

New Series  
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# The Howellsian

## A Message from the Editor

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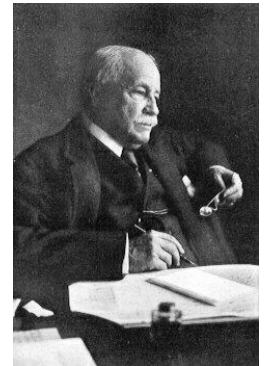
The William Dean Howells Society gratefully acknowledges the support of the University of Delaware in publishing *The Howellsian*.

A few weeks ago spring arrived at last, and preparations for the forthcoming ALA conference are well in hand. It will be held May 24-27 again at the Westin Copley Place Hotel in Boston, where the William Dean Howells Society will next meet. Two sessions on the topic of "Howells and Marriage," arranged by Claudia Stokes, will be held; the programs are printed below. In addition, Susan Goodman and the Society have arranged two special options that are open to members and non-members alike. We look forward to seeing you all there.

Among other items, this issue of *The Howellsian* includes: 1) the first presentation of a prize to be awarded each year by the Society for the best paper read at the annual ALA conference; 2) an announcement about the Howells Society dinner; 3) a revision of the prize-winning paper of 2006 by Michael Anesko (Penn State): "Guilt by Dissociation; or, The Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy*"; 4) a review by Elsa Nettels of a recent book by Paul R. Petrie; 5) the 2007 program for the Society's two sessions at the conference in May; 6) a membership form for new members and renewals.

The next issue (Vol 10, No 2, N.S.) of *The Howellsian* will be published in the fall. Among other items, it will include an account of the Society's business meeting, including the newly elected officers; a review of the Society's panels on this year's ALA program; the name of the Prize winner and the title of the winning paper; an announcement of the topics selected for our two sessions at the 2007 ALA conference (scheduled to be held in San Francisco), a Call for Papers; the author and title of an article to be announced, and recent publications on Howells.

Sanford E. Marovitz, *Editor*



William Dean Howells in 1907

## Presentation of the William Dean Howells Society Prize

The William Dean Howells Society Essay Prize will be presented to Michael Anesko for his outstanding paper, "Guilt by Dissociation; or, The Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy*." The time and place of the presentation are to be announced. The Society is most grateful to Dr. Anesko, who has revised his paper slightly and permitted us to publish it in this issue.

## Howells Society Dinner at the Tavern Club

**4 Boylston Place, Boston**

**Friday, May 25, 2007 at 7 p.m.**

**Reservations must be made by May 15, 2007**

**\$80 for non-WDHS members, \$70 for WDHS members**

We are deeply grateful to our president, Susan Goodman, for her inspired leadership during the past two years. Most recently, she has arranged two events in conjunction with the ALA conference. The first is a dinner sponsored by the Society to be held at the Tavern Club of Boston, of which W. D. Howells was the first president, elected in 1884; and the other is an excursion to the Howells home in Kittery Point, ME (see page 12).

Many of you at the ALA conference six years ago may recall the superb dinner our Society enjoyed at the Tavern Club; the evening was enhanced by splendid dining and camaraderie in the inspiring atmosphere of Old Boston during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now we are planning to do it again! Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres will be served from 7 until dinner time with ample opportunity for drinks and congenial conversation before being seated. **Please note that this will be a very special evening in the magnificent historic Tavern Club, an event to anticipate with joy—and you'll be in great company!**

### Menu

- Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres before dinner Salad
- Beef Tenderloin with vegetable and starch
- Dessert
- Coffee or Tea
- Wine with dinner

Sufficient non-meat dishes will be available for vegetarians.

The all-inclusive price, with gratuities, for members and their guests is \$70 each; for non-members the price is \$80, but for those who wish to join the Society and send \$10 dues to the treasurer before or with their dinner reservations, the dinner price for themselves and their guests will be reduced by \$10 per person.

Reservations should be made by **May 15** so that a final count can be submitted to the Tavern Club. **A reservation form is available on the back page of this newsletter.** If you would like to attend, please mail your check in U. S. funds (payable to the "W. D. Howells Society") to

**Dr. Elsa Nettels**

**211 Indian Spring Rd.**

**Williamsburg, VA 23185**

## Howells-I E-mail List

Did you know that events such as this one are announced on the howells-I e-mail list as well as in *The Howellsian*? The list now has a new, easy web page for subscribing, and, since it is now moderated, no spam will get through to your e-mail box. For more information, go to <http://www.howellssociety.org/howellsI.htm>; to sign up, go to <http://lists.wsu.edu/mailman/listinfo/howells-I>.

## Howells Prize Essay: “Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy*”

### “Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy*”\*

Michael Anesko (Pennsylvania State University)

No one, it seems, has anything to say about *The Quality of Mercy*, one of William Dean Howells’ more interesting novels of the early 1890s. A recent electronic search of the *MLA Bibliography* yielded nothing whatsoever, from which one must infer that what little sustained commentary there is on this novel can only be found between the covers of a handful of notable books (themselves none too recent). Despite its curious complexities, *The Quality of Mercy* has mostly gone unremarked, an omission unfortunate for Howells and for students concerned with the interplay of psychology and narrative.

Given such bibliographical obscurity, a quick run-through of the novel’s plot and major characters will be helpful. As one might easily suppose, *The Quality of Mercy* is about guilt, about crime and punishment. For years, John Milton Northwick, the criminal protagonist, has skimmed money from the large manufacturing concern of which he is treasurer, using the company’s funds to swell the margin of profit from his own private speculations. At the time that the story begins, his most recent gamble in the market has turned sour and his misuse of other people’s money has been discovered. Given three days to restore the purloined capital, Northwick instead flees to Canada with the remainder of it, hoping there to recover the company’s lost assets and thereby to restore his own fiduciary reputation. Leaving behind two daughters at his much-loved estate in Hatboro, Massachusetts, Northwick juggles the railway timetables and switches trains en route, thus avoiding a catastrophic accident in which numerous passengers are incinerated past recognition. Having disappeared, he is presumed by his children to be a victim of the derailment. When the news of his defalcation comes out, they are harrowed even more by a sense of shame, torn between a need to think of their father as blameless and a compulsion to make up his employer’s losses through the sale of family property. Unaware that his family think him dead, Northwick makes his way to the St. Lawrence valley, where he attempts to disguise himself; but, consumed by homesickness and guilt, he gradually loses his ambition to recover the lost money through new speculation or investment. Eventually he is discovered by an ambitious (and none too scrupulous) newspaperman, and at last determines to meet his just fate by returning to the United States to stand trial.

Throughout these months of uncertainty, the Northwick daughters are caught up in various social and romantic entanglements, the younger daughter (Suzette) having attracted the attention of Matt Hilary, son of the company’s president. Misplaced faith in her father and exaggerated family pride make Suzette a difficult object for courtship; her older sister Adeline, even more set in her ways, is grimly referred to throughout the book simply as “the old maid.” After many turns of the ethical screw, the Northwicks and Hilarys are finally reconciled through marriage and mutual forgiveness. Before that can happen, however, Northwick risks a return to his former home, driven by nostalgia and the need to square himself with his family. The shock of his return deranges Adeline, who dies after her father escapes north for the second time. This muted tragedy together with his lingering need for expiation combine to persuade Northwick to surrender. Returning, at last, a prisoner, Northwick himself dies before reaching Hatboro and the prison cell that awaits him.



W. D. Howells in his study  
Picture courtesy of Mark Godburn

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

Psychologically, at least, Northwick has been a prisoner from the start, and Howells' narrative skill in rendering the inward reality of his entrapment marks a significant advance in the writer's imaginative range.<sup>1</sup> Having been found out by his superiors, his accuser's words and looks burn themselves into the man's memory: the word *thief* so fills Northwick's mind that it seems "always about to slip from his tongue."<sup>2</sup> Sitting in the silence of his office at home, Northwick appeals to the painted effigy of his dead wife, whose confidence in him "would have eased the way by full acceptance of the theories that ran along with his intentions and covered them with pretences of necessity" (7). Howells is especially good at capturing the kind of capitalistic casuistry that Northwick indulges, the excuses that for years he has given himself for tampering with the company's books and the "defensive secretiveness" his conduct then inspires (15). Even the physical and surface details—the impatient stomping of Northwick's horses as his driver waits for him at the station, the sense of passing time registered by the "bare line cut along the horizon" where the sunset lingers "in a light of liquid crimson, paling and passing into weaker violet tints with every moment" (4), the "faintly ticking clock" at which Northwick instinctively glances in the company of his family—all resonate with the menace of implied retribution.

Howells himself was pleased with the start he had made, confident that the "whole design" of the book would be "thoroughly realistic" (as he put it) "in the deeper, interior way" (xxv).<sup>3</sup> Before long, however, he found himself running into trouble, losing control of the material, going off on false tacks, having to discard hundreds of pages of manuscript. In the author's letters we find vacillations of despair and restored assurance. The novel "has given me no end of trouble," Howells complains, "either because the subject is difficult, or because I'm less facile than I was."<sup>4</sup> Most students of Howells (following Edwin Cady's reasonable suggestion) have attributed these signs of writer's block to the recalcitrance of his material; and we know from other letters that the author was desperate to get his hands on solid facts about the investigation and prosecution of business fraud. Seasoned journalists, lawyers, even the Pinkerton Detective Agency, answered his queries and supplied him with material details that would lend probability to his plot and an air of reality to his ancillary characters (especially the investigative reporter, Lorenzo Pinney).<sup>5</sup>

All in all, most critics would concur with the Indiana editor of the novel who maintains that, "Unlike *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells worked at *The Quality of Mercy* without the distraction of family problems that plagued him in 1889. What difficulty he had with the new novel was caused by problems of conceptualization, especially during the early stages of his composition" (xi). Those "family problems," as all Howellsians know, involved the tragic death of Winifred, the writer's elder daughter, and the paroxysms of grief and psychological recrimination to which the author and his wife thereafter were condemned. Closer inspection of the novel, however, might suggest that the shadow of Winifred's illness and death lingered in Howell's imagination and affected his work-in-progress. Although criticism has focused almost exclusively on the book's economic themes and social implications—as an exemplum of a modern American businessman, Northwick is much better realized than Silas Lapham—the retributive nature of the story's family dynamics deserves fuller scrutiny.<sup>6</sup>

From one point of view, the pecuniary crime for which Northwick must answer constitutes the least interesting aspect of the broader theme of paternal guilt that reverberates throughout *The Quality of Mercy*. Northwick's own father (trained as a physician but content to perform the more relaxed duties of a country pharmacist) has brought shame to his family by dispensing a fatally incorrect prescription to an unwitting patient. The disgrace of this disaster sends Northwick's mother to an early grave; with almost bemused cynicism, the father lives on "to a vague and colorless old age, supported by his son in a total disoccupation," but utterly abandoned from the latter's affection (12). A few chapters into the book we also witness the melodramatic death of a young child, the son of Northwick's hired man. Surrounded by Northwick, the town doctor, and her husband, the boy's mother cries out in despair, "What are you big strong men good for?"—only to discover that the suffering child has just died in her arms. Her screeching voice and ravaged face "haunt" Northwick, because they remind him "of his own mother," another victim of patriarchal ineptitude (31). Northwick's voluntary exile inadvertently orphans his two daughters, who can only think of him as having perished in the horrible railway accident at Wellwater Junction. Proof of his survival—which surfaces months later when Northwick sends an exculpatory letter to a Boston newspaper—cannot really answer for the emotional wreckage he has made of their family bonds. Despite his recriminatory tone, Northwick's former boss expresses

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

a fundamental truth when he disparages this rather slick maneuver. “You can see all through his letter that he’s trying to make interest for himself,” Eban Hilary declares,

“and that he’s quite willing to use his children if it will tell on the public sympathies. . . . If he had really that fatherly affection for them which he appeals to in others, he wouldn’t have left them in doubt whether he was alive or dead for four or five months, and then dragged them into an open letter asking forbearance in their name, and promising for their sake to right those he had wronged. The thing is thoroughly indecent.”(212)

Northwick’s public testimonial satisfies no one, least of all his own children. “No, I can never forgive him, if he is my father,” Suzette laments. “I can never speak to him again, or see him; never! He is dead to me, *now!*” (220). Even though she will later repent and retreat from this extreme position, the younger daughter’s outbursts further stress an already strained relation with her sister, and the two of them now quarrel over the disposition of family property, most of which was settled on the children long before Northwick’s fraudulent skimming even began. Nevertheless, Suzette now sees everything tainted by her father’s guilt and greed, and insists that they auction it all away and give the proceeds back to the company’s shareholders. Somewhat more sensibly, Adeline engages an attorney to protect their interests and the sale is postponed. Still, the threat of dispossession opens a breach between the two sisters that is never really healed because each stubbornly clings to the belief that her strategy for rehabilitating their father’s reputation should prevail.

Northwick’s letter, we must suppose, constitutes an appeal for understanding, for mercy and forgiveness. Although the actual text of the father’s missive is not disclosed in the novel, we should remember that at almost the very same moment Howells himself was composing another literary plea for absolution: his privately-printed memorial to Winifred, which he distributed to close friends and family in 1891. “It is now more than a year since the life that has left ours here in exile was taken from us,” he begins, “and the instant wish to put in words as perfect a memory of it as we could has gone unfulfilled.” Here as in the novel, the underlying theme of paternal guilt resonates through a vocabulary of exile and a tone of remorse. Howells had wanted his little pamphlet to commemorate Winny’s modest literary gifts and ambitions (in it he prints a dozen of her poems), but the slender volume also serves as a confessional for his own blindness to her pain and occasional indifference to her inward sorrows. “We knew how precious she was, how rare,” he confides, “but there were many stresses in which our knowledge was not expressed in our behavior. Throughout her whole little day, and to the very end, we made many mistakes concerning her. These are bitter to remember; they are wounds that bleed and burn; nothing can ever heal them, nothing can soothe them, but the thought of the love that overflowed even the error with its abundance.” Despite his genuine desire to do justice to her spirit, Howells still feared that his verbal tribute to Winny would ring false. “But it seems the best I could do,” he told his father, “and it will only be one more blunder for her wisdom and goodness to forgive.”<sup>8</sup>

Biographers and critics may never fully unravel the mystery that surrounds Winifred’s illness and death, although most modern researchers would probably agree that (like many other middle-class Victorian women who suffered from neurasthenia) she betrayed all the classic symptoms of *anorexia nervosa*.<sup>9</sup> When her father reminisced about her letters and poems, they had for him “the touch of her thin, soft fingers.” Her emaciated condition in the last year of her life left a distinct impression on her father’s memory. Still a lover of music, Winifred—all fifty-eight pounds of her—“drifted to the piano one day,” he recalled, “a frail, weak phantom of her beautiful youth, and feebly struck the keys.”<sup>10</sup> Introducing us to Adeline Northwick, the author tells us that she is “thin and tall,” and suffers from “a New England indigestion” which keeps her looking “frailer” than she really is. Her wardrobe is “richly” conservative but still fashionable, and “on her slight, bony fingers” she wears a good many rings (19). The first glimpse that we have of Adeline in an earlier novel (*Annie Kilburn*) is almost dangerously prophetic. The main effect of her appearance in that book (in which she pays a social call on the heroine) is only to leave “an impression of frail mottled wrists and high thin cheeks, and an absence of modeling under affluent drapery.”<sup>11</sup> By comparison, the later fiction is almost relentless in cataloguing Adeline’s physical demerits and her compulsive avoidance of food. In what should be a moment of happiness, for example, Suzette catches her sister in her arms, but we are told (rather gratuitously) that her hand encircles a “bony waist, where each rib define[s] itself” to her touch (49). When Louise Hilary comes to have luncheon with the two sisters, the meal is “so meager” that she suspects that the women “are beginning to starve themselves” (143).

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

Eagerly arriving at the Northwick house to find the woman he loves, Matt Hilary laughs inwardly at “the mockery of the anticlimax” when, instead of seeing Suzette, Adeline bashfully greets him at the threshold. “He took her hand in silence,” Howells observes, “and it seemed natural for him to do that reverent and tender thing which is no longer a part of our custom; he bent over it and kissed the chill, bony knuckles” (234-35). Such repeated allusions to this anorexic phantom of femininity invite us to perceive an eerie (and perhaps even cruel) retrospective parallel to Winifred’s case history.

Howells seems compelled to insist upon the skeletal presence that Adeline makes in the novel. The remorseless accumulation of detail with respect to her withered body takes on an almost retributive quality, because it feels extraneous to the dramatic necessity of the narrative situation.<sup>12</sup> Her abrupt death at the conclusion of the book would seem to be the last stroke of physical erasure. Even without Dr. S. Weir Mitchell to prescribe the rest-cure treatment that Winifred received, Adeline is “confined to her bed” and (again like Winny) would seem to be only too adept at concealing her symptoms. Rather oddly, Howells slips into the indirect third person plural to write, “they had not thought her dangerously sick, till the very day of her death, when she began to sink rapidly” (347). This syntactic maneuver dissociates her sister from responsibility for this pitiful outcome, which (after the fact) she is reporting in a letter to her father. Many of the author’s letters written in the wake of Winifred’s death display the same distancing apologetics, a mode of rhetoric that also pervades the memorial pamphlet. In that document Howells would write, “Life withdrew itself more and more to the inward sources in the long ebb, which had already begun, unknown to us but not unknown to her. . . . She was too true, too sincere, too wise to wish to deceive us as we wished to deceive ourselves; but we succeeded only too well.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, they had not thought her dangerously sick—perhaps till the very day of her death.

In *The Quality of Mercy*, the strain of autobiography so familiar in Howells’ more cheerful domestic fiction takes on a rather ghostly, almost uncanny—or, as Freud would say, *unheimlich*—quality. Psychologically, Howells’ novel anticipates Freud’s observation that “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”<sup>14</sup> Northwick’s flight as a fugitive up the St. Lawrence valley replicates an earlier journey he had taken with his now dead wife. Along the way, everything he encounters provokes echoes from the past—the villages have not changed, the hostleries are the same, their proprietors (even the placement of their furniture!) are exactly as Northwick remembers them. The very terminus of his exile is a remote place called Ha-Ha Bay, named for the echo that one can hear from across the narrow inlet. On one level, this obsessive pattern of doubling and repetition confirms Northwick’s desperate need to reframe the present in terms of his more youthful ambition for respectability and distinction;<sup>15</sup> but it seems just as significant that Howells, too, surrenders to an analogous compulsion in having Northwick retrace not just his own steps but also those of Basil and Isabel March, whose wedding journey covers almost the same ground.<sup>16</sup> This trip, to say the least, is no honeymoon; and Northwick’s whole sordid career makes a mockery of the complacent security of the Marches’ bourgeois domesticity. In *The Quality of Mercy*, a scarred psychological landscape denies Howells the innocent pleasures of autobiographical projection that he freely indulged in so many of his other books. Instead he seems here to be struggling with a host of inner demons—guilt, the dread of discovery, materialistic pride—and their autobiographical implications are considerably more lurid.

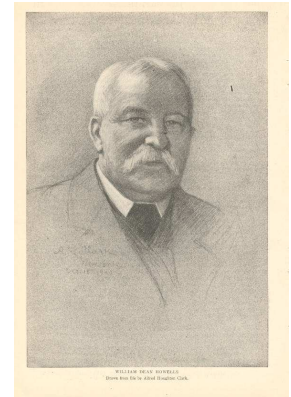
From the beginning, though, Howells knew that he “should try to have a strong love interest in the story,” and to do that he had to invent another family from which a prospective suitor plausibly could be drawn (xxiv). Many other familiar names make cameo appearances in *The Quality of Mercy* (Bromfield Corey [*The Rise of Silas Lapham*], for example, and Ralph Putney [*Annie Kilburn*]), but the Hilary clan is a new arrival in Howells’ imaginary social field, and, in useful ways, provides a necessary counterpoint to the relative insularity of the Northwicks.<sup>17</sup> The Hilarys establish a benchmark of social respectability in *The Quality of Mercy*, their status and their values above reproach. In this respect, they can almost be seen as surrogates for the family of Basil and Isabel March, who perform a similar function in so many other Howells novels. As with the Marches, the author exercises a certain affectionate irony in depicting them, but their own bourgeois self-confidence remains unshakeable and mostly unquestioned. Much like Isabel March, Mrs. Hilary is not very worldly, but she very much enjoys “her place” in the world and prefers

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

“conformity and similarity” as characteristics of social life. How “any one could differ from them to advantage” is beyond her comprehension. “Their ideas were the best,” she complacently presupposes, “or they would not have had them” (283). Her son Matt flirts with socialistic theories, but even these seem harmless enough, since the family fortune affords him land and leisure to pretend a career as a self-reliant yeoman farmer. Because of her father’s criminal behavior, his love for Suzette Northwick encounters a formidable social obstacle; but that, too, is overcome when Eban Hilary generously offers to make up the embezzler’s losses. In contrast to the Northwicks’ scandalous debacle (broadcast in all the papers), the tepid internal family quarrels of the Hilarys never leave the safety of their comfortable drawing room. Altogether, they represent the kind of middle-class stability at which Howells was always clutching, even after he had begun to question (if not strenuously to interrogate) the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie.

Without the “strong love interest” and “constant play of incident” on the surface of the book (narrative bribes “for those who could not look below it,” Howells confessed), *The Quality of Mercy* would be, perhaps, too harrowing in its psychological revelations (xxiv-xxv). John Crowley has suggested that the guilt Howells felt after Winifred’s death “sprang not only from bitterly conscious regret that he had not been more devoted, but also from a subliminal sense of deeper selfishness.”<sup>18</sup> Every recriminatory gesture in the novel points to Northwick’s incorrigible egotism and the sordid consequences of its unchecked indulgence. While the family attorney contemplates some kind of insanity defense, assuming that Northwick eventually will return to stand trial, the alienated criminal does seem to crack mentally, yearning for release from the fear of discovery and the shame of defalcation. To look at a newspaper is almost to risk psychic collapse. “He could bear to keep himself deaf and blind to the self he had put behind him,” Howells writes, “but he could not bear anything less” (176). Tottering under the burden of guilt, Northwick more than once contemplates suicide and even purchases a bottle of laudanum; but for that, too, he lacks courage, and so he pours out the liquid death—“a black dribble of murder on the snow” (185). The relentless cold of the frozen North symbolizes the paralysis of will that overtakes him. Geography ensures his liberty but makes him a prisoner at the same time. Northwick can only hate “the vastness of the half world” where he can come and go unmolested, recognizing a “bondage” that masks itself as “such ample freedom” (200). At last, he can no longer abide it, and determines to make his way home.

Northwick’s *unheimlich* return to his Hatboro estate toward the end of the novel provides an almost literal exemplification of the Freudian Uncanny, because the home is no longer home, the expectation of the familiar is made strange. Just as it does at the beginning of the novel, the word *thief* keeps running through Northwick’s head, as he paces the steps of the piazza, trying doors and windows for a means of ingress. “He must steal into his house,” Howells writes, “as he had stolen out of it” (325). The author’s mirrored syntax reinforces his theme of doubling and repetition. Unaware at first that his children have abandoned the property and stripped it of its contents, Northwick suddenly recognizes the emptiness and instantly feels “a passionate desire to face and appropriate the change in every detail.” One by one he lights a handful of taper matches as he walks through “the dismantled and abandoned rooms,” fantastic-



Howells in *Outlook Magazine*, 1901

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

ally expecting “that in his own room he might find himself. There was nothing there, either; it was as if he were a ghost come back in search of the body it had left behind” (326).

Northwick cannot find himself because he has never really known himself. All along he has simply been a compilation of appearances—an uneducated man whom everyone mistakes for a college graduate, an apparently self-made man whose fortune largely can be attributed to his wife’s dowry, a man whose notion of respectability goes no farther than being “honored for what he seemed” (12). He is, we are told, “a figment of commercial civilization, with only the crudest tastes and ambitions outside of the narrow circle of money making,” already anticipating Thorstein Veblen’s predatory barbarian, “the creature of a civilization too ugly and arid to be borne” (203-04). Northwick has come back to find a man who was never really there.

Northwick’s reappearance has an even more uncanny effect upon his two daughters. His intended reconciliation with them has exactly the opposite effect, as it resurrects their morbid compulsion to outdo one another in demonstrations of affection for him. The differences between them have always been exacerbated by their respective ages and temperaments, and Northwick cannot help himself for having favored the younger, who has “the more modern and more urban habit of caressing her father,” while Adeline follows an “earlier country fashion of self-repression” (19). This emotional asymmetry does not go unnoticed by others. Suzette’s close friend Louise Hilary shudders when she recalls how much father and daughter used to “doat upon each other.” “I don’t see how she can endure him,” Louise even ventures: “he always made me feel creepy” (254). Discovered in the abandoned mansion by the watchful hired man and escorted by him to the more humble cottage where Adeline and Suzette now reside, Northwick first encounters his elder daughter, who catches him in her arms with sobs of joy. Almost immediately, though, the language of affection drains from their conversation, replaced by more pragmatic consideration of the father’s return as a wanted man. Their measured talk is interrupted by Suzette’s descent from her upstairs bedroom:

There was a rustle of skirts on the stairs. Suzette stood a moment in the doorway, looking at her father, as if not sure he was real; then she flung herself upon him, and buried her face in his white beard, and kissed him with a passion of grief and love. She sank into his lap, with a long sigh, and let her head fall on his shoulder. She was his pet again; she was like a little child on his knee; all that was not simply father and daughter was for the moment annulled between them. (332)

The multiplied details of physical intimacy here, confirming a pattern of affectionate demonstrations going back many years, contrast rather glaringly with the father’s comparatively chaste greeting from his older child. Even without Louise Hilary to notice it, there might, indeed, be something rather ‘creepy’ in this excessive display of father-daughter attachment. Howells himself may have thought so, for when he revised this passage after its serial appearance, he deleted the first two clauses of the final sentence.<sup>19</sup> At least in the published book, even the return of the repressed gets repressed.

Whatever his conscious intention, Northwick reignites a strange kind of Electra-complex competition between the two women, who feud jealously after their father’s departure. He is hardly out the door when Adeline begins to shriek retributive allegations at her sister, declaring that she “had never cared anything for her father,” “had wanted to give their mother’s property away, to please the Hilarys,” and had become “perfectly indifferent to everything else” now that she was engaged to be married (339). Adeline’s delusional fantasy impels her to absurd flights of imagined self-sacrifice. “They can get father let out on bail,” she blurts out, “and I can be his bail, and then, when there’s a trial, they can take me instead of him: it won’t matter to the court which they have, as long as they have somebody” (341). Adeline articulates this deranged theory of justice as if she were some queer kind of Freudian Hammurabi—an eye for an eye, a daughter for a father. The literal prison cell she longs for merely displaces the figurative one in which she already lives. Cruelly classified throughout the novel as “the old maid,” Adeline hardly needs confinement in order to be solitary. It can almost be said that Howells finally justifies his title by killing her off, since otherwise so little mercy qualifies his representation of the terminally unmarriageable older daughter.



## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

Throughout the years of Winifred's decline, it almost would have been inevitable for Howells to find some kind of emotional consolation in the attentions of his younger daughter, Mildred. As he was composing *The Quality of Mercy*, the author remarked to his sister that, especially now, he did not want to forbid his surviving children even simple forms of worldly happiness. Describing Mildred's prospect of going on a hayride (where she would benefit from the company of "lots of girls, and nice young fellows" since she was a "favorite, as everywhere") Howells could not help himself from making a comparison. "It is right for her to have this harmless pleasure," he affirmed, "but I think of Winny and her pain."<sup>20</sup> How much he was thinking of Winny and her pain as he was writing *The Quality of Mercy* can only be inferred from that novel's uncanny displacement of her symptoms and her fate.

### Notes

1. Edwin Cady has gone so far as to suggest that "*The Quality of Mercy* marks the last true advance in the growth of Howells' mind." Edwin H. Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885-1920 of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1958), p. 177.
2. William Dean Howells, *The Quality of Mercy*, ed. James P. Elliott (1892; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 8. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.
3. The serial audience for the novel must have shared the author's confidence, for when it was syndicated by S. S. McClure in a number of American newspapers, he reported back to Howells, "Your novel is taking splendidly. This is somewhat of a surprise to me, inasmuch as I had supposed that your work would not attract the million audience." One Chicago paper (the *Inter Ocean*) had to print a second edition to meet the demand for the first installment. See S. S. McClure to WDH, 9 Oct. 1891, *Selected Letters of W. D. Howells: Volume III 1882-1891* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 317n3.
4. WDH to William C. Howells, 17 May 1891, *Selected Letters* 3: 313n3.
5. See, for example, WDH to Sylvester Baxter, 25 Feb. 1891, and WDH to William C. Howells, 1 March 1891, *Selected Letters* 3: 307-8, 309n2.
6. While suggesting that this novel (like others from the same period) "comments at least obliquely on Winny's death," Howells' most recent biographers offer no detailed account of *The Quality of Mercy*. See Susan Goodman & Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 311. Kenneth Eble speaks for the majority when he concludes, summarily, that *The Quality of Mercy* is "a character study of an embezzler." See his *William Dean Howells*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1982), p. 105.
7. William Dean Howells, *Winifred Howells* (Boston: privately printed, 1891), pp. [3], 6-7.
8. WDH to William C. Howells, 17 Nov. 1889, *Selected Letters* 3: 255n3.
9. The amplest assessment of the crippling psychodynamics of the Howells family remains John W. Crowley, "Winifred Howells and the Economy of Pain," in *The Mask of Fiction: Essays on W. D. Howells* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), pp. 83-114. Crowley makes no mention, however, of *The Quality of Mercy*.
10. *Winifred Howells*, p. 14. Howells made a record of Winifred's weight in a letter to William C. Howells, 6 Jan. 1889, *Selected Letters* 3: 243n4.
11. William Dean Howells, *Annie Kilburn* [1888], in *Novels 1886-1888* (New York: Library of America, 1989), p. 738.

## Guilt by Dissociation; or, the Merciless Quality of *The Quality of Mercy* (continued)

12 One of Howells' earliest (and shrewdest) critics, Oscar W. Firkins, is the only other commentator on the novel to have noticed this. As he observes, "Adeline Northwick, the elder daughter, called the 'old maid' with an explicitness which Charles Lamb would not have liked, is drawn with that firm hand which is proof against any limpness in the subject. The portrayal is detailed and painstaking beyond the artistic necessities of the case, and there is no idealization to heighten or sweeten the authentic pathos." Oscar W. Firkins, *William Dean Howells: A Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924), p. 149.

13 *Winifred Howells*, p. 18.

14 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 123-24.

15 William McMurray offers a useful assessment of this pattern in *The Literary Realism of William Dean Howells* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1967), pp. 80-83.

16 William Dean Howells, *Their Wedding Journey* (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1872).

17 The few critics who have written about *The Quality of Mercy* are inclined to discount the role of the Hilary family, objecting to their presence as disproportionate to their actual relevance to the theme of fiduciary malfeasance. With his typical wit, Oscar W. Firkins makes the case quite summarily:

It is quite obvious that the genesis of a love-affair might be referred to a defalcation exactly as it might be referred to the San Francisco earthquake, to the discovery of radium, or to the theft of Mona Lisa. A curious and, in its unimportant way, quite legitimate study might be found in the tracing of such a pedigree; but this study would evidently have no standing in a picture of the normal or representative effects of defalcation. The love-affair makes the Hilarys central instead of merely peripheral, and the institution of two centres impairs the solidarity of the book. (*William Dean Howells: A Study*, 148)

To understand the Hilarys' function as psychologically and socially compensatory, however, helps us appreciate the author's need for giving them prominence.

18 "Winifred Howells and the Economy of Pain," p. 113.

19 See the list of "Rejected Substantives" in the editorial apparatus of the Indiana Edition, p. 440.

20 WDH to Aurelia H. Howells, 17 July 1891, *Selected Letters* 3: 316. Polly H. Howells, the author's great granddaughter, has analyzed the extent to which Mildred became almost a surrogate wife in her arresting article, "Mildred Howells as the Father's Daughter: Living Within the Lines," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1994): 9-28.

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### Howells Memorial House News

A message from Polly Howells: "Harvard University is considering selling the Howells Memorial house at Kittery Point; the university feels that it is a financial drain and that there might be better ways to honor William Dean Howells. I know the few scholars I have contacted about this -- the ones on the Howells Memorial Committee at Harvard, which is now seemingly defunct -- are upset about it. If you would like to put the word out on the Howells website, people could email me with their feelings about it, and I could send them on to the man who is temporarily in charge of this business at Harvard."

If you would like to contact Polly Howells with your thoughts about this issue, her e-mail address is Phows@aol.com.

## **Review: *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather* by Paul Petrie**

**Paul R. Petrie. *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 256 pp.**

**Elsa Nettels**

**College of William and Mary**

Petrie's book could have been titled "William Dean Howells and His Legacy." Howells is the subject of the first two of five chapters. His literary principles then provide the frame of reference in which the works of three successors--Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Willa Cather--are analyzed.

The first chapter defines Howells' theory of literature as set forth in the "Editor's Study," the monthly essay of criticism that Howells wrote for *Harper's Magazine* from 1886 to 1892. His literary criticism includes dozens of reviews and essays published in other periodicals, but the "Editor's Study" is the single most important body of his criticism, containing his fundamental principles, which Petrie enunciates with fullness and precision. Quoting often from the "Study," he posits an unbreakable connection between artistic excellence and fulfillment of the ethical duties of literature, as Howells defined them. Indeed, Petrie argues, ethical and social purpose came first and created esthetic value. "In the *Editor's Study*, Howells attempted to construct a theory of literary art in which aesthetic principles would emerge integrally from considerations of social ethics" (2).

The steady focus on Howells' dictum that literature should be, in Petrie's words, "ethically purposive communication" (6) precludes consideration of Howells' pleasure in literary art and seems to imply that Howells thought it was enough if a novel were an effective "vehicle of public communication"(2). But Petrie's thesis reveals the basis of Howells' literary theory--its grounding in the reader's response to the literary work. What Petrie terms "literary use-value" (14) for Howells depended on the power of literature to awaken the social conscience of readers, to promote in them sympathetic understanding and sense of kinship with others and so to inspire them to work for social change.

As Petrie shows, the Howells of the "Editor's Study" was firm and unequivocal in stating his convictions. But what exactly did Howells think that individual readers should or could do to further the common good? What constructive actions could they take, once their sympathies were aroused by their reading? Petrie answers these questions in his second chapter, in fine analyses of three novels--*The Minister's Charge*, *Annie Kilburn*, and *The Vacation of the Kelwyns*--fictions of "perplexed sympathy"(29) in which well-educated, well-intentioned protagonists struggle to cross class barriers and act for the public good.

For Howells scholars, this may be the book's most interesting chapter, notable for its widely perceptive readings of less studied novels (although *The Minister's Charge* has begun to receive more critical attention.). As Petrie observes, these novels not only dramatize the way middle-class manners and conversation act to exclude outsiders, like Lemuel Barker, but also show how lack of clear class boundaries creates conflict, all the while class consciousness works to shape character. Petrie sees Sewell's failures of communication with his rustic charge as the "pernicious effects of class" (36) rather than evidence of his own deficiencies, but traces Annie Kilburn's misguided efforts to help the poor to her "her own psychic neediness" (47). In the best analysis to date of *The Vacation of the Kelwyns*, Petrie illustrates Howells' use of the characters to debate conflicting views of social class and hierarchy. Petrie does not claim that these novels are among Howells' best works but he shows how decisively they demonstrate an important truth: that the most that privileged characters like Sewell and Kelwyn can achieve is to realize how little they can do to breach class barriers and promote social equality.

In the chapters on Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather, Petrie argues for the importance of the "Howellsian social-ethical agenda" (77) as an inescapable presence which each writer felt compelled to deal with--to modify, challenge, or resist. Petrie's analyses of individual works--Jewett's *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Chesnutt's *The*

## Review: *Conscience and Purpose* (continued)

*Conjure Woman* and *The Colonel's Dream*, and Cather's "Behind the Singer Tower" and *Alexander's Bridge*--are first-rate. Of the three writers, Jewett seems the most natural choice to illustrate his thesis. Only Jewett belonged to Howells' literary world and looked to him as a friend and mentor. Surprisingly, Petrie does not discuss Howells' criticism of Jewett's fiction, which he reviewed in three of the "Editor's Study" essays.

Petrie's treatment of all three writers, including Howells himself, in terms of the social-ethical model set forth in the "Editor's Study" results in a tightly organized book, but the consistent focus, sustained by innumerable references to "Howellsian" realism and "Howellsian" influence and purpose, suggests that Howells was a more potent figure in the careers of Chesnutt and Cather than the evidence shows. But *Conscience and Purpose* is a valuable book, distinguished by penetrating studies of all the fiction it analyzes.

## Howells Society Excursion to Kittery Point

Saturday, May 26, 2007

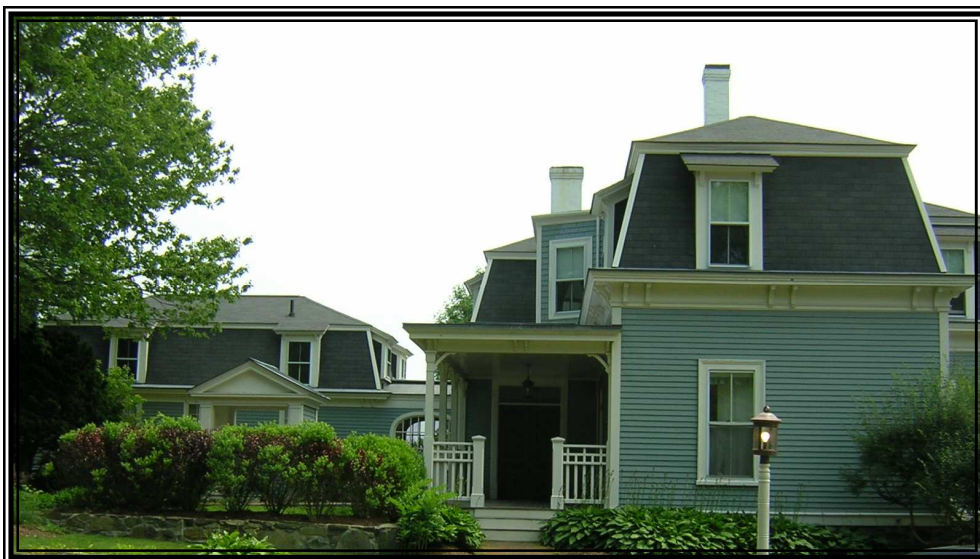
9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Transportation provided. Light lunch and presentations at the site.

Cost: Free

As on the day following our Tavern Club dinner in 2001, the Society has scheduled again a bus excursion to the Howells family home at Kittery Point. It will begin when we board the bus at our hotel on Saturday morning at 9 and end in mid-afternoon the same day; the bus will leave Kittery Point at 2 and arrive back at the hotel in time for participants to have the late afternoon in Boston. Box lunches will be provided. Although the Society has done this before, we may not have a chance to do it again, so if you'd like to visit the Howells Memorial Home, on a truly gorgeous site, this spring is the time to do it.

A short program there will include an informal discussion by Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson on writing their distinguished biography, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (2005), with remarks by Sarah Daugherty and others; comments and questions from the floor will be welcome. Through the generosity of the William Dean Howells Memorial Committee, to whom the Society is grateful indeed, the full cost of the excursion for all participants will be covered.

If you wish to participate in this special "happening" at the Howells Memorial, please notify Susan Goodman by e-mail: [sgoodman@english.udel.edu](mailto:sgoodman@english.udel.edu). Because we expect a large turnout and bus seats are limited, it would be advisable to let her know as soon as possible. Membership in the Society is not required.



## Howells Society Panels at ALA 2007

At press time, these panels had tentatively been scheduled for Thursday, May 24. Check the Howells Society site (<http://www.howellsociety.org>) for updated information. Information will also be sent to the howells-l e-mail list. The program was arranged by Claudia Stokes, Vice President and Program Chair.

### Howells and Marriage I

Chair: Elsa Nettels, College of William and Mary

1. "A Grammar of Marriage: Love in Spite of Syntax in *Silas Lapham*," William Rodney Herring, University of Texas
2. "The Art of Marriage: Taking the Woman Artist as Wife in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*," Sherry Li, National Taiwan University
3. "Marriage and the American Medical Woman in *Dr. Breen's Practice*," Frederick Wegener, California State University, Long Beach

### Howells and Marriage II

Chair: Susan Goodman, University of Delaware

1. "Movement, Modernity, and the Marriage of Elinor Mead and William Dean Howells," Elif Armbruster, Suffolk University
2. "Love in Leisure Spaces: Tourism, Courtship, and Marriage in *The Coast of Bohemia* and *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*" Donna Campbell, Washington State University
3. "If You Liked That, You'll Like This: Howells and Theodor Fontane on Marriage," Richard Ellington, Independent Scholar
4. "A 'Record of Young Married Love': Marriage in William Dean Howells' Criticism and Reviews," Rachel Ihara, City University of New York

## Howells Society Elections

Open positions and current nominees:

**Vice President/Program Chair.** Rob Davidson, Lance Rubin

**Secretary:** Donna Campbell

**Treasurer:** Elsa Nettels

**Editor of *The Howellsian*:** Alex Feerst

At the conference a business meeting will be scheduled, and the agenda will include the election or reelection of officers for the next two-year term, 2007-2009.

All members of the Society are invited to submit nominations in advance for the positions of Vice-President/Program Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, and Editor of *The Howellsian*; all nominations should be sent to Donna Campbell, Secretary (<[campbelld@wsu.edu](mailto:campbelld@wsu.edu)>) by **May 15, 2007**. They should include a brief bio-sketch or vita of the potential nominee as well as the assurance that he or she is willing to serve if elected; self-nominations are acceptable. Biographical sketches for current nominees are available at the Howells Society site.

Claudia Stokes, our current Vice-President/Program Chair, will automatically become President, and Susan Goodman, our current President, will automatically become Past President. Also, all members are welcome to attend the meeting and vote for the new officers. The Society's business meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 24; please check the conference program to learn where it will be held.

The William Dean Howells Society  
Executive Board

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**President:** Susan Goodman, University of Delaware

**Vice President:** Claudia Stokes, Trinity University (San Antonio)

**Secretary:** Donna Campbell, Washington State University

**Treasurer:** Elsa Nettels, William and Mary

**Editor of *The Howellsian*:** Sanford Marovitz, Kent State University

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**Dues Notice and Registration Form for the Howells Society Dinner at ALA**

\_\_\_\_ Membership in the William Dean Howells Society (\$10 for each membership)

\_\_\_\_ Dinner at the Tavern Club (\$80 for each nonmember)

\_\_\_\_ Dinner at the Tavern Club (\$70 for each member)

\_\_\_\_ Total Enclosed

**Please send registration forms and checks for the dinner by May 15, 2007 to**

**Dr. Elsa Nettels**

**211 Indian Spring Rd.,**

**Williamsburg, VA 23185.**

Please make the check out (US funds) to **The William Dean Howells Society**. Thank you. If you are simply renewing your membership and not registering for the dinner, you can send this form any time.

**Application for Membership or Renewal**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**E-mail address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone number (optional):** \_\_\_\_\_

**New Membership** \_\_\_\_\_ **Renewal** \_\_\_\_\_