

THE STYLE OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS
AS EVIDENCED IN FIVE
REPRESENTATIVE NOVELS

THESIS

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PREFACE

For a stylistic study of the novels of William Dean Howells I chose to use five representative novels, Their Wedding Journey, Indian Summer, Annie Kilburn, A Modern Instance, and The Rise of Silas Lapham. Each of these novels concerns not only a different subject, but also a different area of interest. Their Wedding Journey was chosen because it was the first novel Howells published, as well as an excellent example of his travelogue type novels. Indian Summer is an example of those books set in foreign countries, and is also a simple romance. Annie Kilburn is considered by many to be the best of his social novels, and A Modern Instance is considered the best by others. Since they treat of two different kinds of social problems, and are concerned with totally different circumstances, they were both used. The Rise of Silas Lapham is an intense study of the character of one principal character, and is considered by many people to be the best of Howells' novels. These five novels were written over a long span of time, beginning with Howells' first novel and extending throughout the period of his career, and were therefore considered to be representative.

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INTRODUCTION

LIFE OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

William Dean Howells was born on the first of March, 1837, at Morton's Ferry, Belmont County, Ohio, the second child of William Cooper Howells and Mary Dean Howells.¹ His was a heritage of Welsh Quakerism and German orthodoxy. Cady says that no single set of facts about Howells' background is more important than the family idiosyncracies.² His greatgrandfather was a manufacturer of woollens who came to the United States in 1793, returning to Wales in 1797. His grandfather was a radical, unlike his own father, who loved fraternity and equality. His grandfather, settling in Hamilton, Ohio, became a Methodist and an abolitionist. Howells' father edited the Whig newspaper of Hamilton. Dr. Rudolf Kirk calls the father the soul of the family and the mother the heart.³ Mary Dean Howells'

¹William Dean Howells, Years of My Youth, p. 3.

²Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 2.

³William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography and Notes by Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk, intro., p. xxiv.

mother was a Pennsylvania German woman whose Irish husband took her from a comfortable home to the Western wilderness. Howells, according to Kirk, loved his grandmother very much. Howells' own mother followed her visionary husband from town to town until they settled in Dayton, Ohio, in 1849. When William Cooper Howells bought shares in The Transcript, his son, William Dean Howells, went to work for him at the age of twelve. He worked until eleven at night, getting up at four or five in the morning to deliver papers. His father could not pay for The Transcript, and Howells became acutely aware of the financial struggle. Kirk believes that he never lost sight of the social injustice implicit in our civilization after this experience.

William Cooper Howells and sons bought land near Zenia, Ohio, on the Little Miami River, in a planned community, where they would have a grist mill and sawmill. They knew nothing of these occupations and apparently were naive in financial matters. They moved into a one room log cabin on the river for a year, during which time one Howells boy died of tuberculosis, and all the family worked savagely. Howells found a barrel of books in the attic, but his reading was interrupted by efforts to find work. He was set to work in Dayton, where he lived with an aunt and uncle. Bitterly homesick, he did not succeed

in working. Kirk comments on the extremely sensitive affectionate nature inured to poverty. In 1851 the Howells men went to Columbus, where William Dean became a compositor for the Ohio State Journal. He worked from seven in the morning to six in the evening with an hour for lunch and wrote at night. He read avidly -- Zola, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pope, and many others. The family moved to Ashtabula and then to Jefferson, Ohio, in 1854. According to Kirk it was the first opportunity which Howells had had for social life, and he was delighted with it. Cady, however, says that Howells learned to hate Jefferson as the site of neurotic crises which left him permanently damaged.⁴ During this time he experienced the pleasure of acquaintance with the young visitors to the newspaper office who talked of politics, literature and social events. He wrote and studied in a cubby hole under the stairs of the Howells home, learning Greek, Latin, German, Spanish, and literary forms. He endangered his health in his concentration and was forced to work outdoors. He was offered an opportunity to attend college during this time, but his father refused to let him go.

⁴Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 54.

By 1855 William and Joseph Howells were managing the newspaper, and William was trying to report. He accompanied his father to the legislative session in 1858 and met a German man who befriended him and helped him to learn German. It was he who introduced Howells to the work of Heine which had a strong influence upon the young writer. Howells returned to Columbus the next year as news editor and book reviewer for the Ohio State Journal, and in 1860 he submitted some poetry to the Atlantic Monthly on the strength of his success on the Journal.

In 1860 Howells set out to meet those whom he regarded as the literary leaders of the day. He sought out Lowell and was sent on to Hawthorne, who in turn sent him to Emerson. He was a guest at a dinner including Dr. Holmes and J. T. Fields, in what Kirk describes as a scene of apostolic succession for editorship of the Atlantic. His meeting with the literary men of Boston apparently awoke in Howells a clear-cut desire to further his literary ideals.

During 1861, while war was still a remote threat, Howells met Elinor Mead at one of the many gay parties to which he was invited. When the Ohio State Journal failed, and a plan to tour the Western states for the Atlantic also failed, Howells sought and received a consulship to Rome which paid only his fees. He subsequently received a better appointment to Venice,

where he remained for the duration of the Civil War. In December, 1862, he married Elinor Mead in Paris, and their first child was born in December, 1863. During this time, Howells was writing without success, and was disgusted with voluntary exile. He published, in 1866, Venetian Life in England, and began contributing to the New York Times. He left the consular service at the invitation of J. T. Field and became the assistant editor of the Atlantic in March, 1866, at the age of twenty-nine.

Early in his work with the Atlantic Howells became interested in aspiring young authors, and, when he became editor in July, 1871, continued to help them through the Contributors Club. Cady remarks on the ascendancy of the Western writer to the birthright of the Brahmins.⁶ He was invited to the Dante Club by Longfellow, and to check Longfellow's translation of the Paradisio, using the Italian text. The Atlantic continued as the foremost periodical of the United States under Howells' editorship. Howells continued his own writing, ultimately, in a period of forty years, producing more than forty novels, five autobiographical books, a book of criticism and many

⁶Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 127..

articles and short stories. In 1881 he resigned from the Atlantic in order to devote more time to writing, and in 1885 accepted the responsibility for the Editor's Study at Harper's, and later became the first president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was a good and full life, but Kirk suggests that Howells believed that he had outlived his usefulness when a projected library edition of his work failed.

William Dean Howells died in Boston, his spiritual home, on May 10, 1920.

CHAPTER I
DEFINITION OF STYLE

In order to evaluate the style of any author it is essential initially to delineate the boundaries of the study. The first requisite of such categorization is definition -- definition of the term style, as it specifically relates to literary expression, and definition of the limits within which style is an applicable term.

Style is usually understood to be that distinctive manner or method of expressing ideas or thoughts by the writer. Before there can be style, according to Sir Edmund Gosse, there must be thought, clearness of knowledge, precise experience, and sanity of reasoning power.

What makes a masterpiece is the super-structure of expression. . . . It remains true that what is visible, so to speak, to the naked eye, what can be analyzed and described, is an artistic arrangement of words. . . . Language is used to awaken impressions, and these are roused in a way peculiar to the genius of the individual who brings them forth. The personal aspect of style of therefore indispensable. In an excellent style there is an effect upon our senses of mental force of the man who employs it.¹

¹Sir Edmund Gosse, "Style", Encyclopaedia Britannica, pp. 488-499.

Jonathan Swift pursued the matter of the containment of style within word usage in Letter to a Young Clergyman: "Proper words in proper places makes a true definition of style."²

In another aspect of this concept, Cardinal Newman believed that thought and speech were inseparable from each other. He states that matter and expression are parts of one, and that style is "a thinking out into language."³ On the other hand, Samuel Wesley avers that style is the dress of thought.⁴ Thoughts, then, are expressed in language, and that language is composed of the words, figures and syntax of the writer. These, in turn, constitute the style of the writer.

Language, in this study, is construed to be that which is form and expression, used to invoke impressions, which are effective in proportion to the artistry of the writer. The individual personality, its components, its experiences, and the individual responses to those experiences, are the raw materials of the writer's style, refined through his interpretive skills. It is

²Jonathan Swift, Letter to a Young Clergyman, Oxford Dictionary, p. 525.

³John Henry Cardinal Newman, Idea of a University, A Reader for Writers, p. 545.

⁴Reverend Samuel Wesley, An Epistle to a Friend Concerning Poetry, Oxford Dictionary, p. 565.

the composite vehicle through which ideas are conveyed and impressions created by the writer in his use of words, his manner of expression, his facility with figures of speech, the syntax he employs, the symbolisms he draws in his manipulation of ideas and experiences into realities.

Inasmuch as William Dean Howells developed a strong literary philosophy, perhaps more often than not misleading his readers into assuming that familiarity with his philosophy equates with familiarity with his style, it is especially prudent to establish firm definitive determinants for study of his style. It is easy to be led into the fascinating study of Howells' ideas, his philosophies, the effect of his personal life and experiences on his work, and his professional life as newspaperman and editor, while attempting an analysis of his style.

Apparently Howells agreed with the contiguous character of style and thought, at least categorically, when he stated that great literature is nothing more or less than the clear impression of minds that have something great in them, whether religion, or beauty, or deep experiences.⁵ In a man of Howells' catholic reading

⁵William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 5.

experience and devotion to learning, per se, it is inevitable that the language be learned and precise, and that the contiguity of language and expression be both simply and complexly conceived.

CHAPTER II

HOWELLS ON STYLE

The student of Howells who wishes to familiarize himself with Howells' concept of style will find constant iterations of his theses in his book reviews for Harper's Magazine, his criticisms, his novels, and his autobiographical writings. These, however, frequently, if not almost always, deal with the aspects of his creed of character development, his philosophies of novel writing, and his idealistic requirements, both of himself and other writers, expressed perhaps best in the familiar statement from his essay on Mark Twain in Harper's Magazine of May, 1887:

Let fiction cease to lie about life,
let it portray man and woman as they are,
actuated by the motives and measures we
all know.¹

Rudolf Kirk, sometime professor of English literature at Rutgers University and foremost authority on Howells, writing in collaboration with his wife, Clara Marburg Kirk, explores both intensively and extensively the

¹William Dean Howells, "Essay on Mark Twain", Harper's, Vol. LXXIV, p. 987.

philosophies which Howells developed and their causal components. His general conclusions, that Howells defended the commonplace as the source of novel material, attacked romanticism, idealized morality, and insisted that plot development and denouement inhere in the nature of the characters' interplay within the novel, agree on the whole with those of Edwin Harrison Cady of Syracuse University, who has written exhaustively on the contributions of Howells to the Realist movement in America. It is interesting that neither of these accomplished scholars has considered the matter of Howells' style in detail.

William Dean Howells himself spent little time in recounting his own self-requirements in technique. In My Literary Passions, he is perhaps most explicit and lucid. Excerpts from this set of autobiographical essays reveal a man in his mature ability, secure in his command of spontaneous perfection of grammar, responding to an inner need to recall the steps by which he reached his present assurance. He recalls that in his early reading and studying he had read widely, without supervision. In his childhood his father had read to the family from Cervantes, Goldsmith, Irving, and other classic writers, thus encouraging his children to read. When Howells was still just a boy, he had discovered a barrel of books

which he read avidly. Later, he spent six or seven years reading and studying late into the night in a cubby hole under the stairs in his parents' home, teaching himself Greek, Latin, Spanish and German, and reading poetry, fiction, and drama.² In My Literary Passions he wrote:

I sometime wish in these later years that I had spent much less time in it, or the world of books which it opened into; that I had seen more of the actual world.³

Later, however, he conceded that

The severe schooling I gave myself was not without its immediate use. I learned how to choose between words after a study of their fitness, and though I often employed them decoratively and with no vital sense of their qualities, still in mere decoration they had to be chosen intelligently, and after some thought about their structure and meaning.⁴

He apparently credited his study of languages, particularly the classical Latin and Greek, with enlarging and deepening his vocabulary and comprehension when he wrote

I have trusted that in making known to me the source of so much English, my

²William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf Kirk and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. xxxvi.

³William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 80.

⁴Ibid., p. 50.

little Latin and less Greek have enabled me to use my own speech with a subtler sense of it than I should have had otherwise.⁵

He developed, however, at one time, a dislike for words derived from Latin, or, by association, any words having subtle meanings. He wrote of this temporary attitude as if he were speaking of some indiscretion of youth:

. . . and I formed a preference for the simpler Anglo-Saxon woof of our speech. . . . I had an aversion for the Latin derivatives . . . and I did not escape from this lamentable error until I had produced with weariness and vexation of spirit several pieces of prose wholly composed of monosyllables. . . .⁶

He never fully abandoned his love for simple, exact words, as evidenced in the following:

I still like the little word if it says the thing I want it to say as well as the big one, but I honor above all the word that says the thing.⁷

Along with his preference for the word which exactly expressed his ideas, Howells insisted on precision of total expression as well. He reiterates,

My reading from the first was such as to enamour me of clearness, of definiteness: anything left in the vague was intolerable to me.⁸

⁵William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 92.

⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁷Ibid., p. 111.

⁸Ibid., p. 58.

He particularly enjoyed Chaucer for his simplicity of expression, and wrote of him:

I rejoiced in the freshness and sweetness of his diction, and though I felt his structure was obsolete, there was in his wording something homelier and heartier than the imported analogues that had taken place of the phrases he had used.⁹

When Howells was editor of the Atlantic, he wrote of himself:

I revised all proofs, verifying every quotation and foreign word, and correcting slovenly style and syntax, and then I revised the author's and my own corrections. This proof-reading was a school of verbal exactness and rhetorical simplicity and clearness.¹⁰

Howells, then, having read much over a long period of time, and having written acceptable material himself, was further schooled by the necessity of editing other people's material in preparation for publication. Much of his writing reflects this attention to detail.

He wrote in Years of My Youth that he wished always and evermore to think and dream and talk literature, and literature only, whether its form of prose or of verse, in fiction, or poetry, or criticism.¹¹ Kirk calls him a

⁹William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 111.

¹⁰William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 192.

¹¹William Dean Howells, Years of My Youth, pp. 159-163.

journalist with poetry singing in his heart.¹² While Howells was intrigued with Dickens, he wrote that

All the while that he held me so fast by his potent charm I was aware that it was very rough magic, now and again, but I could not assert my sense of this against him in matters of character and structure.¹³

The poet in him apparently could only express himself and empathize with those who expressed themselves with technical purity. He found in Ruskin, according to Cady, some confirmation of his style, both in naturalism and synthesis in art of abstract design and command of fact,¹⁴ perhaps interpreted by Howells as truth itself. He asserted from the "Editor's Study":

Do not trouble yourselves about standards of contempts or passions, but try to be faithful and natural; and remember that there is no greatness, no beauty, which does not come from truth. . . .¹⁵

Howells gives credit to several writers who influenced him profoundly, particularly Heine, Tourguenief and Tolstoy. His overall style, purpose, and

¹²William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf Kirk and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. xliv.

¹³William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 93.

¹⁴Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 117.

¹⁵William Dean Howells, "The Editor's Study," Harper's, Vol. LXXC (September, 1887), p. 641.

characterization were, of course, affected by them, as well as others. Heine's influence may have been the greatest, and of him Howells says:

Heine at once showed me that . . . literature was from the springs of the best common speech, and that the nearer it could be made to conform, in voice, look and gait, to graceful, easy, picturesque and humorous or impassioned talk, the better it was.¹⁶

Howells, however influenced toward common speech, was conditioned to purity of language through the classics, and considered American English imprecise. He used dialect freely where it seemed appropriate for characterization, but continued to use flawless syntax and construction in narration. He continued to use whatever word he deemed most definite and exact within the context immediately concerned, whether that word was English, French, Italian, or coined.

Cady states that Howells' ideal method demands serious effort from the mature reader, since it deals in civilized and fine-grained subtleties.¹⁷ Howells, himself, stated pragmatically that

To adjust one's self to the enjoyment of these costs an intellectual effort, and

¹⁶William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 172.

¹⁷Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 128.

intellectual effort is of no ordinary person. . . .¹⁸

Tourguenief may have influenced Howells more than is ordinarily acknowledged. It is clear from the following evaluation of his work that Howells followed his concept of characterization and plot development:

In its way, Tourguenief's method is as far as art can go. . . . The persons are sparsely described, and briefly accounted for, and then they are left to transact their affair, whatever it is, with the least possible comment or explanation from the author. The effect flows naturally. . . .¹⁹

Certainly Howells' novels flow naturally, but he does not follow Tourguenief in the matter of least possible comment or explanation. Some of Howells' determined intrusion into his books may be explained in part by the following discussion on Tolstoy from My Literary Passions:

He has not influenced in aesthetics only, but in ethics, too, so that I can never see life in the way I saw it before I knew him. Tolstoy has not only Tourguenief's transparency of style, unclouded by any mist of the personality which we mistakenly value in style, and which ought no more to be there than the artist's personality should be in the

¹⁸William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 128.

¹⁹William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 172.

portrait; but he has a method which not only seems without artifice, but is so.²⁰

It is this last statement which seems most significant from his own evaluations of the masters to the student, forasmuch as Howells mastered the art of sublimating his technical ability to his message, not by veneering, but by moulding words, phrases, mechanics, and art into a final refined work reflecting a craftsman able to produce smooth, finished product without the marks of tools upon it.

²⁰William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 250.

CHAPTER III

DICTION

Diction, as defined in this study, includes those aspects of word usage, vocabulary, phraseology, or parlance which directly affect the color and movement of the novels under scrutiny. For clarity and consistency of presentation, all figures of speech and descriptive passages are considered in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into considerations of (1) figures and figurative language, (2) description, (3) words and word usage, (4) dialogue, including dialect, and (5) contrasts.

Figures and figurative language

In an article entitled "Mr. Howells' Literary Creed", published in the October, 1891, issue of the Atlantic, a critic asserts that Howells uses literary figures, not as directly the objects of his humanism, but also as concrete examples of artistic tendencies.¹ This writer concurs

¹"Mr. Howells' Literary Creed," Atlantic, Vol. LXVIII (October, 1891), pp. 566-567.

with this estimation of his purpose, adding that some of Howells' figures appear to be some sort of intellectual exercise, practiced not so much for the benefit of the reader as for the enjoyment of the writer. Certainly their frequent overlapping of one another and the enthusiastic momentum of some appear to be the result of the writer's sheer love of imagery.

Sir Edmund Gosse declares that the ability of some authors to bring up before the memory incessant analogous metaphors is the property, not merely of certain men, but of certain ages.² Certainly Howells lived and wrote in an age replete with literature containing figurative language, and some of his use of it may be attributable to the age rather than the man.

While Howells employed simple simile and metaphor, he frequently lengthened and broadened his figures to include a number of types within a single large figure. He touched every common figure, including metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, litote, personification, and irony, but it was in the latter that he was most at home. Within descriptive passages these figures flowed from his pen

²Sir Edmund Gosse, "Style", Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 21, p. 489.

in mellifluous euphonism, but often they were accompanied by, or understated with, ironic or sardonic humor. For example, from Annie Kilburn: "A faint, mixed perfume of violet sachet and fricasseed chicken attended her."³

Because of this undercurrent in his writings, irony will be discussed as including both specific figures and larger ironies, particularly Howells' "twists of irony," and his sometimes "tongue-in-cheek" humor.

Howells was adept at the use of succinct figures, pregnant with connotation or innuendo, as well as simpler and gentler figures. He incorporated color especially effectively, as well as the use of all senses. Again, this implies the effort of participation of the reader, and, consequently, the time and attention to enjoy that which he had prepared. These sensory appeals, particularly in such tightly written dramas as A Modern Instance and Annie Kilburn, tend to refresh the reader as they create a pause for reflection in the midst of activity.

The excerpts below illustrate the small, but highly effective, figure, significant in its context, but able to stand alone to delight the tongue and mind:

³William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 121.

. . .the aristocratic gloom of the yellow
waiters. . .⁴

.
. . .in the mere wantonness of unalloyed
prosperity. . .⁵

.
Mrs. Gerrish cackled some applausive
incoherencies. . .⁶

.
His passengers looked down the rock-fretted
brown torrents. . .⁷

.
That morning the east wind came in, then
crisped the air till it seemed to rustle like
tinsel.⁸

.
The tireless machines marched back and forth
across the floor . . .⁹

⁴William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 69.

⁵Ibid., p. 70.

⁶William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 89.

⁷William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 323.

⁸Ibid., p. 363.

⁹William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 145.

Let the . . . sun . . . take the dust that the
hot wind caught up and sent swirling . . .¹⁰

.

Isabel had emerged into a world of dishabille,
a world wildly unbuttoned and unlaced. . .¹¹

.

. . . pestled away a prescription . . .¹²

.

. . . the rising sun slanted across the green expanse
and turned the distance to gold. . .¹³

.

One of the few examples of the use of alliteration
is found in this instance from The Rise of Silas Lapham:

The Cambridge flats showed the sad, sodden
yellow of meadows stripped bare after a long sleep
under the snow . . .¹⁴

Its relatively poor quality suggests that it was not
deliberate, and perhaps implies that Howells did not care
to use this figure, since it must often be artificially
composed.

¹⁰ William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 26.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 87.

¹² Ibid., p. 66.

¹³ William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 346.

¹⁴ William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 440.

Similarly, Howells used onomatopoeia sparingly, most often preferring to use it in a single statement; e.g., "The bell on the orthodox church called . . . with the same plangent, lacerant note . . ." ¹⁵ and, referring to Niagara Falls, ". . . the diapason of the cataract. . ." ¹⁶ In the following example from A Modern Instance, Howells became more elaborate:

In Indiana in the spring night, whose breath buffeted their cheeks . . . had gathered over those eternal cornfields, where the long crooked windrows, burning on either hand, seemed a trail of fiery serpents writhing away from the train as it roared and clamored over the track. ¹⁷

In the passage below from Annie Kilburn, Howells conveys his distaste of the dissolute Putney by means of onomatopoeic expression:

"Ha, ha, ha. Ha, ha, ha," shrieked Putney, and his laugh flapped back at them from the house-front they were passing. ¹⁸

¹⁵ William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 266.

¹⁶ William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 152.

¹⁷ William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 343.

¹⁸ William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 285.

Howells is even more facile with larger and more complex figures, showing a piercing insight and tendency to dramatize the commonplace. The figures below particularly show his artistry:

At private parties, where the congealed particles of village society were united in a frozen mass, he was the first to break the ice, and set the angular fragments grating and grinding upon one another.¹⁹

.....

His lips compressed themselves to a waving line, and his high, hawkbeak came down over them; the fierce light burned in his cavernous eyes, and his grizzled hair erected itself like a crest.²⁰

Howells was a man of humor, expressed through many media. Cady remarks that he had once said the humor is the rebate on the heavy liability known as life,²¹ indisputably true in the following:

The burly mounted policeman, bulging over the pommel of his . . . saddle, jolted by.²²

¹⁹William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 19.

²⁰Ibid., p. 352.

²¹Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 165.

²²William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 35.

The young people exchanged curt speeches which had for them all the sensation of repartee . . . ²³

.

Mr. MacAllister . . . ²⁴ tiddled farcically forward on his toes . . .

.

. . . a voice which had the flat, succinct ²⁵ sound of two pieces of wood clapped together. . .

Again, there is compassion and a sense of pathos in some of Howells' figures, wherein Howells is not the amused onlooker, but one who empathizes in an objective and delicate fashion. His gentleness and compassion are apparent in the following:

The flower . . . exhaled a delicate odor and a thrill of exquisite compassion. . . ²⁶

.

She sat every day in this chair. . . and let the clock tick the long hours of her life away. ²⁷

²³William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 80.

²⁴William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 91.

²⁵William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 61.

²⁶William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 201.

²⁷William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 27.

Howells used figurative speech so freely that it is difficult to extract single examples of particular figures from his work. He so determinedly exacts participation of his reader that he demands the full senses, emotionally, intellectually, and, to a degree, physically. Many of his figures appeal directly to the physical senses of hearing, smell, or sight, as in the following:

The long procession of lamps on the beautiful street was flaring in the clear red of the sunset.²⁸

.....

The spars of a vessel pencilled themselves delicately against the cool blue of the afternoon sky . . .

.....

The air was full of a smell pleasantly compounded of oakum, of leather, and of oil.³⁰

.....

The air was full of the din of bells. . .³¹

²⁸William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 437.

²⁹Ibid., p. 24.

³⁰Ibid., p. 24.

³¹Ibid., p. 403.

The still air transmitted a turmoil of
 sound . . . ³²

.

. . . letting their voices flare out upon
 the silence, and then drop extinct one by one. . . ³³

.

On the other hand, he allows the reader to slip
 into the figures and feel with him the inclement or
 lovely weather, or the emotion of a moment of discovery.
 The following seem to exemplify most accurately, while
 perhaps not most lyrically, this peculiar talent of
 Howells:

At last the long endurance of the day was
 spent, and out of its convulsion burst floods
 of rain. . . ³⁴

.

Now a flush mounted the pale face of the
 east. . . the air was deliciously fresh and
 sweet and Basil bathed his weariness in it. . . ³⁵

³²William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 441.

³³William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 67.

³⁴William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 75.

³⁵Ibid., p. 97.

Then there are stretches of grey, westerly weather, when the air is full of the sentiment of early autumn, and the frying of the grasshopper in the blossomed weed of the vacant lots on the Back Bay is intershot with the carol of crickets. . . . 36

.

The weather had softened and was threatening rain or snow; the dark was closing in spiritlessly. . . . 37

.

The winter which held the village in such close siege was an occupation under which Nature seemed to cower helpless, and men made a desperate and ineffectual struggle. . . . 38

Further, Howells exhibited his skill in the enlistment of his reader's participation, allowing him glimpses of the inner beings of his characters. In the following examples, Howells demonstrates this ability:

Marcia gasped, as if she felt the clutch in which her husband had her tightening on her heart. . . . 39

36 William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 75.

37 Ibid., p. 97.

38 William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 176.

39 William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 42.

Irony

Howells had both an unusual facility with and a deep appreciation for the ironies of life. Cady, particularly, indicates respect for the "perfectly aimed, clear, hard phrase often finished with a re-echoing ironic twist."⁴⁰ His wry, humorous irony is an indispensable element of his writing, whether it be considered in the small, incidental ironies, or their larger, more sweeping counterparts. His fabled little twists, such as the theft of Bartley Hubbard's wallet containing the money which he had borrowed from his friend, Halleck, abound in his novels. Hubbard had borrowed the money under false pretenses, but had retained it with an idea of returning it to Halleck. Halleck, in unacknowledged love for Hubbard's wife, Marcia, had lent it reluctantly in loyalty to her. Hubbard, bullying and threatening, had left his home in a tiff, apparently with the basic idea of intimidating his wife, who was ashamed of his having borrowed from Halleck. The theft forced him to do exactly what he had threatened -- to leave Marcia -- in spite of his plan to return after having frightened her into following his will.

⁴⁰Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 16.

"Now he could not return; nothing remained for him but the ruin he had chosen."⁴¹ Annie Kilburn, attempting to find spiritual approbation through human beings, sought it among the ministers of the various denominations, only to finally find favor with the tatterdermalion Mr. Peck,⁴² of whom the other clergymen thoroughly disapproved. Leaving home after the quarrel with Marcia, Bartley Hubbard packed his clothes into the bag he had bought for Marcia, and which still held her perfume.⁴³ The young minister of Annie's church preached a sermon on industry from the text, "Consider the lilies."⁴⁴ Gibson points out the ironic implications of the name of Equity in the behavior of the tight-fisted landlord who bought Bartley Hubbard's horse from him on the night he left Equity for almost nothing. He further avers the revelation of irony in the contrasts of Clara Kingsbury's efforts on behalf of the Indigent Children's Surf-Bathing Society, Witherby's dirty

⁴¹William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 277.

⁴²William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 165.

⁴³William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 276.

⁴⁴William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 21.

journalism, and the moralistic severity of the wealthy lawyer, Atherton, in the decaying town of Hatboro.⁴⁵

It is Halleck's insipid morality which causes the ironic ending to A Modern Instance -- Marcia's return to her homestead as a wraith following in her mother's path of withdrawal. Putney, the incorrigible alcoholic of Annie Kilburn, remarks on the self-congratulatory Brandreth, who felt his stardom in the community theatrical, ostensibly held for the benefit of the Hatboro working people, to be a true triumph, "Yes, Brandreth is one of the most lady-like fellows I ever saw."⁴⁶ Isabel March is revealed as intolerant of a woman's resting her head on a man's shoulder in public, but when she falls asleep and finds herself on Basil's shoulder on awakening, she has the grace to concede her own intolerance.⁴⁷

Howells even uses irony in the titles to some of his novels, including three of the five studied in this paper. Annie Kilburn records the story of a

⁴⁵William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), intro., p. xi.

⁴⁶William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 179.

⁴⁷William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, pp. 110-112.

naive, well-meaning, simple country gentlewoman who has traveled a great deal, but who has learned little about people's motives and attitudes. The title is simple, but even in this there is irony, for underneath the simplicity of both the woman and the title there is much unrest, duplicity and drama. The Rise of Silas Lapham is the story of the rise to material success of a man who is without standards with which to measure that success, and who finds himself, or rises, in character after losing the things gained in his futile search for real success. Ultimately, then, his rise actually is not in the sense of achievement of wealth and position, but in the growth within the man himself. Indian Summer relates the story of a belated romance between mature people in the Indian summer of their lives. The gentle irony in this title is almost too subtle for easy recognition: Howells often appears straightforward in his statements at first reading. Indian summer is a time of late blooming, of warmth just before the first acute chill of winter. The title suggests that this is their last opportunity to find themselves, and they, not nearly so mature as their years imply, almost miss their chance. It is again very late when they become aware of their own opportunity for fulfillment.

Howells more frequently employed broader ironies, encompassing the development of the major portions of the novel concerned. For instance, much of Indian Summer deals with the development of a romance between Colville, a mature man, and Imogene Graham, a young protegee of Mrs. Bowen, Colville's real love. In the same vein, young Tom Corey's infatuation with Silas Lapham's daughter did not so nearly involve him in a mesalliance as a complete debacle for want of communication. One of the most poignant ironies of Silas Lapham's life evolves at the disastrous dinner party at the Corey's home. After imbibing the unfamiliar wine, Silas becomes expansive and loquacious:

He lost the reserve which he had maintained earlier, and began to boast. He himself introduced the subject of his paint, in a natural transition from pictures; he said Mr. Corey must take a run up to Lapham with him some day. . . . As he cast off all fear, his voice rose, and he hammered his arm-chair with the thick of his hand for emphasis. Mr. Corey seemed impressed; he sat perfectly quiet, listening, and Lapham saw the other gentlemen stop in their talk every now and then to listen. After this proof of his ability to interest them, he would have liked to have Mrs. Lapham suggest again that he was unequal to their society. . . .

The ironies of Silas Lapham's life are amusing but pathetic. Lapham's kindness to the Millions harmed him in the eyes of many of the people he wanted to impress favorably, but he was motivated by old loyalties, and was blinded to the results of his behavior. Mrs. Lapham, when Silas proposed to move to Beacon Street, suggested that she would do the washing to save money as she had done in Lumberville if Silas would install set tubs, pleading that she was no longer young. Silas, hearing current books discussed, responded with the statement that the family did buy a good many books, but that he got about all the reading he wanted in the newspaper. Their unawareness of their own ignorance was almost a protection to them.

The destruction of his dream house by Silas himself is all the more ironic because he could not have saved it for his family because of financial reverses. Howells' ironies always seem as logical and inevitable as this one. Because of the rent linen window cover any tramp could have entered the house during the winter and set it afire, but its devoted owner himself accidentally set the fire. He was preoccupied with the problem of trying to save it, and was careless.

Description

In the analysis of Howells' diction, the distinction between what should be classified solely as description and that which would be more properly placed under the study of figures is occasionally difficult, as evidenced in the passage below:

But the garden itself seemed to know him, and to give him a tacit recognition; the great, foolish grotto before the gate, with its statues by Bandinelli, and the fantastic effects of drapery and flesh in party-colored statues lifted high on either side of the avenue; the vast shoulder of wall, covered thick with ivy and myrtle, which he passed on the way to the amphitheater behind the palace; the alternate figures and urns on their pedestals in the hemicycle . . . the white statues or the colossal busts set at the ends of long alleys against black curtains of foliage; the big fountain, with its group in the center of the little lake, and the meadow, quiet and sad, that stretched away on one side from this; the keen light under the levels of the dense pines and ilexes; the paths striking straight on either hand from the avenue through which he sauntered, and the walk that coiled itself through the depths of the plantations; all knew him. . .⁴⁹

Howells is particularly effective in his descriptions. The immediate reaction of the reader of his first book,

⁴⁹ William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 185.

Their Wedding Journey, is that one has read a series of fine descriptions, and it requires some thought to realize that it is much richer and more clever than it would seem at first. One is caught up in the beauty of the descriptions and occasionally jarred by the return to reality in the harsher moments. In later books, Howells tended toward the use of description as a functional part of the development of the action, but in this book, which is chronologically the first of the five studied, he spends a great deal of time and energy in description. For that reason I have edited the descriptive examples stringently. Some of the briefer passages are given as examples below:

. . . the broad, effulgence and dense 50
unluminous shadows of the moonshine. . .

.

A corner grocer, seated in a sort
of fierce despondency upon a keg near
his shop door, had lately equipped him-
self for the struggle of the day in the
battered armor of the day before. . .

.

⁵⁰ William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 137.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 25.

Here and there stood groups of dwellings unmolested as yet outwardly; but even these had a certain careworn and guilty air, as if they knew themselves to be cheapest boarding houses or furnished . . . lodgings for gentlemen, and were trying to hide it. . . .⁵²

In his larger descriptions of landscapes and/or localities, the "panning" of Howells' mental camera creates a diorama of exquisite detail, not blurred with overexposure, but sharp in detail and complete in scope. This quality of expert photography is apparent in much of his description, reflecting his alert observance of and keen focus on detail. One excellent example of this is found in Indian Summer:

Her carriage was one of the few private equipages that drove up to Madame Uccelli's door; most people had not even a remise, but, after the simple Florentine fashion, had taken the little cabs, which stretched in a long line up and down the way; the horses had let their weary heads drop, and were easing their broken knees by extending their forelegs while they drowsed; the drivers, huddled in their great-coats, had assembled around the doorway to see the guests alight, with that amiable, unenvious interest of the Italians in the pleasure of others. The deep sky glittered with stars; in the corner of the next villa garden the black plumes of some cypresses blotted out their space among them.⁵³

⁵²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 25.

⁵³William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 58.

According to William M. Gibson, New York University professor, editor of A Modern Instance, like all good rendering of background in fiction, Howells' settings support characterizations and actions, enriching the characterization and enforcing the logic of the action.⁵⁴ Considering the description, then, in the context of setting, Howells used his evocative power to describe the environment with which his characters interact. The introduction to Annie Kilburn is an excellent example:

The village stood on a wide plain, and around it rose the mountains. They were green to their tops in summer, and in winter white through their serried pines and drifting mists, but at every season serious and beautiful, furrowed with hollow shadows, and taking the light on masses and stretches of iron-gray crag. The river swam through the plain in long curves, and slipped away at last through an unseen pass to the southward, tracing a score of miles in its course over a space that measured but three or four. The plain was very fertile, and its features, if few and of purely utilitarian beauty, had a rich luxuriance, and there was a tropical riot of vegetation when the sun of July beat on those northern fields. They waved with corn and oats to the feet of the mountains, and the potatoes covered a vast acreage with the lines of their intense, coarse green; the

⁵⁴William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), intro., p. vi.

meadows were deep with English grass to the banks of the river, that, doubling and returning upon itself, still marked its way with a dense fringe of alders and white birches . . .

Behind the black boles of the elms that swept the vista of the street with the fine gray tracery of their boughs, stood the houses, deep-sunken in the accumulating drifts, through which each householder kept a path cut from his doorway to the road, white and clean as if hewn out of marble. Some cross streets straggled away east and west with poorer dwellings; but this . . . was the main thoroughfare . . . with those square white houses which they build so large in Northern New England. They were all kept in scrupulous repair, though here and there the frost and thaw of many winters had heaved a fence out of plumb, and threatened the poise of the monumental urns of painted pine on the gate posts. They had dark-green blinds, of a color harmonious with that of the funereal evergreens in their dooryards. . . . At one end of the street stood the Academy, with its classic facade and belfry; midway was the hotel, with the stores, the printing office, and the churches; and at the other extreme, one of the square white mansions stood advanced from the rank of the rest, at the top of a deep-plunging valley, defining itself against the mountain beyond so sharply that it seemed as if cut out of its dark, wooded side. It was from the gate before this house, distinct in the pink light which the sunset had left, that . . . a cutter . . . dashed away, and came musically clashing down the street under the naked elms.

The reader is precipitated almost without volition into the novel's action through the subtle movement of the setting. Howells leads into the story with a description which immediately leaves a textured and colored impression of identification of locale, culture and time. A little later in the book, intensifying the atmosphere of cold, beautiful and bitter, he continues:

The forenoon sunshine, beating strong upon the thin snow along the edges of the porch floor, tattered them with a little thaw here and there. . .⁶¹

leaving the reader set down in an old New England town, frosty both in internal and external climate.

Howells' description of people is simply intended for further character revelation to the reader, rather than as a means of identification or study of appearance. He seldom dwells upon personal features unless they are relevant to some characteristic not easily shown otherwise, or, in some cases, unless they emphasize and reiterate some weakness or strength. However, for each character he pauses long enough

⁶¹William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 4.

at the introduction to describe the person well enough that he is later easily recognized, as in the instance of the initial description of Marcia Gaylord:

She thus showed a smooth, low forehead, lips and cheeks deeply red, a softly rounded chin touched with a faint dimple, and in turn a nose short and aquiline; her eyes were dark and her dusky hair flowed crinkling above her fine black brows, and vanished down the curve of a lovely neck. There was a peculiar charm in the form of her upper lip: it was exquisitely arched, and at the corners it projected a little over the lower lip, so that when she smiled it gave a piquant sweetness to her mouth, with a certain demure innocence that qualified the Roman pride of her profile. For the rest, her beauty was of the kind that coming years would only ripen and enrich; at thirty she would be even handsomer than at twenty. . . .⁶²

The elements of foreshadowing are contained within the description, for when Marcia had reached the time which should have seen the fulfillment of her beauty, she had become a recluse, no longer with demure innocence, a woman in whom the promise of youth had died ignominiously. The corruption of both her marriage and her soul were not fully anticipated in her own

⁶²

William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 3.

description -- the description of Bartley Hubbard completes the foreshadowing:

The young man who looked up at her from the doorstep had a yellow moustache, shadowing either side of his lip with a broad sweep, like a bird's wing; his chin, deep-cut below his mouth, failed to come strenuously forward; his cheeks were filled to an oval contour, and his face had otherwise . . . regularity. . .⁶³

Within this very brief additional description is included the elements of Bartley's character which ultimately ruin him -- the failure of his chin, or character, to come strenuously forward.

In Indian Summer, Colville observes the elderly gentleman, the Reverend Mr. Waters, and knows his character:

. . . the old gentleman was short and slight, with a youthful eagerness in his face surviving on good terms with the gray locks that fell down his temples from under the brim of his soft felt hat. With the boyish sweetness of his looks blended a sort of appreciative shrewdness, which pointed his smiling lips slightly aslant in what seemed the expectation rather than the intention of humor.⁶⁴

⁶³William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 3.

⁶⁴William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 69.

Howells may have been referring obliquely to the Italian tenet that a man's character is told by the formation of his features and the lines of his face, known as la faccia dichiara.

Words and Word Usage

Continuing with the study of Howells' diction, having considered figurative speech and description, it is logical to immediately consider words and word usages. Again, Howells is faithful to his own statements in using words appropriately and precisely. Within the descriptions and figures heretofore studied, the effect was that of firmly interwoven words, each in its most functional and beautiful place. Howells could not be content to remain within the bounds of American English even in books written for popular consumption, and so each novel is sprinkled with terms adopted from French, Italian and Latin. Since French was, at the time Howells was writing, the language of the educated, it may be assumed that Howells used French more freely than any of the other languages with which he was familiar. Among the most frequently used words are ennuye (or ennui), menage and denouement. In describing the town of Hatboro and its people in Annie Kilburn, he used hauteur in its

precise French meaning, and, again in Annie Kilburn, he spoke of adieux that were almost radiant. Other words in these same places would have been less cogent, but in some instances the use of French words rather than English seemed to sway toward the grandiloquent; e.g., the use of a merveille and pour-boire where marvelous (or a synonym) and tip, respectively, would have been more natural and clear. Since the time in which Howells wrote, however, many words from French, Spanish, and some from Italian and German have come into common usage in American English, and it is possible that with Howells the use of foreign words was natural in his role as a cosmopolitan scholar. Certainly, the use of Italian words in Indian Summer is appropriate, since the book is set in Italy. To a person familiar with the country, and particularly the city of Venice, the statement that "a figure of primo tenore witnessed the maneuver from the box of his cab. . ." ⁶⁵ would immediately invoke for him the picture of an obese, possibly balding, self-assured Italian man,

⁶⁵William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 17.

dressed in formal garb with spats, sitting with ponderous dignity upon the seat of a vehicle resembling a hansom cab; for a person unfamiliar with the country the phrase only bewilders. These allusions to other languages and other cultures in Howells' books appear to imply his desire that others as broadly read and traveled as he enjoy his books rather than the general populace. Perhaps this is part of his avowed allegiance to Boston and the Brahmins; anything less would have diminished him in his own concept.

Occasionally, Howells used words in their obsolescent or obscure meanings, or tended to "coin" words not customarily used in that particular manner. On one occasion in Their Wedding Journey, he refers to an umbrageous stream,⁶⁶ apparently adapting the rare and poetic meaning of umbrageous as having a shadowy or shady appearance. It would perhaps have been better to have used the phrase shady stream, but Howells ventured into the esoteric vocabulary of a literate and articulate world citizen, revealing himself in the

⁶⁶William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 111.

substitution of farrago for medley,⁶⁷ and irrefragable⁶⁸
for the more common and equally precise irrefutable.

Apparently Howells chose words for their euphony as well as their precision, as in this example:

Marcia wore a sort of dark robe . . . in which she looked a Roman Patrician in an avatar of Boston domesticity. . .⁶⁹

The use of some other word than avatar, possibly reincarnation, would not have been so satisfactory in the poetic scansion of the last several words or the mood setting phraseology of the whole statement.

Sometimes Howells' words delineate a thought to the reader and startle him with their unusual character, as in the following example:

"And you won't give me any coffee?"

"Oh yes, I'll give you some coffee", said Annie, with a sigh of baffled scrupulosity that made them both laugh.⁷⁰

⁶⁷William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 318.

⁶⁸William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 352.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 172.

⁷⁰William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 217.

She was waiting for the right moment to turn her delicate head, sculpturesquely defined by its toque. . .⁷¹

Certainly, it is an astute writer who refers to a ". . . castellated baron. . .,"⁷² and ". . . phantasmal cars. . .,"⁷³ who can be forgiven for dutiolatry⁷⁴ and Italianized sympatheticism.⁷⁵

Howells' writing may have been either hampered or enhanced by his vocabulary, and perhaps the choice of opinions rests with the reader.

Dialogue

All of Howells' novels are built around dialogue, through which character is revealed, action is carried forward, themes are made clear, and interweaving relationships are shown to the reader. Again, examples of dialogue usage are multiple, and, of course, they

⁷¹William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 10.

⁷²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 69.

⁷³Ibid., p. 58.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁵William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 49.

may be drawn from any of the novels, but the one which is herein discussed is typical, and revealing of all the elements studied to this point:

"Well", said Lapham, and nodding to Corey to enter, he closed the door upon him. Then he turned to the young man and demanded: "Was I drunk last night?"

Lapham's strenuous face was broken up with emotions that had forced him to this question: shame, fear of the things that must have been thought of him, mixed with a faint hope that he might be mistaken, which died out at the shocked and pitying look in Corey's eyes.

"Was I drunk?" he repeated. "I ask you, because I was never touched by drink in my life before, and I don't know. He stood with his huge hands trembling on the back of his chair, and his dry lips apart, as he stared at Corey.

"That is what everyone understood, Colonel Lapham", said the young man. "Every one saw how it was. Don't --"

"Did they talk it over after I left?" asked Lapham vulgarly.

"Excuse me" said Corey, blushing, "my father doesn't talk his guests over with one another." He added, with youthful superfluity, "You were among gentlemen."

"I was the only one that wasn't a gentleman there!" lamented Lapham. "I disgraced you. I disgraced my family. I mortified your father before his friends." His head dropped . . .

Lapham continues to abase himself to young Corey, offering to release him from connection with the company,

and young Corey, whose interest in Lapham's daughter renders him even less comfortable, protests:

"I can't listen to you any longer. What you say is shocking to me -- shocking in a way you can't think."⁷⁶

Howells portrayed his characters through their conversation with one another not only in what they said, but also in the manner in which they said it. He used dialect as a means of portraying the character both of individuals and of groups. He did not introduce the origin of the speaker -- he simply began in the tongue native to the one who spoke. His dialects run the gamut from the American Jewish in an incident of Their Wedding Journey to the speech patterns of northern New England in Annie Kilburn. To have so faithfully reproduced these as well as the mountain dialect of the grizzled old Kinney of A Modern Instance is the work of an astute observer whose pen mimics carefully. Each dialect has its own inflection, cadence, idiom and nuances. Comparing the following passages, it is easy to distinguish between dialects, even for the unpracticed:

⁷⁶William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, pp. 294-296.

"They had to raze the steeple some to git their cross on," he added; and then he showed her the high-school building as they passed, and the Episcopal chapel. . . .

"Yes," she said, "that was built before we went abroad."

"I disremember," he said, . . . "I d'know . . . as you know we'd got a new minister to our church. . . . Well, come to think. . . . I don't know's you'd had time to heard. He hain't been here a great while."⁷⁷

Kinney, entertaining Bartley Hubbard in his cabin, spoke with an uneducated syntax, but he had some self-taught familiarity with noble names:

"They say old Agassiz recommended fish as the best food for the brain. Well, I don't suppose but what it is. But I don't know but what pie is more stimulating to the fancy. I nev' saw anything like meat-pie to make ye dream. . . . Well, I guess folks of sedentary pursuits, like you and me, don't need it; but these fellows that stamp around in the snow all day, they want something to keep their imagination goin'. And I guess pie does it. . . . Ever try apples when you was at work? They say cld Greeley kep' his desk full of 'em; kep' munching away all the while when he was writin' his editorials. And one of them German poets -- I don't know but what it was old Gutty⁷⁸ himself -- kep' rotten ones in his drawer; liked the smell of 'em."⁷⁹

⁷⁷William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, pp. 15-16.

⁷⁸Corruption of Goethe.

⁷⁹William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 83.

Contrasts

Within this section contrasts will be considered along with paradoxes and anachronisms. Howells' sense of the paradoxes in human nature often illuminated his writing with vignettes such as the following:

In this poor lady, who had so long denied herself spiritual comfort, there was a certain obscure luxury. She liked little dainties of the table; she liked soft warmth, an easy cushion. It was doubtless in the disintegration of the finer qualities of her nature, that, as they grew older together, she threw more and more of the burden of acute feeling upon her husband, to whose doctrine of life she had submitted, but had never been reconciled. . . . Thrown in upon herself in so vital a matter as her religion, Mrs. Gaylord had involuntarily come to live largely for herself, though her talk was always of her husband. . . . She padded herself round at every point where she could have suffered through her sensibilities, and lived soft and snug in the shelter of his iron will and indomitable courage.⁸⁰

Kirk points out that the contrasts to be noticed in the minor experiences of daily living never ceased to amuse and sadden Howells, and it is these subtly analyzed contrasts that form the basis of the true

⁸⁰William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 71.

Howells novel.⁸¹ Howells uses stated contrasts, broader implied contrasts, and clearly defined contrasts to make his points. Overall, of course, these contrasts undergird and support the ironical spirit of many of his novels.

Into the tranquillity and serenity of the night boat journey upon the Hudson River in Their Wedding Journey is thrust the horror and confusion of an accident, and "the place with which she had been familiar a little while before was now utterly estranged. . ." ⁸² The sharp juxtapositions are further emphasized by the stillness of the disabled boat, lying idle in the current, with the chaotic movement of the people aboard the boat. Throughout his writings, Howells makes careful note of beauty and serenity, and just as meticulously and mercilessly draws every disturbing element. In Their Wedding Journey the gentility and refinement, both of the Marches and their associates in their familiar surroundings, contrast vividly with the uncouth behavior of the burlesque troupe and the tawdry accommodations which the Marches are forced to share with them. The

⁸¹William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf Kirk and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. xcii.

⁸²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 87.

troupe's cavorting about and uncouth behavior directly contrast with the calm and gentle demeanor of the Marches and their tolerance of the situation.⁸³

A much subtler approach, in Annie Kilburn, depicts the love of true gentility against mercenary charity, and Annie's true need to be magnanimous against the use to which her philanthropy was turned by her friends.⁸⁴

In The Rise of Silas Lapham, the contrast between Silas' idealization of success and its true attainment is perhaps less significant than the contrast between his behavior and that of Corey, but they are of essentially the same nature.

Even in small ways Howells was constantly at work to produce awareness of contrasting situations, as in the incident following Ben Halleck's receipt of the package containing divorce papers for Marcia Hubbard which had been inadvertently delivered to him. In the carriage taking Halleck and his sister, Olive, to the Hubbard home, Halleck is indifferent to his surroundings and to his sister's excitement:

⁸³William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 352.

⁸⁴William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, pp. 43-44.

He sank with a sigh against the carriage cushions, answering Olive's eager questions and fervid comments with languid monosyllables. . . . 85

Howells used contrasts freely, but with discretion. He placed Marcia Gaylord in poor surroundings in Boston, having her limited acquaintance with people of equally poor background, both physically and socially, in contrast with her previous gracious and genteel home. In some interpretations this might be construed as a symbol, and it is frequently difficult to discriminate between Howells' minor symbols and his simple contrasts.

⁸⁵William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 325.

CHAPTER IV
SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM

One of the most difficult facets of Howells' great talent to categorize accurately is his symbolism. One finds the more obvious symbolisms readily, those less apparent with effort, and finds that Howells' rich mysticism leads him on to dimly perceived filaments, gossamer and elusive. It is in this area that the study of Howells becomes tantalizing and difficult.

The thread runs through all of the five books studied, interlocking, interweaving, and moving tangentially, almost like a sub-plot. For easier consideration of the interplay, I have considered each book separately, even though it would be as effective to study them topically.

In Their Wedding Journey, the first to be considered, Basil March is Howells, epitomizing the best of the urbane traveler, mature and cognizant of his environment. Isabel does not appear to be more than a prototype: she is not so vivid nor aware as Basil. It may be that in attributing to Howells' further symbolism here is to beg the question; however, substantiation of the almost mystical and hazy symbolisms regarding Howells' attitude toward marriage lies herein. The first really significant one appears during the sojourn in New York, when the travelers are beset with

annoyances, of which Howells says,

Their afternoon's experience was something that Basil and Isabel could, when it was past, look upon only as a kind of vision, magnificent at times, and other times full of indignity and pain.¹

They pursue their way through squalid surroundings, intense and debilitating heat, witnessing a sunstroke, to their destination, arriving in the cool dusk. The beginning of their journey has been most pleasant, almost euphoric; perhaps this is to say that their marriage is basically serene beneath superficial turmoil, or perhaps it more nearly says that it will remain strong until the relief of mellowing years brings no divisiveness. At the end of their journey, the confusion at the hotel in Quebec coincides with the end of their honeymoon and the beginning of their humdrum lives. They become separated, and are intensely aware of their separation, but they are able to take others into their world again.

In several places Howells has used the concept of the microcosm as a representation of the whole, as in the incident in which

They had the comfort of finding the Tappan Zee in every expanse of the river, and of dis-

¹William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 75.

covering Sunnyside on every pleasant slope. By virtue of this helplessness, the Hudson, without ceasing to be the Hudson, became from moment to moment all fair and stately streams upon which they had voyaged or read of voyaging, from the Nile to the Mississippi.²

When Basil and Isabel visit a convent associated with a church in Montreal, the nuns are very gracious hostesses to them. One of them presents Isabel with a rose, perhaps symbolic of the beauty and purity of the giver, or, because of Howells' firmly expressed anti-Catholicism, it may have represented the only thing of beauty which they saw. The fact that Howells placed the incident in the midst of a charge against the system of self-abnegation promoted by the Church seems to emphasize his recognition of the purity of the motives in the one who gives the lovely rose to Isabel.

A lonely young man on the excursion boat catches Basil March's attention, and he and Isabel speculate about his destination and occupation. It is moot whether Basil's assumption that the young man is a poet is a symbol, but it would appear that he is a projection of Basil's own dream of poesy which he feels may not be fulfilled, as in Howells' own life.

²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 77.

The most vivid symbolism of Their Wedding Journey, to this writer, is the lovely scene in Quebec of the Silver City:³

They looked back with him at the city, whose thousands of tinned roofs, rising one above the other from the water's edge to the citadel, were all a splendor of argent light in the afternoon sun. It was indeed as if some magic had clothed that huge rock, base and steepy flank and crest, with a silver city. They gazed upon the marvel with cries of joy that satisfied the driver's utmost pride in it, and Isabel said, "To live there in that Silver City, in perpetual sojourn! To be always going to go on a morrow that never came! To be forever within one day of the end of a wedding journey that never ended!"³

Thus the mundane city is covered with a precious mantel of beauty in the eyes of a woman whose own barrenness has been supplanted with fulfillment.

In A Modern Instance, the next novel to be considered, Bartley Hubbard epitomizes all that is decadent in society, particularly in Boston, symbol of gentility. He plays upon Marcia Gaylord's unstable emotions with consummate skill in order to inflate his own ego. Marcia's own irresponsible morality was not supported by the genteel traditionalists of Boston, and Cady charges them with being unable to communicate to her the vital spark.

³William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 319.

They are only successful in making her yearn to be like them, but they are too far from their own sources to support her.⁴ Boston, and Bostonians, symbolize that which is genteel, Bartley that which is decadent, and Marcia that which is weak and vacillating. Cady says that A Modern Instance is a study of rising cultural obsolescence in New England⁵ and, by extension, the modern world. In that case, then, aside from the obvious ironic symbolism of the name of Equity, it is also the symbol of that which is decaying through carelessness and indolence, recounted in the comment,

The lamps were out in the houses (where the smell of rats in the wainscot and of potatoes in the cellar strengthened in the growing night) when Bartley and Marcia drove back through the moonlit silence to her father's door.⁶

There are many instances of Howells' use of physical characteristics to symbolize moral or ethical conditions. The style and fashion of Marcia's clothing is mentioned in detail and in such a manner as to suggest that her character was somewhat vain, but one may infer that the

⁴Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 209.

⁵Ibid., p. 212.

⁶William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), p.3.

attractive outside habiliments covered a most unattractive inner person, and that her interest in dress was not natural pride, but a shallow attentiveness to self. Another physical symbolism, of which one becomes increasingly aware as the novel progresses, is Bartley's gain in weight, which becomes noticeable to his associates:

Ricker. . . had considered in all mere young man's nonsense that Bartley would out-grow. But now, as he looked at Bartley's back, he had his misgivings; it struck him as the back of a degenerate man, and that increasing bulk seemed not to represent an increase of wholesome substance, but a corky, buoyant tissue, materially responsive to some sort of moral dry-rot.⁷

Later, at the divorce trial in Indiana, his corpulence had increased with his moral degeneration:

It was not the fat on Bartley's ribs only that had increased; his broad cheeks stood out and hung down with it, and his chin descended by the three successive steps to his breast.⁸

The other physical symbol in A Modern Instance which is noteworthy is Halleck's limp, which is one indication of his ineptitude in the tangled affairs of his love for Marcia. Perhaps it was Howells' intention to indicate

⁷William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed., William M. Gibson), p. 243.

⁸Ibid., p. 350.

lameness, not only in Halleck, but in all persons who are so morally rigid that they lose sight of the impositions which their morality makes upon the lives of other people.

Howells, with detached amusement, flings a last, superfluous symbolism into Bartley Hubbard's life; he has him to be killed in a sordid quarrel in Whited Sepulcher, Arizona.

It is in Annie Kilburn that Cady sees the greatest amount of symbolism. He enumerates three major symbols: (1) Annie's nearsightedness, (2) Mrs. Munger's association with leather, and (3) the use of the architecture of old Hatboro, beautiful but neglected, against the crass commercialism of the new part of town.⁹ He also mentions Putney's alcoholism as a psychic disease, or disease of the will, which, in Cady's estimation, is connected with the illness of Howells' daughter, Winifred.¹⁰ If this is true, it is in accordance with Cady's insistence that Howells must be interpreted in the light of his psychic problems. He compares Howells with Hawthorne in his manipulation of atmosphere and symbols.¹¹

⁹Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 88.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 118.

¹¹Ibid., p. 118.

The self complacency which allowed the neglect of the fine old homes in Hatboro also permitted the terrible factories and promoted the competitive, tasteless architecture of the nouveau riche in South Hatboro. Putney's home was, on the other hand, simple and well cared for. Cady states that this is because Putney, victim of alcoholism, is still an humble and simple soul, unchanged by the superficiality of the times.¹² He also analyzes Howells' use of Putney's drunk scenes, along with Bartley Hubbard's and Silas Lapham's, as strategems organic to his creative intention.¹³ In each case the scene is revealing of more than would have been logical in another setting, and in each the man's weaknesses are brought to the fore. Symbolically, then, the drunkenness is each man's Achilles heel, of which he is psychically unaware.

Mrs. Munger, associated with leather, is leathern herself -- fine, exquisitely tooled leather, of course, but, nonetheless, leather. After her despoiling entertainment following the theatrical which she so enthusiastically promoted, she was unable to grasp her own perfidy against Annie, and rushed to exorcise her guilt through

¹²Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 89.

¹³Ibid., p. 89.

Annie and Mr. Putney, whom she had most harmed. In her gratitude for what she interprets as Annie's approval of her, she grasps Annie's uncovered (guileless) hand in "a double leathern grasp."¹⁴

The presentation of the ill-conceived theatrical on the tennis court stage, with adaptations of action and scenery to fit, may have symbolized the strictured perceptions of Hatboro's newcomers: Shakespeare's classic, condensed and edited by narrow, shallow minds, must be performed in a narrow, familiar place.

There is a suggestion of symbolism in the fact that Annie's generously designed frame is so sparsely filled out. Like Olive Halleck Atherton's blind and feckless pursuit of subscriptions for the Indigent Children's Surf-Bathing Society, Annie's efforts toward the Social Union were simply an unacknowledged search for identity and fulfillment.

Indian Summer is not so rich as Annie Kilburn in symbolisms: It has been said to be too autobiographical for Howells to have used symbols freely. The basic

¹⁴William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 214.

¹⁵William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 83.

symbolism is different from those in the other novels. Colville, the mature urbanite, living away from his native country, is nostalgic for his lost youth and lost romance, which are synonymous to him. He sees in the youth of Imogene the phantom of his own youth, and it is this which attracts and entraps him:

A sense of the girl's beauty lingered in Colville's thought all day, and recurred to him again and again. . . . How divinely young it all was, and how lovely!¹⁵

To Colville's annoyance and the delight of the reader, a twinge in his shoulder, which he attributes to rheumatism, often has the effect of bringing him abruptly and reluctantly back to the truth of age and physical condition, and, incidentally, the condition of his emotions.

In all of the novels studied here, Howells uses time of day or year as a background for emotional growth or trauma. In the case of Marcia Hubbard it is an inverted use: summer is blooming when Marcia, bitter and despairing, returns to her parent's home after her divorce.

¹⁵William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 83.

In the first flush of the young and jubilant summer they opened the dim old house at the end of the village, and resumed their broken lives.¹⁶

Having experienced Howells' other usages of time-change, the reader is left to infer that possibly these broken lives can be renewed, but more likely the bloom of summer is a mockery of their hopelessness. The house to which the embittered Marcia and her palsy-stricken father return is the same in which her mother wasted away. It was spring when Marcia and Bartley Hubbard experienced their greatest happiness with their baby.

Basil and Isabel March embarked on their wedding trip in the middle of the summer, the mid-part also of their lives. After a winter of misunderstanding, Colville and Lena Bowen, in Indian Summer, resolve their romance in "a sudden access of summer,"¹⁷ Italy's most beautiful time.

In The Rise of Silas Lapham, this device is also used. It is in the winter that Silas grieves and frets over his misfortunes, and, ultimately, in the bitterest weather of the winter, his dream is destroyed.

Silas Lapham, himself, is the symbol of the selfmade,

¹⁶William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), p. 358.

¹⁷William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p. 304.

uncouth man whose eager climb to success dissolves under pressures of ignorance and self-conceit. The house on the bay side of Beacon Hill epitomizes his concept of success: what he himself is impressed with must perforce impress others. The destruction of his dream by his own hand is retributive justice; he has no perceptions with which to grasp this fact. Silas, in conversation with the Coreys, hears a current book mentioned. The book is not symbolic within itself; however, the act of being conversant with it implies a certain consciousness which was lacking in the Laphams, to whom the book itself becomes a symbol, concrete and attainable, of all that which is just beyond their grasp. Corey is the liaison between the two worlds of the novel; he is not aware of his role. Rogers, Lapham's rejected partner, is, in effect, a sort of conscience, appearing and reappearing, like a wraith, inexorable and persistent, demanding decisive behavior of an increasingly disoriented Silas. Boston, in this novel, the home of aristocrats and literata, symbolizes all that is unattainable to the Laphams, the gauche and unlettered. The doors may be opened, as the Coreys was, but the intruders themselves close them again.

CHAPTER V
SYNTAX AND MANNER OF EXPRESSION

It is almost redundant to say that Howells used the English language with great facility. His command of the language is unusual; his knowledge of syntax immaculate. His essays lend themselves to a detailed study of syntax; however, there is orderliness and precision also in the novels.

Syntax is usually considered to cover the arrangements of words and phrases, paragraph unity, coherence, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation. These are simply the details which came to Howells as naturally as speech; he was so completely inured to the excellence of literary expression through his reading experience that he had what may be termed an instinct for articulate expression. The fact that, in an era of mellifluous language, when the literati were concerned with purity, linguistically and stylistically, Howells' critics at no time concerned themselves with his syntactical usages, implies that they are not at issue. He makes a point of including in his self-edited Criticism and Fiction

a summary of his own experience as Editor of the Atlantic:

I revised all proofs, verifying every quotation and foreign word, and correcting slovenly style and syntax, and then revised the author's and my own corrections. This proof-reading was a school of verbal exactness and rhetorical simplicity and clearness. . . . The manuscripts supported while they fatigued. . . very often they startled the drooping intelligence with something good and new.¹

The third chapter of Their Wedding Journey is a good example of his command of writing rules: in the chapter there are well-developed sentences, good paragraphing, and, ultimately, good chapter development. There is an effective introduction, with movement forward into the body of the statement. The third sentence exemplifies Howells' talent for succinct statement, as well as his precision of form:

In the transaction with the castellated baron, you have of course been treated with haughtiness, but not with ferocity, and your self respect swells with a sense of having escaped positive insult; your key clicks cheerfully in your pocket against its gutta-percha number, and you walk up and down the gorgeously carpeted, single columned, two story cabin, amid a multitude of plush sofas and chairs, a glitter of glass, and the tinkle of prismatic chandeliers overhead, unawed

¹William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 192.

even by the aristocratic gloom of the yellow waiters. . .²

The scheme of the chapter has been well set, the descriptive phase has moved into the expository phase, and the chapter is begun. In the foregoing sentence, Howells has used parallel development, repetitive imagery, and immaculate grammar. His punctilious usages are framed in balanced clauses and phrases, and his punctuation is consistently correct. The chapter begins and ends with soliloquies, both of which are devoted to the calming of the soul, after a mounting crescendo of motion and confusion within the action of the chapter.

It is in Their Wedding Journey, of the five novels explored, that Howells appears to have most enjoyed rhetorical effort: there is a rich, almost casual ease in the eloquence of his language. The description of the hod-carrier is an example:

The man carrying the hod to the top of the walls that rankly grow and grow as from his life's blood will only lay down his load when he feels the mortal glare of the sun blaze in upon heart and brain; the plethoric millionaire for whom he

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William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 69.

toils will plot and plan in his office until he swoons at the desk; the trembling beast must stagger forward while the flame-faced tormentor on the box has strength to lash him on; in all those vast palaces of commerce there are ceaseless sale and purchase, packing and unpacking, lifting up and laying down, arriving and departing loads; in thousands of shops is the unspared and unsparring weariness of selling; in the street, filled by the hurry and suffering of tens of thousands, is the weariness of buying.³

The reader is aware that this quotation is composed of a single sentence, written for force in coordinate clauses, each in itself a searing commentary on the condition of the laboring force, each lucid and effective individually. It is coherently stated, perhaps written with the encompassing consciousness of the magnitude of the problem. Howells appears to spend his effort deliberately, with cause, but the reader is cautioned against over-interpretation.

Howells, in general, employed the active voice of verbs, lending vigor to the action of the novel, with incidental use of the passive voice. He did not use the subjunctive mood often, but where apropos, he used it correctly. In the texts of the novels,

³William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, pp. 55-56.

where his own language and expression are appropriate, his verb conjugation is accurate and his declension of nouns and pronouns faultless. In conversation, the usages concur with the characterization of the individual depicted. For instance, in an early conversation between Bartley Hubbard and Mrs. Gaylord, the observer is provided insight to both natures through their conversation:

"Are you pretty well to-day?", she asked.

"Well, no, Mrs. Gaylord, I'm not," answered Bartley. "I'm all out of sorts. I haven't felt so dyspeptic for I don't know how long."

Mrs. Gaylord smoothed the silk dress across her lap, the thin old black silk which she still instinctively put on for Sabbath observance, though it was so long since she had worn it to church. "Mr. Gaylord used to have it when we first married, though he ain't been troubled with it of late years. He seemed to think it was worse Sundays."

They continue to discuss his dyspepsia, until she decides: "I don't know but what a cup of tea would be the best thing for you."⁴

Through Howells' judicious use of poor syntax, Mrs. Gaylord's personality is revealed more effectively

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William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 27.

than would have been possible with the use of description alone -- a woman unschooled, but gracious in her timidity.

It has been remarked that Howells is the English teacher's delight: any sentence, not within conversation, in his writing may be diagrammed with ease by any student. If this be true, then his use of modifiers, his clause introductions and usages, his controls of both conjugation and declension, and his placement of sentence elements must perforce be accurate, if not precise. A sentence which seems to reflect all these requirements well is found in the paragraph of description on Henry Bird, the young printer at the Free Press office:

He seemed to be one of those simple, subordinate natures which are happy in looking up to whatever assumes to be above them.⁵

Howells comments of Sir Walter Scott that

On the simplest occasions he went about half a mile to express a thought that could be uttered in ten paces across lots.⁶

Apparently he followed his own creed, for William M.

⁵ William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 49.

⁶ William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 17.

Gibson, editor of the Riverside Edition of A Modern Instance, says that Howells largely eliminated the *raisonneur* and witty comment typically present in the earlier fiction,⁷ and Cady further comments on the fine economy and directness of development let by the new concern for ideas.⁸

Perhaps, then, Howells' manner of expression is due consideration beyond the matter of technicalities. His manner of expression became uniquely his own: he became the master of anecdotal telling, description, and conversational manner,⁹ an artist of figurative language, and a craftsman in the use of intrusions. It is these intrusions which particularly characterize Howells' works, and it is they which will be studied next for continuity of thought.

⁷William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), intro., p. xviii.

⁸Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 83.

⁹Ibid., p. 160.

Author Intrusion

Howells used many means of insinuating himself into his novels, becoming an amused onlooker in some instances, an editor intruding into the main them, a raconteur, a character in reverie, a devil's advocate in discourse, a commentator speaking in an aside, the voice of conscience, and the manipulator of an interlocutor.

Using the means of editorial comment, Howells inserted himself into his books to discuss his sociological views, his qualms about Catholicism, his love for Boston, his dislike of New York, his scorn for Americans less refined than himself, and his evaluation of all things dissatisfying to himself. His ironic, or at times sardonic, viewpoint, frequently humorous, occasionally cutting, often colored his comments. For instance, he comments, when Bromfield Corey is concerned about Boston's reaction to his son's return to Boston,

A man has not reached the age of twenty-six in any community where he was born and reared without having had his capacity pretty well ascertained. . . . A man's qualities are sifted as closely in Boston as they doubtless were in Florence or Athens; and, if final mercy was shown in those cities because a man was, with all his limitations, an Athenian or

or Florentine, some abatement might as justly be made in Boston for like reason.¹⁸

Some of Howells' comments on social conditions are confined to brief statements, while others are more complex and subtle. He treated many serious subjects with a quasi-bitter, biting tongue, as in the case of his discussion of religious behavior among the citizens of Equity:

The habit of church going was so strong and universal in Equity that even strangers. . . found themselves the object of a sort of hospitable competition with the members of the different denominations. . . . There was. . . a profound expectation. . . . This was Bartley's custom. . . for in the rather chaotic liberality into which religious sentiment had fallen in Equity, it was tacitly conceded that the editor of a paper devoted to the interests of the whole town ought not to be of fixed theological opinions.¹⁹

Religion there had largely ceased to be a fact of spiritual experience, and the visible church flourished on condition of providing for the social needs of the community.

He was less biting and more tongue-in-cheek in his treatment of Hatboro's intellectual fading and attendant ills of soul:

In the process of that expansion from a New England village to an American town of

¹⁸William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 177.

¹⁹William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, pp. 17-18.

which Putney spoke, Hatboro had suffered one kind of deterioration. . . . She remembered a distinctly intellectual life. . . . There used to be houses in which people. . . took a keen interest in literature, and read new books. . . . The decay of the Unitarians as a sect perhaps had something to do with the literary lapse of the place. . . it is certain that they were no longer the leading people.²⁰

In the following, he became militantly critical:

It was rapture to take a carriage, and drive. . . as in Europe to the churches, the churches of a pitiless superstition, the churches with their atrocious pictures and statues, their lingering smell of the morning's incense, their confessionals, their fee-taking sacristans, their worshippers dropped here and there upon their knees about the aisles and saying their prayers with shut or wandering eyes according as they were old women or young! I do not defend the feeble sentimentality, -- call it wickedness if you like, -- but I understand it, and I forgive it from my soul.²¹

Later, when the Marches visited the convent and school of the Grey Nuns, he again attacked the church for the system which could produce nuns:

The visitors went about the hospital, and saw the old men and the little children to whom these good pure lives were given, and they could only blame the system, not the instruments of their work. . . . They pitied the Gray Nuns amidst the unhomelike comfort of their convent, the unnatural care

²⁰William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 153.

²¹William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 245.

of these alien little ones. Poor Soeurs Grises in their narrow cells. . . the power of your Church is shown far more subtly and mightily in such as you, than in her grandest fanes or the sight of her most august ceremonies. . . .²²

His comments on Americans and American behavior are liberally sprinkled throughout his books. He had a fastidious dislike for uncouth behavior, and was totally impatient with bad taste and pretentiousness. In a comparison of America with Europe he invariably preferred Europe. One of his gentlest gibes was in the scene of Their Wedding Journey in which he allows Basil to construct villas and castles along the shore of the Mohawk River, and then patriotically reconstruct the Dutch and Indian past, only to find that

He was foiled by the immense ignorance of his wife, who, as a true American woman, knew nothing of the history of her own country, and less than nothing of the barbarous regions beyond the shores of her native province.²³

In his comments Howells was often autobiographical, as in the instance of the club for journalists to which Bartley Hubbard was invited:

They were mostly young men, who found

²²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 256.

²³Ibid., p. 105.

sufficient compensation in the excitement and adventure of their underpaid labors, and in the vague hope of advancement; there were grizzled beards among them. . . . Here and there was an old fellow. . . proud of his vocation. . . . None, indeed, who have ever known it, can wholly forget the generous rage with which journalism inspires its followers.²⁴

In the face of Silas Lapham's financial disaster, Howells intrudes into his book to say:

Our theory of disaster, of sorrow, of affliction, borrowed from the poets and novelists, is that it is incessant; but every passage in our lives and in the lives of others, so far as we have witnessed them, teaches us that this is false. The house of mourning is decorously darkened to the world, but within itself it is also the house of laughing.²⁵

The technique of using an interlocutor varied from choosing and placing in the story a representative, as in the case of Atherton in A Modern Instance and Sewell in The Rise of Silas Lapham, or making the principal character an alter ego, such as Basil March in Their Wedding Journey and Colville in Indian Summer, to using, almost at random, a character, either in discourse or reverie. In this manner, additional knowledge can be given to the reader by the narrator as a secondary center

²⁴William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), p. 138.

²⁵William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 103.

of revelation.²⁶ Basil March speaks, acts and thinks for Howells, so that in Their Wedding Journey one is totally immersed in Howells' viewpoint. Howells causes March to react to the ostentation of the steamboat in the following manner:

They mocked the public provisions which, leaving no interval between disgraceful squalor and ludicrous splendor, accommodates our democratic menage to the taste of the richest and most extravagant plebian amongst us. . . . It is this ruthless imbecile who will have lace curtains on the steamboat berth into which he gets with his pantaloons on.²⁷

Basil March is Howells' instrument for showing his love for history when Basil's mind wanders away

. . . to the doughty old Breton navigator, the first white man who ever set foot upon that shore, and who more than three hundred years ago explored the St. Lawrence. . . . The scene that Jacques Cartier then beheld, like a mirage of the past projected upon the present floated before him, and he saw at the mountain's foot the Indian city of Hochelaga, with its vast and populous lodges of bark, its encircling palisades, and its wide outlying fields. . . then he lifted Jacques Cartier's eyes and looked upon the magnificent landscape.²⁸

Some of Howells' dilemma concerning his early absorption in the world of books is reflected through

²⁶ Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 103.

²⁷ William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 72.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 279-280.

Colville, his alter ego in Indian Summer:

He gave Colville the scholar's far-off look as he turned to go: he was already as remote as the fifteenth century through the magic of the book, which he opened and began to read at once. Colville stared after him; he did not wish to come to just that yet, either. Life, active life, life of his own-day, called to him; he had been one of its busiest children: could he turn his back upon it for a charm or use that was in the past.²⁹

Howells used the technique of allowing a character in reverie or meditation to discover for himself (and the reader) what had been apparent all the time to him, as in this instance from Annie Kilburn:

And she discovered what must always astonish the inquirer below the pretentious surface of our democracy -- an indifference and incredulity concerning the feeling of people of lower station.³⁰

It is interesting that one of Howells' most remarked upon theories of human behavior, the "row of bricks" concept, is presented by the unlettered and crass Silas Lapham, Howells' antitype:

"Sometimes," he said, "I get to thinking it all over, and it seems to me I done wrong about Rogers in the first place; that the whole trouble came from that. It was just starting a row of bricks. I tried to catch up and stop 'em from going, but they

²⁹William Dean Howells, Indian Summer, p.72.

³⁰William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 164.

all tumbled, one after another. It wasn't in the nature of things that they could be stopped till the last brick went.³¹

A second well-known theory, the economy of pain, was put into the mouth of Sewell, Howells' interlocutor in

The Rise of Silas Lapham:

"One suffer instead of three, if none is to blame?" suggested Sewell, "That's sense, and that's justice. It's the economy of pain which naturally suggests itself, if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figments of the shallowest sentimentality."³²

Without an understanding of the role Howells plays in his own novels, the reader is hapless and bereft of the deep pleasure careful reading of his better works affords.

Proverbs, Maxims, Aphorisms

One of Howells' eccentricities was his constant commentaries on social, cultural, and family life. Many of these took the forms of recitations of what one might term proverbs, some almost entirely his own clichés, and some in the form of witticisms, verities, or aphorisms. This is not the author intrusion which is discussed in the last section, but interpolation of some moral

³¹William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 513.

³²Ibid., p. 338.

judgment or observation within the natural flow of the story.

In A Modern Instance, the coquette from Montreal, Mrs. MacAllister, had practiced her wiles on Bartley Hubbard, who self-righteously forebore responding. Herewith Howells remarks that this was not so much to Bartley's credit as he imagined, and continues with the comment,

The flirt can only practice her audacities safely by grace of those upon whom she uses them, and if men really met them half-way there could be no such thing as flirting.³³

On this same topic, Howells has Halleck remark, "All flirts are fools."³⁴

Kirk points out that Howells' father, who had a strong influence on him, gave a rich experience in idealism based on the Swedenborgian creed, and that a fine, unfaltering ethical line runs through Howells' work due to this Swedenborgian training, with its constant choice between the Devil and God.³⁵ This, no doubt, was the foundation of his firm morality and integrity of spirit, but his

³³William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), pp. 95-96.

³⁴William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 239.

³⁵William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf M. Kirk and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. xxiii.

diverse cultural and social life may have also provided supportive precepts.

Even in Their Wedding Journey, which Kirk terms a light and delicate account,³⁶ with a casual and genial atmosphere,³⁷ Howells takes frequent opportunity to insert these brief, but telling remarks. Certainly, in the more intense novels they are an integral part of his technique of delving into the character of his protagonists. Howells has been accused by many later critics of being didactic, dogmatic and moralistic, but it is presumed that these critics were those who were unduly affected by the tone of the period in which they were writing, or those who tended to read Howells non-selectively and superficially.

Howells was not habituated to the use of proverbs in fiction only, but also in his criticisms and other essays, as in the following:

Moods and tastes and fashions change;
people fancy now this and now that; but
what is unpretentious and what is true is

³⁶William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf M. Kirk and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. lxxiii.

³⁷Ibid., intro., p. xcvi.

always beautiful and good, and nothing else is so.³⁸

Annie Kilburn, meditating upon her condition of maidenhood, perceives that "our own fate appears to us unaccomplished, a thing for the distant future to fulfill,"³⁹ and Howells comments that there is no condition of life that is wholly acceptable, but none that is not tolerable when once it establishes itself.⁴⁰

In contrast with Annie's forlorn state, Basil March, on his wedding journey, jubilantly cries, in answer to some apostrophe to their bliss from Isabel, "It's the greatest imaginable satisfaction to have lived past certain things."⁴¹

In compassionate insight, Howells mused that ". . . there is little proportion about either pain or pleasure: a headache darkens the universe while it lasts. . ."⁴² His depth of understanding of the nature of man is further emphasized in the rueful cry, "So old a world,

³⁸William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, pp. 9-10.

³⁹William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 36.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 36.

⁴¹William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 79.

⁴²Ibid., p. 69.

and groping still!",⁴³ and the sardonic comment placed in Basil March's mouth: "How sad is the fruition of human wishes!"⁴⁴ Not so gently, he affirms

The unjust and the inefficient have always that consciousness of evil which will not let a man forgive his victim, or like him to be cheerful.⁴⁵

and, further,

They cannot be civil where they are not just; honesty and courtesy go together.⁴⁶

It is Howells, the sophisticate, rather than Howells, the moralist, who asserts that

It is certain that our manners and customs go for far more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these.⁴⁷

On the other hand, it may have been Howells, the ironist, who found grim satisfaction in demanding from the reader attentiveness up to that point of the tale, for he continues with the qualification:

⁴³William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 300.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 223.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁷William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 509.

Perhaps we pay too much; but it will not be possible to persuade those who have the difference in their favour that this is true.⁴⁸

If this be true, then it is reflected in Halleck's cry to Atherton, "There are so many hells where self-respect perishes", and in Atherton's reply, "I believe that the hell people make for themselves. . . is the best place for them." Finally, he has Atherton to comment, a little sadly, that it is our deeds that judge us, rather than our meanings or intentions.⁴⁹

Howells concentrated on the rudiments of good character both in the individual and in society. Among his comments the following are typical:

But no man wholly escapes the contingencies in which he is confronted with himself, and sees certain habits, traits, tendencies, which he would like to change for the sake of his peace of mind hereafter.⁵⁰

.

Charity is the holiest of the agencies which have hitherto wrought to redeem the race from savagery and despair; but there is something holier yet than charity, something higher, something purer and further from selfishness, something into which charity shall

⁴⁸William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 509.

⁴⁹William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, p. 229.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 262.

willingly grow and cease, and that is justice.⁵¹

Howells apparently believed that his writing should fulfill a mission of morality, for he wrote:

Is it true--true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry -- this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak, and without it all graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of naughtiness.⁵²

and

Morality penetrates all things: it is the soul of all things.⁵³

⁵¹William Dean Howells, Annie Kilburn, p. 240.

⁵²William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 49.

⁵³Ibid., p. 42.

CHAPTER VI

CRITIQUE

Temerity is a necessary element of a student critique of Howells' work. He was a polished and refined aesthete, scholar, critic, and cosmopolite. His erudition presupposes adverse criticism of his mechanical techniques, and tends to discourage comment on his limitations. However, those limitations not only exist, but, in some instances, are quite readily apparent. Howells was conditioned to purity of language by his early reading of the classics, and his firm, editing of his own work is evident. Harry Thurston Peck, a contemporary of Howells, avers that it is chiefly from his fiction that one obtains the truest insight into all his intellectual processes, as well as the best examples of his critical ability and fundamental limitations.¹

Edwin Harrison Cady wrote that it seems clear that Howells' creative impulses came from an aesthetic use of

¹Harry Thurston Peck, "Living Critics XII, William Dean Howells", The Bookman, An Illustrated Literary Journal, Vol. IV, pp. 529-541.

memory,² and it is apparent that Howells used his memory well, synthesizing and creating with discrimination and taste. Cady also mentions his keeping of diaries containing extensive observations of people and scenes, heavily detailed, from which he could produce a "powerfully dramatized novel packed with insights and artistically skillful well past the point of relative perfections."³ He further acknowledges that Howells had a mind long trained to explore fresh juxtapositions of character and culture.⁴

Commenting on Howells' admitted dependency upon the influence of Heinrich Heine, the romantic ironist, Cady charges that Howells' style became so imbued with Heine that his imagination eventually amounted almost to identification, and it was to be many years before these tricks and quirks disappeared from Howells' writing, if ever. He attributes Howells' sense of the incongruous, of antithesis, of bathos, and his power to belittle romantic pretence to Heine's influence. He admits that

²Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 204.

³Ibid., p. 210.

⁴Ibid., p. 192.

these complexities exercise the wits, and harden the mind against sentimentality and emotional irresponsibility.⁵

Cady has studied Howells at length, particularly in the light of his realism, and has written on his alleged neuroticism, thus qualifying as an able interpreter and observer of Howells. He concedes that Annie Kilburn proceeds with magnificence and power pictorially, scenically, atmospherically, dramatically, and symbolically.⁶ He finds elements of greatness in A Modern Instance in the potent illusion of personalities, settings and action, the fine artistry in handling symbols, tone, atmosphere, and dialogue, the excellent texture of description and style, and the expert penetration.⁷ He acknowledges that The Rise of Silas Lapham is equally artistic, repeating some of the previous comments regarding this novel, adding "Stylistically there is new maturity in the old Heinesque virtuoso which disappears behind the solid fabric of fiction."⁸

⁵Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, pp. 53-54.

⁶Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 83.

⁷Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 208.

⁸Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 83.

A contemporary critic, writing in the Atlantic, said disgustedly that in A Modern Instance Howells is aggressive in tone, shrill in pitch of voice, intemperate in zeal, and almost incoherent in protest.⁹ Another contemporary mildly suggests that the book might have been more intelligible if Howells had used more concise phrasing and expression. He found no quarrel with the theme.¹⁰ Cady acknowledges that matters in the book were handled naturally as well as perceptively, communicated through visions of the postures and gestures of the characters or by means of irony.¹¹ Thus, it is possible to see that each book is adjudged, but its whole or its parts, differently by different critics.

Cady insists that an author must be dispassionate and that his passion must be under artistic demand.¹²

He declares

He could not only entrap his reader in vivid romantic emotions, he could also, with brilliant comic and satiric effect,

⁹"Mr. Howells' Literary Creed," Atlantic, Vol. LXVIII (October, 1891), pp. 466-669.

¹⁰"Review of A Modern Instance," Atlantic, Vol. L (November, 1892), pp. 709-712.

¹¹Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 209.

¹²Ibid., p. 203.

snatch away the veil of illusion, lay bare the machinery of artifice which had entrapped him, and unite reader with writer in a hearty, self-cleansing laugh at authors and readers who indulge in such claptrap. The methods used and the effects obtained by the romantic ironist are complex.¹³

He believed that the function of Howells' sociology was to startle the reader with the quick, ironic shock of recognition,¹⁴ and acknowledged that Atlantic readers were charmed with his power to sharpen their vision of their own most common lives.¹⁵

Howells attributed much of his stylistic development to his reading of Bjornson, Turgenev (Tourgeineff), Tolstoy, Valdes, Hardy, Zola, and Ibsen, learning from them the lesson that the greatest beauty is always associated with the greatest truth.¹⁶ Bishop reiterates that the true strength of Howells' best work accrues from the intensity with which his people are imagined and realized.¹⁷ Howells insisted in a review in the Century

¹³Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 209.

¹⁴Edwin Harrison Cady, The Realist at War, p. 106.

¹⁵Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 155.

¹⁶William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, (Ed. Rudolf and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. xiv.

¹⁷William Dean Howells, A Modern Instance, (Ed. William M. Gibson), intro. p. xi.

Magazine that the art of the author consisted in having painted his character as she exists, saying that the novelist can do no more.¹⁸ This, of course, is in keeping with Howells' often stated basic precept regarding fiction: "Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and measures we all know."¹⁹

It is within this creed that Howells' carefully drawn characterizations were so effective. His assertion that no language is ever old on the lips of those who speak it²⁰ is one basis for the skill with which he wrote. His tenet is completely consistent with the idea that

Novels hurt because they are not true - not because they are malevolent, but because they are idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behooves us to know and to understand, that we may deal justly with ourselves and with one another.²¹

and his assertion that

As in literature the true artist will shun the use of real events if they are of an improbably character, so the sincere observer of the man will not desire to look upon his

¹⁸William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 244.

¹⁹William Dean Howells, "Essay on Mark Twain," Harper's, Vol. LXXIV, p. 987.

²⁰William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 65.

²¹Ibid., p. 42.

heroic or occasional phases, but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness. To me, at any rate, he is at such times very precious and I never perceive him to be so much a man and a brother as when I feel the pressure of his vast, natural and unaffected dullness. Then I am able to enter confidently into his life and inhabit there, to think his shallow and feeble thoughts, to be moved by his dumb, stupid desires, to be dimly illumined by his stunted aspirations, to share his foolish prejudices, to practice his obtuse selfishness. Yes, it is a very amusing world, if you do not refuse to be amused. . . .²²

Howells did not refuse to be amused. His humor is forthright but subtle, never hackneyed or out of taste. Frequently wry, and often compassionate, Howells could hate the sin while loving the sinner. Of his humor, Cady has written:

As he matured, his humor became more and more effectively an instrument for something more than fun, a critical instrument for conveying the subtlest meanings. It is in this regard most of all that the appreciation of Howells' work has suffered from hasty and superficial reading. . . . It was his way of coming to terms with life.²³

Howells' insistence on morality within his novels, evidenced in part by his use of frequent interpolations in the text, is also revealed in his thematic treatment of delicate subjects. Kirk questions whether, instead of

²²William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey, p. 106.

²³Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, pp. 164-165.

the delicacy frequently attributed to Howells, there might be instead a certain moral squeamishness which sometimes lessened his power as a novelist. He questions whether Howells might have spurred other writers to deal with harsher facts than he could, and whether he was aware of his own inability to cope with certain aspects of realism.²⁴ Cady believed that Howells revolted against his father's Swedenborgian religion, denying its theology while accepting its ethical insights. He asserts that Howells refused to pretend to solve the problem of knowledge when there was no clearly demonstrable solution.²⁵ Perhaps it is Peck, his contemporary, rather than these two who wrote in the following century, who best explains Howells' omission of realistic details in his novels:

Art is the interpreter. . . and in fiction as in all literature he who sees wholes and not fragments is the master. It is a mere gloss of the scholiast which makes creation to be the production of something out of nothing.²⁶

²⁴William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, (Ed. Rudolf M. and Clara Marburg Kirk), intro., p. cxlvi.

²⁵Edwin Harrison Cady, The Road to Realism, p. 150.

²⁶Harry Thurston Peck "Living Critics XII, William Dean Howells", The Bookman, An Illustrated Literary Journal, Vol. IV, p. 568.

It is this underlying fineness of conceptual strength and depth and psychical understanding which enriches Howells' powerful description, his grasp of character and its nuances, his breadth of scope, and incisively perceived relationships.

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