1904

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THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

THE CRITICAL PRINCIPLES OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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DETROIT, MICHIGAN

JUNE, 1946

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHY

William Dean Howells (March 1, 1837 -- May 11, 1920), novelist, leader of American letters for the quarter-century ending in 1920, was born at Martin's Ferry, Belmont County, Ohio. His ancestry was mixed, a Welsh ingredient predominating strongly on his father's side and Pennsylvania German on his mother's. An English great-grandmother sobered the Welsh ferment; an Irish grandfather (mother's father) aerated the Teutonic phlegm. The Welsh ancestors made clocks and watches. To that land, as visitors and immigrants, the watch-makers gradually followed their product, and in a new world, not always generous to merit, they wandered, ventured, and lost money for two unquiet generations. The novelist's father, William Cooper Howells, was a migratory, ill-paid, anti-slavery journalist in Ohio, and had little to share with his cherished second son but a scant dole of bread, high principle, a buoyant and indomitable humor, and a liking and capacity for letters. He was a Quaker who turned Swedenborgian. In 1831 he married Mary Dean, a woman in whom resided an Irish warmth of heart and who needed all her German birthright of thrift and patience to rear eight children on the thousand dollars, more or less, which was Ohio's rating of the yearly value of an editor's services to the commonwealth.

At the age of nine the boy William was setting type in his

father's printing office; for years the family profited by his skill. Meanwhile, he gave his leisure to a strenuous and passionate self-discipline in letters. From the start he wished to write; he read devoutly and imitated his divinities with an ardor which is touchingly reflected in My Literary Passions (1895). This double diligence, mechanical in the printing-office, enthusiastic in the study, had much to do with the steadiness and abundance of the overflow from his maturer pen.

Office, study, and a little recreation cut down the time for school, and the slightness of his formal schooling would have made eminence in literature impossible to any less self-reliant and self-sustaining temper. The man who was to decline honorary degrees from six universities, including Oxford, and to reject offers of professorships in literature from Yale, Harvard, and John Hopkins, attended neither university nor high school; he went to common school when he could and received a little help in foreign tongues from inexpert or desultory tutors. In boyhood he studied Latin, German, Spanish; in manhood he knew some French, and acquired efficiency, if not proficiency, in Italian. Technically, he mastered no language, and he mastered no literature, not even English, in the scholar's exacting sense; but his assimilations in the fields were extensive and genuine, and, curiously enough, the flexibility in which the self-taught man is normally deficient became almost the characteristic property of his mind.

Howells passed his boyhood in various Ohio towns, Martin's Ferry, Hamilton, Dayton, Ashtabula, Jefferson, and Columbus.

In the last named town, between 1856 and 1861, he was reporter, exchange editor, and editorial writer on the Ohio State Journal, and two happy winters in this period when opportunity, both social and literary, was freshest, became in his grateful retrospect the heyday of his life. At twenty-two he published, in association with John J. Piatt, Poems of Two Friends (1860), a volume which the public with great unanimity declined to buy; but the majestic Atlantic Monthly published five of his poems in one year, and a trip to New England in 1860 brought him into personal contact with Lowell, Fields, Emerson, Holmes, and Hawthorne, the high society in which his maturity was destined to rejoice.

A life of Lincoln, which he compiled in the summer of 1860 from supplied materials, found a market in the West, and the grateful President named the author for the consulate in Venice. The Confederate privateers, whose maneuvers in that seaport Howells was expected to outwit, forbore to show themselves, and he devoted four years (1861-65) to observation of the people -- embodied in the agreeable and valuable Venetian Life (1866) -- and to a study of the language and literature which later found in Modern Italian Poets (1887) a slender, but discriminating, outlet. Marriage and the birth of his first child enriched the spot with indestructible associations. On December 24, 1862, he was married to Eleanor Gertrude Mead, a woman whom he had loved in Columbus, and in whom, throughout a union of forty-seven years, he found a high, literary conscience that seconded and fortified

his own.

Returning to America in 1865, Howells faced briefly, and for the only time in his life, the stringencies of the baffled seeker for the imperatively needed job. The ordeal ended with his appointment to the staff of the New York Nation under E.L. Godkin, and his delight in this work imparted a tinge of sacrifice to his acceptance a few months later of the sub-editorship of the Atlantic Monthly under James T. Fields, the Boston publisher, at a salary of fifty dollars a week. His connection with this periodical, then still in the first vigor of its youth and the first warmth of its ideals, lasted fifteen years (1866-81); in July, 1871, he became editor-in-chief. In Cambridge, where he dwelt for years, he found himself part of a social life ".... so refined, so intelligent, so gracefully simple ...." that he doubted if the world could show its equal.

By this time, the prolific stream of his novels and his allegedly unique form of criticism had stamped him as America's man of letters. Young writers looked up to him for inspiration and guidance, while the public suspended its judgment upon literary works until the good Dean nodded his approval or disapproval.

Howells' later life was uneventful. For about six months (1891-2) he edited the Cosmopolitan magazine. Gifts of academic degrees and offers of academic posts were frequent. He was the first president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, serving in that office until his death. He died quietly and unobtrusively at his home in New York on May 11, 1920.

CHAPTER II

THE CRITICAL PRINCIPLES OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

In the year 1891 the critical opinions of the awesome and celebrated William Dean Howells were collected; they were sifted for superfluous material and then assumed the form of a small book entitled Criticism and Fiction.[1] The publication of this work was very much like the explosion of a bomb in a reading room, and the reverberation has not yet died out. This literary battle for realism was now placed before the steady gaze of the American public and while the intensity of the conflict gained in momentum, its most powerful adherent remained stolid and impassive to all criticism that did not aid in the advancement of his most cherished doctrine.

Howells was looked upon and even, you might easily say, regarded himself as a sort of prophet to the inhabitants of late nineteenth century America. When the fastidious character of the Dean began to gain prominence, he inveighed loudly and fiercely against those authors who at that time were reigning upon the throne of popularity. They offered an utterly distorted and misrepresented view of life because, instead of making life itself the norm and model for their artistic endeavors, they chose to imitate the literary works of the masters.

> The present state of literature is that writers are taught to compare what they see with what they read,

1. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction.

> not with the things that they have observed and known, but with the things that some other artist or writer has done. If they have themselves the artistic impulse in any direction, they are taught to form themselves, not upon life, but upon the masters who became masters only by forming themselves upon life. The seeds of death are planted in them, and they can produce only the still-born, the academic.[2]

Howells expressed a fervent hope that the day would be near at hand when each new artist would be considered, not in proportion to any other artist, but in relation to human nature -- the norm and criterion of literature should be truth, not academic and romantic falsehood.

The salvation and sacred reputation of literature, he averred, can only lie in the acceptance of this doctrine of realism. "Realism is that type of literature which is true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women."[3] This theory bore no traces of originality, but it had never before universally characterized literary endeavor.

> In life, the realist finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives. In criticism it is his business to break the images of false gods and misshapen heroes, to take away the poor, silly toys that many grown people would still like to play with.[4]

2. Ibid., pp. 197.
3. Ibid., p. 241.
4. Ibid., p. 201.

> Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportion; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language of unaffected people everywhere -- and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness, but of usefulness for it.[5]

Mr. Howells' plea and protest was straightforward and plain-spoken. The novelist should deal truthfully with his material, which is human life in all its breadth and in all its depth. He should not sophisticate it nor should he in anywise attempt to idealize it. He is to be a witness sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. "The object of a novel should be to charm through a faithful representation of human actions and human passions, and to create by this fidelity to nature a beautiful work."[6] The novelist should deal with the mean of human life and not with the exceptional, the abnormal, the monstrous, or else he will surely violate just proportion and present but a distorted vision of the world as it really is. Above all, he will set up no false ideals of self-sacrifice, of heroism, of strength, of passion; for who is the novelist, that he shall presume to improve upon human nature as it is?

The novelist must beware of begetting supersensitive ideals of life which falsify the simpler and saner ideals. He must

5. Ibid., p. 244.
6. Ibid., p. 233.

refrain from the wild, the visionary, the exaggerated, the freakish. He must deal with man as he sees him, and with woman as he sees her, observing carefully, with whatever insight and imagination he may have, and then recording faithfully the things of good report and the things of evil report.

Although Howells unintentionally prepared the way for the onslaught of naturalism in this country, he was not in strict conformity with the exercise of its principles in the United States. At the same time, however, he held that its principles might be an actual and true portrayal of life in the major part of the continent. "No literature", he says, "can live long without joy -- not because of its mistaken aesthetics, however, but because no civilization can live long without joy. The expression of French literature will change when French life changes; and French naturalism is better at its worst than French unnaturalism at its best."[7]

His opposition to American naturalism was ascribed to its being a distorted and perverted view of American life; it tended to make the sordid and the ugly the whole of life. Naturalism thus was in direct opposition to his "divine average" view. Howells was under the impression that the ugly and the sordid held an infinitesimal place in American life and any such display of these forces was a rare exception and not a commonplace occurence. The American spirit breathed a healthful and optimistic air, its pulse steadily beating with vigor and youthful confidence.

7. Ibid., p. 222.

> The guilty intrigue, the betrayal, the extreme flirtation, even, is the exceptional thing in life, and, unless the scheme of the story necessarily involved it, it would be bad art to bring it in and as bad taste as to introduce such topics in a mixed company.[8]

Another major reason why naturalistic literature should not infiltrate the pure American air is because the majority of fiction readers in America are young women and the novelist must refrain from shocking and corrupting the morals of these young ladies.

> It could say very justly that the novel in our civilization now always addresses a mixed company, and that the vast majority of the company are ladies, and that very many, if not most, of these ladies are young girls. If the novel were written for men and for married women alone, as in continental Europe, it might be altogether different. But the simple fact is that it is not written for them alone among us, and it is a question of writing, under cover of our universal acceptance, things for young girls to read which you would be put out-of-doors for saying to them, or of frankly giving notice of your intentions, and so cutting yourself off from the pleasure -- and it is a very high and sweet one -- of appealing to these vivid, responsive intelligences, which are none the less brilliant and admirable because they are innocent.[9]

Particularly irritating to the Dean was the naturalistic portrayal of sex -- a very tender and delicate subject with him. In rebuttal to criticism concerning his lack of passion, he declares:

> Most of these critics who demand passion would seem to have no conception of any passion but one. Yet there are several other passions: the passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship; and all these have a greater part in the drama of life than the passion of love. And infinitely greater than the passion of guilty love. Who can deny that fiction would be incomparably stronger, incomparably truer, if

8. Ibid., pp. 262-263.
9. Ibid., p. 263.

> once it could tear off the habit which enslaves it to the celebration chiefly of a single passion in one phase or another, and could frankly dedicate itself to the service of all the passions, all the interests, all the facts.[10]

Therefore Howells implies that sex with its problems should be recognized and portrayed because it forms an important part in life. But it should not be portrayed as to form the whole of life because this would be a distortion of the truth. Sex should be dealt with by the artist in the proportion as it affects the average man and woman.

Art and Morality

Howells' precepts as to art and morality were firm and unwavering throughout his life. One must understand his conception of the moral nature of the novel in order to understand the man himself.

The dictum "Art for art's sake" is abstractly possible, but, since we are human beings composed of passions and emotions, it is not concretely possible. Beauty is truth, truth beauty. Good art, in short, is good morality. Howells is willing enough to concede the possibility of an unmoral aim, that an artist may create solely with an eye for beauty, but that beauty can ever be the sole effect of his creation is inconceivable. Morality penetrates all things; it is the soul of all things. Beauty may clothe it on, whether it is false morality and an evil soul, or whether it is true and a good soul. In the one case the beauty will corrupt, and in the other it will edify, and in either case it will infallibly and

10. Ibid., p. 266.

inevitably have an ethical effect, now light, now grave, according as the thing is light or grave. A representation of life is bound to be, in effect, a criticism of life and an artist cannot, by invoking an old and still hazy abstraction such as beauty, escape his moral responsibility.

> The light of civilization has already broken even upon the novel, and no conscientious man can now set about painting an image of life without perpetual question of the verity of his work, and without feeling bound to distinguish so clearly that no reader of his may be misled, between what is right and what is wrong, what is noble and what is base, what is health and what is perdition, in the actions and the characters he portrays.[11]

When Howells was ten years of age, he read and was ineffably impressed with that classic masterpiece Don Quixote by the celebrated Spaniard Cervantes. The stern fact that novels enveloped in falsehood could produce evil and immeasurable harm in its readers deeply affected his tender sensibilities, so much so that it remained a lasting feature of his theory of realism.

In his own day, he perceived that the majority of novels proceeded from the germs of literosity and falsehood. His observing eye clearly singled out the evils these works of art produced. The serious reading of such falsehood

> begot such high-strung and supersensitive ideas of life that plain industry and plodding perseverance are despised. And matter-of-fact poverty or everyday, commonplace distress meets with no sympathy, if indeed noticed at all by one who has wept over the impossibly accumulated sufferings of some gaudy hero or heroine.[12]

Howells' opinion is that these novels exert a poisonous and

11. Ibid.,pp. 240-241.
12. Ibid., p. 239.

lethargic effect upon the character of the reader. Falsehood drugs his intellect and renders him unfit for acting. They owe their origin to fancy; they live in the realm of the imagination; they die in the fetters of falsehood. Thus, as is readily seen, these novels are in direct opposition to the realistic doctrine of Howells.

These novels exert their principal and most degrading influence upon the characters of young men and women. They portray to young, formative minds an utter misrepresentation of the actual world and so render them unfit to meet and combat the real problems of life. Since these people do not possess a clear conception of life, these novels only aid further in deranging that true picture which is so necessary for them to secure. It must be borne in mind that the principal harm from these novels proceeds from the fact -- not that they are malevolent, but that they are idle lies about human nature and an utter distortion of a correct perspective of values which is essential for a young person starting out on the road of life.

Howells believes that the gaudy or stock hero and heroine have accomplished more harm by setting up a false ideal of heroism and goodness in the minds of young and susceptible people than any other specific evil.

> That heroine long taught by example, if not precept, that love, or the passion or fancy she mistook for it, was the chief interest of life, which is really concerned with a great many other things; that it was lasting in the way she knew it; that it was worthy of every sacrifice, and was altogether a finer thing than prudence, obedience, reason; that love alone was glorious and beautiful, and these were mean and ugly in

comparison with it.[13]

The gaudy hero, too, was enjoying a wave of tremendous popularity in America. He was worshipped and idealized by millions of immature Americans.

> With him too love was and is the great affair, whether in its old romantic phase of chivalrous achievement or manifold suffering for love's sake, or in its more recent development of the virile, the bullying, and the brutal, or its still more recent agonies of self-sacrifice are as idle and useless as the moral experience of the insane asylums. With his vain posturings and his ridiculous splendor he is really a painted barbarian, the prey of his passions and his delusions, full of obsolete ideals and the motives and ethics of a savage.[14]

The issue now resolves itself into the question of what constitutes morality and immorality in Howells' conception. Does he possess a tangible norm of morality by which a work of art can be judged for its morality and immorality?

Throughout his critical principles, the pervading thought is that man himself is the norm of morality. Man, he implies, is composed of a higher and lower nature; his primitive nature must be subservient to his higher rational nature. Now, if a novel flatters the passions at the expense of the principles or the rational nature of man, it may not instantly kill, but it does poison and deaden the soul. "Those novels, however, which insidiously portray a world where the sins of the flesh are unvisited by penalties (whether these penalties be swift or slow, but inexorably sure) in the real world are composed of deadly poison. More cunningly and surely than all types of novels, these do kill."[15]

13. Ibid., p. 239.
14. Ibid., p. 240.
15. Ibid., p. 239.

The Gothic type of novel with its turn for the marvelous, the strange, the medieval did not stain the soul so deeply as these latter novels. But insofar as they present an ariel portrait of supposed realism, "they lull our judgments, coddle our sensibilities, and pamper our gross appetites".[16] Their most harmful effect lies in their being innutritious and clogging the soul with unwholesome vapors of all kinds. Insofar as they do this, they weaken our moral character and make us indifferent and unprepared to realistically face the world and its manifold problems.

Possessed of an over-scrupulous ethical temperament, he looked upon the artist's obligations and responsibilities to the public through exaggerated and impaired glasses. His role of literary high-priest was to cleanse the souls of his audience by leading them closer to goodness and truth, not to sacrifice them upon the altar of romantic falsehood.

> The author can no longer expect to be received on the ground of entertainment only; he assumes a higher function, something like that of a physician or a priest, and they expect him to be bound by laws as sound as those of such professions; they hold him solemnly pledged not to betray them or abuse their confidence. It is the solemn duty of the author to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong; what is base and what is noble, so as to leave no lingering strain of doubt in the reader's mind.[17]

The vocation of the artist is a very high and elevated one; he must be faithful to his art by looking upon nature, closely observing it, and by reporting residing ideas which are invisible to the ordinary eye. He sees beauty and poetry in every existing state of reality; he should not endeavor to add anything, to turn

16. Ibid., p. 239.
17. Ibid., p. 266.

it, twist it, or restrict it, but only faithfully report it. Since nature has endowed him with the precious gift of discovering ideas in things, his work will be beautiful if he paints these as they appear.

Novel

Literary critics are of the firm conviction that Howells' highest and most suitable form of literary expression was the novel. Judging by his prolific output of these narratives, there is no doubt that Howells himself considered it the most apt vehicles for his artistic expression.

This American novelist commenced writing at a time when the quality of the novel was at a very low ebb; the historical romance was riding the wave of its highest popularity, and the American public sent up eager and hungry cries for more of these questionable products.

In strongly attacking the contemporary taste in literature, he inveighed against those authors who rely upon effectism to sell their books. "Effectism is the itch of awaking at all cost in the reader vivid and violent emotions, which is supposed to do credit to the invention and originality of the writer."[18] Howells skillfully pointed out that it was a very simple matter to arouse emotions, but a far more difficult feat and one worthy of higher artistic merit to arouse the intellect and hence make men know each other better.

> Men are more like than unlike one another; let us make them know one another better, that they may be all

18. Ibid., p. 225.

> humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. Neither arts, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as serious interests; they are all lower than the rudest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth.[19]

He bitterly renounced those novels which were impregnated with action, and which offered a complicated plot as a criterion of artistic merit.

> There are many persons who suppose that the highest proof an artist can give of his fantasy is the invention of a complicated plot, spiced with perils, surprises, and suspenses, and that anything else is the sign of a poor and tepid imagination. The power of the author to dazzle with strange incidents, to entertain with complicated plots and impossible characters, now belongs to some hundred of writers in Europe; while there are not much above a dozen who know how to interest with the ordinary events of life -- and by the portrayal of characters purely human.[20]

These qualities in a novel are glaring signs of weakness, for the author seizes upon the most unusual aspects of life and, at the same time, clothes falsehood in a garb of glamor. These novels fail to produce any profound impression upon man; they reveal no great truth concerning life; and they offer no glimpse into this great moral battle in which it is the fate of every mortal to participate. They play upon the minor chords of life, and play upon them as if they were the major ones; this requires little skill, but does produce financial returns.

This type of novel will pass with the seasons of the year; its only fate will be to fade into oblivion. The essential test

19. Ibid., pp. 282-283.
20. Ibid., p. 225.

of a novel, a truly great novel, is that it be human, and the only manner in which this quality of humanness can be achieved is that the author study humanity. The sensational -- war, rape, murder, etc. -- are not the legitimate constituents of a great novel. Rather a novel of this rank is composed of the small, apparently insignificant and frequently unobserved events of human life. What subject is more suitable than the greatest of God's creatures -- man?

> The true novelist embraces the common; he sits at the feet of the familiar and the low. The foolish man wonders at the unusual, but the wise man at the usual. Today always looks mean to the thoughtless, but today is a king in disguise...banks and tariffs, the newspaper, Methodism and Unitarianism are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphos.[21]

Howells' conception of plot was quite distinct from the characterization of plot to which America at that time had habituated herself. He stated that human character is the novelist's proper field and any contriving of plots was to be discouraged as false and mechanical. Characters must make out the plot. Every event, barring chance and accident, must grow out of human character -- plot cannot characterize.

He assiduously followed the artistic method of Turgeniev, who began his stories by sketching the biography of each personage, formulating as completely as possible the tastes, habits, and traits of each. Thoroughly familiar with his group of imaginary people, Turgeniev needed only to bring them together into some relationship where they would proceed to act out the drama for themselves.

21. Ibid., p. 232.

The realist, Howells would say, writes from the beginning forward and never from the ending backward. Writing from the ending backward is, of course, precisely what Stevenson and Poe recommended in their celebrated essays on the method of composition.

Howells frowned upon young America's clamor for action within the pages of her novels. To him this demand imprinted the stigma of immaturity and puerility upon his native land's uncouth soul. Throughout his works he hammered home again and again the fact that the inner life, which should be the humanist's chief concern, is checked and ceased to operate in the presence of catastrophe, insofar as disaster produces any effect whatever. He further maintained that great changes in character are rare and isolated phenomena, and that when they do occur, they are obscure in their causes and gradual in their operation.

The interior state of the soul was Howells' principal concern. To him the beautiful motive is more significant than the beautiful deed, the vicious motive more terrifying than the vicious crime. The lesson he teaches is that what people do is of infinitely less importance than what they are.

There is no conventional conclusion to a novel, save that the essential keynote of its termination is the faithfulness of the author to himself and his characters. This faithfulness will keep the eyes of the author focussed upon human nature and will serve as a safeguard from the temptation of contriving pleasing and mechanical conclusions.

> I cannot hold him to less account than this: he must be true to what life has taught me is the truth, and

> after that he may let any fate betide his people; the novel ends well that ends faithfully.[22]

Henry James and Howells were at one in their sophistication, realizing that a conclusion may be wholly spiritual. This is illustrated in the authentic peace of Silas Lapham.

Objectivity, detachment, and self-obliteration provide a hinge for his entire doctrine of realism. As they swing, so swings his doctrine. To Howells' mind the slightest infringement or violation of these qualities amounted to direct literary blasphemy. At the same time, however, he averred that this does not mean that realism is mere photography, for these qualities do not deprive the novelist of his power of judgment.

In order to illustrate what is meant by the violation of this doctrine, he particularly singled out Dickens, Thackeray, and Fielding and proceeded to burn them at the stake before the eyes of his amazed readers. He stated that these writers' ultimate purpose was to present a realistic portrayal of nature, but they miserably failed when they infused their own personalities into their works. Thus, in violating this fundamental tenet of realism, they committed literary suicide.

Comments and judgments like those of Thackeray, sometimes valued as expressions of the author's personality, have no longer a place in representative art. A dramatist, Howells went so far as to say in a passage that brought him much notoriety, could scarcely commit a more grievous artistic sin should he spring

22. Ibid., p. 234.

upon the boards during the presentation of his play and explain the action to the audience and blame his characters publicly for their misdeeds.

Since, therefore, this doctrine of realism drew its strength from an effective external control, the personal weapons of satire and sentimentalism were looked upon with extreme disfavor.

As a concrete illustration of his critical principles, he singled out his ideal novel, Don Quixote, by Cervantes. It profoundly impressed him as a boy and still more so as a man.

> I believe that its free and simple design, where event follows event without the fettering control of intrigue but where all grows naturally out of character and conditions, is the supreme form of fiction.[23]

In his extensive review of the English novel, the two volumes of Heroines of Fiction, he finds it to have arrived at a perfection beyond which it has never gone. George Eliot he pronounces the greatest talent after Jane Austen, one with whom it is useless to compare any of her contemporaries except Hawthorne, or any who came after except Thomas Hardy.

His attitude toward continental fiction ranged from intense admiration to cold disgust. Exuberant praise was expressed for the Russian novel, while an attitude of revulsion was extended toward the naturalistic novel of France. Howells, throughout the long span of his life, always retained a feeling of strong admiration for Spanish fiction. In fighting romanticism, he took his weapons from their critics, Palacio Valdes and Emilia Pardo-Bozou.

23. William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 21.

Howells is regarded by all students of literary history as an outstanding advocate of an American literature; his plea was for a literature American in spirit as well as in dialect. In reply to Matthew Arnold who observed an identity of English and American literature, Howells declared that a definite distinction must be drawn between these two literatures. The free and optimistic American spirit must form its soul; the dialect must be American, not English.

> For our novelists to try to write Americanly from any motive would be a dismal error, but being born Americans, I would have them use Americanisms wherever these serve their turn; when their characters speak, I should like to hear them speak true American, with all the varying Tennesseean, Philadelphian, Bostonian, and New York accents. If we bother ourselves to write what the critics imagine to be 'English', we shall be priggish and artificial, and still more so if we make our Americans talk English.[24]

In conformity with his American spirit, Howells advocated the eradication of the aristocratic spirit in the arts and the formulation of a pure democratic creed.

Past literature has been stamped with an artificially aristocratic air -- its appeal, says Howells, had been to the select few. The primary cause for this limited range of readers rested in the fact that the majority of the American people were uneducated and possessed no leisure time to read literature. Now, however, the democratic structure of the American government offered educational opportunities for all; the reading public now had enormously increased.

24. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, pp. 256-257.

It is now the solemn duty of the writer not to write for the select few, but for the average man. The writer also takes upon himself the duty of making men aware of their likeness to each other and making them see and appreciate the beauty in the world.

In a democracy, "Art for art's sake" no longer possesses any meaning. No art can exist for itself, but must take on this duty of promoting goodness and fraternity among the members of a democracy. If it fails in attaining this end, it is not worthy of the name of art.

Although the fierce attack that was launched against Howells' critical principles was echoed throughout the literary world, it was ultimately proved to be foolish and immature. Literary authorities and critics made the fatal mistake of hailing his critical principles as a novel and unique critical formulation. Nothing could be further removed from the truth.

If we care to look at these critical principles with an impartial eye of criticism, it will readily be perceived that fundamentally all that Howells did was to voice a demand that art, especially the art of fiction, should deal with life simply, naturally, and honestly. This is not novel, this is not revolutionary, but, on the contrary, it has been the watch cry of critics of every generation in every century.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVEL

Howells' sojourn in sophisticated Italy and the imposing fact of being a Westerner in cultural Boston made him very sensitive in regard to class distinctions. It was only natural that, when he began to undertake the novel as a form of artistic expression, he first chose such familiar material as social inequalities, class distinctions, and the mores of society as suitable topics.

He looked upon these conditions with disdain and so selected the comedy of manners in novelistic form as the most apt vehicle of expression of them to the American public.

The comedy of manners flourishes only in the midst of decorous, highly artificial societies where social conduct is presumed to conform to a standard of good taste set up by its inhabitants. Fashion, instead of conscience and religion, dictates the rules of morality. Its purpose is to portray vividly and concretely the thoughts and actions of this supercilious society and strongly satirize it by evoking laughter and pity in the reader when he sees its artificial mores, its shallowness, its haughtiness, its debauchery.

In the politely Victorian circle about Boston and American expatriates abroad, Howells discovered a society admirably suited to treatment in the comedy of manners. Here the individual's

conduct was subject to a dual control; that exercised by the New England conscience, whose vagaries continually interested and sometimes amazed the Western-born Howells and that exercised by bourgeoise Victorian standards of respectability.

Their Wedding Journey, A Chance Acquaintance, A Foregone Conclusion, The Lady of the Aroostook, and A Fearful Responsibility form his comedies. In this thesis, however, because of the limited nature of the topic, we will consider only two: A Chance Acquaintance and The Lady of the Aroostook.

A Chance Acquaintance broaches a theme which was very dear to Howells, the rise of love between persons of disparate social castes. The story concerns the love affair of a self-reliant, intelligent girl from the Mid-West with an aristocratic Bostonian who considers breeding and manners the essence of love. Her sincerity and simple understanding and his artificial manners and airs clash.

The story is set in motion by an exceedingly commonplace and lifelike incident of travel. Miss Kitty, the heroine, inadvertently takes the arm of Mr. Miles Arbuton, the aristocratic protagonist, and the embarassing episode which ensues is made very naturally to prepare the way to a delightful steamboat acquaintanceship. This acquaintanceship finally merges into love. The man thus won, hesitates to introduce his betrothed to some fashionable acquaintances, and the girl with equal spirit and good sense rescinds the engagement.

The Lady of the Aroostook

The Lady of the Aroostook presents the theme of A Chance

Acquaintance in the opposition between passion and class, with an original setting and a reversed outcome. Its heroine, Lydia Blood, is a New England edition of Kitty Ellison. Her function is identical with Kitty's, to represent the true gentility of democracy as opposed to the snobbery of a superficially Europeanized society. The sharpest shot is delivered in having her originality and her finer instincts appreciated in a society with more conventions than it could possibly know what to do with. He seeks to have Lydia Blood prove herself a lady in a situation so unladylike as to harrow the souls of anglicized Bostonians. Accordingly he gets her, after it has been arranged that she shall be sent to her aunt in Venice, aboard the freighter Aroostook, where it is discovered that she is the only woman on board and is making the voyage with three men passengers, not to speak of the crew. Two young gentlemen, Mr. Staniford and Mr. Dunham, are shocked at the situation, but at last they begin to pity the girl. They give the matter a most exhaustive analysis, debating ways and means of keeping their fellow passengers unconscious of the anomaly of her position and utterly unable to do the one possible thing, accept the situation.

Mr. Staniford, the haughty, aristocratic Bostonian type, thinks himself much superior to the New Bradford schoolmistress and so evades her, but gradually Howells lets us know by incidents that he possesses a heart. He perceives the good and simple qualities of Lydia's nature and falls in love with her. He follows her to Venice where Howells skillfully brings out the contrast between Lydia's gentle democratic nature and the aristocratic, superficial,

Europeanized mind. In this novel, Howells declares that love is a leveling force of all classes when Lydia and Staniford contract the matrimonial bond.

Qualities

These two novels are perfect illustrations of Howells' technique and conception of the comedy of manners. His favorite theme in these novels is his concern with the affairs of the heart, his trick of illuminating the feminine mind and contrasting the sexes, his occupation with the question of social distinctions, his sturdy nationalism, the caste spirit in conflict with the leveling force of love.

His handling of the love theme in these novels is done with a very reserved and restrained hand. The stupidity of his lovers, which makes it all but impossible for them to know that they are in love, is owing to no lack of passion on their part, but to an uncontrollable aversion on the part of their author to the notion of love at first sight. Love and passion do not exist in the principal characters, only intellectual and moral interest.

All interest in these novels centers in the interior state; very little action is present. The heroes and heroines spend most of their time probing into each other's souls. Conversation is the medium the author chiefly stresses and its matter centers around those topics which were chiefly interesting to a Bostonian of that day -- art, music, literature, social doctrines, travel, etc.

It is the almost unanimous opinion of critics that these novels in regard to form and construction almost approach a state of perfection. Beauty of dialogue and scenery are among its chief

assets.

Ethical Novels

If William Dean Howells' name is to be engraved upon the tablets of immortality, his claim will rest upon the merit of his four ethical novels: The Rise of Silas Lapham, A Modern Instance, A Hazard of New Fortunes, and The Landlord at Lion's Head.

In these novels and in these alone, he called forth the full power of his genius and consciously imitated the method of the Russian novelist -- Turgeniev. He now dealt with that which Homer, Sophocles, Shakspeare, Chaucer, and all the immortal masters had attempted to delineate -- human character. The fulfillment of Howells' passion was directed to a portrayal of human nature in all its varied aspects. We shall deal with the success he achieved in the next chapter.

The Rise of Silas Lapham.

The Rise of Silas Lapham is a Bostonian novel. A Boston family of the strict Brahminical type, the Coreys, find themselves under obligations for help in a painful emergency to the Laphams, a family of crude manners, mushroom wealth, and sterling virtue. The Laphams, pricked to social ambition by the new acquaintanceship, build a house on the Back Bay. The contrast of the two social worlds is amusingly depicted in the chapters that record their intercourse; and the elder Lapham allows himself to become intoxicated at a dinner to which he and his family have been self-sacrificingly invited by the Coreys. Meanwhile, Tom Corey, only son of the distinguished family, has obtained a place in the mineral paint

establishment of Silas Lapham and has seen something informally of the two Lapham girls, the elder of whom, Penelope, is interesting, while her younger sister Irene is dazzlingly beautiful. The young man makes love to the elder girl, but so unobtrusively that he is supposed by both families and by both girls to be making love to the other. He proposes to Penelope; she refuses in remorse and dismay; Irene is momentarily furious, the Lapham family is thrown into consternation; and the Corey family, recoiling from any bond with the Laphams, is still further distressed by the discovery that the choice has fallen on the plainer and less valued girl. The question whether a girl may decently marry the man she loves if the anticipation of two families had previously bestowed him on a consenting sister is argued extendedly and gravely and dejectedly by the lover and the girl and the girls' parents and the Unitarian minister and the Uniterian minister's wife. The end is marriage. Meanwhile the new Lapham house burns to the ground, while the Lapham fortune of which it was the bright particular sign, crumbles to nothingness. Safety is offered through dishonesty; but character finally triumphs over interest and Silas Lapham carries his poverty and his self-respect to a last asylum in his country home.

A Modern Instance.

The shattering of marriage against the undisciplined wills of the participants -- the demand for character in marriage -- is the theme of this story.

A Modern Instance is the story of an unfortunate marriage, which is wrecked by the husband's desertion and finally ends in

divorce. Out of half a dozen planes on which the story might have been pitched, from cynical comedy to romantic sentimentality, Howells chose that of a sincere interest in human nature and in the solutions of moral problems. The impetuous, passionate Marcia Gaylord, her self-indulgent husband, Bartley Hubbard; her father, the rugged old Squire; her unconfessed lover, Ben Halleck, are all drawn with great vividness and life-like reality.

In the talk of these people, questions of ethics, such as the social function of the press, come up quite naturally for discussion. Of these questions the topic of divorce is naturally the chief. Because of his love for Marcia, Halleck is appropriately made the spokesman for greater freedom in divorce; his friends Atherton, on the other hand, is made the spokesman for the most rigid ideals regarding the sanctity of marriage. And it is Atherton who is voicing the opinions of Howells.

A Hazard of New Fortunes.

The measure of Howells' characters in the novel is to be taken not so much by their actions upon each other as by their response to the spectacle of class warfare, and more specifically to a traction strike similar to the one Howells had observed in New York. The characters are so chosen as to represent a wide variety of attitudes toward industrialism. There is the rich old Pennsylvania Dutch oilman, Dryfoos, whose philosophy is that business is a matter of the survival of the fittest. There is the radical socialist, Lindau, who is mortally wounded in a picketing brawl. There are Conrad Dryfoos and Margaret Vance who forego the luxury of their homes for social service in the tene-

ments. There is the temperamental artist, Angus Beaton, who thinks of the strike only as an inconvenience to his comfort; the newspaperman, Fulkerson, who enjoys the excitement with the gusto of a true gossip. Above all, there is Basil March, who, acting as Howells' spokesman, denounces competitive capitalism for its failure to offer economic security and advocates the peaceable change of the system by the democratic exercise of the ballot.

The Landlord at Lion's Head.

A Boston painter named Westover spends a week in a farmhouse in northern New England, to paint the Lion's Head, a picturesque summit in the adjacent mountains. The family at the house includes, in addition to a consumptive father and a consumptive elder son who die off at fitting intervals, a stalwart mother, Mrs. Durgin, and a sturdy lad of thirteen, Jeff Durgin, the future landlord at Lion's Head. A neighboring family, the Whitwells, consists of a spirited little girl, Cynthia, whom Jeff Durgin intermittently torments, a very small brother, and the father, a rustic wiseacre, who dispenses sagacities. To this world Westover's visit ends in a shower of apples, a bit of valedictory malice from his friend and quondam follower, Jeff Durgin. The apple shower is little in itself; it is a mere symptom; indeed, the entire book is symptomatic.

Some years later the returning painter finds a summer hotel replacing the old farmhouse, the profits of which are to sustain young Jeff Durgin in a career which embraces Harvard, the law school, and legal eminence in a seductive future. These are the mother's plans. Jeff himself is indifferent to Harvard and averse

to study, and he manages in his first year to incur suspension and -- rather through bad luck and bad company than actual misconduct -- to spend a night in a Boston police station. A vacation trip to Europe brings him within eye-shot of the Vostrands, Europeanized Americans, mother and daughter, whom he re-discovers and grows to like among the summer tenantry of Lion's Head. In Boston he renews the acquaintance, but his hopes of the girl are cut short by the mother's final determination to sacrifice her to an Italian count, whose character is as worthless as his property. Jeff Durgin, known in Harvard as a "Jay", has obtained a precarious footing on the chilly edge of Boston society. Disappointed of Genevieve Vostrand, Jeff makes love to Cynthia Whitwell, who has ripened into beautiful and self-reliant womanhood. She yields to his courtship, approves his wish to forsake law and betake himself to hotel-keeping, but sends him back, rather against his will, to obtain his degree at uncongenial Harvard.

Once more at college, Jeff works off his latent resentment at the insistant Cynthia by flirting recklessly with Bessie Lynde, a Boston aristocrat, fruitlessly pretty and ineffectually clever, tired, incautious, and disposed to find in flirtation with a "Jay" the same sort of stimulus that her brother seeks in the bottle. Thus, at a mid-year party, Jeff provides drink for the brother and diversion for Bessie, a combination that arouses in Westover an indignation which Jeff thinks irrational and even the reader finds overstrained. A kiss leads to a flimsy engagement which is brought to a speedy and timely end by the man's unfeeling but clairvoyant selfishness. He owns the truth to Cynthia, who puts

an end to the engagement. When he returns to Cambridge, the flirtation with Bessie Lynde is casually resumed, but is stopped by a horse-whipping inflicted upon Jeff Durgin by Alan Lynde, Bessie's indignant brother.

Mrs. Durgin follows her elder son to the grave after a final ineffectual effort to reconcile Cynthia to Jeff, and the passage of the estate into the hands of the younger prepares the way for his experiments in hotel-keeping. He starts on a preparatory trip to Europe, but not before, in a chance encounter with Alan Lynde, he had thrown that young man to the ground and barely mastered the homicidal impulse which his hands toward the throat of his enemy. In Florence he meets again his old flame, Mrs. Vostrand's daughter, whom the death of the worthless count has released from disastrous marriage. Marriage follows, the inner grimness of which, for the wife, is poignantly suggested in the picture of specious success and geniality at Lion's Head. The book closes with Cynthia Whitwell's consent to accept the offered hand of Westover.

Howells' Aims

In these novels Howells introduces us to various personages and then leads us by the hand to gaze upon the intricate mechanisms of their souls. He reveals their characters by showing us how they react, both interiorly and exteriorly, to various events thrust upon them.

Howells carries his fullest ethical conviction when he is defining and illustrating the responsibility of the individual for his own happiness. The books he values most highly are those

which show under the most ordinary circumstances the truth of the conflict between desire for present happiness and the instinct to be good, which reveals the necessity of moral law for the individual. To picture the degeneracy latent in a selfish nature, and to fix that more firmly in terms of our common conditions than did George Eliot in Ramola, was his purpose in the novels, A Modern Instance and The Landlord at the Lion's Head.

In the Rise of Silas Lapham, Howells attempts to portray the clash of character against material gain, with character emerging triumphant. Although Lapham does not procure his money by purely ethical means, his character grows in length and breadth during the conflict. His innate honesty is really made to contribute to his material downfall.

In A Modern Instance, the view is chiefly turned upon the character of Bartley Hubbard. At the beginning of the story, we realize that Bartley has a selfish and unscrupulous nature; he possesses the potentiality of doing much evil. Howells attempts to show that these possibilities exist within the nature of Hubbard and that only occasions are lacking for them to be brought out and actualized. Some occasions do arise within this story, and hence we watch his gradual degradation.

In a Hazard of New Fortunes, Howells endeavors realistically to portray the interior state of a multitude of characters, by their reaction to a social strike in the city of New York. By the reaction of the different characters to this event, he attempts to depict fully their characters. The method is impeccable, but the result is questionable.

The Landlord at the Lion's Head is essentially an illumination of things not done. No novel ever so searchingly revealed the consequences of what we do not do. Jeff might have succumbed to drink, but he did not, for he had inherited, along with his maternal grandfather's weakness for wine, a powerful will and a herculean constitution. He might have formed a vicious liaison with Bessie Lynde, but the impressiveness and the very validity of the Lynde episode are conditioned by the fact that he did not. He might have been a murderer, but he spared, when he had him by the throat, the man who had insulted and injured him. Howells attempts to delineate Jeff's character in view of his intentions and potentialities.

Economic Novels

It is generally assumed by the majority of critics that Howells derived his social ideas solely from Tolstoi; this idea is erroneous and indicates utter ignorance in regard to the man himself and the times in which he lived.

In the year 1886, Howells followed the trial of the Chicago anarchists with deep concern. He braved a hostile public opinion to intercede for them, and he counted his experience an important factor in his growth. In 1887, he wrote his first socialistic novel, Annie Kilburn.

The years of Howells' economic novels were years of especially numerous industrial struggles, and he was sufficiently conscious of these struggles to use incidents from them in his works. Howells also consciously made use of the material furnished him by the nationalist program of Bellamy's Looking Backwards

and made acknowledgement of his obligation to Bellamy.

Four principal novels are Howells' contribution to his social theory. They are: Annie Kilburn; its partial sequel, The Quality of Mercy; A Traveler from Altruria; and its much delayed continuation, Through the Eye of the Needle. In this thesis we shall only deal briefly with two: Annie Kilburn and The Traveler from Altruria.

Annie Kilburn.

The theme of Annie Kilburn simply reiterates Howells' social doctrine that justice instead of charity should be the basis of a sound social order.

Annie returns from Europe to her home in South Hatboro, accessible to new ideas, and finds South Hatboro electric with them. In the efforts of the Reverend Mr. Peck, the new religion of social service is finding its expression, and an organization for social betterment, known as the Social Union, is on foot. But the two forces are not at all in accordance , Mr. Peck with his ideal of social equality being presently brought into active conflict with the union, with its old ideal of charity, which does so little beyond confirming the rich in their vanity and snobbishness and the poor in their discontent. Annie, who wants to do good with her money, finds her natural alliance with the union and is made, even as all Hatboro, extremely uncomfortable by Mr. Peck. She cannot see the impossibility of friendly intercourse between the poor and their benefactors. She finally sees her error and is won over to Mr. Peck's viewpoint.

A Traveler from Altruria.

The utopian romance, A Traveler from Altruria, is as definitely of its epoch as Annie Kilburn, though it followed Bellamy's Looking Backward, in which Howells was greatly interested.

Mr. Homos, the principal character, is a traveler from the ideal commonwealth of Altruria, who visits America to study our competitive order. The book is simply sly sarcasm directed at the existing American order and exuberant laudation for the utopian order. Its philosophy concisely is that the power of each is the property of all and the power of all is the property of each. This work is definitely not a story, but a string of random and indolent sketches.

The predominant themes of these economical novels is the delineation by Howells of aristocratic insolence and the fervent preaching of social equality.

His social doctrine is excellently summed up by Taylor:

> The system of competitive capitalism with its accompanying ideal of individual success, is no longer satisfactory. It produces only a heartless struggle for survival, governed largely by a chance, in which no life is secure, in which even invention, fruit of man's ingenuity, only adds to the misery of the unemployed. It produces contrary to the equalitarian ideals of America, inseparable class distinctions between the rich and the poor. Competitive capitalism should therefore be replaced by socialism; the machinery of government should be employed to central productions in the interests of all rather than in the interests of the exploiting few. This socialism should not be the effect or agent of class conflict, but should represent the will of the majority, peaceably expressed by suffrage.[1]

1. Walter Fuller Taylor, "William Dean Howells and the Economic Novel", American Literature, IV (May, 1932), p.113.

CHAPTER IV

THE APPLICATION OF HOWELLS' CRITICAL PRINCIPLES TO HIS NOVELS

Now that we are acquainted with the critical principles and the outstanding novels of Howells, the point of interest at present is the contrast and comparison of his principles with his novels. Or, briefly, did the author and critic assiduously apply his critical principles to his novels or was he unable to follow them and led astray through different interests? In a task of this kind it is only natural to expect minor deviations, but in regard to important principles it is only fair to demand that the author strictly adhere to them. We shall see that Howells fails in the application of the principal tenets of criticism to his novels.

Treatment of Sex, the Profane, and the Sordid

"Realism", says Howells, "is that type of literature which is true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women."[1] Bearing this in mind, he strikes fiercely at those authors who attempt to make passion and sex the whole of life by saying that realism "dedicates itself to the service of all the passions, all the interests, all the facts".[2]

So far we are in perfect conformity with such admirable views and wait to see how he carries them out in his novels. But, alas, we are confronted with one of the most dismal failures in the

1. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 237.
2. Ibid., p. 267.

history of American letters. He not only fails to treat sex and the sordid aspects of life in a clear and bold light, but, in entire contradiction to his principles of realism, utterly neglects to treat them at all -- reductio ad absurdum.

Oscar Firkins, a very ardent admirer of Howells, says:

> In these forty volumnes, adultery is never pictured; seduction never; divorce once and sparingly (A Modern Instance); marriage discordant to the point of cleavage only once and in the same novel with the divorce; crime only once with any fullness (Quality of Mercy); politics never; religion passingly and superficially; science only in crepuscular psychology; mechanics, athletics, bodily exploits and collisions only rarely."[3]

Midway in his career, upon recognition of the fact that his realistic principles demanded the depicting of all the passions that swayed ordinary men and women, including sex and the most naturalistic aspects of life, he offered the feeble excuse that his audience was composed largely of young women, and he could not conscientiously portray those slices of life to the gentler sex.

We certainly did not wish Howells to degrade the morals of these young, innocent girls with tempting sexual descriptions and licentious portrayals of irregular love. But we believe that his reading public possessed the inexorable right to demand that, in accordance with his principles, he acknowledge the existence of these passions and these naturalistic conditions which were prevalent at that time in America. The morals of no sane person would be disturbed by the scientific treatment of truth.

3. Oscar W. Firkins, William Dean Howells, p. 65

In attempting to add fiber to this feeble excuse, he said that America, unlike Europe, had no sex problem -- that the spirit of optimism and happiness existed in the place of European naturalism and sordidness. We realize that Howells was not any profound thinker, but this statement would tax the patience of a saint.

It is an unmistakeable and undeniable fact that the degree and intensity of sexual perversion and the prominence of the sordid and appalling aspects of life are much more pronounced in Europe, but this does not mitigate the fact that such aspects and tendencies of life are a daily feature of the American scene. We should like to ask Howells whether the fact of being an American exempts a person from the ordinary temptations and weaknesses that afflict other human beings. Race and environment may lessen the degree of temptation, but as long as human nature is human nature these temptations and weaknesses will always remain a problem which must be faced. And any portrayer of human nature who would be successful must recognize this.

Logically speaking, however, it is readily perceived that these two reasons of Howells are in direct contradiction to his principles of realism -- that he portray man in all his motivations.

Now let us observe the non sequitur esse of his principles within his novel proper.

His earlier novels or his comedies of manners establish no fact other than the course of true love never runs smooth, and they have no problems, as Howells himself once said of A Fore-

gone Conclusion, but the sweet old one of how they shall get married.

Hartwick, disgusted with Howells' genteel writing, said:

> Mr. Howells' favorite characters are winsome, radiant, high-minded daughters of Brahminical Boston, who fall in love with nice, eligible young Americans and, after a terrific amount of soul-searching and worrying about whether honor, modesty, and all the proprieties have been thoroughly observed, at last venture into matrimony.[4]

The feminine heroines in these novels never entertain an impure thought, a licentious desire, or are ever tempted to perform an illicit action. This is wonderful. This is idealistic. But unfortunately it is not quite human. Above all, it is not realism.

The heroes are more interested in the social code of the ladies than in their moral code. "The heroines are all born without bodies and the heroes never seem to notice the omission."[5] This may be the realism of saints, but it is not the realism of ordinary people.

The characters in his ethical novels too, like the earlier novels, lack bodies. They all live an ethereal existence. The degeneracy of Howells' two most evil characters in these novels, bartly Hubbard and Jeff Durgin, is unconvincing to the reader.

The character of Bartly Hubbard is singled out by his selfishness from which proceeds his unscrupulous business ethics, his indifference and even dislike for his wife, his habit of over-

4. Harry Hartwick, Foreground of American Fiction, p. 322.
5. Ibid., p. 327.

drinking. Howells wishes to make us see a selfish character who has no end other than his own welfare at heart. He uses all means to make us realize the selfishness of Bartly's character, but he does not and will not say that his creation is immoral in his relations with women. No, he is morally perfect. It is inconceivable that a person with Bartly's nature, whose goal centered in his own pleasure, would refrain from such acts. Yet Howells states that he practises realism.

Jeff Durgin, the landlord at the Lion's Head, is another example of this serious defect in Howells. The author skillfully portrays the slow degradation of Jeff, showing at great length and in varied incidents his latent evil and corrupted impulses. The apogee of this degeneration is reached when he kisses a recent acquaintance during his period of engagement to another girl. Howells takes great pains to denounce him because of this inadvertent act. If Jeff was the type of person whom Howells desires to picture, he certainly would have had more intimate relations with women, especially the flirt, Bessie.

Here are two selfish characters, the type that Howells heartily despised, whose interests were entirely centered in themselves and who did not consider or care about the rights of other people. They drink; they fight; they are unscrupulous in business ethics; they are insensitive toward the feelings of their friends, but still they respect women and are filled with only the highest and most chaste thoughts toward them. Is this realism?

In the social novel Howells did not only fail to portray

true emotion, but he failed dismally in his purpose -- to create sympathy for the working class.

Howells said that the error of romanticism was to

> idealize the victims of society, to paint them impossibly virtuous and beautiful, but truth, which has succeeded to the highest mission of romance, paints these as they are, bids the world consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel, filthy, but not altogether loathsome, because the divine can never wholly die out of the human.[6]

Howells has not indeed painted the victims of society as beautiful and virtuous, but neither has he shown their viciousness, their cruelty, and their filthiness. He has not revealed how the spark of the divine smoulders in places dark and vile. He gave those places a more searching scrutiny than did the fathers of humanitarianism, but he recoiled from them in the end, thus impersonalizing his view of the lower ranks, inducing a general, unlocalized pain, a hatred of all suffering whatsoever.

In his economic novels we do not see the working class laboring in the sweat shops; we see no picture of the slums; we see nothing of the deplorable state of juvenile delinquency; we see nothing of the poor immigrants who expected to find a heaven in America and found only a hell; we see nothing of the tedious and incredible state of these people who really represented the true America of that time. We hear only abstract arguments and opinions from aristocrats concerning these people. These victims of society were impersonalizations for Howells, and they became

6. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 281.

impersonalizations for the reader. He sympathized with them, but he eschewed the true condition of their existence. By shunning them, he shunned the beating heart of the true America. He had no penetrative understanding of American society and so his socialism is more an expression of finical dislike of poverty than anything else.

"Because he could or would not see tragedy and brutality in American life, he concluded that it was not there."[7] It is altogether possible that he could not readily find such things in Boston, but that was certainly untrue of America at large.

Not only did he avoid sex in his own novels, but he wanted all others to avoid it too. As late as 1916, he proclaimed himself "victorian in my preference for decency".[8]

Hartwick says that

> his abnegation of passion amounted almost to a passion in itself. What remains when these important constituents of life have been removed is an interest in travel, pure love, literary gossip, and some watered sociology. For while he may have conceived of 'realism' as a slice of life, he was pretty careful where he did the slicing.[9]

Inability to Portray the True Passions

Howells in his doctrine of realism says that the artist should not concern himself with only one passion, but should include them all. "The passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship, the passion of love, etc."[10] In other words,

7. C.Hartley Gratton, "Howells: Ten Years After," American Mercury, XX (May, 1930), p. 45
8. Ibid., p. 45
9. Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction, p. 331.
10. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 75.

Howells' ideal is to portray in correct proportion the influence of the passions upon the common man. He wished the power and strength of his novels to lie in vivid character drawing and graphic portrayal of human nature in its many guises, its strengths and its weaknesses; the human heart with all its tenderness, its joys and fears, its softer sentiments, and its wildest passions.

With few exceptions, however, his characters display none of the real and intense passion that is such an important constituent of the lives of men and women. His characters for the most part are stiff and ornamental, who think out the solution to every problem before they act. Here is no impulsive action. Here is no unpremeditated action. In his novels the emotions rarely overcome the reason. If this occurred, it would be a violation of the Bostonian social code. His characters finally emerge as puppets pulled by the strings in Howells' genteel hands.

The only method, of course, of portraying emotion is for the author to place himself within his characters and to portray the characters' reactions to circumstances thrust upon them. Howells, however, is unable to catch the significance of his characters; he places a portion of his own genteel temperament within them, and hence we have this lack of emotion and true feeling. He does not feel. Circumstances have surrounded and enclosed him.

His novels demonstrate with fine precision that life is not interesting to the people that live it, and that the commonplace is just as commonplace as the romantic had always supposed it to

be. Living people, common or extraordinary, have emotions. His novels are emotionless. The people in his novels, with the exception of a few, are not so profoundly moved that the reader catches the contagion of their feelings and their interests. Howells' realism, proclaiming the co-identity of life and literature, leaves the great things in life out.

> If there were no more passion in the world than Mr. Howells recognizes and portrays, about eight million of us Americans would never have been born, and, once born, half of us would have died of ennui.[11]

There are certain events in life which we as human beings are destined to confront. Birth, death, marriage, calamities, temptation, etc. comprise but a few; we react according to the composition of our characters. Man is composed of a body and soul; he strives to attain the ideal state in which reason, the faculty of the intellect, is the sole governor of the passions. Human experience, however, offers testimony that this is not the realistic state of affairs. Upon occasion the passions, the uncontrolled emotions, embrace the soul with a firm hold and only relax their grip with the passage of time.

He, however, strips life not only of its false romance but also of its true romance. Seldom in his books does he come to grips with a terrible motive or heart-tearing ecstasy -- and people do have those motives and those ecstasies in real life.

Let us single out the treatment of death in his novels. Death itself rarely occurs within his novels and, when it does

11. W.L.Phelps, "William Dean Howells," Yale Review, X (October, 1920), p. 102.

occur, the fastidious Howells hurriedly skims over it by immediately terminating his chapter.

In the Hazard of New Fortunes, when Conrad is killed by workmen in a social strike, Howells closes his chapter and commences the next one a few weeks later. He then gives us a very vague delineation of the effect of Conrad's death upon his father, but, of course, by this time all vividness of impression is lost.

The Reverend Mr. Peck's death in Annie Kilburn is treated in the same manner. He is struck by a train and dies offstage. We find the townpeople weeks later hazily discussing him.

Other impulses and passions are treated in the same casual manner. In the Rise of Silas Lapham we await with expectation the effect that Silas' loss of money will have upon him, but Howells avoids this emotional picture by portraying Silas years later working upon his farm.

The climax of happiness and exuberance in the lives of most young ladies is attained when they are being proposed to by the men they love, but Howells' young characters discuss marriage as they would a dry business proposition. It appears to me that Howells, instead of portraying the average, really portrayed the exceptional -- the insipid.

Like Shakspeare and Chaucer, Howells proposed to picture the human soul in its nakedness, but unfortunately he was not able to strip off its garb of decorum and social restrictions.

Provinciality of Howells

Howells' doctrine is essentially humanistic; it seeks to

delineate the universal soul of man; it therefore tends to embrace all mankind -- all men in all countries.

Howells, however, immediately contradicts his own principles by advocating a nationalistic literature. "A literature", he says, "essentially American in spirit and technique."[12] Nationalism is directly contrary to cosmopolitanism.

And although he advocates a cosmopolitan and nationalistic literature at one and the same time, he practises in his novels a decidedly provincial literature. His material consists of Boston society and her social codes. As an instance of this, let us observe how he deals with the Bostonian scruples.

Vernon Louis Parrington says:

> There are more scruples to a page of Howells than in any other writer except Henry James -- for the most part invisible to the coarser vision of a later generation.[13]

A scruple, which in reality is nothing but a part of the artificial Bostonian code, seems to be as important to Howells as the distinction between good and evil.

In the Lady of the Aroostook, Staniford, though desperately in love with the schoolmistress Lydia, finally decides that it would be ungentlemanly to propose until she is placed under the protection of her aunt in Venice. Howells and aristocratic Boston thoroughly agree with him, and the superficial Staniford remains firm in his decision. The result is that he almost loses Lydia, but he must sacrifice anything, even marriage itself, in

12. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 257
13. Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, p. 250.

order to keep his social code inviolate.

In A Modern Instance, the questions of the novel are two, and both of them could only be problems in an extremely special, limited, and narrow social situation. The first is whether divorce is ever justified, which is decided in the affirmative, though a divorced woman, it is indicated, must reconcile herself to losing social caste. The second is whether a man should marry a woman he has loved before her divorce, while she was another man's wife -- loved unavowedly and at a distance. This is decided in the negative.

In the Rise of Silas Lapham, the problem is whether a girl may decently marry the man she loves if the joint anticipations of two families have previously bestowed him on a consenting sister.

In the Son of Royal Langbrith, the son reveres his father as a saint, although his father cheated the father of the girl the son loves out of thousands of dollars and drove him to opium, and although he kept a mistress for years. The problem of the story is whether or not the son should be saved from his parental adulation by a revelation of the truth. The revelation is made accidentally by a cynical uncle, but the Howells' verdict seems to be that all concerned should have kept still.

These are but a few of the many scruples that the pages of Howells' novels.

In his novels there is no probing of human life and character, but only a measuring of both by social prejudices and conventions. Once those prejudices and conventions shift in nature or emphasis,

the novel loses heavily in significance. It illustrates accurately the fallacy of the Howells method, which sacrificed the penetrating analysis of mankind to accuracy in the rendition of externals. In seeking to look closely at real life, Howells captured the temporary insipidities and missed the fundamental realities.

> His error is to assume that the tea table situations rule the world at large -- that whether a man has his tie on straight or his shoes shined is just as significant, say, as his adjustment to the universe, death, birth, or the relation of the sexes. No novelist ever more completely lacked a sense of relative values.[14]

Howells' mistake was in assuming that Boston was America; the Bostonian the average American, Boston social ethics and scruples the ethics and scruples of America. Nothing, of course, could be further removed from the truth and thus he became very provincial in his attitude and conception of life. The cry of the masters, such as Shakspeare, Homer, Socrates, etc, was "the proper study of mankind is man". Howells' cry was the proper study of mankind is the Bostonian man.

Violation of Critical Principles and Art in Economic Novels

"The object of a novel", according to Howells, "should be to charm through a faithful representation of human actions and human passions, and to create by this fidelity to nature a beautiful work."[15]

His economic novels are a thorough and direct violation of

14. Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction, p.334.
15. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p.233.

this principle, such a violation that it is human inconceivable that a man could write such social works after proclaiming such principles.

Howells definitely uses this type of novel as a social and didactic instrument for popularizing his socialistic theories. Throughout his critical principles, he constantly emphasizes the importance and primacy of character. He vehemently states that events should flow out of character -- all should center around character -- character is the milieu of a novel.

Yet, in these economic novels, he subordinates character to his socialistic ideas and theories; all the characters are mere puppets for his watered sociology. Unlike his other novels, it is difficult to remember any single character and, if we do remember them, we only have a hazy remembrance of their temperaments.

Mr. Howells advises young writers to write from the beginning forward, not from the end to the beginning. In other words, the characters should work out the plot. But it is quite evident in these novels that his socialistic ideas form the plot, while the characters stand mutely aside.

Some of these novels do not even contain plots. The Traveler from Altruria is a series of isolated incidents relating the Dean's opinions on matters of sociology. It is forced and artificial. About seven-eighths of the book contains dry dialogues which are nothing but Howells' opinions on this subject.

The economic novel is not only a violation of Howells' critical principles, but it is also a reverberating violation of the

principles of all art. The ultimate end of art should be the creation of an artistic work which pleases by its truth and beauty. The Dean, however, desecrates the name of art by using it as an instrument for his humanitarian theories. If he wished to publicize his pet theories, he should have chosen another form of expression, such as the essay.

Objectivity, Detachment, Self-Obliteration

Howells' conception of objectivity, detachment, and self-obliteration is one of the most important and crucial points of his doctrine. He immediately renounces any author who puts the least hint of his personality into his work. He declaims against Dickens who really infused comparatively little of his personality into his novels. And Dickens was, on the whole, a valiant fighter in the cause of realism against an effete romanticism, precisely as Mr. Howells himself was. Let us observe how the precise Howells followed out this principle in his novels.

Howells' theory of objectivity, detachment, and self-obliteration of course precluded all taints of sentimentalism and satire, two personal devices which he thoroughly detested.

Sentimentalism

Sentimentalism is the arousing of excessive emotions from false and unwarranted causes. Such a person is usually referred to as one who "wears his heart on his sleeve".

I maintain that Howells and his heroines are very sentimental people. Howells is sentimental in attempting to stir up the emotions of admiration and sympathy for his heroines when he has

delineated their characters in such a manner that no such feelings are warranted. The heroines are sentimental in that they continually admire and sympathize with themselves over causes that mystify the average reader.

His feminine heroines are young, snobbish, social-minded girls who believe themselves the quintessence of goodness and look upon men in general as rather evil characters. They consider no man good enough for themselves, but, in order to avoid loneliness, they condescend to marry. They consider their delicate and fragile souls deeply offended by the masculine sex over the least trivialities.

Howells is deeply in love with this type of feminine character. Throughout all his novels, he valiantly sides with them in their quarrels with the other sex and devotes much time to arousing sympathy in the reader for their dreadful treatment at the hands of the coarser sex. He considers no mortal worthy to touch the hem of their garments.

Cynthia Whitwell, in The Landlord at the Lion's Head, affords an illustration of this type of heroine. Howells, however, fails to evoke sympathy and admiration for her, and the result is a sentimental catastrophe. Cynthia is a perfect young lady who has never performed an evil action or a breach of etiquette in her life. Howells winces and cries in anguish over Jeff's treatment of her, while the reader is in a quandary attempting to discover in Jeff's acts the alleged evil. Howells, in the guise of Westover, is continually railing at the amazed Jeff, telling him that he does not possess the qualities to merit the fair Cynthia.

This continuous refrain strikes a monotonous and dull tone upon the ears of the reader. After Howells has successfully dissolved Jeff's and Cynthia's engagement through a minor cause, he then permits the effeminate and genteel Westover to marry the radiant Cynthia.

Throughout all his principal novels, the woman is wronged and hurt by the man -- Cynthia by Jeff Durgin, Penelope by Tom Corey, Marcia Hubbard by Bartly Hubbard, etc. In Howells' opinion it is impossible for these girls to be the cause of harm and inconvenience to anyone. His love for these feminine creatures verges on worship.

Therefore I maintain that the emotions of admiration and sympathy which Howells essayed to arouse for the characters of these feminine heroines are false and unwarranted. They are so because his delineation of their characters warrants no such emotions. Howells himself is more emotionally than rationally in love with them.

Satire

Howells made consistent use of the weapon of satire in his novels. His "comedies of manners" formed perfect vehicles for satire directed at aristocratic insolence and class distinctions. His economic novel, the Traveler from Altruria, is a naive and somewhat superficial satire directed at our competitive, capitalistic system. This satire consists in the contrast drawn between the ideal state of Altruria and our own existing economy.

His keenest satire was directed at that class which rose to prominence after the Civil War -- the nouveaux riches. In

Annie Kilburn the storekeeper, Gerrish, is courteously, ever so courteously, ridiculed because of his satisfaction in being a self-made man. Yet Howells implies, in spite of the fact that Gerrish has attained to the American business ideal, that he is a petty and conceited person and very limited in his stock of ideas. Because he is operating a village mercantile store, he feels quite competent to settle the American labor problem.

The same treatment is meted out to the other nouveaux riches, such as the Dryfooses in the Hazard of New Fortunes and the Laphams in The Rise of Silas Lapham.

> There can be no question of the ability of Howells as a satirist. His books are full of clever epigrams, hitting our weaknesses, our self-deceptions, our compromises with our consciences, our relations with other men and women.[16]

Although the personal instruments of satire and sentimentalism were an outlandish enigma to Howells, inconceivable as it might appear, he utilized both to a great extent, in direct contradiction to his principles. Both sentimentalism and satire are pervasive throughout his novels.

Ending of a Novel

Howells says "that the young and inexperienced love to have the story end happily; but to the more literarily experienced, it is not the prosperous or adverse fortune of the characters that affects one, but the good or bad faith of the novelist in dealing with them.[17] He adds further that "the novel ends well that ends faithfully."[18]

16. A.H. Quinn, "The Art of William Dean Howells," Century, C (August, 1920), p. 681.
17. William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 234.
18. Ibid., p. 234.

During his lifetime, Howells was accused of contriving artificial endings to please his audience. Since, as he admits, his audience was composed largely of young women who naturally desired happy endings, it appears that the good Dean forgot his principles of faithfulness and bowed to the wishes of the ladies who yearned for the conventional endings.

Mr. Delmar Cook said:

> Howells was accused of bidding for popularity in his easy descensions to the conventional. Without the presumption of attributing such a motive, one may safely say that he was rather too fond of giving his characters in marriage.[19]

This giving of his characters in marriage at times seems much too forced. In the Hazard of New Fortunes, Fulkerson's character and temperament are in perfect incompatibility with the character and temperament of Miss Woodburn, but Howells must have a marriage and so he forces them into the matrimonial bond.

In the Lady of the Aroostook, the love and finally the marriage of Staniford and Lydia does not appear to be faithful to reality because both of them were reared in contrasting environments and are of wholly different temperaments, but Howells terminates the story in a beautiful marriage.

Faithfulness is the theory of Howells' endings, but conventionality is his practice.

Violation of Simple Plot
Complicated and Double Plots

Howells is a firm advocate of a simple and effective plot with every event and incident contributing to the plot proper. In regard to Howells' larger works, Firkins says:

19. Delmar Gross Cooke, William Dean Howells, p. 92.

> A story must be born double; the fable must be twofold in the germ. Too many of Howells' larger works remind one of houses in design, but hastily remodelled as duplexes in compliance with an impulsive afterthought.[20]

An illustration is afforded by A Modern Instance. That vigorous novel unfolds a psychic process, a process of alienation between two persons, lovers at first, later husband and wife, which ends in the shame and bitterness of divorce. The progressive and mutual attitude of these two persons is the substance of the story.

There is another young man who loves the wife. In Paris this would be relevant, surpassingly relevant; the young man would at once take an active part in the disintegrative process. But we are not in Paris; we are in Boston, and the young man who loves the woman as girl, wife, and widow is Bostonian in his delicacy of conscience. This delicacy is active not only after the marriage, which converts his passion into nominal guilt, but after the divorce, which recalls it to the plane of technical innocence. He is no factor in the separation. The condemnation of this deedless and wordless passion is a point near to Howells' heart, and he suspends his story to provide the legal friend, Mr. Alberton, who voices Howells' opinions, with a wife. He does this apparently for no other end than to ensure that fullness and frankness of discussion which domestic leisure and candors invite. The momentum of a powerful story suffers an irremediable check.

In The Rise of Silas Lapham we have another of the many

20. Oscar W. Firkins, William Dean Howells, p. 69

illustrations of this defect. We have here two plots, a love affair and a bankruptcy. They do not concern each other, but they concern the same persons, and their domiciliation within the same covers would have been entirely pardonable if they had been so domiciled from the outset. As it happens, the most important part of the story, the bankruptcy plot, is late; it is so much a laggard that it almost seems a trespasser.

Non-Realistic Devices

Howells has elsewhere in his novels as well as in his criticism been at great pains to demonstrate the futility of trying to redeem a hero by making him take part in a rescue or other heroic exploit. That can be done only by making the nobility inherent in his character.

But Howells in A Chance Acquaintance attempts to redeem Mr. Atherton in part by having him glamorously save the heroine Kitty from a ferocious dog. He again repeats himself in the Lady of the Aroostook by having Mr. Staniford redeem himself by sacrificing his life to save the drunkard, Hick. These devices are contradictory to his principles, unconvincing and non-realistic.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

It must not be assumed that the writer finds the works of Howells void of all quality and hence to be regarded as products of an infantile mind. Nothing could be further from the truth. But literary criticism must deal harshly with Howells because he has given expression to his critical principles, advocated the establishment of a school of realism, and further implied that he has assiduously followed these principles. Again, nothing could be more removed from the truth. However, for the moment, without a strict eye to his principles, let us consider his novels.

Howells' comedies of manners, being nothing but light, superficial criticisms of an artificial society, attained the end for which they were written. In their class there is nothing in American literature that rivals them. They are beautifully written, pregnant with humor and wit, and they contain beautiful scenic descriptions. Lightness and gaiety pervade throughout all the passages.

In the ethical novels, Howells' chief aim was the delineation of human character. He sought to portray the thoughts, the feelings, the impulses, the latent potentialities of the human soul. If a high degree of success did not crown his efforts, it must be acknowledged that his method was impeccable

and that he introduced it in America.

Having been born in Ohio, he was in part immune against the catastrophe that overtook all thorough-going literary Bostonians. His American birth and training preserved him. But he was never the man he might have been if he had not come under the enervating spell of obsolete pieties. Nature made him witty, genial, sympathetic, observant, and endowed him with an infallible ear for the rhythms of English prose. To read any of his earlier novels is to get an impression of a man of rare and diversified gifts, born to be one of the great interpreters of human life. But something happened to him -- he was stricken by the dead hand in literature. In this evaluation of Howells, we shall attempt to uncover the reason for this deadly blow.

Type of Realism

The persistent voice of William Dean Howells was heard throughout the corridors of America continually advocating his case for a realistic type of literature. Realism is riding the wave of popularity today, but the good Dean lies buried in the grave of forgotten literature. What is the reason for this? His realism was by no means the kind that one thinks of as derived even in part from French sources. It was well-mannered and invariably under control. A fastidious man, Howells avoided in his fiction, as in his life, all that smacked of vulgarity, of noise, of violence. He was a Westerner, but his humor was as remote from Mark Twain's as the poles are separate. Howells'

realism is rather of the Jane Austen variety, placid in behavior and refined in taste. In editorial and essay, he battled vigorously and successfully for such realism as Boston could read with complete approbation, not the brand that Stephen Crane was soon to flourish before shocked eyes in New York. By example and by precept Howells practised shunning the disagreeable and repulsive.

> To take the method of realism without its substance, without its integrity to the bolder passions, results in a work precise in form and excellently finished, but narrow in outlook and shallow. Hamlet and the King's crime are both left out.[1]

Throughout his critical principles, Howells prepares us to expect a divine average type of realism in his novels.

> His gentle nature would not permit him to follow men out of the cheerful sun into those darknesses of the mind and the soul which also belong close to the commonplace. He clung to the day as Hawthorne to the night. Like Emerson, Howells closed his eyes to evil and its innumerable traces. His America, transcribed so fully as it is, is still an America of the smooth surfaces.[2]

Howells employed a selective, a respectable, an official realism. He chose his subjects as a sage chooses his conversation -- decently. Selectivism, of course, is a necessary device for any realistic author, but Howells goes to the extreme when his selectivism concerns only that which has successfully passed a prudish examination by him.

By closing his eyes and ignoring the great truths in this world, his fiction was weak and a false expression of this or

1. W.C.Brownell, "The Novels of Mr. Howells," Nation, XXXI (July, 1880), p. 50.
2. Carl Van Doren, The American Novel, p. 136.

any other country. He thus belied his own critical doctrines and sapped their strength with absurd qualifications.

Did not the very things that he shunned constitute a part of the actual phenomena of social behavior that he had not business to ignore and did not his turning his back upon them put him in the ranks of the romantics?

His realism is therefore genteel, highly selective, and tainted with the vapors of romanticism -- a truly Bostonized realism.

Cause for this Type of Realism

What is the reason for this type of realism? Why is it that a person gifted with such high artistic genius, reared in the true vein of American blood, the small mid-western town, exposed during his youth to a life of poverty and hardship, should wear the garb of a false and decayed realism?

His environment constitutes a partial solution to this question. During the period of his youth, his entire being was consumed with a passion for reading. At that time his interest in books far exceeded his interest in human nature. From the age of ten, his imagination was clouded with the figures of Don Quixote, Pancho, the Vicar of Wakefield, Rip Van Winkle, and innumerable other artistic creations. He inhabited this arcadian dreamland, not the realistic world of sports and games in which the average youth finds so much delight. During this time, he had little social intercourse with people and so he commenced life with an inadequate understanding of human nature. Also,

since his contacts with the youths of that day were almost nil, his nature took on no ruggedness and strength, but instead it was left in a delicate and sensitive condition.

At the age of twenty-three he procured a position as consul to the Venetian government. As there was little activity at that time in Venice, he spent his time in becoming acquainted with all phases of Italian literature. Although he insisted that he hated Europe, he unconsciously imbibed its customs and so at the termination of his consulship he was quite Europeanized.

When he finally arrived in America, he was not obsessed with any desire to travel over the country and view the "real" America in the making -- the America of growing factories and towns, but instead he chose to settle in isolated Boston and write of the real America.

He was very fastidious in the choice of his friends; they consisted largely of the literati of Boston aristocratic society -- Lowell, Longfellow, James, Hawthorne, Emerson, etc. He possessed no actual dislike of the lower and uncouth classes, but he did possess an unconscious aversion to their company. In short, they were distasteful to him.

He became so enamored of Boston society that he gradually became an organic part of it with all its artificiality and ornamental brightness. It finally became his norm of civilization, a Utopia to the rest of America.

> The civilization of Boston -- Cambridge -- Concord seemed to him the highest, the best, the most desirable yet attained by mankind. Since he believed the Massachusetts civilization to be the ultimate, he

wanted everyone to participate in it, everywhere in the United States to be like it.[3]

The octopus of Boston society finally had seized Howells and slowly began to squeeze. Nothing could now save him. When he left the growing West and settled in Boston, he "... left a christening to attend a funeral".[4] He accepted the urbane mores of its social and literary arbiters and wasted the rest of his career in safe and sane works for young ladies, books that dealt only with the most smiling aspects of life.

Another reason for his type of realism lies in his temperament. He was ultra-genteel, Victorian, and highly sensitive. He was squeamish when faced with dirt, gain, crime, bestiality -- the ingredients in the life of a large part of both the rural and urban masses. He, the exponent of realism and polemicist for truth, shrank from such realities and such truths.

As an illustration of his ultra-gentility, he once said in defense of Twain, when a person criticized Twain for his blasphemy, "I can forgive a little blasphemy, but I cannot forgive people who place their hands upon me when we meet; Twain does not do this."[5]

A human touch, it appears, even irritated the genteel Howells.

Result of this Type of Realism

From a perspective survey of Howells' realism as propounded

3. B. Smith, "Howells: The Genteel Radical", Saturday Review of Literature, XI (August 11, 1934), p. 42.
4. Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction, p.339.
5. J.Erskine, "William Dean Howells," Bookman, LI (June, 1920), pp. 385-9.

throughout his multifarious novels, we have no picture of the true America, but rather a meticulous and well-drawn picture of the age of innocence.

If his purpose was to portray vividly the Bostonian social conscience in all its peculiar aspects, it must be acknowledged by all that he admirably attained his purpose. If it was to focus microscopic attention upon the meticulous details of Bostonian life, again all must reverently bow to the result. But, as we know, this was far from the purpose of Howells.

For years Howells lived in an atmosphere of complacent convention, a society dominated by women, culture, and convention. Cambridge and Boston in the seventies and eighties were still in the age of innocence, greatly concerned with erecting defenses against the intrusion of the unpleasant, reverencing the genteel in life and letters, soberly moral and making much of the eternal verities. In such a world of refined manners and narrow outlook, what should the realist do but report faithfully of what he saw and heard? And Howells perforce became a specialist in women's news, an analyst of the tenuous New England conscience, a master of Boston small talk.

His realism in the end became little more than a technique -- a meticulous transcription of New England convention, the casual action submerging itself in an endless stream of talk. No doubt Howells was true to what he saw; certainly no one has ever fixed more exactly than he the substance of the age of innocence.

He possessed real gifts of which he made the most. Refine-

ment, humor, sympathy, fidelity to external manner, and rare skill in catching the changing expression of life -- a passion for truth and a jealous regard for his art; he had all these qualities, yet they were not enough to make him a great realist. He belonged to the age of innocence, and, with its passing, his works have been laid away. He had no followers to keep his method alive.

Reason for Decline in Popularity

Howells' popularity has waned chiefly because of the fact that naturalism has replaced humanism as a mode of life, and that Boston is no longer America.

Nothing could better illustrate the distorted perspective of Howells than the reaction of the present generation to his novels. The characters in these novels appear to be products of a European environment; they are foreign and strange. They lack American traits. The average American of today simply cannot feel at ease in the presence of Howells' creations, all of which proves that the Boston of that day is as far distant to the average American reader as Europe today is to him.

There is little doubt of Howells' popularity during his lifetime. Although polemical discussion raged over him, he was universally read by all literate Americans. He fitted his times. He was looked upon as an interpreter of the mecca of culture to the United States. But, as Boston and her social doctrines began to lose influence in the United States, Howells' works also began to lose influence. His works possess no shreds of

immortality because they are based too much upon fluctuating values. The stamp of immortality is engraved only upon those works that are based upon the eternal verities and beauties of life.

Style

Howells' staggering output is sufficient to warrant that he did not conceive art as a long patience, but it may be interesting to inquire somewhat more closely into his intention, his theory of style. His ideal of style in literature is, as a matter of fact, perfectly consonant with his ideal of structure. Just as the form of the novel should be free and flexible, adaptable always to the exact transcription of ordinary events, so the manner of speech should be the ordinary manner of a clear and musical speaker. Since he would not have the form distorted or moulded in accord with Stevenson's one creative and controlling thought to which every incident and character must contribute, he could not have the style pitched in unison with this; as the romance bids.

The contriving of patterns and webs of discourse, which for Stevenson made writing a fine art, appear to Howells as an artificiality only less dangerous than the contriving of Plato.

> Of tributes to his graceful and musical style there is no end. Even those who deny its possessor's ideas are ready to promise him immortality because of it.[6]

To read any of the beautiful pages of Venetian Life (the book in which he is nearest to being a poet) and then to read

6. Delmar Gross Cooke, William Dean Howells, p. 142.

The Flight of Pony Baker, a delicious boys' book which proves that he was incorrigibly young at sixty-five, creates the impression of a man with a great imagination and the genius of perfectly expressing the tunes of that imagination.

Mark Twain, in an essay on Howells' style, once declared that other men, including himself, sometimes found the right word, but Howells always found it.

At one time, he had a craze for the simple Anglo-Saxon words, despising most heartily all long Latin derivatives.

> I still like the little word if it says the thing I want to say as well as the big one, but I honor above all the word that says the thing. To aim at succinctness and brevity, merely, as some teach, is to practise a kind of mockery almost as offensive as the charlatanry of rhetoric. In either case the life goes out of the subject.[7]

The crowning aspect of Howells' style is his mastery of dialogue -- the ordinary, everyday language of men and women. Delmar Cooke says, "Even those hostile to Howells' social and artistic ideals will tell you that he has no competitors living or dead in this branch of the narrative art".[8]

The secret of the success of his dialogue is the attainment by Howells of the conversational manner and correct adjusting of the conversation to the person's character. Howells' humor is of that very high sort which is based on a close and delicate observation, humor true, unexaggerated, life itself.

7. William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 112.
8. Delmar Gross Cooke, William Dean Howells, p. 150.

The best comment upon his humor is that given by his friend, Mark Twain:

> As concerns his humor, I will not try to say anything, yet I would try if I had the words that might approximately reach up to its high place. I do not think anyone else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and delicately and deliciously as he does, nor has so many to play with, nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the playing themselves and he was not aware that they were at it. For they are unobtrusive and quiet in their ways and well-conducted. His is a humor which flows softly all around, about, and over and through the mesh of the page, pervasive, refreshing, health-giving, and makes no more show and no more noise than does the circulation of the blood.9

9. Delmar Gross Cooke, William Dean Howells, p. 150.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Significance - Place in American Letters

William Dean Howells will always remain a great literary tradition in America. His name will always remain synonymous with the spirit of American letters. His name will always be rung when the masters of the American language play upon the chords of the American spirit. Howells will be acknowledged as taking an important part in the development of their music.

His natural abilities stamped him to be the long-awaited, great interpreter of the American scene -- the creator of the great American novel. Fate, however, in the nature of unforeseen circumstances, was to play its part; America sadly moaned as she watched Howells gradually lose his battle with fate, then sadly resigned herself until another interpreter should step forth and catch the true spirit and greatness of this youthful and mighty land.

Modern America developed in the single generation from the Civil War to 1900. Within thirty years, 1870 to 1900, the population grew from thirty-eight million to seventy-six million. Within even less time the enormous areas between Kansas and California were settled. Meanwhile the older sectional cultures - New England, Mid-West, and Southern - were being submerged in a

nation-wide, rising tide of industrialism, which shifted the economic basis of our culture from farms to factories, from rural life to urban. At the same time the older cultural disciplines --speculative, theological, and aesthetic -- were being replaced by new disciplines brought forth by nineteenth century science. Those new forces, working with astonishing speed, produced no slow, orderly development, but a cultural revolution, a revolution that made the Civil War itself almost as remote by 1900 as the War for Independence had been in 1860.

The East, still basking in the glory of its outworn aristocratic culture, turned its face away from the rising young West and remained isolated. Her young men, the only hope of her future, had left to take their part in the westward movement. The East was now stagnant and sterile; it was slowly sinking into a state of decay and corrosion. When Howells left the West to live in the East, he indeed "left a christening to attend a funeral",[1] and his novels afford a perfect illustration and description of that Bostonian funeral.

But all this does not discount the fact that William Dean Howells is one of the stars in the American galaxy of authors. America has profoundly the impression he has made in her national life. His influence was by no means limited to his literary output; on the contrary, his influence has struck at the roots of American life and culture.

Howells placed himself accurately in relation to his pre-

1. Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction, p.339.

decessors in American literature when he said at his seventy-fifth birthday dinner in 1912: "I knew Hawthorne and Emerson and Walt Whitman; I knew Longfellow and Holmes and Whittier and Lowell; I knew Bryant and Bancroft and Motley; I knew Harriet Beecher Stowe and Julia Ward Howe; I knew Artemus Ward and Stockton and Mark Twain; I knew Parkman and Fiske".[2]

Four years later he could have spoken of his intimate friend, Henry James, in the past tense also. If we add that he was born in 1837 before the deaths of Poe, Irving, and Cooper, it will be seen that his lifetime touched all of the important writers. His own first book appeared in 1860 and his last, posthumously, in 1920. In 1916 he recorded, in commenting bitterly on a rejection, that he could look back on fifty years of inevitable acceptance. His constant friendliness enabled him to meet the young men of his last days. He was friendly, for instance, with Hamlin Garland, Booth Tarkington, and Brand Whitlock. He was kind to Stephen Crane. He was interviewed by Van Wyck Brooks. Thus his lifetime spanned almost the whole course of American literature, while he was himself active for sixty years.

During this span of time he was not only regarded as one of the literary figures of his time, but in a certain sense he was looked upon as a dictator of American letters. His opinions were valued and respected. His influence was pervasive and far-reaching, more than that of any other single person.

When Howells began his career of prolific outpouring,

2. C. Hartlay Gratton, "Howells: Ten Years After", American Mercury, XX (May, 1930), p. 42.

America was in a puerile and adolescent state in regard to artistic taste. The historical romance was in vogue. The public clamored for novels that were pregnant with action -- blood and thunder romances. Taste was on an incredibly low level of quality.

His small book, Criticism and Fiction, electrified the world. It was the cause of raging controversies, but it accomplished its purpose in making America sensitive and ashamed of its low intellectual taste.

As a critic he was among the earliest to make contemporary foreign literature common intellectual currency in this country, especially the literature of Russia, Spain, and Italy, and he wielded an incalculable influence in giving a realistic (as he understood it) color to American reading.

Before the eyes of an amazed Europe, especially England, he tumbled Dickens, Thackeray, and Scott from their lofty thrones. As a result of this, he became the target for much severe criticism, but posterity has proved him correct in his estimation of these masters.

As a novelist he was the first American writer to undertake realistic fiction. There were plenty of earlier writers of fiction, but they were either not theoretical realists or not pure fictionists. In his ethical novels, he stressed the importance of human nature and character in reference to action.

He was the inspiration and discoverer of the young school of realism, which included such writers as Boyesen, Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Robert Herrick, who all followed

the trail he had blazed.

So, in the last analysis, Howells was really more important in the history and elevation of American taste than as an artist. America will always owe Howells an undying tribute of gratitude as an arduous laborer in striving to arouse America from a state of adolescence to a state of maturity. He, like Matthew Arnold, was a school teacher for his age and, like the classicist, his success and influence has not yet been fully tabulated.

He is now looked upon in literary history as a transition writer. It is chiefly owing to him for the present popularity of the naturalistic school of American writers. His writings formed a transition stage between the then prevalent form of idealism and the present form of naturalism. It is my opinion that Howells would have achieved inimitable success as one of the world's great essayists if he had clung to that form of expression. His informal and conversational manner of writing, his sparkling humor, his easy and carefree manner of expression stamp him with the supreme qualities of an informal essayist. His brilliant and vivid essays in Life and Literature[3] and Literary Friends and Acquaintances[4] equal, if they do not surpass, anything of its kind in the history of American letters. In these works we see the genial Howells, perfectly at ease, and relating in his informal manner his thoughts and ideas upon the insignificant things of life. They are models of per-

3. William Dean Howells, Life and Literature.
4. William Dean Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintances.

fection and high artistry. But, as existing facts prove, he chose the novel as his supreme form of expression, and so today his chief importance rests in his value to the literary historian. The opportunity of Howells to return to popular fancy, as did his friend Henry James, is very small indeed. The dead hand of literature, in the form of strict provinciality, has secured Howells' position in the literary grave with only quietness and memories of forgotten lore to comfort him.

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