Classic American Novels on Film and Television, OLLI, Fall, 2023

Sept. 15: THE HEIRESS, 1949, a version of Henry James’ 1880 novel “Washington Square,” directed, and produced by William Wyler. This version was based on the drama “The Heiress” by Augustus and Ruth Goetz, which had been a stage adaptation of the James’ novel. The camera work was done by Leo Tover, the music was by Aaron Copland and the production company was Paramount Pictures. The running time was 115 minutes. The film cost $2.6 million and made $2.3 in US rentals, in other words, a commercial failure. It was an artistic, and prestige, success, winning many awards.

The Cast: Olivia de Havilland as Catherine Sloper

Montgomery Clift as Morris Townsend

Ralph Richardson as Dr. Austin Sloper

Miriam Hopkins as Lavinia Penniman

Vanessa Brown as Maria

Betty Linley as Mrs. Montgomery

Ray Collins as Jefferson Almond

Mona Freeman as Marian Almond

Selena Royle as Elizabeth Almond

Paul Lees as Arthur Townsend

Henry James did not think highly of his short novel “Washington Square.” He thought that the treatment of Catherine was the only good thing in the book. But this novel has been well liked, even by readers who do not like James’ highly subtle plots and sometimes tortuous and involved prose style.

The Goetz stage adaptation was a definite hit. The Broadway staging, which opened in Sept. of 1947, starred Wendy Hiller as Catherine and Basil Rathbone as Dr. Sloper. It ran for 410 performances. The London staging, starting in 1949, had Ralph Richardson as Dr. Sloper, a role he repeats in the movie. It ran for 644 performances. This 1947 stage version has been revived four times.

Olivia de Havilland saw the Broadway version, and asked William Wyler to let her star in a film version. The Goetz couple were paid $250,000 for the rights to film, and they were offered $10,000 per week to write the screenplay. The couple were asked to tone down (or up) the role of Morris Townsend for the film, because the studio was afraid of damaging the screen persona of Montgomery Clift as a romantic leading man.

Aaron Copland won an Oscar for his music, which employs the famous song “Plaisir d’ Amour” (1784) by the composer Jean Martini, “Il Tedesco.”

The performance of Olivia de Havilland is a dramatic triumph. It is also a distinct visual success in making one of Hollywood’s most beautiful actresses look “plain.”

In 1997, a new version of the story appeared. This time the adaptation was of the original novel, by Carol Doyle. It was directed by Agnieszka Holland, and starred Jennifer Jason Leigh as Catherine, Albert Finney as Dr. Sloper, Ben Chaplin as Townsend, and Maggie Smith as Mrs. Penniman. In color, this film has a less dark and brooding effect than the 1949 film. This film follows James’ story more closely than the 1949 version.

The 1949 film is fairly close to the James’ novel in plot development. Two of the dramatic climaxes of the novel are given more “stagey” treatment in this film. The novel treats Mrs. Penniman as more of a comic relief than the 1949 film.

Both the 1949 and the 1997 versions tend to take more sympathy from Doctor Sloper and give more sympathy to Morris Townsend.

One example: In the novel, Dr. Sloper interviews Mrs. Montgomery, who is Morris’s sister. In the course of their conversation, she agrees that Morris is selfish, and ends the meeting with a statement that comes down to: “Don’t let him marry (Catherine).” In both film versions, Mrs. Montgomery becomes offended by the doctor’s questions, and breaks off the meeting in a hostile manner, thus making the Doctor look worse than James’ portrayal of him.

This story, it seems to me, to be a tragic conflict between the right of a daughter to freely make a choice in love, and the compulsion of a parent to try to avoid a marriage with disastrous consequences. If Dr. Sloper is right about Morris Townsend, he seems to make very bad choices in his efforts to protect his daughter. Telling a child that she is unlovable is a poor way to get rid of an unsuitable lover.

The obsession with money in this story reminds me of Jane Austen novels in which males come with price tags (“5000 pounds per annum”). Catherine Sloper has $10,000 of her own money, and Dr. Sloper is worth $30,000 per annum. What would those figures get us in purchasing power today. Well, $10,000 in 1850 would be worth $400,000 today, and $30,000 would be worth $1.2 million. Well, we can presume that Morris Townsend is good at arithmetic…so?

Do you have memories and associations with Washington Square? In my youth, the Dr. Slopers had moved to Scarsdale. But Washington Square, especially on weekends, was the magnet, shrine-like place where young people from all over the New York area would gather with guitars and vibe with one another. There was a lot of romance, but little in the way of fortune-hunting.

I did attend a film conference in the late 1980s at New York University, and I did walk around the Square early in the morning. I was struck by the contrast of high-achieving joggers taking care to avoid the people who slept on the sidewalks of the square. That’s Manhattan.

In 1949, Wyler was between his 1946 triumph with “The Best Years of Our Lives” and the 1952 film, “Detective Story.” Wyler was famous for his numerous takes and his attention to detail. He won his first Oscar for “Dodsworth” in 1936, a film to be shown in this course later on.

In 1949, Olivia de Havilland had the year before been nominated for an Oscar for her stunning portrayal of a mental patient in the film “The Snake Pit.” After “The Heiress,” for which she won a 1949 Oscar, she had a child, turned down the role of Blanche Dubois in “Streetcar,” played Juliet, without success, on Broadway, and went to live in Paris.

In 1949, Montgomery Clift had just risen to stardom in the 1948 films “The Search” and “Red River.” In two years after “The Heiress”, he gave what has been described as his perfect “method” performance in “A Place in the Sun,”(1951) with Elizabeth Taylor, who adored him, along with a generation of American teenagers. In 1956, a bad car accident was to have serious effects on his looks and his career.