

# Catherine's Growth Through the Changes of Dress in Henry James's *Washington Square*

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## Abstract

Many of James' works, as typical Bildungsromans, delve into the psychological and emotional growth of women. Growth can be manifested in many different ways. The change of vestiture is one of them. Dress can show the character's taste, judgement towards the outside world, and more importantly, a view to an inner world. At the same time, through the change of dress, we can perceive this character's psychological and emotional growth. So this essay will explore Catherine's inner growth through the changes in dress from the perspective of Bildungsroman.

**Keywords:** Henry James, *Washington Square*, Bildungsroman, Dress identity, awakening

## 1. Introduction

James demonstrates mastery in portraying psychological reality, a skill evident in his work, *Washington Square*. The narrative centres around the growth of the protagonist, Catherine. Her father, Dr. Slope, emerged as a witty, clever, and sophisticated physician. Driven by the memory of his late wife, he named Catherine after his dead spouse, hoping she would embody the same qualities. However, Dr. Slope's success bred conceit, and his unattainable expectations for Catherine made him consider her a disappointment, showing little genuine care. In stark contrast to her father's expectations, Catherine was a plain and unremarkable girl. Deprived of discourse power by her critical father, she became taciturn and blamed herself for his disapproval. Despite wholeheartedly trying to please him, Catherine's efforts went unnoticed, and her father ridiculed her, leaving her in a state of profound self-abasement. As the story unfolded, a young man named Morris Townsend expressed his love for Catherine. This marked the first instance where she received admiration and praise from other people. Morris helped her realize her own merits. Catherine began to question if she was truly the source of her father's perpetual dissatisfaction. In an act of rebellion against her father's objection to her relationship with Morris, Catherine decided to defy her father's wishes. To divert her attention from Morris, Dr. Slope took her on a trip to Europe, even resorting to threatening her in a desolate valley. Despite these efforts, Catherine remained steadfast in her decision. Upon returning, she chose to proceed with the wedding, accepting the condition of being removed from her father's will. Unfortunately, Morris turned out to be after Catherine's wealth, and upon learning this poor girl won't inherit her father's fortune, he heartlessly abandoned her. Despite the challenges, Catherine refused to surrender. Recognizing the hypocrisy of men and her father's dominance, she sought hope in herself. Immersing herself in charity work, she transformed into a respected lady. More importantly, she refused her father's will to reclaim her dignity. Catherine endured numerous hardships, ultimately discovering her true identity. This narrative mirrors a classic Bildungsroman novel, with Catherine's growth symbolized by her attire changes.

## 2. Literature Review

Many scholars are enthusiastic about studying Henry James and his novels. However, *Washington Square* is not very intriguing. Until now, only a few scholars have fully examined James' *Washington Square*, yet his writing provides us with many new perspectives and assists us in understanding the power relationship in families at that time.

In "'It's All a Blind': Scopic Economies in Henry James' *Washington Square*" (2018), Carrie Hill analyzes

Catherine's growth through the medium of gazing. Though the two main male characters inhabit and manipulate the social and economic spheres areas, Catherine is able to train her own gaze and then in turn to manipulate the gazes of the men who seek to abuse them.

Some scholars analyze this novel from the alienation of characters. In the essay "Washington Square: Styles of Money" (1994), Janet Gabler-Hover points out that Morris Townsend can be read as a victim of bourgeois resistance to his social indeterminacy. This viewpoint can explain why Morris racks his brains in scheming and stimulates Catherine's growth terribly.

Also, some scholars have analyzed the meaning of dresses. Clair Hughes (2001) points out that "James's use of dress imagery is always economical" (p. 4), but we can find deep meaning through it. However, this is the first time anyone has analyzed the meaning of Catherine's change of dresses from the perspective of Bildungsroman.

### 3. Theoretical Basis

According to Simhachalam, "a bildungsroman is the name affixed to those novels that concentrate on the development or education of a central character" (p. 22). In this kind of novel, the young protagonist experiences a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world. "It may or may not contain some form of ritual" (Marcus, p. 222). At first, the naive and pure protagonist suffers a lot of pain, which can be caused by family conflict, romantic relationships, and so on. Then, they will be tested by this crisis. During this stage, they engage in introspection, contemplating their beliefs, aspirations, and the meaning of life, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves. Finally, he or she will have an epiphany and transition from youth to adulthood. In this novel, the protagonist Catherine, after experiencing her lover's deception and discerning her father's hegemony, finally becomes mature and finds the meaning of her life. And the form of ritual is the changing of her dresses.

Catherine's dress is mentioned three times. The first time is in chapter three. Catherine wore a red satin gown trimmed with gold fringe. The second time is in chapter seven. Catherine wore that red satin gown to meet Morris in her house and confronted her father. The third time is in chapter thirty-four. A white dress replaced Catherine's red gown. In literature, colours often carry symbolic meanings that reflect characters' emotional states, experiences, and narrative arcs. The following section will analyze these dresses' symbolic meaning and their role in Catherine's growth.

### 4. Discussion and Results

#### 4.1 *The Red Dress: Symbol of Passion and Danger*

The red dress with gold trim worn by Catherine serves as a profound symbol of her growth. Catherine's initial choice to wear the red dress represented her youthful enthusiasm and hope for acceptance, particularly from her father. However, the contrasting reactions she received from her father's sarcasm and Morris's admiration catalyze a transformative process within Catherine, leading to a realization of her worth. Through a comprehensive analysis of the symbol of the red dress, we will witness her emergence as a resilient and empowered individual.

##### 4.1.1 Red for Passion and Power

As to the meaning of red, "it indicates force, vigour and energy" (Cayce, p. 11). Catherine was a very submissive and self-abased girl. She always wanted to gain her father's approval and make him happy. When she first appeared in public, she wore a red dress with gold trim.

"Our heroine was twenty years old before she treated herself, for evening wear, to a red satin gown trimmed with gold fringe. It made her look, when she sported it, like a woman of thirty; she had not a grain of coquetry, and her anxiety when she put them on was as to whether they, and not she, would look well" (James, 1985, p. 38).

Her decision to wear the red dress reflected her positive attitude towards this party and her eagerness to assert herself in the public sphere and transcend her perceived plainness. At the same time, the vibrant attire symbolizes her passionate love towards her father. She wanted to prove her taste in dress to her father, thus winning his praise. Catherine believed this red dress was an improved alternative to her dull, colourless, and silent self, who desperately wished to win her father's approval.

According to Roland, "the wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of meaning that goes beyond modesty, ornamentation and protection. It is an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act at the very heart of the dialectic of society" (pp. 90–91). The significance of dress choice becomes evident in how it

reflects a person's taste. Catherine's selection of a red gown for a youthful dance party proved mismatched, making her appear older than her age. This highlights her need for knowledge about the language of dress, a gap left by the absence of maternal guidance. Catherine's inappropriate dress choice points to the absence of basic lessons in social poise and grace and underscores her father's neglect in guiding her growth. Her father's meanness became apparent as Catherine's hopeful anticipation was met with sarcasm and discontent. Rather than gently educating her on the nuances of dress, her father chose satire over guidance. "You are sumptuous, opulent, expensive," her father rejoined. "You look as if you had eighty thousand a year"(James, 1985, p. 46). Her father's merciless contempt served as a harsh awakening for Catherine, forcing her to confront the stark reality of her father's disapproval and the vast gap between her aspirations and his expectations. The contrast between Catherine's vibrant attire and her father's cold indifference catalyzes self-reflection, prompting her to reassess her relationship with her father and her sense of self-worth.

In contrast to her father's reaction, Morris's admiration for Catherine in the red dress provided a glimmer of hope and validation. He actively talked with Catherine and invited her to dance. This genuine appreciation for her beauty and charm counterbalanced her father's cynicism, affirming Catherine's worthiness of admiration and love. Through Morris's acknowledgment of her beauty, Catherine experienced a moment of affirmation and recognition, which fueled her growing sense of self-assurance and empowerment.

Then, Catherine decided to marry Morris and she wore this red dress again to confront her father. "After dinner Morris Townsend went and stood before Catherine, who was standing before the fire in her red satin gown"(James, 1985, p. 64). At this moment, red represents her power and energy. This is an important step for Catherine's growth. Because before that she never had the courage to have conflicts with her father. In her father's study room, she clearly expressed her willingness to marry Morris. "'When was this arrangement made?' the doctor asked. 'This afternoon—two hours ago'" (James, 1985, p. 83).

However, her father did not take her place seriously, nor did he even bother to feel the pressures and contradictions his daughter was enduring. The doctor, who had always prided himself on being wise and intelligent, did not show a single ounce of care and compassion when he faced his daughter; instead, he looked at his daughter playfully, and he only thought that this act of his daughter daring to rebel against him was very laughable, as the original text reads, "He was so quiet; he was not at all angry" (James, 1985, p. 87). From this description, we can imagine his state of mind then. From his point of view, he believed that his daughter, who he had nurtured, would never have the right to rebel against him. As a vested interest in a male-dominated and patriarchal society, he wanted to crush Catherine without spending a single ounce of energy. He waited for his daughter to beg him for forgiveness and to admit her defeat. This response is not only a father's pressure on his daughter, but it epitomizes the oppression of a daughter in a weak position by a father with supreme power in a patriarchal and authoritarian family.

Catherine began to grow brave and strong, inspired by love at this moment. The dress symbolizes her feminine identity, and the red represents her courage and determination. She not only confronted her supremely powerful father but also battled the timid and weak version of herself from the past. "she, too, must be quiet. But her very effort to be quiet made her tremble" (James, 1985, p. 87). From this description, we can feel the fear of Catherine. But she still chose to wear the red dress, at which her father mocked. This shows that she decided to overcome her father's prejudice. And she bravely defended her lover, who had been hated by her father, and expressed her wish to marry Morris. It is in the pivotal moment of confrontation with her father that the symbol of the red dress reaches its climax, as Catherine boldly asserted her autonomy and challenged patriarchal authority. The red dress, infused with courage and defiance, symbolizes Catherine's unwavering resolve to break free from the shackles of societal expectations and shape her destiny.

#### 4.1.2 Red for Danger

"Red is associated with danger (the most serious crisis is described as a red alert), anger and aggression (it is linked with Mars, the Roman god of war), or wickedness or evil" (O'Connell, p. 38).

As Catherine's infatuation with Morris deepened, the symbol of the red dress takes on a darker hue, representing danger, aggression, and evil. Despite her father's warnings and Morris's subtle manipulations, Catherine remained trapped in a romantic fantasy, oblivious to the ulterior motives lurking beneath the surface. In Catherine's battlefield, Morris was her emotional pillar, and she believed their relationship was pure love. Yet, Morris was a cunning and deceitful man, only interested in Catherine's inheritance. In each conversation, he carefully concealed his impatience. As we can see from the passage, Morris does not love Catherine at all. "He looked at her for a moment, smiling a little; and the doctor, if he had been watching him just then, would have seen a gleam of fine impatience in the sociable softness of his eye" (James, 1985, p. 64). He had no patience

toward Catherine. And in his relationship with Catherine, he kept deceiving her. “This was an easy promise to make, and Morris made it with fine effect. But for the moment he undertook nothing more onerous” (James, 1985, p. 167). From this description, we can sense that all he had done was saying some sweet words, then pressuring Catherine, demanding her to get her father’s agreement towards their marriage and get her inheritance.

In a word, at first, the red dress shows Catherine’s longing for acceptance from her father and her deep love toward him; then, her father’s ruthless contempt and Morris’s admiration let her begin to realize that she shouldn’t blame herself for her father’s contempt. Catherine’s realization of her father’s inability to truly see her for who she was marks a crucial turning point in her journey toward self-acceptance. At the same time, red is the color that represents danger, blood, and evil. The red dress is a warning sign. When she wore this red dress, Morris, who promoted her growth in a terrible way, approached her with an evil purpose and hurt her deeply.

#### 4.2 *The White Dress for The Lack of Vitality and Self-redemption*

White has always been an important color in Western culture and literature. In some Western countries, white is a color for weddings, and it’s also a divine color according to the Christian religion. According to Yu (2014), white symbolizes truth, purity, innocence, and the sacred or divine. In American culture, “white garments are priestly vestments, associated symbolically with purity and truth. But it also associated with paleness, bloodlessness, lack of vigor, and death” (p. 64-65). In the novel *The Great Gatsby*, “white actually symbolizes empty, vacuity, superficiality, ruthlessness” (Zhang, p. 42). It also represents redemption. In the chapter “The Whiteness of The Whale” in the novel *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote that “white robes are given to the redeemed” (p. 155).

The color white represents hopelessness, lack of vigor, and emptiness in this book. But at the same time, it symbolizes self-redemption, spiritual purity, and truth for life. The last mention of Catherine’s dress is in chapter thirty-four, when she took off her passionate red dress and put on a plain white dress. “Catherine was within the room, in a low rocking chair, dressed in white, and slowly using a large palmetto fan” (James, 1985, p. 210). The symbolic motif of this white dress worn by Catherine serves as a poignant reflection of her journey toward self-redemption and self-actualization.

##### 4.2.1 White for The Lack of Vitality

The contrast between the passionate red dress and the pale white dress serves as a powerful visual motif that underscores Catherine’s journey from enthusiasm to lack of vigor.

Her father took her to a desolate valley to intimidate her and threatened her with her inheritance to follow his instructions. She eventually realized that her father had always regarded her as private property and the object of his majesty. Morris resolutely left her after knowing she could not inherit a huge fortune, regardless of her emotions.

The two most important men in her life had caused her great harm. All her hopes were shattered. “There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void” (James, 1985, p. 203). From this description, we know that in the aftermath of her betrayal and disillusionment, Catherine’s once bright and hopeful outlook was replaced by a sense of bleakness. She refused to find herself another mate. “With Catherine’s later wooers she failed to establish relations as intimate as those which had given her so many interesting hours in the society of Morris Townsend” (1985, p. 204). As she navigated the complexities of love, betrayal, and familial expectations, Catherine’s once bright and hopeful outlook was overshadowed by a sense of emptiness and desolation. The color white, which initially symbolized purity and innocence, ultimately represents the lack of vitality in Catherine’s life.

##### 4.2.2 White for Self-Redemption

Luckily, Catherine didn’t give herself up. After experiencing the disillusionment, she decided to find hope in herself. As she donned the white dress, it also manifests her inner journey towards self-actualization. The purity and simplicity embodied by white symbolize Catherine’s newfound clarity and purity amidst the chaos of her external circumstances. Despite her challenges, Catherine emerged as a figure of quiet strength and determination, steadfast in her pursuit of self-acceptance and redemption.

In the former chapters, Catherine’s father forced her to promise to him that she would never marry Morris, which is the precondition to get her heritage. But she rejected her father’s will in exchange for her dignity. She also dismissed Morris’s proposal. In this white dress, she refused to meet Morris stoutly. “‘I would rather not see him,’ said Catherine, quickly” (James, 1985, p. 211). She began to find her interests and values. She devoted herself to charity work, became a respectable old lady, and eventually found her identity. Her choices show that Catherine had achieved her spiritual independence and self-redemption; at this time, compared with red, white is

the perfect color for her. Also, the symbol of the white dress underscores Catherine's resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the betrayals and disappointments she experienced, Catherine refused to be defined by her circumstances. Moving beyond her pre-defined identity, she drew strength from within, embracing her inner tranquility and resilience.

The symbol of the white dress becomes intertwined with Catherine's growing journey. Rejecting her father's attempts to control her and Morris's manipulative advances, Catherine refused to be defined by the expectations of others and instead embraces her own values and principles instead.

## 5. Conclusion

The pattern of this novel represents a typical Bildungsroman novel. From the change of dress, we can see Catherine's personal growth. At first the outset, she was a very timid girl who . She wore a red dress to please her father and conceal her self-abasement. However, her father's ironic reply made her realize he would never be pleased with her. But However supported by love, she Catherine had gained the courage to challenge her father and win back her control over her life. At this coming of age stage in her life, the red dress represents her passion and strength. Still, red is dangerous, symbolizing Morris's deception in their relationship. After discovering the false love of her father and lover, she stoutly found hope in herself. This time, she put on the white dress, which is a very good symbol of her hopelessness but self-redemption. During Catherine's growing process, her dresses play a very highly vital role with each dress. They have representing a different meaning each time and can help us understand Catherine's psychological changes.

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## Authors' contributions

Ziyue Zhang drafted the manuscript and was responsible for study design. Prof. Wang and Prof. Liu revised the paper. Prof. Rutledge was responsible for proof-reading. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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