifies him as an aesthete—a prime target of satire in late nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature and cartoons (25–26). Barry Maine notes how Morris's

"[L]iving on" what his family could give him and spending all of his inheritance on traveling abroad is a disquieting reminder and "face in the mirror" for the author as well who had traveled abroad on his parents' nickel and had not yet fully succeeded at earning his living by his pen. (221)

Significantly, Ticien Marie Sassoubre has interpreted Morris as a product of, and a spokesman for, the "emerging culture of consumption" of mid-nineteenth century America (1052).

My own reading of *Washington Square* stems from a conviction that Morris Townsend is a key figure in the novel and that the way in which James constructed and deployed this character bespeaks his preoccupation with a period of New York (and, by extension, American) history that he saw, retrospectively, as the dawn of an era of materialism and market-based human relationships.¹ It seems to me that James

fashioned Morris Townsend as the harbinger of a new culture that, as William Leach has shown, had grown steadily in the decades following the Civil War and whose “cardinal virtues” were “acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness” (3). Consequently, this essay takes a close look at Morris’s attitude toward and interaction with objects. It further examines his body language, his demeanor, his tastes—all aspects of his characterization that, in my view, have not received sufficient attention. As we shall see, much of Morris’s personality, his priorities and desires, manifests itself in the way he moves in a room, looks at things, touches them, what he wears, drinks, and smokes.

To return to the genesis of this character, there is no denying that in terms of his role in the plot the young man lost considerable ground in the transition from notebook entry to novel (especially to his adversary, the heiress’s father): he became much less substantial. And yet, the very lightweight, superficial quality that James deprecated in his letter to William seems perfectly appropriate for Morris Townsend. Shallowness becomes him. It fits him like a glove, a very fine, expensive glove, one would think, given Morris’s fastidious fashion sense to which James, more than once, calls the reader’s attention. In contrast to the noticeable bodily strength and impeccable anatomical structure, which, we are told, constitute in no small measure his “fine parts,” Morris is suitably airy and—as regards his past, his finances, and occupation (or lack thereof)—downright shadowy. It is precisely his lack of depth that, one suspects, permits him to survive disappointments and thwarted schemes and reach middle age, as we see at the end of the novel, remarkably unscathed. He is, one might say, all surface, a beautiful, shining surface in which Dr. Sloper perceives a troubling resemblance to himself, Catherine sees for the first time the chance to be loved, and her aunt Mrs. Penniman projects her desire to experience, however vicariously, the romantic and sensational scenarios she has only read about. Fittingly, as we shall see, Morris is very much concerned with, and appreciative of, surfaces² and textures, which he clearly enjoys assessing primarily through the sense of touch³ and the almost tactile loving glances he casts on fine objects and comfortable spaces. For all his reservations, James, an “author intensely occupied with the material world” (El-Rayess 8), created a character whose very skin-deep quality makes him the ideal incarnation (so to speak) of materialistic narcissism and the need for self-gratification. Morris gave James the opportunity to explore the powerful lure of things, to which, as some of his later fiction, letters, and especially autobiography *A Small Boy and Others* testify, he himself was far from being immune. Here was a character, moreover, who was simultaneously a consumer and a living commodity, in the way he offered himself up for visual consumption as a thing of beauty and a product to be purchased at a very high price. Paradoxically, the very thinness of Morris’s quality enabled James to delve deep into his own relation to materiality (perhaps too revealingly, hence his discomfort with the novel).

It is only in chapter 4 of *Washington Square* that Morris Townsend makes his appearance, quite fittingly at a party, a setting that naturally enhances his outward, performative traits: physical beauty, elegance, winning manners, effortless conversation. However, a phrase in the novel’s opening paragraph might be said to prefigure his presence and role, as well as his close association with his antagonist. After providing us with temporal and geographical coordinates (“a portion of the first half of the present century, and more particularly during the latter part of it, . . . in the city of

New York” [NO 3]), James introduces his first character, Dr. Sloper, as a successful professional man and a highly respected member of society. He is an American, i.e., the citizen of a country in which “to play a social part, you must either earn your income or make believe that you earn it.” In the case of Dr. Sloper, a physician with a prosperous practice, the first of these two options certainly applies. The alternative—making believe that you earn an income—seems, in retrospect, to anticipate the aura of vagueness that surrounds Morris’s alleged employment in the last third of the novel, when he describes his office as “a place peculiarly and unnaturally difficult to find” (144)—perhaps, we suspect, because there is no such place.⁴ This impression is strengthened when the narrator, commenting on an upcoming rendezvous between Morris and Mrs. Penniman, notes that the young man “was even kind enough to leave his office for this purpose, during the hours at which business might have been supposed to be liveliest.”

It is worth noticing that “make believe,” the expression that possibly foreshadows Morris’s role and distinctive *modus operandi*, is almost synonymous with acting. “Actor” is, significantly, one of the terms to which Catherine Sloper has recourse as she struggles to find words to do justice to Morris’s dazzling physical beauty on the occasion of their first encounter. At first, she draws upon painting and sculpture to describe him as a work of art come to life:

He had features like young men in pictures; Catherine had never seen such features—so delicate, so chiseled and finished—among the young New Yorkers whom she passed in the streets and met at parties. He was tall and slim, but he looked extremely strong. Catherine thought he looked like a statue. But a statue would not talk like that, and, above all, would not have eyes of so rare a color. (19–20)

Although a New Yorker himself, Morris possesses a quality of beauty that appears to remove him from local experience, thus rendering him exotic. The streets and domestic interiors of New York seem far too prosaic to have produced such statuary shapeliness. He is more like a precious import from Europe of the kind that well-to-do New Yorkers used to bring back from their grand tour and proudly display in their homes. In an ironic reversal of the Pygmalion myth, here it is a woman (and a supposedly unimaginative woman to boot) who falls in love with a statue that comes to life before her very eyes. The almost palpable intensity of Catherine’s response to the statue-like young man in front of her stands in sharp contrast to her muted indifference, later in the novel, toward the actual statues and other celebrated works of art she sees during her European trip.

After dancing with Morris, Catherine is still under the effect of close proximity with his person. “Dancing,” the narrator informs us, “had never made her dizzy” (19). It is Morris’s beauty, not the “harmonious rotation of the polka” that has made her lightheaded. But after paying more attention to the way Morris talks and carries himself, Catherine moves on to two other branches of art—literature and the theater—in search of an apt simile:

Catherine had never heard any one—especially any young man—talk just like that. It 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 every one looking at him, so that you wondered at his presence of mind. (20)

Without knowing it, Catherine here comes very close to the mark. She senses, quite correctly, that there is a fictional quality about Morris, accompanied by an exceptional ability to please. As if aware of the possibly disturbing implications of this train of thought, and unwilling to relinquish the pleasure she is obviously experiencing, she quickly removes Morris from the stage, as it were: "And yet Mr. Townsend was not like an actor; he seemed so sincere, so natural" (20). It does not occur to Catherine that Morris is "like" an actor *precisely* because he seems "so sincere, so natural," for *that* is the epitome of good acting; more important that is Morris's idea of good acting. As it happens, he is playing to perfection the part of a young man who is deeply taken with Catherine. The close association of Morris with the stage inevitably evokes the germ of the novel, namely actress Fanny Kemble's anecdote about her brother. It is almost as if, as a way of acknowledging that source, James had transferred Fanny Kemble's role and skills onto her brother's fictional counterpart.

Morris has traveled widely, read widely, and has been an enthusiastic theatergoer: he has seen "all the principal actors" and has "been to all the best theatres in London and Paris" (the art of making believe, it would seem, finds a much more congenial soil in sophisticated, morally lax Europe, than in straightforward and straight-laced America) (33). But even the best actors fell short of Morris's very exacting standards because, as he puts it, they always exaggerate. They are not like him. They are not "natural" enough. Like other Jamesian Americans who have spent long periods of time in Europe (Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* come to mind), Morris has learned the Old World's art of dissimulation and perfected it. Indeed, he is such a consummate practitioner of that art that he seems capable of imparting it to others without effort, as if by osmosis. When asked by her cousin Marian what she thinks about Morris, Catherine, normally direct (almost to the point of crudeness), replies "'Oh, nothing particular!' . . . dissembling *for the first time in her life*" (NO 21, emphasis mine). Later that same evening, Catherine gives proof of this newly acquired skill when she tells her father that she is tired (she is not) and chooses not to satisfy his curiosity about Morris by pretending she does not know his name. The god-like status of Dr. Sloper, in his daughter's eyes, renders her transgression all the more remarkable.

James does not make us privy to Morris's first impression of Catherine. Thus we have no way of knowing if he read the costly red dress she wore on that occasion as an advertisement of her fortune (this being the danger against which her father, in his typical ironic tone, had cautioned her: "You look as if you had eighty thousand a year" [22]). If, indeed, when looking at Catherine Morris "glimpses an opportunity," as Ozick has argued, he certainly makes the most of it by showing how well "he can entertain, . . . amuse, . . . entrance" (56). It is Morris, one feels, who on this occasion has *advertised* an enticing luxury, namely his own person. This is arguably the most visible result of the way in which, as we learn later in the book, he has spent his youth, traveling, spending his inheritance to buy beautiful things: he has turned himself into an exquisite object for visual and social consumption.

The focus continues to be on Catherine's point of view when Morris pays her his first social visit, at the house in Washington Square, in the company of his cousin Arthur Townsend. Although only a distant relation of Arthur's and a member of a minor branch of the Townsend clan, Morris has obviously made the most of the family connection. Arthur is betrothed to Catherine's cousin Marian Almond, and it was at their engagement party that Morris first made Catherine's acquaintance. A stockbroker by profession, young Arthur represents an emerging figure in the New York landscape of the 1840s, which is (presumably) the timeframe of the first part of the novel.⁵ A spokesman for the new fast-talking, fast-moving, fast-earning New York,⁶ he brings into Dr. Sloper's quiet, conservative household something of the frenetic pace and rambunctiousness of commerce the doctor had wished to escape by moving north, from the City Hall neighborhood (in lower Manhattan) to Washington Square. Most important, this quintessential representative of the spirit of capitalism ushers into the house the aspiring social climber Morris. Although apparently very different, the two young men are both involved in buying, selling, and speculation. For Arthur this is simply the nature of his line of work. Morris, as we shall see, wants to secure for himself a life of leisure, and the only thing he can put up for sale to close the deal is his own beautiful person. Whether (and I would add "to what extent") his physical beauty "constitutes value" is, as Sassoubre has pointed out, "one of the central questions of the text" (1056).

During the scene of Morris's visit to the house in Washington Square, Catherine finds herself talking to Arthur, while his cousin is left to the attentions of Mrs. Penniman. Wishing she were in her aunt's place, Catherine finds it difficult to concentrate on Arthur's rapid talk, except when Morris becomes the main topic. Acknowledging his responsibility for Morris's presence in the Sloper household, Arthur assumes an apologetic tone, as if, because of Morris's uncertain social status, he had violated the law of propriety: "My cousin asked me to bring him, or I shouldn't have taken the liberty" (26). In the course of this conversation with Arthur, Catherine once again has an intuition about Morris, an intuition of whose import, at this stage, she cannot be entirely aware. "He's more like a foreigner" (27), she ventures. Catherine's statement may sound incongruous, if not absurd, when she hastens to add she has never met a foreigner, and yet her suggestion is oddly accurate because Morris, as we have seen, possesses features the likes of which, at least in Catherine's experience, are nowhere to be found in New York. But it is also as if she felt, right from the start, that Morris does not really belong to that social environment. As Catherine later puts it to her aunt, Mrs. Penniman, Morris is "a perfect stranger" (29). Coming, as his surname suggests (Lucas 41), from a part of town and society socially remote from Washington Square, he is an outsider.⁷

Even Mrs. Penniman, notwithstanding her near-infatuation with Morris, seems at some level to be aware that he is out of place in Washington Square. When, later in the novel, Dr. Sloper makes it quite clear that Morris is no longer welcome in his home, Mrs. Penniman's choice of an alternative place where she could meet him is rather significant. After giving the matter a great deal of consideration, she selects "an oyster saloon in the Seventh Avenue, kept by a negro" (82). The oyster saloon, as Cindy Lobel has pointed out, was the "restaurant type most associated with New York City in the antebellum period" and most notorious for the often questionable behavior of its customers (131).⁸ Mrs. Penniman's choice of venue is mainly motivated

by her desire not to be seen in Morris's company by relations or acquaintances, and certainly no member of her circle would be likely to patronize an oyster saloon. And yet it is as if, intuitively (she has noticed the restaurant "in passing" [83]), she had picked an environment well befitting Morris, a man with a shady past who, underneath a polished veneer, has an element of coarseness in him that becomes increasingly noticeable as the story progresses. He belongs in the oyster saloon; Mrs. Penniman doesn't. James makes this apparent through the difference in their behavior and, more specifically, in what they partake of at the restaurant. Characteristically but, given her surroundings, incongruously, Mrs. Penniman orders "a cup of tea" (83). It comes as no surprise that the tea proves "excessively bad," but typically Mrs. Penniman manages to fit even this little incident into her view of herself as the loyal friend of star-crossed lovers: "[It] gave her a sense that she was suffering in a romantic cause." Morris, by contrast, completely oblivious as he is to Mrs. Penniman's fantasies, adds more than a dash of prose to the scene when he orders an oyster stew and proceeds "to consume it before her eyes." There is something very assured and habitual about this gesture. One can easily imagine Morris as a regular customer of this or similar establishments where, in the company of men, he can be himself. Increasingly impatient with Mrs. Penniman, Morris seems to seek comfort, as he does elsewhere in the novel, in sensory gratification. Interestingly, when Mrs. Penniman mentions this encounter to Catherine, she substitutes the oyster saloon with a more genteel confectioner's shop. She has a general idea, the narrator tells us, that "she ought to dissemble a little" (91). It is indeed plausible that Mrs. Penniman, in lying about the location of her encounter with Morris, might be primarily concerned with protecting her own reputation. But perhaps she also senses that the association of Morris with the oyster saloon might be too revealing, that it might blemish his impeccable gentlemanly image in Catherine's eyes.

It is on the occasion of Morris's second visit to the house in Washington Square that James begins to disclose something more of his character, dropping subtle hints as to his possible motives. Even though we are not given access to Morris's thoughts, we can learn a great deal by following his eyes and studying his gestures:

The visit was a long one; he sat there—in the front parlor, in the biggest armchair—for more than an hour. He seemed more at home this time—more familiar; lounging a little in the chair, slapping a cushion that was near him with his stick, and looking round the room a good deal, and at the objects it contained, as well as at Catherine; whom, however, he also contemplated freely. (32)

Finding himself alone with Catherine (her father is absent and her aunt strategically refrains from joining her), Morris surveys the scene, perhaps mentally estimating the value of every piece of furnishing and décor. It is as if he were savoring in advance the sheer pleasure of comfortable living that every object around him seems to promise (as well as the prospect of absolute mastery of the house that Catherine's meekness and awe-struck admiration of him seem to guarantee). There is a distinctively grasping quality in his gaze and body language in this scene, as if he were metaphorically taking possession of the house. His attitude and demeanor here mark him as the embodiment of what "modern consumer culture," in the words of Jean-Cristophe

Agnew, “produces,” namely “a way of seeing—a way best characterized as visually acquisitive” (73).

Signalled by that apparently casual slapping of a cushion with a stick, there is also an intimation of aggressiveness, an element of Morris’s character that has not been sufficiently noticed. I find it significant that James calls attention to that unmistakably phallic stick on two more occasions, later in the novel, when Morris is in the company of Mrs. Penniman and lets his true nature peep through his suave façade. In the first instance, the brutality of his language when he asks if Dr. Sloper has finally consented to his marriage with Catherine (“I hope you have come to tell me that he has knocked under” [110]) is matched, moments later, by his body language: “Morris walked along some time in silence, tapping the railings and gateposts very sharply with his stick” (112). He lets his stick do the talking here and it is probably fortunate for genteel Mrs. Penniman, the widow of a clergyman, that she is not familiar with that language. In a later meeting in which Morris must acknowledge his defeat and face the prospect of an awkward break-up with Catherine, the handling of the stick is accompanied, and underscored, by an expression of irritation: “Morris gave his stick an angry swing. ‘Oh botheration!’ he exclaimed perversely” (146). He is literally lashing out at all the people (including himself) who, in different ways, have been responsible for depriving him of that life of sumptuous leisure to which he feels entitled. Intriguingly, the person who is most responsible for Morris’s disappointment, Dr. Sloper, is also shown, in a very important scene, brandishing a stick. It is one more link between two characters who have many similarities, not the least of which is a poor opinion, if not a dislike, of women. The scene in question takes place somewhere in the Alps, while Catherine and her father are crossing a mountain pass. Dr. Sloper has just discovered that taking Catherine to Europe has not had the effect he desired. She is still in love with Morris and has been corresponding with him regularly: “The Doctor looked up and down the valley, swinging his stick; then he said to her, in the same low tone—‘I am very angry’” (125). Like Morris, Dr. Sloper conveys part of his exasperation through the object he holds in his hand, his gesture announcing, as it were, the sentiment to which his words give expression immediately afterwards.⁹

Like the stick, the hat can be seen as a signifier for masculinity. Significantly, on a number of occasions James shows Morris in the act of looking at, and/or touching, almost caressing his hat, which, like every element of his costume, is of very fine make and well beyond what a man without a fortune could afford. Contact (whether visual or tactile) with his hat seems to help Morris in moments of awkwardness or conflict, as if it reminded him of the source of his power, i.e., his assured masculinity and sexual allure. When the delicate topic of Catherine’s fortune comes up in her conversation with Morris and she declares without any hesitation that she is “glad” they will be rich, Morris hides his face from her by “looking into the crown of his hat” while he replies “No, it’s a misfortune” (56). There is only so much even a consummate actor can do in certain circumstances. During the second verbal duel Morris engages in with Dr. Sloper—in chapter 12—the young man is shown twice smoothing his hat, even though, the narrator notes, it is “already remarkably glossy” (64). In a situation in which he must draw on all his reserves of self-control in order not to lose his temper, Morris seems to find comfort and reassurance from physical contact with the soft, even surface of his hat, an apt emblem of the elegant, easy life to which he aspires (during their previous encounter, sensing he was failing to make a good impression,

Morris had looked “down at his remarkably neat shoes” [49]). Tellingly, Morris repeats the same gesture of smoothing his hat in another extremely awkward situation, namely right after his botched attempt to provoke a quarrel with Catherine, so as to have the excuse to break up with her. Having failed to convince her that he absolutely needs to go away on business, Morris makes a hasty retreat: “‘Very well, then; we won’t talk about it any more. I will transact my business by letter.’ And he began to smooth his hat, as if to take leave” (153). One wonders whether Catherine is suddenly reminded of that hat later that day when, sitting at the window, hoping against hope Morris might come back to her, she sees instead her father coming home and lifting his hat to her “with an air of exaggerated courtesy” (155). It is almost as if Morris had metamorphosed into Dr. Sloper before Catherine’s very eyes. It is no wonder that the doctor’s gesture, “so incongruous” with Catherine’s condition, instills her with “a kind of horror.”

A similar echo effect characterizes the scene in which Dr. Sloper, at his most sadistic, hovers over Catherine until she is forced to confess that her planned marriage with Morris has fallen through: “Her father stood where he had planted himself; she hoped he would go, but he smoothed and buttoned his gloves, and then he rested his hands upon his hips” (167). It is almost as if James had fleshed out Dr. Sloper by endowing him with some of the traits originally attributed only to the jilter in the notebook entry. Dr. Sloper may not be exactly “luxurious” (CN 11), but he and Morris, as Millicent Bell has pointed out, share “a well-developed sense . . . of the uses of things” (25). More specifically, they share a keen taste for comfort, a high sensitivity to sensory pleasure. Their first confrontation takes place, appropriately, after dinner, during what was at the time the quintessentially male ritual of drinking and smoking after the ladies had left the room. Dr. Sloper discovers that there is no need to “press” Morris to drink since the latter finds

quite enough encouragement in the superior quality of the claret. The Doctor’s wine was admirable, and it may be communicated to the reader that while he sipped it Morris reflected that a cellar-full of good liquor—there was evidently a cellar-full here—would be a most attractive idiosyncrasy in a father-in-law. (39)

One feels that, under different circumstances, the two men could have found a very pleasant common ground in their appreciation of fine things. Dr. Sloper himself admits as much during his conversation with Morris’s sister, Mrs. Montgomery, when he tells her: “[If] the only office of a son-in-law were to dine at the paternal table, I should set a high value upon your brother. He dines capitally” (NO 74). The purpose of Dr. Sloper’s visit to Mrs. Montgomery, which takes him to the social wilderness of Second Avenue, is to find confirmation of his suspicion that Morris is an idle sponger who lives off the modest resources of his widowed sister (the mother of five children). However, his painstaking, clinical survey of Mrs. Montgomery’s house fails to uncover the proof he seeks (he eventually obtains it from Mrs. Montgomery herself, after subjecting her to what comes very close to psychological torture). What the house *does* help explain is why Morris should be so powerfully attracted to Dr. Sloper’s residence and its treasures. As we look, through Dr. Sloper’s eyes, at the modest but immaculately neat and tidy habitation into which Mrs. Montgomery has

welcomed her restless brother, we realize that this feminized realm of pious sobriety is the antithesis to the doctor's enclave of masculine amenities (fine wines, cigars, etc.). Thanks to Mrs. Montgomery's prudent and careful management, her house does not show those conspicuous signs of "the ravages of Morris Townsend's immorality" (75), which the doctor had hoped to see, but it does suggest why an inveterate hedonist such as Morris would be starved for pleasure and would regard the doctor's abode as his proper domain:

She lived in a neat little house of red brick, which had been freshly painted, with the edges of the bricks very sharply marked out in white. . . . There were green shutters upon the windows, without slats, but pierced with little holes, arranged in groups; and before the house was a diminutive yard, ornamented with a bush of mysterious character, and surrounded by a low wooden paling, painted in the same green as the shutters. . . . Dr. Sloper, when he went to call, said to himself, as he glanced at the objects I have enumerated, that Mrs. Montgomery was evidently a thrifty and self-respecting little person . . . who took a virtuous satisfaction in keeping herself tidy, and had resolved that, since she might not be splendid, she would at least be immaculate. (70)

Having savored the delights of the doctor's wine cellar and dinner table and enjoyed the other comforts of his house, Morris naturally longs to come back for more, a longing that becomes all the keener when the doctor's disapproval threatens to bar him from the premises. It is then that his gaze zeroes in on the house's simultaneously enticing and forbidding "spotless white door," which "seemed to figure" for him "the closed portal of happiness" (89).¹⁰ Morris's attitude could admirably exemplify Georg Simmel's well-known statement in *The Philosophy of Money* that "we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (67). When the house on Washington Square seems to recede farther and farther away from his grasp, Morris looks at it with the aching intensity, and almost palpable desire, with which a child presses his face to a pastry-shop window:

Morris, left to himself, stood looking at the house a moment; after which he turned away, and took a gloomy walk round the Square, on the opposite side, close to the wooden fence. Then he came back, and paused for a minute in front of Dr. 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. (89)

There is a kind of visual gluttony in the way Morris surveys the building—mentally sampling its pleasures, as it were—that recalls the close connection between sight and taste in James's autobiography *A Small Boy and Others* (encapsulated in the compulsive act of gaping), especially in its numerous evocative passages attesting to James's overfondness for sweets in his childhood.¹¹ Like a child contemplating a shop window, Morris has limited buying power, his access to actual consumption being dependent on the goodwill of others. Specifically, he needs to find someone disposed to accept his external qualities (his physical beauty and elegance) as currency, in lieu

of what would be normally expected from a prospective son-in-law by an upper-middle-class family (a fortune or a prestigious profession). By planting himself in front of the Sloper house, Morris literally comes face to face with the object of his desire and, simultaneously, with the painful, frustrating consciousness of its elusiveness. As he admires the alluring façade in front of him, Morris may be said to be an early example of the Jamesian character who invites reflection on “male consumer desire” at a time when ogling commodities on display was regarded as a quintessentially feminine activity (El-Rayess 9).

It is a measure of Morris’s remarkable self-control that the next time he is permitted to cross that “portal of happiness,” his body language betrays no trace of his desire for material comfort. He finds himself alone with Catherine in the front parlor, and it is on this occasion that she conveys to him her father’s resolution not to leave her a penny of his fortune should she wed Morris against his wishes. Instantly decoding this message as a test intended to expose his mercenary motives, Morris does not let his eyes wander around the room and keeps them for the most part firmly on Catherine. It is only when he is safely out of her range of sight—because she is leaning her head on his shoulder—that he allows his face to give cautious expression to his mounting sense of exasperation: “‘My dear good girl!’ he exclaimed, looking down at his prize. And then he looked up again, rather vaguely, with parted lips and lifted eyebrows” (108). Earlier in this scene James draws attention to the powerful impact that Morris’s sheer physical presence has on Catherine. On the basis of what we know about him at this stage, we may assume he has taken every possible measure (as regards grooming, choice of apparel, etc.) to look his very best, to present himself as a prize worth having at any cost: “When Morris stood there before her, the first thing that she was conscious of was that he was even more beautiful to look at than fond recollection had painted him” (104). Morris is so aware of the power of his appearance that when Catherine fumblingly explains that she sent for him because she wanted “to see” him, he sets her right: “But did you want *to look at me* only?” (105, emphasis mine). That he regards his beauty as his capital, the one real asset he can make use of to secure what he desires, is made abundantly clear by his reflections on the eve of Catherine’s journey to Europe. With the prospect of Catherine’s fortune being drastically reduced, the investment of Morris’s natural resources now appears unprofitable. While he wavers as he weighs two options—eloping with Catherine, or biding his time, in the hope her father might eventually relent—he is firm and absolutely confident in his self-appraisal. And the language with which James conveys Morris’s reasoning is appropriately and unmistakably economic:

He had not forgotten that in any event Catherine had her own ten thousand a year; he had devoted an abundance of meditation to this circumstance. But with his fine parts he rated himself high, and he had a perfectly definite appreciation of his value, which seemed to him inadequately represented by the sum I have mentioned. (113)

Although Catherine is blissfully unaware of Morris’s self-monetization, there are times when she can scarcely conceive that she has the good fortune to enjoy his presence and company, as if he were a luxury far beyond her means. Thus, for example, when she sets eyes on him after her long European sojourn, he appears to her “resplendent,”

and “it was some time before she could believe again that this beautiful young man was her own exclusive property” (134).

Morris, on his part, sees Catherine as the key to acquiring valuable commodities, leisure, and surroundings consistent with his own beautiful façade, namely the beautiful house on Washington Square he covets so dearly. Morris does gain free access to the house, courtesy of Mrs. Penniman, during the year in which Dr. Sloper and Catherine are in Europe. Frequently invited to tea, he makes the most of the opportunity, freely enjoying the doctor’s possessions, finally surrounded with the perfect props that allow him to play, quite convincingly, the master of the house.¹² The inescapable impression is that the idea of touching, using, consuming the older man’s things and literally usurping his space, intensifies Morris’s pleasure:

He had his chair—a very easy one—at the fireside in the back-parlor . . . and he used to smoke cigars in the Doctor’s study, where he often spent an hour in turning over the curious collections of its absent proprietor. . . . [A]s a young man of luxurious tastes and scanty resources, he found the house a perfect castle of indolence. It became for him a club with a single member. (121–22)

Morris makes himself so much at home that when Catherine, after her return, receives him in the front parlor, the area of the house designed for visitors,¹³ he has “a certain sense of being wronged” (134). Dr. Sloper, on his part, sharply attuned as he is to his abode, to his things, is quick to sense that his domain has been violated (shades of Goldilocks). As he explains to Mrs. Penniman:

Mr. Townsend has been a good deal in the house; there is something in the house that tells me so. We doctors, you know, end by acquiring fine perceptions, and it is impressed upon my sensorium that he has sat in these chairs, in a very easy attitude, and warmed himself at that fire. (NO 138)

Dr. Sloper’s “perceptiveness,” in Bill Brown’s words, “seems to result less from [his] profession than from the quotidian intensity of his possession” (153).

Morris’s attitude and mood are anything *but* easy during the brief visits he pays Catherine after her return from Europe. Having decided to give her up he cannot muster the courage to break the news to her and, contrary to his wont, tries to reduce to a minimum the time he spends in her house. Indeed, when Catherine guesses his intentions and tries to force a confrontation, Morris practically takes flight from the premises. Interestingly enough, the building and all the appealing things it contains seem to dematerialize in this section of the novel, to fade into the background. In part this is due to James’s story-telling approach, which here, perhaps even more noticeably than in the rest of the novel, favors dialogue almost to the exclusion of commentary. But it is also as if we were invited to experience Morris’s self-defensive strategy. Perhaps there are no references to the rooms, the furniture, the objects to which Morris has previously paid enraptured attention because Morris forces himself to ignore them. Were he to look around him, he would have to take in all the comforts he is surrendering and that would be far too painful.

When, many years later, in the final scene of the novel, Morris regains admission into the Sloper household for the last time, the interior space is left once again unidentified, almost as if it were an empty or abstract space. On this occasion, however, it is not so much that Morris does not wish to look around, but that he seems to have lost his bearings. Back when he longed to enjoy the house he clearly thought of it as Dr. Sloper's habitation, as a dwelling that reflected the doctor's tastes, social status, and patriarchal power. Everything in it signified the comforts that were the prerogative of its male owner. But Morris can hardly recognize the house into which he has been briefly admitted thanks to the initiative (and tactlessness) of Mrs. Penniman because it is now very much Catherine's home. There is an unmistakable element of retribution in the palpable unease Morris feels when he makes a hopeless last-ditch attempt to convince Catherine to marry him. Even stroking his "glossy perfumed beard" brings him no consolation, as he confronts "with a clouded eye" (187, 189) Catherine's lucid resolution to remove him from her presence, and her life, forever. The man who had taken so much pleasure in gazing with adoring eyes at the house and its contents, caressing every object, enjoying the welcoming softness of its chairs, is left standing for the duration of his final interview with Catherine and can only look "vaguely round him" (189). Except for that brief survey—which fails to locate any reassuring reference points—Morris's gaze remains fixed on Catherine, who, since her father's death, has not only come into her own, but also, we are made to understand, has become one with the house, now forever beyond Morris's reach.

NOTES

I'm very grateful to David McWhirter for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹In the opinion of Scobey, it was in Victorian New York, in particular, that "the emergence of new wealth seemed to confirm the fabulous prosperity, material instability and moral corrosiveness of nineteenth-century capitalism" (211).

²So is Dr. Sloper—at least this would seem to be the opinion of his own sister Mrs. Almond. When she asks him if he will relent in his opposition to Catherine's engagement to Morris, the doctor answers in the negative by comparing his firmness of purpose to the inflexibility of "a geometrical proposition" and claiming "I am not so superficial" (NO 109). Mrs. Almond, who, the narrator reminds us, "was clever," is ready with a rebuttal query, which she poses with a teasing smile on her lips: "Doesn't geometry treat of surfaces?"

³Justly emphasizing James's attentiveness to touch, Otten has noted his "tendency to conceive of domestic spaces as tactile" and how "through touch, the categories of social class are transformed into physical identities and so given a seemingly irrefutable bodily basis" (xxi).

⁴According to Conrad, the space that lies beyond the parlor-like precinct of Washington Square is like an uncharted territory. Conspicuously still a city in the making, the socially unformed New York of the novel "permits Morris to invent a spurious existence for himself within it, at a pair of coordinates which can't be checked on. . . . He partakes of the city's enigmatic nonentity" (26).

⁵On the difficulty of identifying with precision the chronology of the novel, see Winter.

⁶Although undoubtedly a minor figure, Arthur is arguably the character who most clearly contributes to placing the novel's setting (both in terms of time and space). Singing the praises of the development craze of mid-nineteenth-century Manhattan, he explains to Catherine that the way to live in the city is to "move every three or four years" so as to always "get the last thing" (NO 26). An embodiment of impermanence, Arthur may be said to foreshadow the New York of *The American Scene*.

⁷According to Klein, the pun in the name Townsend also means that Morris "threatens to be the end of the proper town, namely Washington Square" (12).

⁸On the history of oyster establishments in New York City, see also Kurlansky's *The Big Oyster*. The mention of an African American in *Washington Square* is worth noting. In the 1830s and 1840s an African American by the name of Thomas Downing had in fact "pioneered the respectable oyster cellar in New York City" and owned one of the few oyster saloons that "accommodated women, provided they had the proper escort" (Lobel 132). However, despite the efforts of Downing and those who tried to emulate his success, oyster saloons could not entirely free themselves of the reputation for the bawdy, raucous behavior and shady dealings that they had previously earned as male-only establishments. Together with

the autobiographical digression (in chapter 3) about James's maternal grandmother's house (echoed, many years later, in *A Small Boy and Others*), the episode of the oyster saloon belies the theory that the setting of Washington Square is vague or unimportant, as some of the early critics of the novel had suggested. By contrast, James's fellow expatriate Pound famously praised *Washington Square* (along with *The Europeans*) for being "so autochthonous, so authentic to the conditions" (302).

⁹Similarly, in chapter 12 of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Lord Warburton makes of his hunting whip, a quintessential component of a country gentleman's apparel, a conduit for masculine aggressiveness and frustration. See Person (97).

¹⁰For a description of a real prosperous middle-class house on Washington Square, namely the residence of Dr. Robinson (a physician, like Dr. Sloper) and his family, see Wall (105–06).

¹¹In her discussion of the prominence of the shop window in James, particularly in *A Small Boy and Others*, El-Rayess quotes a revealing passage from a letter James wrote in 1915 to the British Prime Minister's wife Margot Asquith to compliment her for her diary. Speaking of his stance as mere spectator of political life, as opposed to her insider position, he noted: "I flattened my nose against the shop window and you were there within, eating the tarts, shall I say, or handing them over the counter?" (43).

¹²Morris's attitude in this section functions as a good illustration of Belk's argument that at "the highest levels of materialism, [worldly] possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction" (291).

¹³On the social connotations of the parlor, and the reception of visitors in Victorian America, see Bushman (267–79).

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