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Setting the Hook of Realism:
A Study of the Early Career of William Dean Howells

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William Dean Howells

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Introduction:

William Dean Howells contributed more to the development of literary realism in the United States than any other single author. Not only did Howells produce fiction in the realist vein prolifically, he was also integral to realism's increasing popularity through his support as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Howells used his position first at the *Atlantic* and then at *Harper's* as a pulpit from which to spread the gospel of realism. While at the *Atlantic*, Howells developed his own ideas about realism that were reflected in both his literary works and his reviews. His support of realism is also seen in the materials he elected to publish and the ardent support he showed for the next generation of American writers early in their careers.

While many studies on William Dean Howells focus on his later works like The Rise of Silas Lapham and A Hazard of New Fortunes, my study examines specifically his period with the *Atlantic* and the works he produced during this time as key to his development as one of the leading proponents of American realism. Much has been written on his later life, but his work as editor of *Harper's* is a culmination of the lessons he learned as editor of the *Atlantic*, and his "Editor's Study," often considered Howells' manifesto on realism, is a result of the principles he formulated in his *Atlantic* "Reviews and Literary Notices." His later works represent the completion and practice of theories on literature that were developed between his first visit to Boston in 1860 and his move to *Harper's* in 1885.

I intend to illustrate the development of Howells' theory of literary realism early in his career. I will accomplish this through an examination of his writing for publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1860 through 1882, an analysis of his reviews and criticism during his tenure there, first as assistant editor and then as editor, and his early support of a new breed of American realist including Mark Twain and Henry James.

Before tracing Howells' literary development, clear definitions for the terms "romanticism" and "realism" are critical. In terms of names, romanticism is often referred to as a romance whereas realism is commonly called the novel. Broadly, romanticism is a search for the meaning in nature through symbol; realism is the search for meaning in the commonplace and a portrayal of the actual. More specifically, romanticism is often set in a glorified past and features characters of higher social status. It typically exhibits a love of and search for meaning in nature and an air of mysticism. As defined by Everett Carter in Howells and the Age of Realism, Romanticism is:

the search for meanings that lie behind, or above the world of things. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there had been a dominance in German and English thought of thinkers and writers whose vision was directed behind the world of physical appearances. Friedrich Schlegel gave the name "romantic" to these writers, and from Blake through Wordsworth and Coleridge to Keats and Shelley, the romantic imagination was concerned

with a "search for an unseen world," with penetrating "to an abiding reality, to explore its mysteries, and by this to understand more clearly what life means and what it is worth. (Carter 23)

Specifically, romanticism deals with nature and the spiritual or psychological truth that lay behind the tangible. Carter cites romantic authors from Howells' youth, including Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, as "concerned with the truths which lay behind the world of appearances, all turning to the symbol as a means of fusing this truth with the physical, all immersed in a tragic vision of life" (Carter 24). For romantics, the physical is merely a symbol of the spiritual; it is only the surface. There is a strong relationship between romanticism and idealism, in that romanticism is often the search for the ideal, the spiritual, and the deeper meaning behind the material.

Another characteristic of romanticism is a reflection, often sentimental, of the past. Edwin H. Cady in The Road to Realism defines sentimentality as "irresponsible emotionality" (123). Sentimentalism tends to focus on a glorified past with no connection to reality. Because of the lack of connection to reality and its dependence on emotion, sentimentality is irresponsible. Sentimentalism is the driving force behind the popularity of romance and "then as now the popular appetite for sentimentality was as insatiable as it was profoundly corrupting to its addicts" (123). A longing for the past infused with heightened emotions and sentimentality are characteristic of romanticism.

In romance, the importance of characters is often superseded by the plot and action. Though highly critical of romance when compared to realism, Richard Chase in The American Novel and its Tradition provides an insightful definition which articulates the function of character:

The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society of the past. Human beings will on the whole be shown in ideal relation - that is, they will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic. To be sure, characters may become profoundly involved in some way. . .but it will be a deep and narrow, an obsessive, involvement. . . .Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of the plot. (Chase 13)

Realistic character development, a cornerstone in the development of realism, is of no importance in romance, which is often geared to plot and action. Chase concludes, "The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility. . . . the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms" (13). The tendency of romance to emotional and unbelievable elements colors the plot. There is little or no connection to reality. Unlike realism's goal of capturing life like a photograph, romanticism is searching for the symbolism

behind reality. Many of the key components that distinguish romanticism as a literary form contrast directly to the principles of realism.

It is easy to say that realism is the antithesis of romanticism, as it was historically a reaction to romanticism. Richard Chase writes: "Doubtless, the main difference between the novel and the romance is in the way in which they view reality. The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life" (Chase 12). Through sentimentality, the purpose of romance is to interrupt plot and relate it to the ideal; by contrast, realism sets out to portray accurately the commonplace while allowing the reader to make his or her own judgments.

Focusing on the importance of character in realistic fiction, Richard Chase continues: "Character is more important than action and plot, and probably the tragic or comic actions of the narrative will have the primary purpose of enhancing our knowledge of and feeling for an important character, a group of characters, or a way of life" (12). Whereas in romance the plot is the purpose of the work and characters are simply inventions to suit the storyline, realism treats character development differently, focusing on characters that mirror reality while events in their daily lives create the plot.

In continuing regards to plot, Chase remarks: "The events that occur will usually be plausible, given the circumstances, and if the novelist includes a violent or sensational occurrence in his plot, he will introduce it only into such

scenes as have been (in the words of Percy Lubbock) 'already prepared to vouch for it'" (12-13). Romance, by contrast, is often given to sensation and features actions that are implausible in terms of reality. The author of romance requires that readers often suspend reality, taking a leap of faith in terms of plot. Authors of realistic fiction find a sense of power in the portrayal of actions that are true to life.

Other characteristics of realism are the portrayal of the commonplace, vernacular diction, the subject matter, and the objective narrative stance. These characteristics become those that differentiate literature intended for the rising literate middle class from romanticism, which was often aimed towards the upper class. Chase writes, "the novel served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class" (13). The subject matter and setting are usually contemporary and the realistic novel or realism typically exposes failure in some facet of society. The narrator in a realistic novel takes an objective position, providing facts that allow an informed audience to draw conclusions on the subject matter.

A final difference between romance and realism is in the purpose of the literature and means by which authors set out to achieve that purpose. Often removed from the subject matter, romance is disengaged typically with little or no social purpose. Romanticism's purpose was to entertain, inspire, and enlighten through symbolism. As more of an engaged form of literature, realism, which emerged from the practice of journalism, is often used as a vehicle to expose the moral shortcoming of social and political systems through

an accurate portrayal of real and current situations. The power of realism stems from the accurate portrayal and exposure of situations that typical people would find appalling in order to bring about reform. As with groups like the muckrakers around the turn of the century, realistic writers often expressed a social consciousness in their work.

William Dean Howells, a man fixed on the notion of becoming a successful romantic poet, transformed himself into the leading proponent of realism in America in just over 20 years. His literary career evolved from his very early romantic poetry to nonfiction sketches of life around him and then to an increasingly complex and engaged realistic fiction. His time at the *Atlantic* and the next 10 years gave him insight into a new form of literature. Realism merged the lessons he learned during his formative years as a journalist and elements of the fiction that he was writing in the 1870s. The end result was a unique form of literature that molded direct and personal observation with a social consciousness. It drew from the imagination that Howells brought to his characters and his plot. It also drew from the world around him. George Arms, editor of Howells' selected letters, summarized the author's change in the 1870s: "The author who in 1876 had wondered whether he could think of new plots had disciplined himself by the end of the decade to offer completed novels at yearly intervals. He had moved toward a deeper penetration into American life, from comedy in an international setting, to spiritualism, to problems of professional women, and to divorce" (152). In a short period

of time, young William, the budding romantic, became William
Dean Howells, the great American realist.

Chapter 1: Howells' Early Literary Career: -1865

Howells' literary career began at the age of ten when he traded the schoolhouse for work in his father's print shop. His work taught him to set type and gave him more exposure to the printed word at an early age than formal schools had offered. He soon moved from the print shop to the newsroom when by the age of fourteen he found work as a compositor for the *Ohio State Journal* in Columbus, the same paper which employed his father as a legislative reporter (Cooke 17). Young Howells spent his time at the *Journal* casing type, but between assignments, he let his high-culture literary desires flourish. According to Kenneth Lynn's biography William Dean Howells: An American Life, he spent time "making up poems and dreaming of a literary future for himself of 'overpowering magnificence and undying celebrity'" (63). According to D. G. Cooke, young Howells remained fixed in his romantic ambitions even while employed by the newspaper: "With all his later aversion to the romantic, Howells kept a fondness for the artificialities of the pseudo-romanticism of the classic period, which make no misleading pretensions to reality" (Cooke 18).

William Cooper Howells, young Will's father, attempted to reinforce the budding journalist in his son.

With his father as guide, Will duly visited the state penitentiary, and the lunatic, deaf-and-dumb, and blind asylums. With his Western pride in the social progress of the state of Ohio, William Cooper was thrilled by such institutions, and was

hopeful that his gifted son would write about them. Penitentiaries and asylums, however, merely bored Will—and, in fact, he quickly grew bored by Columbus in general. (Lynn 63)

Whether William Cooper's goal was to encourage his son to follow journalism or to merely take an interest in the social institutions that had interested him, one cannot be certain. Clearly young Howells expressed very little interest in the penitentiaries, asylums, or other social institutions, many of which would be the subject of later realistic novels.

Regardless of his father's attempts to expose his son to different facets of society found in asylums or prisons, Howells continued his flirtation with romanticism. In 1862, Howells' father secretly offered one of Howells' poems to the editor of the *Journal*. It was published and soon after was picked up by a New York paper and the *Cincinnati Commercial* (Lynn 63). Howells was at first upset by his father's action, but later flattered by the acceptance. He quickly submitted more poetry, described by Lynn as being "in admiration of the pastorals of Alexander Pope" (64). Howells was, however, still a long way from realizing his role as one of the principal architects of American realism. He was making a living as a journalist and acquiring exposure to the various social elements that would be important to the furtherance of his career. But, his aspirations were still decidedly literary and his concept of literature was disengaged, far from the social reality he covered as a reluctant journalist.

At age 19, young Will was employed by the *Cincinnati Gazette* as a political reporter responsible for detailing the

daily proceeding of the state legislature. Having spent two winters with the *Gazette*, Howells was obviously fond of this type of reporting as it associated him with high-class, cultivated people and focused little on the realities of the time. In efforts to retain and further use his talents, The *Gazette* offered Howells the job of city editor. He began the training for this position, which involved following reporters on assignment, but regardless of the salary—a thousand dollars a year—he was quickly dissuaded from taking the job following an incident with a drunken woman.

If I could not mercifully imagine them, how could I intelligently endure the raving of the drunken woman which I heard one night in the police station where my abhorred duties took me for the detestable news of the place? I supposed it was this adventure, sole of its sort, which clinched my resolve to have no more to do with the money-chance offered to me in journalism. My longing was for the cleanly respectabilities, and I still cannot think that a bad thing, or if experience cannot have more than the goodly outside in life, that this is not well worth having. (Howells Years 123)

His desire for "the cleanly respectabilities" and his abhorrence for some of the realistic elements that city threw his way, forced Howells to decline the job and return home. By not accepting the job based on a disdain for the disturbing elements of reality, young Howells proves quite different from the author of realism that he would become. Written in hindsight in Years of My Youth, Howells acknowledged that by

failing to accept the position at the *Gazette*, he had missed out on an experiential opportunity.

I think that if I had been wiser than I was then I would have remained in the employ offered me, and learned in the school of reality the many lessons of human nature which it could have taught me. I did not remain, and perhaps I could not; it might have been the necessity of my morbid nerves to save themselves from abhorrent contacts; in any case, I renounced the opportunity offered me by that university of the streets and police stations, with its faculty of patrolmen and ward of politicians and saloon-keepers. (Howells Years 122)

The education that the streets and police stations had to offer would have to wait; it would take the next twenty years for Howells to learn the lessons that he had passed up. Had Howells accepted the position, he may have reached the pinnacle of his theory and practice of realism sooner.

Howells continued to battle between journalism, which had encompassed the majority of his professional life, and the desire to write the literary works of high-culture that incorporating the materials he was reading. In Years of My Youth, he writes

Journalism was not my ideal, but it was my passion, and I was passionately a journalist well after I began author [sic]. I tried to make my newspaper work literary, to give it form and distinctions, and it seems to me that I did not always try in vain, but I had also the instinct of actuality, of

trying to make my poetry speak for its time and place. For the most part, I really made it speak for the times and places I had read of. (Howells Years 153)

In terms of any journalistic or realistic pursuit, the terms "actuality" and "literary" create a great conflict. In the excerpt above, Howells tried to write to reflect his time and place, but his writing at this point was still bookish, based more on the romantic material he was reading than the reality around him. By the late 1850s, Howells had not developed his own voice that could reflect his Midwest reality. He continued to stray back and forth between romanticism and journalism. Clearly, journalism and its connections to reality were as important to the developing author as was romanticism and literary pursuit. Judging by the next step in his literary development—publication of poetry by the *Atlantic*—Howells' interests still lie strongly with emotional, romantic literature.

Howells was a fledgling journalist with literary ambitions and had published some literary materials in local and regional papers. It was not until 1859 when Lowell accepted "Ardenken," Howells' first poem published in the *Atlantic*, that Howells joined a select group of Western poets published in the predominantly Eastern publication. Lynn recounts that Lowell had been trying to increase Western readership and was pleased to find additional talent in the West through Howells (Lynn 85). This overjoyed Howells. He had a very high opinion of the *Atlantic* though he downplayed it in letters to his friend and fellow Western poet, J. Piatt.

In the introduction to Selected Letters (1852-1872), George Arms notes that "the publication of "Ardenken," accepted for the *Atlantic* in July 1859, was delayed until the following January while James Russell Lowell searched the poetry of Heine, fearing that so polished a contribution might be a translation rather than an original composition" (4). The early poetic work of Howells illustrates his romantic ambitions and the mere fact the Lowell held the poem from publication pending verification illustrates Howells' closeness of style and content to the high romantic German lyric poet:

"Ardenken" is a romantic poem that relates the drowning of a loved one in a shipwreck to struggles in nature:

Like a bird of evil presage,
To the lonely house of the shore
Came the wind with a tale of shipwreck,
And shrieked at the bolted door, (ll 65-68)

His use of nature imagery to contrast life and death is one of typical elements of romantic literature. Howells describes the surroundings of "the house in the maple-gloom, / And the porch with the honeysuckles / And the sweet-brier all abloom" (ll 6-8). He uses spring imagery, typically a symbol for life and rebirth, to contrast death in the house:

My soul is sick with the fragrance
Of the dewy sweet-brier's breath:
Oh, darling! The house is empty,
And lonelier than death! (ll 9-12)

This illustration of death with contrasting spring imagery attempts to paint a portrait of the loss of a loved one, but

does not acknowledge the actual death. Howells is more taken with the narrator's reaction to death. The subject of "Ardenken" is not a death, but the sentimentalized, emotional reaction to a death. Howells' use of nature imagery to illustrate the death of a loved one is romantic and expresses a heightened sense of emotion, which could be characterized as sentimental.

Through his letters, Howells expressed a respect and admiration for romantic German poetry, and Heine, in particular, strongly influenced him. In a letter to Lowell in 1861, Howells remarks, "I remember every word that you said to me, and particularly all that touching my Heine-leeshore, and I try to write always outside of my affection for that poet. But what with the German blood I have, and my intense love for German poetry, it is hard for me to avoid that German manner" (Selected Letter 1852-1872 71). Both Howells and Lowell recognized Howells' resemblance to Heine in style and content. Howells tried to avoid mirroring Heine, but was unsuccessful in his early attempts.

Howells completed a book of poetry with John J. Piatt entitled Poems of Two Friends, which received mixed reviews and did not sell well. The *Atlantic* found promise in both authors, but praised Howells for his "more instinctive felicity of phrase" (*Atlantic*, April 1860).

In a letter to John J. Piatt, the co-author of Poems of Two Friends, Howells remarks:

I was afraid, when I had finished Heine, that "now the wine of life was drawn," but I was mistaken. Uhland pleases me quite as well—perhaps better. He

is purer, and dreamier. You of course have read him Longfellow-ed; but the honey of his poetry has not the genuine taste, even when strained through the silver net of our poet's thought. -I really don't know what I shall do! If I go on admiring Uhland at this rate, and swelling with unexpressed sentiments, I am afraid I shall burst. (Selected Letters 1852-1872 42)

Howells' description of Heine as "the wine of life" and his admiration for Uhland, another reknown romantic poet, illustrates his continued draw towards romanticism and the German romantics. Howells expresses his love for the work of Uhland, showing the direction of Howells in terms of high literature and the pull that the romantics had on him.

Encouraged by acceptance from the *Atlantic*, Howells continued on the literary path. Popular magazines like the *Saturday Press* began to publish his work. Howells wrote biographical sketches and romantic poetry for William T. Croggeshall's The Poets and Poetry of the West. This work achieved little success, but it further connected Howells to people and romantic literature of his own time and place.

As his nerves and squeamishness had forced him to pass as editor of the *Gazette*, the spring of 1860 brought another missed opportunity for Howells as a journalist and fledgling realist. Contracted to write a campaign biography of Lincoln, Howells was fearful of going to Springfield to interview Lincoln and sent a law student to do it for him. "The thought of asking a total stranger for details of his personal history was distasteful to a young man who despite his successes of

the previous winter, still had a tendency to shy away from social challenges" (Lynn 89). His failure to interview Lincoln reflects his early inability to seize opportunities and report on the pressing issues and people of his time. Howells remarked on the events later in Years of My Youth:

There were several campaign lives of Lincoln which must have seemed better than mine . . . I have heard that he annotated a copy of it. . .but I am not certain that I should like to see it, much as my curiosity is concerning it. He [Lincoln] might, he must, have said some things which could not console me for missing that great chance of my life when I was too young to know it . . . and I cannot flatter myself that I missed another great chance of my life. . . I blamed myself for not speaking to him, of course, as I blame myself for not having gone to him instead of sending to him for the facts of his past. (Howells Years 174-5)

Perhaps only through time did Howells recognize the missed opportunities of his life. At no other single point did Howells have such an opportunity to connect his journalistic background and through reportage convey the story of a man who would so shape the times.

Following the biography of Lincoln, Howells was contracted to write a book on the principal manufacturing industries in the East (Lynn 90). He accepted the assignment mainly because it would take him to New England, which he considered the literary hub of the world. Lynn describes Howells' failure:

The book on manufacturing got off to a very bad start, when he visited an iron foundry in Portland, Maine, and was refused admission on suspicion of planning to steal the manufacturer's secrets. Although he finally succeeded in penetrating a shoe factory in Haverhill, Massachusetts, his distaste for the experience was vast, and he soon abandoned the notion of doing anything in New England of a professional nature except paying calls on great writers. (Lynn 90)

As with his failure to interview Lincoln, Howells saw no potential in a story on the industrial conditions that were shaping the country. Because of his lack of interest in journalism, Howells saw no connection between his high literary ambitions and the potential of such journalistic assignments.

Howells passed on the opportunity to write about manufacturing, but while in New England he successfully entered the literary high society of the Brahmin caste that consisted of James Russell Lowell, James T. Fields, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others. Howells struck a chord with Lowell, who invited him to dine at the Parker House. This invitation was more than a request to dinner; it was an invitation to meet the great literary figures of Boston society. "Dr. Holmes was predisposed to look favorably upon the bright, ambitious, Western poet with whom his friend Lowell had invited to dine" (Lynn 95). Howells equally impressed both Fields and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who were taken by Howells' romantic literary ambitions. While

in New England, Howells met other authors including Emerson and Thoreau. Howell also met and dismissed Walt Whitman in New York. Only later in his career would Howells recount Whitman's literary accomplishments and remark highly of their meeting. Having reviewed Leaves of Grass for the *Ashtabula Sentinel* in 1860, Howells exhibited his lack of interest in Whitman and realism of the time by concluding that the work contained some high points, but much of it, particularly Whitman's sexual metaphor, embarrassed and put him off.

Interested in possible employment at the *Atlantic* as a means to further his preoccupation with high literature, Howells specifically asked Lowell about the position of assistant editor, but Howells was informed that the position had been filled. Howells saw magazine editing as a bridge from journalism to high literature. Regardless of the individual successes of Howells' literary pilgrimage, the striking impression he made on the literary high society of Boston facilitated the continuance of his career and made possible his future employment at the *Atlantic*.

Following the trip to Boston, Howells continued to write and publish in the *Atlantic*. "The Pilot's Story," which was published in the *Atlantic* in September 1860, was still grounded strongly in romanticism and aiming for high literature, Howells dabbled ever-so-slightly in realism. "The Pilot's Story" represents his continued use of sentimentalism and romance. He uses social issues of the day in a role designed to draw sympathies from his audience and promote the cause of abolitionists, making "The Pilot's Story" more a sentimental work of romanticism than a work of realism.

This poem is about a slave girl who faces no alternative to suicide after her master gambles her away. Howells chose contemporary subject matter and a contemporary setting, putting his character aboard a riverboat. His principal characters—which include a slave girl, a Southern gentleman, and a gambler—give this work a strong Midwestern voice. In addition, Howells also addresses social problems: "She was a beautiful woman, with just enough blood from her mother, / Darkening her eyes and her hair to make her race known to traders; / You would have thought she was white" (323-324). Howells addresses the issue of multi-race heritage, as he does with other social issues, but provides no social commentary. This is the limit to which Howells touches on any element of realism in this work.

In addition to the slave girl's own mixed heritage, Howells further complicates matters with the introduction of her son, the offspring of a Southern gentleman and his slave.

'Sold me? Sold me? Sold? -And you promised to give me my freedom!-

Promised me, for the sake of our little boy in Saint Louis!

What will you say to our boy, when he cries for me there in Saint Louis?

What will you say to our God? -Ah, you have been joking! I see it! -

No? God! God! He shall hear it, --and all of the angels in heaven,--

Even the devils in hell! -and none will believe when they hear it!

Sold! (324)

The social issue of children sired by the master was, as Howells implies, common but undiscussed. The notion of a motherless child plays greatly on the sympathies of his primarily abolitionist audience, exposing the work as more romantic than realistic. As with the social impact of the slave girl being a mulatto, Howells provides observation, but avoids any kind of social commentary.

While the attempt to draw sympathy is a characteristic of sentimental romanticism, Howells' stereotypical characterization is also typical of romanticism. Any attempts at realism are completely overshadowed by the fixtures of Howells' romanticism.

"The man that was with her, -- you see such, -- / Weakly good natured and kind, and weakly good-natured and vicious, / Slender of body and soul, fit neither for loving nor hating" (324). The characterization of the Southern gentleman is so typical, that clearly Howells is trying to present an image of what the North considered the stereotypical Southerner rather than an actual person. The descriptions of the gambler and even the slave girl are equally ambivalent. While some elements including contemporary setting and the social issues of "The Pilot's Story" are realistic, its characterization and purpose is decidedly romantic. It is engaged literature only in that it intends to capture the sentiments of a specific audience and incite action. "The Pilot's Story" is predicable and sentimental, and its melodramatic plot, stereotypical characters, and sentimental intentions illustrate Howells' continued infatuation with romantic poetry.

"The Pilot's Story" proved a very successful work for Howells. A review published August 18, 1860 in the *New York World* praises the poem as "simple, strong, true, and full of feeling." Lynn reveals the success of "Pilot's Story":

Yet the poem became popular because it gave the Northern audience on the eve of conflict with the South exactly the images of slave and planter in which it wished to believe. "The Pilot's Story" was reprinted in numerous newspapers during the fall of 1860; and in December, popular success was capped with critical approval when James Russell Lowell wrote to Howells to say that he, too, joined in the general appreciation of a "really fine poem." (92)

Because of the North's thirst to demonize the South, Howells set the hook of his sympathies in an audience willing to be moved by his politicized romantic verse.

Howells had found success as a romantic poet, and at this point in his literary development, he saw no reason to pursue anything else. Howells still had strong high literary ambitions, and after being published in the *Atlantic* and various newspapers He had achieved the early success that made a career in literature seem more plausible. Reflecting on past successes, Howells still longs for a life as a poetry, but is unsure of its plausibility.

It was that year so memorable to me for having five poems published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, two of them in the same number, and I must have been strongly confirmed in my purpose of being a poet.

Of course I knew too much of the world, and the literary world, to imagine that I could at once make a living by poetry, but I probably expected to live by some other work until my volumes of poetry should accumulate in sufficient number and sell in sufficient quantity to support me without the aid of prose. As yet I had no expectation of writing fiction (Howells Years 179-180).

Howells made the assumption that his limited success as a poet would continue and his remarks express his ambitions toward high literature. "But I doubt if I was afterwards more constant in my social duties; I was intending more and more to devote myself to poetry, and with a hand freer than ever" (Howells Years 182). Howells had considered journalism simply as a means of financial support, but with his recent publications, he felt that his social responsibilities in terms of reportage would no longer be necessary. Lynn sums up Howells' position: "Reporting, in other words, was a task he performed when he had to, but it was definitely not his cup of tea. The young Howells was a poet, and being a poet meant living in a dream world" (Lynn 126). Howells would extend the dream world as he escaped the brutalities of war, serving in Venice nearly the entire time the Civil War raged in America.

The next step in Howells' literary development came while in Venice serving as U.S. Consulate, a position he had garnered from Lincoln as a result of his campaign biography. Howells' literary submissions were now more frequently rejected. Fields, who replaced Lowell as editor of the *Atlantic* told Howells ". . . that the poems wartime America

wanted to read would deal with the social and political realities of the day and not with the timeless melancholy of romantic young men" (Lynn 108). The words of Fields and repeated rejection influenced Howells. Whether his change was precipitated by the advice of others or a more basic need to make a living through writing, Howells' perception and style of writing changed while overseas, as did the subject matter.

Howells' migration from romantic poetry aimed at a bookish elite to realistic literary prose for the middle class was not immediate. The failure to publish his poetry while in Europe and the repeated criticism from friends and respected authors led Howells to experiment with more realistic literature.

While in Venice, Howells found it nearly impossible to publish his work in America. The editor of the *Atlantic*, James Fields, who replaced Lowell, was hesitant to print anything further from Howells. In his letters, Howells' biting sarcasm describes his feeling towards the *Atlantic*: "I wish you, honestly, luck with the *Atlantic*. I have had some Venetian Sketches on probation in that purgatory for seven months" (Selected Letters 1863 155). Howells' comparison of the *Atlantic* as "purgatory" shows his dismay and disillusionment at his recent string of failures in regards to that magazine. Later in 1863, writing to his father, Howells remarked "I have got all my things back from the *Atlantic*, with which I think I have ceased to have favor. But if now and then I can reach their public through the magazine, I shall do so" (Selected Letters 1863 172-73). The *Atlantic's* diminished desire to publish Howells' work and his continued

desire to remain a literary voice through that publication pushed him to write more realistic material that Fields would accept.

Some of Howells' literary friends and the people that he was trying to impress simply were not taken by his romantic poetry. The *Atlantic* had changed the title from "The Empty House," and Howells remarked, "the changed destroyed all the pleasure I would have taken in the printed poem, and so evilly enchanted the verses, that I do not know them" (Selected Letters 1861 72). Holmes' responded critically, writing: "I liked your last piece in the *Atlantic* though not equally with the Pilot's Story wh[ich] I have told you was very remarkable—Your last is rather Tennyson-ish--& I prefer pure Howells to any foreign flavored productions [.]—" (Selected Letters 1861, footnote 2, 74). Holmes praised "Pilot's Story" for its realistic elements. Its Western setting and contemporary plot were more representative of Howells and the time and place in which he was living.

In addition to Holmes, the opinion of Lowell, a friend and a prominent literary figure in New England, meant a lot to the budding author. In a letter dated 28 July 1864, Lowell wrote:

I don't forget my good opinion of you & my interest in your genius. Therefore I may be frank. You have enough in you to do honor to our literature. Keep on cultivating yourself. You know what I thought. You must sweat the Heine out of you as men do mercury. You are as good as Heine—remember that. (Letters 1861, footnote 2, 72)

Lowell's remarks seem almost as encouraging words from a father to a son reminding Howells that he was good enough, but he needed to find his own voice. Howells took the opinions of his friends and, more importantly, the editors that controlled his future publication very seriously as he continued to develop his own literary voice while in Venice.

When Howells returned to America with Venetian Life, the literary fruit of his time in Europe, he was a man with changing literary perceptions:

Venice marked the point at which a poet who dwelt in Arcadia became a prose writer concerned with the everyday world about him. . . . neither Twain nor Howells was totally changed by what he learned in the Rockies or the Piazza di San Marco; but their youthful romanticism was thereafter crossed with an antiromantic skepticism. (Lynn 126-127)

Venetian Life marks a change in that Howells' subjects reflect his developing interest in the commonplace. It represents the beginning of a new direction that continues to develop over the next fifteen years during his time with the *Atlantic*.

Howells' Venetian Life, a collection of travel sketches, showed his renewed interest in journalism and reportage. Barring the exotic setting, Howells creates a portrait of Venice that emphasizes the slums and poor peasants, illustrating his interest for the commonplace through writing about ordinary people and events. In The Road to Realism, Edwin Cady writes:

After his fashion he had previously worked as a poet, a reporter, and a scholar-critic, in about

that order of importance. He began in Venice to work again at all three, but it is safe to guess that he thought his exotic surroundings would stir the poet to new heights of achievement. On the contrary, by the time he was done with Venice the poet had almost dropped out of sight, the reporter had made a creative leap to a path which led up toward a dazzling future, and the scholar-critic had won the plaudits of the very Americans Howells thought most worth impressing. (Road to Realism 102)

Venetian Life represents for a Howells the product of the emerging interest in the commonplace and a loss of interest in romantic poetry.

Howells presents in Venetian Life the occurrences he witnessed daily while in Europe; however, he presents them more as a tourist visiting a foreign land. Writing for the *North American Review*, James Lowell reviewed Howells' Venetian Life saying, "there was a refinement, an instinctive reserve of phase, and a felicity of epithet, only too rare in modern, and especially in American writing (Critical Essays 4). Of the product of Howells' time in Europe, Lowell writes "The artist has studied his subject for four years, and at last presents us with a series of pictures having all the charm of tone and the minute fidelity to nature which were the praise of the Dutch school of painters, but with a higher sentiment, a more refined humor, and an airy elegance that recalls the better moods of Watteau" (Critical Essays 4-5). While Venetian Life was not a work of realistic fiction, it is a strong

connection between Howells' journalistic background and his literary future. In addition, the work was critically successful, pushing Howells to continue on his present course.

William Dean Howells' evolution from a poet with romantic ambitions towards a highly regarded proponent of American realism is evident in works like "The Pilot's Story" and most predominantly in Venetian Life. Howells' idea on the purpose of literature was evolving, evidenced by his shifting focus from sentimental subjects to common people and places. As a young reporter in Ohio, his aspirations were towards high literature with reportage as a means of financial support. During his time at the *Atlantic*, his opinions of literature continue to change and he arrives at the recognition that journalism and reportage can have more literary merit and power than the high romantic poetry he aspired to write in his youth.

Chapter 2: Howells' Evolving Literary Career: 1865-1875

Howells landed in New York in 1865 following his return from Venice resigned to making a living through journalism. Henry J. Raymond, editor of the *New York Times* turned Howells down when he applied for a position because he felt that the aspiring author was not cut out for journalism in the New York. Though he was turned down by the *New York Times*, E.L. Godkin was impressed by some of Howells' unpublished travel sketches and offered him a full time job at *The Nation*.

Howells' duties at *The Nation* included writing a column called "Minor Topics" in which he dealt with random issues ranging from hand-shaking to the cold. One of the common subjects of this column was the violence occurring around him ranging from concealed weapons to gruesome murders and train accidents. Before leaving Venice, Howells started focusing on some of the violent episodes around him. "In an article for the North American Review he had dilated upon the viciousness of Italian brigands, and in a dispatch to a New York newspaper (ironically, it was the *Times*) he had discussed the guillotining of an unfortunate creature named Picot in Marseilles" (Lynn 132). Howells' rejection by the *New York Times* incited him to cover topics as he might have for the paper. "Minor Topics" reflects his new interest in violence, a theme that would turn up in his future realism.

Howells' work at *The Nation* did not last long as James Fields, editor of the *Atlantic*, upped the ante and offered him a position at "twenty-five hundred dollars a year, an increase

of twenty-five per cent over what he had been making on *The Nation*" (Lynn 135). With this increase in pay came an increase in responsibilities and a good chance of succeeding Fields as editor. In a letter to his father, Howells wrote: "He gives me \$2,500 a year for work that will not occupy my whole time, and my chances of succeeding him will be fairer than anybody's else. But I do not care for the succession, much, my object in life being to write books, and not to edit magazines"

(Selected Letters 1866 250). His duties included sifting all manuscripts submitted, corresponding with contributors and seeking new ones, proofreading and other fact checking, and submitting monthly four to five pages of book reviews (Lynn 135).

Fields also encouraged Howells to contribute his own material to the magazine. Around the same time that he hired Howells in 1866, Fields was interested in incorporating new types of sketches of American life into the *Atlantic*. In an effort to increase readership of the magazine, Fields obtained an exclusive contract with James Parton, a renowned magazine journalist, to publish in the *Atlantic* and sought his advice concerning the type material published in the magazine. Parton told Fields that the *Atlantic* needed "fewer ponderous Emersonian essays and more red-blooded reporting on topics of real interest . . . the *Atlantic* could easily be made much more popular if 'a writer named Mark Twain [were] engaged and more articles connected with life than with literature.'" To write this kind of account on the realities of American life would, Parton suggested, require a "long period of investigation-out-of-doors" (Sedgwick 84).

Parton's advice on popularizing the literary magazine with articles that took a journalistic approach and reflected real life was influential with the highly literary Fields. Reflecting Parton's ideas, Fields discussed with his new assistant editor the importance of "finding men who could write little short lively sketchy things of from six to eight pages in length" (Sedgwick 98). Howells soon responded by taking on himself the task of writing the short sketches for which Fields was looking.

To fulfill a need that Fields saw for the *Atlantic*, Howells began applying the style of travel writing that was successful in his Venetian Life to a less exotic setting in a series of sketches that narrated journeys around his new home of Cambridge, Massachusetts. His travels took him from upper class neighborhoods to the black tenements. These works fuse his travel writing with a contemporary, even familiar America creating a product far closer to realistic fiction than his previous efforts. Howells began publishing his sketches of life in suburban Cambridge in the *Atlantic* in January 1868.

Howells' Suburban Sketches advanced realism in three major ways. The first principle of realism is accurate observation of the commonplace, and to create a sense of realism Howells described what he directly witnessed. These sketches marked a renewed connection to his journalistic roots expanding on his successful series of travel sketches, but shifting the focus from the exotic Venice to the familiar Boston. Second, it engaged him in contemporary social issues, such as Irish immigration to Boston, which many considered problematic. Finally, "The Scene," a sketch of a drowned girl,

exhibited one of Howells' earliest realistic portrayals of the disturbing side of American life. All three elements combine to form for Howells an early example of where his literary career was headed.

While in Venetian Life the setting was exotic, Howells set Suburban Sketches in Cambridge where he was living at the time, intentionally focusing on the commonplace and using daily occurrence for his plot. His first sketch entitled "Mrs. Johnson," published in the *Atlantic* in January 1868, sets the premise for the work and shows Howells' desire to portray the commonplace:

It was on a morning of the lovely New England May that we left the horse-car, and, spreading our umbrellas, walked down the street to our new home in Charlesbridge. . . . Here and there in the vacant lots abandoned hoop-skirts defied decay; and near the half-finished wooden houses, empty mortar-beds, and bits of lath and slate strewn over the scarred and mutilated ground, added their interest to the scene. (Suburban Sketches 11)

Howells opens with a direct, close description of the scene including elements like vacant lots and half finished houses that portray Cambridge commonplaces realistically. He shows that his interest is not in refined Cambridge, but is taken by a sense of disruption and decay that plagues the neighborhood.

Howells' intention in this work is to create a narrator who in the course of his journeys accurately observes and records life around Cambridge. In a letter to Charles Norton, Howells expresses his thoroughness in precisely sketching the

scene: "At present, I don't aspire above writing some sketches of things about Cambridge, and I go over the ground a dozen times to see if I've told fibs" (Selected Letters 1869 346). Having been criticized for falsely portraying Venice, Howells was dedicated to presenting a portrait of Cambridge that was as realistic and literally accurate as possible.

Howells' ability to observe and describe the familiar closely and accurately still had its clear limits, but Suburban Sketches marked a real advance. Concern about prying into private lives was one limitation for Howells. In Venice, he had written as a tourist and noted everything as it appeared because much seemed foreign to him, but at home in Cambridge, Howells questioned whether he should write about personal events. In "Pedestrian Tour" a couple of women are mourning the loss of a loved one and Howells writes: "If I had beheld all this in some village *campo santo* in Italy, I should have been much more vividly impressed by it, as an aesthetical observer; whereas I was now merely touched as a human being, and had little desire to turn the scene to literary account" (Suburban Sketches 65-66). Howells' realism flinches here. He felt this scene with the ladies mourning was, on one hand, disturbing and, on the other, a little too personal. But the fact that he chose to at least include the event illustrates his commitment portraying exactly what he saw. By including this scene for his audience, he demonstrates his growth as a writer of realism, but still Howells is hesitant about portraying the human experience. This hesitance would later fade only with the distance provided by fiction.

The same hesitation exists in his account of the drowned girl in "The Scene," but here Howells comes closer to confronting difficult truths. Confronted with subject matter as horrible as a suicide, he comes to the conclusion that this scene is very different from the material in Venetian Life or any of the other sketches. He resigns himself to being a critical spectator when describing the scene to the reader:

In the bottom of the cart lay something long and straight and terrible, covered with a red shawl that drooped over the end of the wagon; and on this thing were piled the baskets in which the grocers had delivered their orders for sugar and flour, and coffee and tea. (Suburban Sketches 194)

The subject matter of realism is often disturbing. For Howells, a man with a youthful distaste for the disturbing, the confrontation with a suicide is a victory for realism. This description illustrates the evolution in the course of one work as Howells has come closest to portraying an obviously disturbing and personal scene.

Howells himself felt he had made real progress in Suburban Sketches but his friend Henry James was disappointed in the work, partly for the very graphic quality Howells liked. In a letter to Charles Norton, James regretted that the realism in Suburban Sketches was more descriptive and literal, than imaginative.

His recent sketches in the *Atlantic*, collected into a volume, belong, I think, by the wondrous cunning of their manner, to very good literature. He seems to have resolved himself, however, into one who can

write solely of what his fleshly eyes have seen; and for this reason I wish he were "located" where they would rest upon richer and fairer things than this immediate landscape. Looking about for myself, I conclude that the face of nature and civilization in this our country is to a certain point a very sufficient literary field. But it will yield its secrets only to a really grasping imagination" (James Letters 252).

James expressed a dissatisfaction with the material Howells used citing a need for "richer and fairer" material" by which he seemed to imply subjects of greater social sophistication, preferably European. But on one point James was right. James thought Howells' realism too limited to visual description, lacking psychological depth and social analysis. The depth that James thought missing from Suburban Sketches would only come for Howells as he applied his realism to fiction.

James's conclusion is that Howells needed to be more imaginative while reporting less and to choose more cultivated material. Howells had aimed at neither.

Regardless of James's impression, Suburban Sketches represented progress in terms of realism for Howells as he now focused upon a close observation of everyday American life. In a letter to James, Howells wrote:

In some ways these things seem rather small business to me; but I fell naturally into doing them I persuaded myself (too fondly, perhaps) that they're a new kind of study of our life, and I have an impression that they're to lead me to some

higher sort of performance. They're not easy to do, but cost me a great deal of work. (Letters 1870 352)

A realistic portrayal of the commonplace—a "study of our life" as he called it—with a narrator who functioned as a tourist observing everyday American life was new to the *Atlantic* and, he believed, to American literature.

Howells' commentary on contemporary social issues, like immigration, reflects his changing ideas about realism and social engagement. He expresses his feeling on the recent influx of immigration, particularly of the Irish, whom he felt had overrun Boston. In "Doorstep Acquaintance," Howells recounts his frequent talks with vagabonds and foreigners around Cambridge. In one particular account, Howells described an immigrants' life and the new joy he found in America: "He bethought him of coming to America and he had never regretted it, but for the climate. You spent a good deal here,--nearly all you earned, --but then a poor man was a man, and the people were honest. It was wonderful to him that they all knew how to read and write" (Suburban Sketches 42). Through this immigrant, Howells expresses his opinion on immigrants. He is not opposed to all immigrants, particularly those that were honest and literate, but he was opposed to the massive influx of Irish immigrants, whom he repeatedly demonized in this work. The vagabond continues: "he viewed with inexpressible scorn those Irish who come to this country, and were so little sensible of the benefits it conferred upon them" (Suburban Sketches 42). Howells heavily criticized people who came to this country and did not appreciate what it

had to offer, and he used Suburban Sketches to express his sentiments on the subject. The opinions that Howells expresses in regard to immigration, a social concern of the time, were very different from his later views expressed in such novels as A Hazard of New Fortunes, but it represented one of the first realistic portrayals of a contemporary social problem in his works, making very clear his opinion on the matter.

In addition to focusing on the commonplace and using it to express a social problem, Howells forced himself to deal with graphic imagery that he had shunned in the past. "The Scene" is about a girl who has drowned herself. Through the early part of the sketch Howells reveals the conflict between the romantic poet and the journalist in himself. Initially the narrator says of himself, "that literary soul fell at once to patching himself up a romantic story for the suicide, after the pitiful fashion of this fiction-ridden age, when we must relate everything we see to something we have read" (Suburban Sketches 191). Howells is critical of his younger, romantic self who did, in fact, relate everything to something he read.

"The Scene," which details the group gathered to see the drowned girl, bears few similarities to some of the sketches that he had recently completed, as this disturbing subject matter resembles little when compared to his other subjects. In the vein of realism, Howells' details the removal of the body and the that has gather to witness the event.

The preparation for it, whatever it was to be, was so deliberate, and the reality had so slight relation to the French roofs and modern improvements of the comfortable Charlesbridge which

he knew, that he could not consider himself other than as a spectator awaiting some entertainment, with a faint inclination to be critical. (Suburban Sketches 191)

This statement represents Howells' present state of development toward literary realism. He is moving more towards direct observation without a filter. The scene of the drowned girl was one that he needed to relate to readers. The chaos created around the scene caught the young realist's attention and he could not simply turn a blind eye. Though not truly a work of literary realism, Suburban Sketches presents strong elements of realism throughout the various sketches, making this work a strong transition point for the author.

Howells' next work, Their Wedding Journey, continues in the direction of realism with its presentation of the commonplace, but adds a sustained narrative element, as well as increasing characterization and psychology missing from his previous work. The beginning of Their Wedding Story expresses Howells intention:

. . .in attempting to tell the reader of the wedding-journey of a newly married couple, no longer very young, to be sure, but still fresh in the light of their love, I shall have nothing to do but to talk of some ordinary traits of American life as these appeared to them, to speak a little of well-known and easily accessible places, to present now a bit a landscape and new a sketch of character. (Their Wedding Journey 3)

Maintaining his past accomplishments with travelogues, this work is still an account of a journey. Howells begins with seemingly romantic ambitions as he informs readers that the couple are newly married, as one might expect in a work of romance. However, elements of the commonplace appear as he describes the couple as older. Howells characters are not young newlyweds, as might typify a Victorian romance novel, but older and more representative of the people Howells saw around him. His subject matter typifies the commonalities of American life often seen, much as he did in Suburban Sketches. His hopeful advance in character is laid out and allows the reader to be the judge. With the advance of a narrative plot and more complex characters, this work is less of a travelogue and has more elements of realistic fiction than his previous efforts.

Early in the writing process, Howells expressed in a letter to his father his hopes for his new book. "I have fairly launched upon the story of our last summer's travels, which I'm giving the form of fiction so far as the characters are concerned. If I succeed in this—and I believe I shall—I see clear before me a path in literature which no one else has trod, and which I believe I can make most distinctly and entirely my own" (Selected Letters 1870 360-61). Howells' development towards realism—a connection for him between journalism and fiction—was a new venture in American literature. He combined many of the elements he explored in journalism and travelogue writing, but with Their Wedding Journey, these elements took on the guise of fiction when combined with stronger elements of character and plot. The

hope and optimism that he expressed showed that his development was not only progressing, but that it was a conscious effort. In a similar letter to Ralph Keeler concerning his venture into a new style of fiction, Howells wrote:

I feel more and more persuaded that we have only to study American life with the naked eye in order to find it infinitely various and entertaining. The trouble has always been that we have looked at it through somebody else's confounded literary telescope. I find it hard work myself to trust my eyes, and I catch myself feeling for the telescope, but I hope to do without it, altogether, by and by." (Their Wedding Journey xiv)

Expressing his desire to articulate direct and accurate observation, Howells avoids preconceived romantic literary notions. Howells is now critical of high culture and disengaged literature which he refers to as "somebody else's confounded literary telescope." By studying American life with a telescope, he is so far removed from reality that he cannot see the intricacies of the commonplace. By using someone else's telescope, as Howells writes, he is witnessing the world through someone else's instrument and from their point of view. Only by using his own eyes can he develop his own perspective and literary voice.

D.G. Cooke in William Dean Howells describes Their Wedding Journey: "clever in portraiture, rich in historical flavor, and in kaleidoscopic description, with a classic bit of scene-painting at Niagara, the work has its most remarkable

quality in the air of adventure investing the thousand little incidents of travel"(156). This work possesses such qualities because it comes directly from Howells' personal experiences. Almost the entire manuscript comes from his earlier writing for the *Ohio State Journal*, his diary of his and Mrs. Howells wedding journey, and his travels with his father in 1870. Because the experiences in the work are his own, he has a closer perspective on the subject matter and can present them in greater detail with a narrative voice that is more engaged than as a tourist quaintly presenting a foreign culture. Instead of seeing the world through someone else's telescope, Howells watches and writes about his society through a microscope.

Their Wedding Journey represents for Howells, the would-be realist, a growth in terms of characterization and narrative voice. The Marches represent a more refined step for Howells. Through in many respects Basil is William Dean Howells, in some respects he isn't. Basil March is one of Howells' earliest attempts at the creation of a fictional character. For Howells, the only way to create fiction was to base it on his personal experiences. Howells accounted his sunstroke that occurred while in New York in his diary, and included this incident in the work but is observed rather than experienced by the Marches. "Howells' use of this experience in the novel provides an early example of the way in which he achieved realistic objectivity by using the Marches as 'witnesses of the events' rather than as 'prominent actors'" (Their Wedding Journey xxiii). His use of direct observation was successful in Suburban Sketches, particularly in the

sketch of the drowned girl, and he has successfully incorporated it into this work. While Basil is at times still seen as a tourist, Howells was struggling between romanticism and realism.

Howells uses the character of Basil to start a literary discussion, questioning both his beliefs and the beliefs of others. During the Marches' discussion of the romantic ballad of Sam Patch, Basil remarks "We shall never have a poetry of our own till we get over this absurd reluctance from facts, till we make the ideal embrace and include the real, till we consent to face the music in our simple common names" (Their Wedding Journey 68-69). As Basil often represents Howells, this remarks clearly represents Howells' advocating the principles of realism. The combination of his realistic portrayal of the commonplace coupled with the narrative thread and characterization make Their Wedding Journey a major step for Howells on the road to becoming a realist.

Considered by Howells to be his first real novel, A Chance Acquaintance is not only an early example of realism, but is also consciously anti-romantic. The strong characterization of Eastern and Western values in Miles and Kitty, respectively, illustrate the direction that Howells' work was taking. Kitty represents Howells' evolution towards realism and a changing, more open view of literature, while Miles is a representation of the conventional literary romantic ideas to which Howells had formerly aspired. Howells wrote to his sister in January 1862 concerning A Chance Acquaintance: "the work was meant simply 'to use up the Quebec material that we got last summer'" (A Chance Acquaintance

xiv). Howells' realism was derived from his personal experiences. But while his intentions were to exhaust the Quebec material, he had further hopes for the narrative. He commented to his father on March 10, 1872: "I've got my story pretty nearly half done, and I've hopes of its success. I know that you will approve of it. I'm writing it with more heart and conscience than ever before" (A Chance Acquaintance xiv). By writing this work with more heart and conscience, Howells puts more of himself into it and writes it from a more realistic position. Howells hoped that his novel would overshadow his previous works in popularity because he was taking a chance by exploring and broadening his realistic approach. In a letter to Hjalmar Boyesen, Howells wrote: "I'm writing a story—a real story, this time with a plot" (Selected Letters 1872 393). In this letter, Howells alludes to his perceived shortcomings in previous works and his hope to further his progress towards realistic fiction. With A Chance Acquaintance, Howells succeeded in adding a greater depth of character development and a narrative plot to his already successful travelogues.

The chance acquaintance of the novel begins when Kitty Ellison, the well-mannered, free-thinking girl from the West, mistakenly grabs the arm of Miles Arbuton, the personification of the snobbish, closed-mindedness of a high culture Bostonian. In this instance, Howells introduces a theme integral to his realism that will carry on through most of his late work: the conflicts between the new West and the established East and the battle to establish American values in the shadow of European dominance. "The American experience

becomes the central issue: within the framework of a story of romantic love the book confronts the social ideals of the democratic West in Kitty Ellison and the aristocratic East in Miles Arbuton" (Introduction to A Chance Acquaintance xiii). Howells takes romance, the popular form of literature at the time, as a frame and applies his direct observation and realistic portrayal of the commonplace to the plot. Howells' evolving narrative voice and evolving social conscience appear in the characters. The values that Howells instills in Kitty, his representation of the West, are the values that Howells sees in America; whereas, elements of aristocracy and high culture, expressed through Miles, represent for Howells New England and values of Europe. A Chance Acquaintance is more than an East versus West novel; it is an America versus Europe novel as well. The review from *The Nation* remarked: "the native American rearing of simple hearts produced human beings while the European training of the coastal aristocracy too often nurtured correct but inflexible prigs" (Introduction to A Chance Acquaintance xxiii). Remarking on Howells' intended theme, *The Nation* captured his sentiments and the essence of the argument concerning what Howells considered as a wholly American upbringing versus the more European sentiments of New England.

Avoiding sentimentality and maintaining his realistic ambitions, Howells' characterization of Kitty Ellison and Miles Arbuton remains very faithful to his impressions and observations. Kitty represents Howells' background and his democratic leaning. She is a free-thinker from the Midwest and represents the new American girl. As the essence of the

realism of the novel, particularly when compared to Miles, Kitty represents Howells' developing notions of realism in her perceptions and comments to Miles:

"Why, I don't know," said Kitty, "there was that little settlement round the saw-mill. Can't you imagine any human interest in the lives of the people there? It seems to me that one might make almost anything out of them. Suppose, for example, that the owner of that mill was a disappointed man who had come here to bury the wreck of his life in-sawdust?" (A Chance Acquaintance 43).

In her ideology concerning human interest in the unsophisticated American commonplace, Kitty more clearly represents Howells and his realistic aspirations. Kitty is a proponent of engaged literature, as is Howells. Kitty expresses the virtually unlimited possibilities that lie in accounts of the commonplace to Miles. This is a sentiment that Howells also believes in, judging by the content of his work.

"I suppose there's a pleasure in finding out the small graces and beauties of the poverty-stricken subjects, that they wouldn't have in better ones, isn't there?" asked Kitty. "At any rate, if I were to write a story, I should want to take the slightest sort of plot, and lay the scene in the dullest kind of place, and then bring out all their possibilities." (A Chance Acquaintance 98)

Howells' ideology of realism and interest in common people and occurrences is vested in the character of Kitty through her

ideal novel. The story that Kitty would write is the story that Howells hopes to write.

Whereas Kitty represents Howells' Western culture and his opinions of literature, Miles represents the attitudes and opinions of Boston and Howells' early romantic ambitions. In a letter home, Kitty clearly illustrates the character of Miles:

He is Europeanized enough not to think much of America, though I can't find that he quite approves of Europe, and his experience seems not to have left him any particular country in either hemisphere. . . I am afraid that he believes in "vulgar and meretricious distinctions" of all sorts, and that he hasn't an atom of "magnanimous democracy" in him. In fact, I find to my great astonishment that some ideas which I thought were held only in England, and which I had never seriously thought of, seem actually a part of Mr. Arbuton's nature or education. He talks about the lower classes, and tradesmen, and the best people, and good families, as I supposed nobody in this country ever did. (A Chance Acquaintance 80-81).

Arbuton, characterized as typifying Boston, is portrayed as a snob with only an interest in high culture. He parallels many of the sentiments that Howells early in the author's career. Miles is shown as close-minded, representative of European sentiments:

This new Boston with which Mr. Arbuton inspired her was a Boston of high and difficult tastes, that found its social ideal in the Old World, and that

shrank from contact with the reality of this; a Boston as alien as Europe to her simple experiences, and that seemed to be proud only of the things that were unlike other American things; a Boston that would rather perish by fire and sword than be suspected of vulgarity; a critical, fastidious, and reluctant Boston, dissatisfied with the rest of the hemisphere, and gelidly self-satisfied in so far as it was not in the least the Boston of her fond preconceptions. (Chance Acquaintance 91)

For Kitty, Boston reflects many of Miles' negative mannerisms. This notion of Boston is a contrast to Howells' earlier romantic view, but reflects his changing sentiments and loyalties. Miles represents Howells' earlier self in both his feelings and actions. The viewpoint of Miles and his former self—the one Howells is criticizing—is contrasted against Kitty's personal experiences and the Marches, who provide Kitty with her only secondhand impressions. "It was doubtless, no more the real Boston we know and love, than either of the others; and it perplexed her more than it need, even if it had not been mere phantasm. It made her suspicious of Mr. Arbuton's behavior towards her, and observant of little things that might very well have otherwise escaped her" (Chance Acquaintance 91). For Kitty, Miles is a reflection of the city. His close-minded, European values cast a shadow on a Boston that once represented the epitome of literature in America for Howells.

Arbuton's effects on Kitty mirror the effects that the high literary society of Boston had on Howells. Boston's high literary society embraced Howells as a poet in 1860 furthering his romantic ambitions. Representing high culture Boston, Arbuton has a similar effect on Kitty:

If it had only been the painter whose arm I took that first day on the boat, instead of Mr. Arbuton! But the worst of it is, he is making a hypocrite of me, and a cowardly, unnatural girl. I wanted to go nearer and look at the painter's sketch; but I was ashamed to say I'd never seen a real artist's sketch before, and I'm getting to be ashamed, or to seem ashamed, of a great many innocent things. . .

. Up to the present moment, Fanny, if you want to know, that's the principal effect of Mr. Arbuton on me. I'm being gradually snubbed and scared into treasons, stratagems, and spoils. (A Chance

Acquaintance 88)

Howells shows Arbuton as imposing his will and opinion on the freethinking Kitty. Simply because of his higher status and his exposure to high culture, he criticizes her when her views do not align with his. In the account, Arbuton represents in a degree the pressure exerted by Boston's literary society on Howells. By criticizing Boston through Miles, Howells is criticizing the society that welcomed him as one of their own. In his criticism of Boston, Howells draws a line between his ambition to realistic fiction and the high culture, disengaged literary sentiments of Boston.

At this point in his literary development, Howells' ambitions towards realism had surpassed the limits of his typically romantic, idealistic supporters in Boston. On A Chance Acquaintance, Howells remarked, "people speak to me of it more than of Their Wedding Journey. I am glad I have done it for one reason if for no other: it sets me forever outside of the rank of mere culturists, followers of an elegant literature, and proves that I have sympathy with the true spirit of Democracy" (Introduction to A Chance Acquaintance xxvii). Having forgotten his romantic ambitions, for he once longed to be a "follower of an elegant literature," A Chance Acquaintance is the novel in which Howells permanently sets his course as a realist.

Everett Carter in Howells and the Age of Reason sees Howells' commentary on America found in A Chance Acquaintance as a weakness:

In telling their story, he was too much concerned with using them (the characters) to illustrate a thesis, in this case that, in America, East is East and West is West, and the twain can meet but only rarely marry happily. The imposition of the thesis impaired Howells' allegiance to the truth of his subjects; when writing of a Boston aristocrat it was almost impossible to prevent the stereotype from slipping between pen and paper. Ruefully Howells admitted to Henry James that he had allowed Arbuthnot [sic], the Boston hero, to become a "simulacrum;" but he promised not to repeat this error. (Carter 107)

In light of the criticism of Miles, Howells remarked he was "a Bostonian and not the Bostonian" (Cady 183). Howells was aware that the failing of his characters was that they appeared stereotypical, particularly Miles, but his particular concern was to express his opinions of Boston society and its contrast to what Howells saw as a defining American core of values spearheaded by the West. In a letter to his father, Howells stressed the difficulty in writing this novel. "I know that there's good material in the plot, if I only have the wit to dig it out. My great trouble is to keep it from degenerating into anything like caricature, on one hand, and from something too seriously heavy on the other" (Selected Letters 1872 394). Howells consciously worked to maintain the reality of his plot, which was based on a trip to Quebec the previous summer, and his characters, elements of which came from his own family. With the importance of conveying a message, Howells found it difficult to maintain a balance of theme and character.

A Chance Acquaintance is anti-romantic in that it excites, but ultimately disappoints, the sentiments of the typical romance reader by disguising a commentary on the state of America as a love story only to have the romance fail at the end. Serialized in the *Atlantic*, the work introduces two characters and draws them together by fate. Howells' original title, Romance of a Summer's Month, illustrates his intentions of using typically romantic ideas as a guise for his commentary.

The pinnacle in terms of realism is the novel's anti-romantic ending. Howells has created two characters who are

very different and put them into a seemingly sentimental romance where the typical plot would bring the two together at the end. In a testament to reality, Howells has the pair, particularly Kitty, realize that there can be no happy ending. Reflecting the sentiments of monthly installment readers, James Parton, the journalist who had counseled Fields to put more American life and less literature in the *Atlantic*, commented on the story monthly as it developed. His early letters reflect the false romantic elements that Howells uses: "The whole number teems with suggestion. But, O Lord, if you let that horrid Bostonian have that nice girl, you will have to convert him severely first" (A Chance Acquaintance xvii). Like many of Howells' audience, Parton assumed that Howells would manipulate the plot to result in the predictable marriage.

At the end of the novel, Howells expresses the reality of the situation through Miles:

But here the whole fabric of Mr. Arbuton's defense [sic] toppled to the ground. He was a man of scrupulous truth, not accustomed to deceive himself or others. He had been ashamed of her, he could not deny it, not to keep the love that was now dearer to him than life. He saw it with paralyzing clearness; and, as an inexorable fact that confounded quite as much as it dismayed him, he perceived that throughout that ignoble scene she had been the gentle person and he the vulgar one. (A Chance Acquaintance 160)

Howells presents Arbuton as an honest character. He realizes that any relationship with Kitty cannot work. Having concluded the work, Parton remarks on the surprise ending:

You aggravating wretch! Just as I had forgiven Boston, just as you had got him where he could do himself most good-humbled, on his knees—and in a fair way to become, at last, not wholly unworthy of the princess of Erie Creek—then you up and stop. Too bad!

No: too good—too true—just the very way it would have been, and ought to be. But you must fight it out with the hardened novel-reader. Your little book does honor to your genius, but more to your courage, your faith, your truth, your loyalty. It is an honest book. (A Chance Acquaintance xvii)

Parton's comments capture exactly what Howells accomplished with this novel. By presenting two obviously incompatible people and bringing them close together, Howells draws in an audience attracted by popular romantic ideas. He then exposes the reality of the situation by keeping the two apart.

During the early part of his career, Howells evolved quickly, moving from an aspiring poet to a clear course set towards realism. Having just returned from Venice, Howells began this early part of his career in newspapers. He quickly moved to the *Atlantic* and established himself with his first sketches of life around Cambridge. In Suburban Sketches, Howells presented a book that was like a travelogue, but focused through personal observation on the common everyday environment around him. Suburban Sketches provided Howells an

outlet for his developing social consciousness through which readers could gaze into both the positive and negative sides of life. As he moved to Their Wedding Journey, Howells developed a stronger narrative voice and more complete mastery of characterization. He also worked to separate himself from the more idealistic, high culture element of Boston. In Chance Acquaintance, Howells developed stronger fictionalized characters and allowed them to represent East versus West issues that he saw in America. The plot in this, his first true novel, was more cohesive and less of a travelogue. His voice and characterization also increased in the brief period between works. In a very brief period of time, Howells had made a literary name for himself and established a direction that would position him as one of the major proponents of American realism.

Chapter 3: Howells' Transition from Narrative Fiction to
Literary Realism 1875-1882.

During Howells' later years at the *Atlantic*, his literary theory continued to develop. Having cast away most, if not all, of his romantic ambitions and moved toward realism through direct observation, Howells was focused on using fiction as a means to convey his ideas of realism. He altered the use of the narrator, which in his travelogues and some of his earlier fiction had presented the single truth as Howells saw it in his own voice. The narrative voice was transferred from an omniscient narrator to fictional characters with a limited perspective, creating stronger characters with a greater sense of autonomy. He allowed his characters to speak for him, presenting the values that he now saw as typifying the developing American middle class. This shift in narrative perspective greatly enhanced his ability to convey his moral views through a realistic portrayal of the subject. Howells' change in narrative point of view not only allowed him to further develop his social voice, but also contributed to the development of his characterization. The shifted narrator allowed for the creation of characters with more depth, thus increasing his realistic portrayal of America.

His subject matter moved from a picturesque and unengaged portrayal of American society around him to a magnified, exacting view of life as Howells saw it in the city around him. This change in subject now led to a more fervent social consciousness. His work was no longer about courtship, but took on deeper significance, dealing with the realities of

issues that he saw around him. No longer was it enough for Howells to simply showcase the commonplace; now his fiction took on a sociological depth, proving a social conscience and providing an underlying criticism to what Howells saw wrong with America. No longer content to merely express aspects of life realistically, Howells used realism to puncture many of the romanticized social conventions, like spiritualism and marriage.

Reflecting a new interest in alternative forms of social organization like Shakerism, Undiscovered Country marks for Howells a renewed interest and further move toward realistic fiction with a social conscience. This novel reflects both Howells' and society's general interest in alternative religions, like Swedenborgianism and Christian Science, and his interest in the Shakers and their ideas on social living, which bordered on socialism. Whereas society had a more romanticized opinion of both spiritualism and the Shakers, Howells uses personal observation to expose the reality of both, thus deflating the romanticism associated with them.

Evidence of Howells' strengthened realism lies in the characterization of Dr. Boynton, one of the principal characters in Undiscovered Country and in his portrayal of the Shakers. Boynton believes strongly in spiritualism and, through his daughter as a medium, hopes to communicate with his dead wife. The search for a community that will accept his views leads him to the Shaker village, allowing for Howells' detailed portrayal of Shaker society. Through the Shakers and their spiritualism, Boynton realizes that it is futile to try

and communicate with the spiritual world. He dies a reformed man.

As with much of his previous material, Howells based Undiscovered Country on personal observation. He spent a great deal of time with the Shakers in 1875 writing a short descriptive piece called "A Shaker Village," published in the *Atlantic* in June 1876. This piece, much in the vein of his travelogues, provided an explanation of their beliefs and a sketch of life in their village. Howells wrote:

We are here, in the country, where we have been, for the past six weeks, near the Shakers, with whom we are on intimate terms of friendship, and about whose strange life I'm going to make a little paper for the magazine. They present great temptations to the fictionist, and as Mrs. Howells has charged me not to think of writing a story with them in it, I don't see how I can help it. (Selected Letter 1875 103)

Howells' realism typically had journalistic foundations and his use of personal observation of the Shakers in Undiscovered Country follows a similar pattern.

Once again an observer of the American condition, Howells opens Undiscovered Country with a reflection on the changing face of the city. "Some years ago, at a time when the rapid growth of the city was changing the character of many localities, two young men were sitting, one afternoon early in April, in the parlor of a house on one of those streets which . . . were no longer the homes of the decorous ease that once inhabited them" (Undiscovered Country 1). Howells frames his

novel around the decay of the city and the migration to the suburbs: " I don't think I was ever in a street before where quite so many professional ladies, with English surnames, preferred Madam to Mrs. on their doorplates. And the poor old place has such a desperately conscious air of going to the deuce" (Undiscovered Country 2). Howells sees the city as a deteriorating reflection of the hope and optimism that it once represented. The average citizen and hardworking businessman have been replaced by the lowest common denominator, which, as Howells sees it, are prostitutes and fraudulent mediums, there to nibble on the scraps of a once vibrant place. Concerning Howells' portrayal of the city, Samuel Clemens wrote: "Mr. Howells's [sic] pictures are not mere stiff, hard, accurate photographs; they are photographs with feeling in them and sentiment, photographs taken in a dream, one might say" (Critical Essays 206). Through the comparison of Howells' work to photographs, Clements recognizes Howells ability to portray reality is his work. Whereas a photograph is one split second captured, Howells' portrayal takes the often static realism of a photograph and gives it life and movement in both emotion and time.

Howells' negative perception of the city precipitates his interest in alternative social organizations. Howells provides a detailed description of the Shaker village and the communal living as a seeming contrast to the decaying city. The Shakers express their ideas of communal living through their hospitality which is very welcome compared to the cold shoulder of the city that drove Boynton and his daughter away. One Shakers remarked:

"Our rule forbids us to turn any one away. Of late years, the wayfaring poor have increased so much that we have appointed a small house especially for them but we cannot put everybody there."

"I thank you," said Boynton.

"It is not a hotel," continued Humphrey, "for we make out no bills. All are welcome to what we can do; those who can pay may pay." (164)

On the surface, Howells paints the Shakers as the answer to society's problems. Rebecca, a Shaker representing the values and beliefs of the community, tries to define them to Boynton and his daughter, Egeria: "'We try to live the angelic life,' said Rebecca, with some embarrassment: 'to do as we would be done by; to return good for evil; to put down selfishness in our hearts'" (Undiscovered Country 167). Howells' negative perception of city life is directly contrasted with the seemingly perfect existence of the Shakers.

In his search for alternative social organizations, the Shakers offer Boynton hope when compared to life in the city. Realistically, Howells deflates Boynton's initial optimism as the Shaker community is exposed to have its own set of problems. Through the first half of the novel Howells reinforces the potential for hope in the Shakers. In Howells' realism, there is no ideal and the Shakers through their communal living are simply an alternative. Once hoping to use the Shakers as a means to further his search for proof of life after death, Dr. Boynton comments, "They think, the leading men, that my utilization of their conditions will undermine their whole system. And so it will. Their system is

unnaturally and ridiculously mistaken; next after their spiritualism, their communism is the only thing about them that is fit to survive. Their angelic life, as they call it, is an absurd delusion, the dream of a sick woman"

(Undiscovered Country 216). Boynton's initial thought that the open spiritualism of the Shakers would be both accepting and hospitable to his quest for proof of life after death proved wrong. The pedestal on which the Shaker village initially rested has given way and the liabilities of their communal living are exposed. Concerning qualities of the Shakers, Egeria remarks:

"They think they are living the true life," said the girl.

"Do you?" asked Ford.

"They are very good; but I have seen good people in the world outside," she answered. "I think they are the kind that would be good anywhere. I shouldn't like having things in common with others. I should like a house of my own. And I should like a world of my own." (Undiscovered Country 306)

The contrasts between the positives and negatives are balanced in total. Howells praises certain things about the society of Shakers, but is realistically critical of others. The city, particularly Boston, does not offer the hopes and salvation that Howells once envisioned; however, the country and communal living are not the answer either. Lynn writes:

In The Lady of the Aroostook, Howells had sustained the dream of an unfallen Eden by sending Staniford and Lydia off to an improbably golden West. But

The Undiscovered Country belongs to the realm of reality, not romance, and the celibate world of the Shaker Village is no more than a therapeutic way station that Egeria and Ford pass through for psychic repairs. (Lynn 250)

As in Chance Acquaintance, Howells, the realist, draws on romanticized sentiments to create something seemingly perfect and utilizes realism to expose paradise as only an alternative with its own set of problems. Instead of setting up a romantic scenario between two individuals and splintering them in the end, Howells portrays a decaying city, only a shell of its former glory, and then offers up the Shaker village, a seeming paradise on Earth. The end of the novel reduces the Shaker village simply to an alternative with shortcomings and failures of its own. It is no longer seen as a solution to the problems of the city or society.

Howells creates characters with remarkable complexity who initially seem misplaced in society. The principal characters, Egeria and Ford, are sucked down and reduced to completely average, watered-down versions of themselves by the end of the work. Their complexity of the characters is found in their ability to change. They make decisions that determine their own fate. The seemingly suitable ending, typical of Howells' realism, is far from happy.

He [Ford] has given up his newspaper work, and he built himself a laboratory at the end of his garden, where the income from his invention enables him to pursue the higher chemistry, without as yet any distinct advantage to the world, but to his own

content. It is observed by those who formerly knew him that marriage has greatly softened him, and Phillips professes that, robbed of his former roughness, his is no longer so fascinating.

(Undiscovered Country 416).

Ford is reduced to a shell of his former self, giving up his passion for writing for married life in the suburbs. A similar fate befalls the former spiritualist Egeria:

She likes parties and dinners and theatres; since their return from Europe she has given several picnic breakfasts, where her morning costume has been the marvel of her guests. The tradition of her life before marriage is locally very dim; it is supposed that she left the stage to marry.

(Undiscovered Country 419)

The once extraordinary characters of Egeria and Ford have become dull and "they have neutralized each other into the vulgarest commonplace" (Undiscovered Country 417). Howells' anti-romantic ending is emotionally unrewarding in terms of character development. The characters of Egeria and Ford built and reached a climax and, instead of an explosion that would be found in typical a romance novel, the anti-romantic Howells allows them to burn themselves out. Lynn writes:

Ford and Egeria have successfully adjusted to the city and to each other, but in the process they have become unconscionably dull. Is it any wonder that readers who loved novels with happy endings found themselves emotionally let down by the conclusion of The Undiscovered Country? Unlike the

author of The American and Daisy Miller, Howells let the boy get the girl in The Undiscovered Country; nevertheless, the marriage of Ford and Egeria is as distressing in its way as James's separation of Newman and Madame de Cintre, or the death of Daisy. (Lynn 250-251)

As an inverse of the Chance Acquaintance, Ford and Egeria must become typical people and live average lives. They cannot possibly continue on the pace established earlier in the novel. While Howells may disappoint the romantic-longings of his audience, he remains true to his realistic vision in the work. The characters have experienced the positives and negatives of both the city and Shaker village, and they realize that neither holds the key to societal bliss. For Howells, there are no blissful endings, only reality

Published after Howells left the *Atlantic*, A Modern Instance was conceived much earlier and with its developed characterization and social commentary, it is a prime example of the direction of his later fiction. Having read a German Translation of Euripides' Medea and seen Franz Grillparzer's Medea, Howells realized connections between the tragedy of these works and a typical Indiana divorce case. The project, begun as "New Medea" in 1876, was put aside and anything that Howells may have written for it has not survived (Letters 1876 140). Howells returned to "New Medea" in early 1881 under the new title A Modern Instance.

In A Modern Instance, Howells shows a firm grasp on many of the fundamental principles of his fully evolved realism. Howells' ideas concerning the function of fiction and the

relevance of character over plot were made quite clear in A Modern Instance. In a letter to his new publisher James Osgood, Howells writes: "The plot is the last thing for which I care. In whatever I do I try to make the faithful study of character and the dramatic treatment of incident my hold upon the reader" (Letters 1881, 277). Clear elements of realism like characterization and character development dominate the plot. Howells' intent was to focus on character development and moral commentary, which then drives the work.

Howells' social consciousness vocalized itself much as it did in Undiscovered Country, but the gravity of the subject matter provides a new level of depth. In a letter to James Osgood, Howells reflects his desire to treat the subject of divorce, a topic of rising concern in American life, with the serious attention it deserves:

Just as the question of spiritualism was the moving principle in the Undiscovered Country, so the question of divorce will be that of "The New Medea." This subject occurred to me years ago as one of the few which are both great and simple. We all know what an enormous fact it is in American Life, and that it has never been treated seriously. I intend to treat it tragically. (Letters 1881 277)

Utilizing principles that he had developed over the past ten years, Howells is approaching a more mature sense of realism with A Modern Instance. Breaking with a reputation for only focusing on "the smiling aspects of life," Howells specifically selects the subject matter and which approaches a darker and more personal side of American life, one which he

had observed, but which had not been treated seriously in literature. Howells continues to Osgood, "I feel that I have a theme only less intense and pathetic than slavery" (Letters 1881 277). Howells' friend Horace Scudder in a review of A Modern Instance for the *Atlantic* compared the novel with some of Howells' past works, remarking:

A Forgone Conclusion was a finer product, but its ethical interest was slighter. The Undiscovered Country dealt with the counterfeit of a noble belief, and was ineffective because there was no positive result. The art which chooses an inferior material in which to cast its forms must not complain if the forms do not last and are not valued. A Modern Instance shows a distinct advance in the author's conception of the life which lies behind the novel, and the foundations are laid deeper in the heart of things." (710)

Writing for Howells' former publication, Scudder, who was clearly well versed in Howells' work, noted his advancements in the area of subject selection and characterization. "If life be the sum of little things, --and there were no great outward events in this chronicle, --it is yet the business of art, when portraying life, to choose that which is significant, not merely that which is characteristic" (Scudder 710). Scudder felt that Howells had failed in some respects, but he praised A Modern Instance as the author's best work to date because of its greater depth. Scudder, a future editor of the *Atlantic*, pronounced it "the weightiest novel of the day" remarked: "It would be unjust to regard A Modern Instance as a

tract against the divorce laws. . . . The book is not even incidentally a plea for stricter divorce laws; it is a demonstration of a state of society of which the divorce laws are the index" (712). Familiar with Howells' previous work, Scudder not only recognized Howells' advancements but also the author's intentions to offer a form of social and moral commentary on an important subject through the use of realism.

At this point in his career, the selection of socially significant subject matter was very important to Howells. "I should be ashamed to write a novel that did not distinctly mean something, or that did not show that I had felt strongly about it" (Letters 1881 277). Like many of Howells' later works, A Modern Instance is a problem novel. Like slavery prior to the 19th century, divorce was a common occurrence in America during Howells' times but it was seldom the topic of serious discussion in American literature. Because the focus of the work was on the ruin of a relationship, the subject matter is both dark and personal. Because Howells allows his fictional characters to speak for themselves, he unflinchingly examines the issue of divorce and its social implications.

Believable plot and characters are essential to realism and in A Modern Instance, Howells creates two near-tragic characters with believable strengths and flaws. Marcia Gaylord, her father's daughter, is portrayed as a highly affectionate but overly jealous woman.

Marcia was the youngest, and her mother left her training almost wholly to her father; she sometimes said that she never supposed the child would live. . . . They spoiled each other, as father and daughter

are apt to do when left to themselves. What was good in the child certainly received no harm from his indulgence; and what was naughty was after all not so very naughty. She was passionate, but she was generous; and if she showed a jealous temperament that must hereafter make her unhappy, for the time being it charmed and flattered her father to have her so fond of him that she could not endure any rivalry in his affection. (A Modern Instance 71)

Howells creates in Marcia a character who has truth depth. She is the product of a bad marriage, as Squire and Mrs. Gaylord remain together to maintain an image. She was spoiled by her father which undoubtedly worked to create the jealous, over-affectionate person that she is. She is wooed by Bartley Hubbard and shows her romantic tendencies early in the relationship.

"Good night," he said, in a low, sad voice. He gave her hand a last pressure, and rose to put on his coat. Her admiration of his words, her happiness in his flattery, filled her brain like wine. She moved dizzily as she took up the lamp to light him to the door. "I have tired you," he said, tenderly, and he passed his hand around her to sustain the elbow of the arm with which she held the lamp; she wished to resist, but she could not try.

At the door he bent down his head and kissed her.

"Good night, dear--friend."

"Good night," she panted; and after the door had closed upon him, she stooped and kissed the knob on which his hand had rested. (9)

Marcia is clearly enchanted as she falls in love with Bartley almost at first sight. Marcia is a flawed character with depth, making her very three-dimensional. This depth of character was attempted in Undiscovered Country, but Marcia has far more substance than any of Howells' earlier creations.

Similar complexity is found in the character of Bartley, making both of the principal characters in the work very strong and credible. Though taken by Marcia, Bartley flirts and shows affections towards other women, often to Marcia's chagrin. If Marcia is characterized as the jealous romantic, then Bartley is a calculating opportunist as he treats Marcia's genuine affection with a logical evaluation:

There were many things about his relations with Marcia Gaylord which were calculated to give Bartley satisfaction. She was, without question, the prettiest girl in the place, and she had more style than any other girl began to have. He liked to go into a room with Marcia Gaylord; it was some pleasure. Marcia was a lady; she had a good education; she had been away two years at school; and, when she came back at the end of the second winter, he knew that she had fallen in love with him at sight. (13)

Bartley is seen as calculating in his approach to Marcia. In terms of the relationship, Bartley offers back little romantic feeling, but instead places Marcia's positive and

negative qualities on a chart and weighs them. Unlike many young couples often romantically portrayed as being blinded by love, Bartley clearly sees the negatives of Marcia's character: "Of course she had her drawbacks, like everybody. She was proud, and she would be jealous; but, with all her pride and her distance, she had let him see that she liked him; and with not a word on his part that any one could hold him to" (13-14). While deciding whether Marcia is the right girl for him, Bartley weighs her qualities, establishing Marcia as the best possibility despite her shortcomings. Bartley is Howells' instrument to puncture any romance from this new relationship.

In Howells' world, reality is complex, seldom leaving clear-cut heroes and villains. Marcia has her flaws as Bartley has his. In a discussion of the causes for their divorce, Mr. Atherton, the lawyer hired to handle Marcia's divorce case against Bartley, and Clara, Marica's friend, come to the conclusion that both Bartley and Marcia have their flaws. "Oh, the meaning doesn't count! It's our deeds that judge us. He is a thoroughly bad fellow, but you may be sure she has been to blame" (332).

The flaws of the two compound upon themselves and create a marriage that was doomed to failure almost before it began. Marcia's father, unblinded by love, sees Bartley as he is and tries to enlighten his daughter to the true nature of Bartley's character. "Oh, you poor, crazy girl!" groaned her father. Don't you see that the trouble is in what the fellow is, and not in any particular thing that he's done? He's a scamp, through and through; and he's all the more a scamp when

he doesn't know it. He hasn't got the first idea of anything but selfishness" (76). Clearly Bartley has character flaws that not only give him depth, but also make him seem real.

Howells' social conscience, his attitude towards marriage and divorce, is one of the fundamental elements of realism in A Modern Instance. From the beginning, Howells uses realism to puncture many of the romanticized elements of marriage. Marcia and Bartley's wedding is marred with elements of realism such as the materialistic elements of Bartley's character and lack of religious foundation in their union.

The minister was an old man, and he seemed quite dazed at the suddenness of their demand for his services. But he gathered himself together, and contrived to make them man and wife, and to give them his marriage certificate.

"It seems as if there were something else," he said, absently, as he handed the paper to Bartley.

"Perhaps it's this," said Bartley, giving him a five-dollar note in return.

"Ah, perhaps," he replied, in unabated perplexity. He bade them serve God, and let them out into the snowy night, through which they drove back to the hotel. (106)

Howells portrays their marriage as a product of haste from the beginning. The issue with the money illustrates the realistic elements in full play at a time when romantic elements would

seemingly be more suited. In Bartley's mind, money seems to answer all questions and solve all problems in their rush to marriage, leaving little or no room for love or religion.

In the spirit of romanticism, the couple rush to get married, but they fail to account for the realities, like the significant amount of money that it costs to begin a new life. Financial issues continue to arise as the young couple search for housing and incur unexpected expenses. The time following the wedding is typically thought of as the happiest time of a young couple's lives, but for Bartley and Marcia, the honeymoon does not last long.

Bartley took out his pocket-book and counted over the bills in it. "A hundred and twenty dollars."

"Why, what has become of it all? We had a hundred and sixty!"

"Well, our railroad tickets were nineteen, the sleeping-car was three, the parlor-car was three, the theater was two, the hack was fifty cents, and we'll have to put down the other two and a half to refreshments" (115-116).

The emphasis on financial issues further deflates the romance from the institution of marriage. In the society around him, Howells saw couples moving away from true love and religion. As was the case with his character of Bartley, they put more emphasis on financial issues. Howells saw the lack of important foundations as playing a major role in increasing the failure rate of marriages. He reflects this in the marriage of his characters.

"Well, I haven't done any of the mistrusting," said Bartley, with humorous lightness. "But isn't sacred rather a strong word to use in regard to our marriage, anyway?"

"Why--why--what do you mean, Bartley? We were married by a minister."

"Well, yes, by what was left of one," said Bartley.

"He couldn't seem to shake himself together sufficiently to ask for the proof that we had declared our intention to get married."

Marcia looked mystified. "Don't you remember his saying there was something else, and my suggesting to him that it was the fee?" (255)

Howells sees the absence of religion as one of the failings of their union. Perhaps if their marriage had been grounded in religion, and not simply based on self-indulgent, materialistic concerns, it might have lasted. Having learned that the foundation of their marriage is not entirely as she thought it to be, Marcia questions Bartley in an attempt to understand the reason behind this seeming fraud.

"Well, you see, it couldn't be helped. We hadn't declared our intention, and the lady [Marcia] seemed very anxious to be married. You needn't be troubled. We are married, right and tight enough; but I don't know that there's anything sacred about it."

"No," Marcia wailed out, "it's tainted with fraud from the beginning." (256)

Howells's treatment of the marriage and early married life exhibit many realistic traits, which he uses to puncture any romantic elements that would be expected from a young couple.

One of the functions of Atherton is to act as a sounding board for Howells' opinions on contemporary divorce. Atherton provides the social commentary of the novel. Howells saw divorce as a product of society's overt self-indulgence.

"I agree with you," said Atherton, playing with his spoon. "You know how I hate anything that sins against order, and this whole thing is disorderly. It's intolerable, as you say. But we must bear our share of it. We're all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state,--or religious state; it's the same thing. Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together in Christian society. It's strange that it should be so hard to realize a thing that every experience of life teaches. We keep on thinking of offences against the common good as if they were abstractions!" (333)

Divorce is an "offence against the common good" simply because, as Howells saw it, a husband left his family for someone's wife who had also left her family. The whole process, multiplied, leads to a complete breakdown in society.

"Because," he [Atherton] said, "you have a *public* duty in the matter. You must keep him bound to you, for fear some other woman, whose husband doesn't care for her, should let *him* go, too, and society

be broken up, and civilization destroyed. In a matter like this, which seems to concern yourself alone, you are only to regard others." (343)

Howells was also critical of people in society like Halleck—an old friend of Bartley who lent them money and assistance in hard times—who express interest in married women. Halleck is a member of an old Boston family and a proponent of high morals in the novel, but he also takes an interest in Marcia. While Howells does not blame Halleck for the divorce, he uses warns of social dangers were Halleck to pursue Marcia. Howells uses Atherton to voices his concerns on falling pursuing a married woman:

You might ask her, if she were a widow, to marry you; but how will you ask her, if she's still a wife, to get a divorce and then marry you? How will you suggest that to a woman whose constancy to her mistake has made her sacred to you?" Halleck seemed about to answer; but he only panted, dry-lipped and open-mouthed, and Atherton continued: "You would have to corrupt her soul first. I don't know what change you've made in yourself during these two years; you look like a desperate and defeated man, but you don't look like *that*. You don't look like one of those scoundrels who lure women from their duty, ruin homes, and destroy society, not in the old libertine fashion in which the seducer had at least the grace to risk his life, but safely, smoothly, under the shelter of our infamous laws. (316)

Howells equated the increasing divorce rate with what he saw as a breakdown in society. If the primary unit of society for Howells was the family, then separation, which constitutes a breakdown in this basic unit, was the destruction of society at the foundations. For Howells, the primary purpose of his fiction was no longer to simply portray society. His aim was at social criticism with the goal of righting some of the wrongs he saw around them through literature.

Whereas A Modern Instance is the bookend for Howells's development of realistic fiction, "Police Report," published in January 1882 in the *Atlantic*, illustrates the development of his realistic nonfiction during his fifteen years at the magazine. The nonfiction piece shows Howells' growth since his earlier nonfiction sketches of life in Venice and Cambridge. "Police Report" illustrates his ability and desire to portray subject matter that lies well beyond "the smiling aspects of life."

"Police Report," Howells' narrative of a journey to police court, represents his continued search for contemporary social reality and a "revolt against unreality." With this journey, Howells is returning to his earlier journalistic roots of direct social observation. "I was fated to a measure of disappointment for when the court opened this reality often appeared no more substantial than the fiction with which I had lost my patience with at home" ("Police Report" 1). Howells returns to social observation to get a break and to further ground his fiction in reality. Howells is clearly disappointed to see life closely mirroring his fiction. His visit to the

police court reaffirms the feeling of social decay present in his last novels and offers little escape.

The clear comparison to his fiction is, if nothing else, a testament to his ability as a realist. Ironically, he defined real life as taking on more of an artistic tone as "It resolved itself into melodrama, or romantic tragedy, having a prevailing comic interest, with moments of intensity, and with effects so thrilling that I came away with a sense of the highest theatrical illusion" ("Police Report" 1). Howells is surprised, if not saddened, that the police court is little more than an illusion with strong influences of melodrama and romantic tragedy. His initial impressions are the beginning of his condemnation of the court system. The police court is clearly not the break from fiction that Howells was searching for, but the system's failures open the eyes of the realist and allow him to truly portray the gritty side of life while calling for changes in the system.

Howells bases his "Police Report" solely on his personal observation of the proceedings. Stating his intentions "to treat my material lightly," he falls from his intended mark as the situations that he observes warrant a criticism of a system that fosters social decay and reinforces social perversion.

I have tried to treat my material lightly and entertainingly, as a true reporter should, but I would not have my reader suppose that I did not feel the essential cruelty of an exhibition that tore its poor rags from all that squalid shame, and its mask from all that lying, cowering guilt, or

did not suspect how it must harden and deprave
those whom it daily entertained. (13)

As a true reporter and realist, he should treat his material as it is, not "lightly or entertainingly." Though he says that is what he intends to do, the magnitude of the situation pushed Howells from a narrative that poked fun of its subject to a deeper examination of the criminal justice system, resulting in complete criticism of it. Howells offered not only a portrayal of the event, as found in some of his earlier sketches, but also allowed his social conscience to reflect critically on the event.

Howells' draws his subject matter from the underside of life in "Police Report." Howells described the trials of criminals who faced the judge on charges ranging from theft to drunkenness. Whereas Howells has been criticized for focusing only on the middle to upper crust of America, all of those portrayed in the "Police Report" are from a low socio-economic status. Howells saw that the majority of society was composed of lower class people and he chose to detail the lives of these often trampled-upon people.

I confess that I had at the time the strongest curiosity to see them, but it has since struck me that it was a finer effect merely to hear their voices in response, and to leave their figures and faces to the fancy. Sometimes the voice that answered "Guilty" was youthful, and sometimes, I grieve to say, it was feminine. (3)

In one case, Howells seems to be coming full circle with an issue that repulsed him in his early life as a newspaperman.

While working in Ohio at a newspaper, Howells had been so dissuaded by an incident with a drunken woman that he turned down the position that would have furthered his career.

"Was she very tipsy?" the lawyer pursued.

The witness was equal to this question. "Well, yes sir, she was. Any way, she hadn't left anything in the bottle on her bureau."

"When did you see the bottle full?"

"The night before. Or in the evening. She commenced drinking in the night." (7)

Using strict personal observation, Howells portrays the cases as he saw them. Clearly, Howells is making the point that regardless of the age or even sex of the defendant, a low socio-economic status is the binding factor for those that come before the police court.

Howells' social criticism is aimed at the failure of police court to deal effectively with crime and especially its failure to rehabilitate the criminal. Witnessing the cases, Howells sees many habitual offenders come before the judge.

"Haven't I seen you here before?" he asked at last.

"Yes," I could hardly hear the prisoner assent.

"How often?"

"Twice."

"What for?"

"Theft," gasped the wretched creature. (8)

Howells' criticism against the police court is that the punishment it hands down offered no help to the criminals whom he commonly saw as childlike--it only created hardened criminals. Howells' realism approaches naturalism as he begins

to fault society for its own creations. Howells grapples with the blame in "Police Report." Are these people truly bad or are they products of a society? "To be sure, the police court is not a cure of souls; and doubtless his doom was as light as the law allowed. . . . the chances were a thousand against one that he should hereafter be anything but a thief, if he were not worse. After all, when one thinks of what the consequences of justice are, one doubts if there is any justice in it" (9).

Continuing his attack upon the criminal justice system, Howells remarked concerning the sentence of one particular offender: "I dare say it was on its way to the House of Industry, or the House of Correction, Deer Island, or some of those places where people are put to go from bad to worse" (16). Howells saw the current forms of punishment as either a mere rap on the knuckles that sent criminals quickly back to the streets or sent them to some form of incarceration that encouraged their deviant behavior. Howells is wrestling with a new form of realism by touching on elements that would later be defined as naturalism. He defines many of the defendants as child-like and places much of the blame on society for the creation of criminals.

Like many of the later realists or muckrakers, Howells criticizes society as he sees it and offers suggestions for reform. Howells' criticism of the police court extends to its circus-like atmosphere. "I have spoken of the theatrical illusion which the proceedings of the court produced; but it often seemed to me also like a school where bad boys and girls were brought up for punishment" (14). Howells views the

theatrical atmosphere created around a serious function like criminal justice as devaluing its actions. He suggests closing the preceding to the public:

If the whole trial could have taken place with closed doors, and with none present but the parties, the lawyers, and the court, what possible harm could have been done? I think none whatever, and I am so sure of this that I would not only have all the police trials secret, but I would never have another police report in print. (16)

This comment seems to subscribe to the more romantic theory that hiding the unpleasant will cause it to cease to exist. This is not Howells' intention. Howells saw the theatrics associated with the police court as reinforcing the actions of criminals and social decay. As he moves to more naturalistic impulses where society, including the police court, is in fact to blame for the creation of criminals, he proposes an idea that limited access to the proceeding would remove it as a factor in the continued development of criminals and the further decay of society.

But elsewhere Howells proposes a more radical approach. He suggests the futility of the whole proceeding and suggests the abolishment of the police court. He provides a series of suggestions for his readers and offers no definitive solution, only different perspectives. With a sense of resignation, Howells writes, "Perhaps there is no cure for vice and crime. Perhaps there is nothing but prevention, in the application of which there is always difficulty, obscurity, and uncertainty" (16). Howells has no answer for this pressing social issue,

but uses the power of realism and direct observation to express the social failings as he witnessed them. He proposes many solutions that from different perspectives might work, but offers no concrete solution.

Howells' last years at the *Atlantic* represented the completion of his transformation to realism. The Undiscovered Country and A Modern Instance represent a greater sense of character development than his previous efforts. The characters are developed more completely and provide a sense of multiple points of view. His use of the different perspectives and more autonomous characters creates a more complex and believable impression of reality.

In his fiction, Howells allows his characters to speak for themselves, typifying the values of a middle-class, commonplace America. This led to the further development of his social conscience. In both fiction and reportage, he now deals seriously with social issues around him providing criticism of what he saw wrong with America. He is no longer content to merely express aspects of life realistically as he had done in his earlier works, but rather, he uses realism to puncture many of the romanticized social conventions like spiritualism and marriage and allows his social conscience to deal with basic issue of social justice.

Conclusion:

It is difficult to imagine that William Dean Howells, one of the major figures in American realistic fiction, once longed to be a romantic poet, but much of his literary successful prior to employment at the *Atlantic* reflects this drive. Poems like "Ardenken" and "The Pilot's Study" were some of Howells' earliest works to receive critical attention. Both were published by Lowell in the *Atlantic*, which was quite an honor for the aspiring poet. The language and tone of these early works emulate that of the German romantic poets—Heine, in particular—whom Howells greatly admired. The styling of these early works reflects an author, raised in the Midwest, searching for his own voice while emulating others. He longed for a career writing literature for literature's sake. With his Midwestern democratic spirit and his background in journalism, Howells' destiny lie in not in romantic poetry, but realism. Through the encouragement of people like Lowell and Fields and a little rebellion against the literary establishment, Howells was able to find his own voice in realistic fiction.

With his first major work, Venetian Life, it is clear that Howells' idea on the purpose of literature was evolving from his earlier poetic ambitions. Fields had lost interest in Howells' romantic poetry, so Howells' new purpose was to find a niche that would once again make him marketable in America. Howells' intent with these sketches was to portray the things he witnessed in Venice, many of which were commonplace and often overlooked by travel writers and unknown to an American

audience. He dealt with the exotic in a non-sentimental fashion, detailing life in Venice as he saw it. Venetian Life marked a departure from his poetic ambitions and a return to his journalistic roots.

When he returned, Howells returned to newspapers as a means of financial support. Still longing for a literary career, Howells jumped at the opportunity to work for the *Atlantic*, the premiere literary magazine of the day. During his time at the *Atlantic*, his opinions of literature continued to change and he arrived at the recognition that journalism and reportage could have more literary merit and power than the high romantic poetry which he aspired to write in his youth. Over the next ten years, William Dean Howells transformed himself into one of the leading figures of American realism.

Howells' initial writing while at the *Atlantic* came with the help and inspiration of Fields and James Parton. Howells established himself with sketches of the commonplace around Cambridge. Also drawn from direct observation, he applied the same intentions that formed the basis for Venetian Life to these new sketches.

In Suburban Sketches, Howells mutated the common genre of travel writing, focusing its telescope on the city around him. In Suburban Sketches Howells demonstrates a developing social consciousness and the use of realistic subject matter by showing both the positive and negative sides of life.

Formed by a series of seemingly unconnected stories, Suburban Sketches lacked a cohesive plot. Howells worked to correct that in his next work, Their Wedding Journey, which is

a cohesive work of fiction. It features a stronger narrative voice and more fully realized characterization, but its focus on travel makes it more of a travelogue, in the vein of his past efforts.

In A Chance Acquaintance, Howells continues his battle to define himself and establish his voice. Howells' anti-romantic ending shows a developing author rebelling against the establishment and working to separate himself from the more idealistic, high literary element of Boston that had initially embraced him.

His fictionalized characters are stronger and more realistic representing his further flight from romantic, idealistic literature. Kitty, the heroine of the novel, reflects Howells developing views on realistic fiction, while Miles, reflecting romantic conventional literary ideas typified by Boston's literary elite, is demonized. The plot in this, his first true novel, was more cohesive and less of a travelogue than his previous efforts. In a very brief period of time, Howells established a direction that would position him as one of the major proponents of American realism.

The Undiscovered Country marks the continued use of direct observation and a new interest in alternative social organizations. Howells contrasts the morally bankrupt city with the seemingly perfect Shaker community and concludes that the Shakers have merely a different subset of problems. Ultimately he finds that no social organization is unflawed and prescribes life in the suburbs for a dulled version of his once exceedingly dynamic characters.

Dr. Boynton and Egeria in The Undiscovered Country and Marcia and Bartley in A Modern Instance are some of the most realized characters in Howells' entire library. They function with goals and motivation, often suffering upsets. These characters do not represent ideas or images, but are dynamic to the point that they take on a life of their own and by Howells allowing them to speak for themselves, they evolve throughout the course of their respective works. The dynamic characters and multiple perspectives create a more believable portrayal of reality. His characters, which typify American values and American types, represent his developing social conscience.

In his work he deals seriously with social issues, providing criticism of the things he saw as problematic with America. No longer content to merely express aspects of life realistically, he uses realism to puncture many of the romanticized social conventions. The Undiscovered Country sets its sights on spiritualism, while A Modern Instance looks intently on the convention of marriage and the increasing divorce rate. In his later works, Howells is increasingly compelled by his social conscience and in "Police Report" he tackles the issue of social justice and the criminal justice system in a similar manner as a later day realist or muckraker.

In just over 20 years, Howells' literary career evolved from his very early romantic poetry to nonfiction sketches of life around him to an increasingly complex and engaged realistic fiction. His literature drew from the imagination that he brought to his characters and plot and the environment

around him. While at the *Atlantic* he strengthened his approach to literature by merging with the lessons he learned as a journalist with elements of fiction. The end result was a unique form of literature that molded direct and personal observation with a social consciousness, forming the basis of early realism.

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