

INTRODUCTION



William Dean Howells

(1837-1920)

William Dean Howells led the international Realist movement in the United States, as the author of 38 novels, 35 plays, 4 books of poetry and 34 additional volumes, as a prominent editor and critic, and as author of *Criticism and Fiction* (1891). His major novels are *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). From 1886 to 1892 in particular he waged an intense crusade for Realism that provoked violent opposition on both sides of the Atlantic, from advocates of Romance such as Robert Louis Stevenson and from Victorian women readers who wanted sentimental fiction that idealized them. He came to know and encourage many writers including Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris. "You held out your open editorial hand to me at the time I began to write," James wrote, "with a frankness and sweetness of hospitality that was really the making of me...You showed me the way and opened me the door."

BIOGRAPHY

Howells grew up in backwoods Ohio and educated himself in a print shop, like Twain. Hoping to become a successful writer, he wrote poetry and made a pilgrimage to New England in 1860. He liked Hawthorne, could not understand Thoreau and did not get along with Emerson. That year he published a life of Abraham Lincoln during the presidential campaign and in 1861 was rewarded with an appointment as American consul in Venice, where he served throughout the Civil War. In 1862 he married a lady from Vermont, Elinor Mead, a second cousin of President Rutherford B. Hayes. Coming from the West, like his character Silas Lapham he yearned for acceptance by society in the East. Since childhood he had despised the crudity of frontier life. Like Henry James, he enjoyed the company of sensitive women and became a fastidious dresser, wanting to be a dandy. "My longing was for the cleanly respectabilities."

Accordingly, after the war he settled in Boston, then the literary capital of the United States. In 1871 he became the powerful Editor-in-Chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*. This gave him entree to the circle that included Longfellow, James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes. His prudish sensibility, acquired social position and environment made him genteel, even though he was leading a rebellion against Victorian literary conventions. He argued that "the novel in our civilization now always addresses a mixed company, and that the vast majority of the company are ladies, and that very many, if not most, of these ladies are young girls." He believed that nothing should be published that "a father may not read aloud to his daughter, or safely leave her to read for herself. After all, it is a matter of business....The manners of the novel have been improving with those of its readers, that is all." Consequently, he has been called a "reticent realist." Yet in part because of such discretion, he became so influential in his day that his move

from Boston to New York in 1889 to write literary commentary for *Harper's* magazine was seen as shifting the literary center of the United States.

COMMONPLACE REALISM

Howells was a genteel Victorian who wrote realistic novels of manners, studying character and class distinctions in America, the same general focus as James in an international context, but as a nationalist who believed that what was “peculiarly American” was “the large, cheerful average of health and success and happy life.” Our novelists, he thought, “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American.” He celebrated the ordinary, the opposite of James, initiating a tradition of commonplace Realism that continues to this day. His novels are very readable, enjoyable, clever, insightful, informed by American cultural history and often humorous. They provide the fullest record of American social life during the late 19th century in American literature, despite the fact that in his theory of limited Realism, tragedy is excluded because it is “rare” in the United States. Howells was not always realistic himself. Contrary to his insistence that Realism “prefers to avoid all manner of strange coincidences and dire catastrophes,” his novels are full of them: Some of his plots turn on train wrecks, fires, brain fever, suicide by poison and death by locomotive.

A Modern Instance (1882)

He announced his intentions in his first novel *Their Wedding Journey* (1872): “Ah! poor Real Life, which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face?” *A Modern Instance* is a study of married life originally entitled *The New Medea*, featuring a heroine comparable in her possessive passion to her Greek counterpart. Marcia Gaylord is Howells’ most notable attempt to portray a complete woman. She is independent in rejecting her father’s advice not to go after and marry Bartley Hubbard, an enterprising young journalist. Her “animalistic” qualities troubled genteel reviewers, though she does develop some moral delicacy. Her “love marriage falls into ruin through the undisciplined character of both.” Bartley turns out to be a selfish lout with “no more moral nature than a baseball.” His moral decay is comparable to that of Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Dreiser.

The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885)

Howells brings Hubbard back in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, his best and most popular novel, about a businessman who makes a moral choice, urged by his wife as a Victorian conscience, that causes him to decline financially while rising morally. Howells intended his writing to have a spiritual dimension, inspired to some extent by New England Transcendentalism, though in his family the works of the mystic Swedenborg--not Emerson--replaced the *Bible*. After 1886 the major literary influence upon him was the religious Tolstoy. However, his faith that even the commonest of things manifests the divine--as in Emerson’s *Nature* (1836)--is only theory in his case. Howells lacked the soul or the skill to convey holistic consciousness, not in psychological allegory nor in style like James nor in any other way. There is no evocation of transcendence in his fiction, it is too commonplace.

The influence of Tolstoy did transform him, though, in the Fall of 1897, when someone threw a bomb during the Haymarket Riots in Chicago, killing 11 people including 7 policemen. Though no evidence was presented connecting them with the bomb, 8 Anarchists were tried and 7 were sentenced to death. So enraged was the public that it took great courage for Howells to make a celebrated plea for justice that provoked vitriolic attacks against him from newspapers around the country. This experience increased his discontent with shallow Boston society and turned him into a socialist, though not an activist.

A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890)

That is when he moved to New York (1889) and published *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the longest of his works, a panoramic novel in the manner of Tolstoy, dramatizing the class struggle. This was the Gilded Age of the robber barons, exploitation of labor and vulgar conspicuous consumption by the rich--much like today. An unsympathetic greedy capitalist, Dryfoos, wants to rise socially in New York as the sympathetic Silas Lapham wanted to rise socially in Boston. His daughters are depicted as pushy and vulgar. The editor

of his magazine, who had appeared in *Their Wedding Journey*, refuses to fire an outspoken radical on his staff. Dryfoos' son turns into a socialist and both he and the editor die from injuries received in a labor riot. The book ends with the streetcar strike of 1888.

Never a radical himself, however, Howells advocated orderly political action to achieve social security and state control of resources. He explained in a letter to Henry James, "After fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a furlined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy." He seems to have known little of Karl Marx.

DECLINE IN STATURE

By the 20th century his avoidance of sex, violence and the uglier aspects of life made Howells seem timid. The champion of Realism seemed insufficiently realistic. The more successful the Realist movement became, the more his reputation declined. Critics and younger writers such as Dreiser did not appreciate what he had done for them and blamed him for a thinness and lack of virility in American fiction. H. L. Mencken described him as "a contriver of pretty things...an Agnes Repplier in pantaloons." Howells died in 1920, the year Sinclair Lewis published *Main Street*. By the time Lewis was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1930, representing the triumph of the Realist Movement, most critics agreed with Lewis in his acceptance speech: "Mr. Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men, but he had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage."

The Depression of the 1930s revived some interest in Howells' social protest fiction, but he was also condemned by Leftists for not being a Marxist. Though overshadowed by Twain and James and others, Howells remains a skillful novelist very much worth reading for pleasure, for his sense of humor, for realistic period details, and for a wealth of cultural information.

Michael Hollister (2015)

