

The Howellsian

Published biannually (with occasional lapses) by the William Dean Howells Society for the information of its members and interested others.



"Mr. Howells at the Time of Writing Annie Kilburn, 1887"

In *Human Documents: Portraits and Biographies of Eminent Men* (1895)

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In Memoriam

Elsa Nettels

by Provost Michael R. Halleran | College of William and Mary | January 4, 2017

Dear colleagues,

I write to share the news that Elsa Nettels, the Mildred and J. B. Hickman Professor of English and Humanities, Emerita, passed away in Williamsburg on Friday, December 30. Professor Nettels taught at William & Mary for thirty years, and was one of the first women to be tenured in the English Department. During her time here, she mentored dozens of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty colleagues, and forged a formidable career as an internationally known scholar of Henry James, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and William Dean Howells. Her publications included three widely acclaimed books — *James and Conrad* (1977), *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (1988), and *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather* (1997) — and well over fifty articles and book chapters in journals including *American Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, and *American Literary Realism*. Her legacy in teaching was equally impressive. In 1997 she received William & Mary's Thomas Ashley Graves Jr. Award for Sustained Excellence in Teaching, and that same year an essay collection titled *American Literary Mentors* was issued in her honor by the University Press of Florida, thanks to the efforts of colleagues Irene C. Goldman-Price and Melissa McFarland Pennell.

Professor Nettels received her A. B. from Cornell University and her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. She joined the William & Mary faculty in 1967 after teaching at Mt. Holyoke College, helped develop the English Department's M.A. Program, and directed numerous honors and M.A. theses. After retirement in 1997 she remained an active member of several literary organizations focusing on Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, William Dean Howells, and Henry James and spent several years writing the authoritative annual bibliographical essay on Wharton and Cather for *American Literary Scholarship*. She was a mainstay of the American Literature Association's annual conference as well as the Edith Wharton and William Dean Howells societies and continued to be an active participant and presenter at national and international conferences well into her retirement.

She will be greatly missed by her friends and colleagues and by generations of grateful students, many of whom followed her lead by pursuing graduate study in literature and careers in university teaching.

A Celebration of Life Service for Elsa Nettels was held on Wednesday, January 11, 2017, in the Christopher Wren Chapel. In accordance with her wishes, she will be interred alongside her parents in Pleasant Grove Cemetery in Ithaca, New York. Gifts in honor of Professor Nettels may be made to The Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36104, or to a charity of your choice. You may leave your memories of Elsa in the comments or in the online [Guestbook](#).

Book Reviews

***Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-Century American Authors*, by Harold K. Bush.**

Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016.
237 pp. Hardcover \$49.95.

In his latest work, *Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-Century American Authors*, Harold K. Bush chronicles the lives and letters of five prominent nineteenth-century authors, Stowe, Lincoln, Howells, Twain, and DuBois, each of whom lost a beloved child and whose subsequent periods of intense grief resulted in some of their greatest works. While Bush is acutely sensitive to the depth of suffering that grieving parents carry with them for the rest of their lives (a grief that he acknowledges he knows all too well), he argues that this suffering can be redemptive, as evidenced by these five authors who turned to writing as a means to cope with the death of a child and remain tied to its memory forever.

Each chapter of *Continuing Bonds* focuses on a single author, narrating the specific loss of a beloved son or daughter, and then connecting that loss and parental grief to a redemptive work. Bush arranges the chapters chronologically, beginning with Stowe and ending with DuBois, examining their expressions of parental grief alongside the religious and societal transformations of the nineteenth century. Specifically, Bush contends that the parental grief of these authors shaped their literary responses to the trials the nation faced as the century progressed—from the

abolition of slavery and turmoil of the Civil War to labor unrest, U.S. imperialism, and institutionalized racism. In order to make this connection, Bush traces a shift in how Americans experienced death and grieving from the antebellum period to the close of the nineteenth century and analyzes how these authors responded to—and often resisted—these shifting paradigms. Bush deftly turns our attention towards the rise of the life insurance and funeral industries in the last decades of the nineteenth century, noting that both of these industries institutionalized the ways American grieved for their loved ones by establishing a set of standard business practices, mediated by the new professional class of life insurance agents and undertakers. By seeking to remove the fear of death from the daily lives of nineteenth-century Americans (often referred to in clinical terms as “the death of dying”), Bush notes, the insurance and funeral industries also greatly diminished the role that faith and redemptive suffering played in the grieving process—the promise that one would someday be reunited with their lost loved ones and the reassurance that they did not die in vain.

Bush’s persuasive thesis on the transformative power of parental grief is perhaps most convincingly explored in his chapter on William Dean Howells. Here, Bush claims that the death of Howells’s beloved daughter Winifred (affectionately called Winny by her parents), “radically changed” the author and greatly contributed to his style of realism (104). It was Winny’s prolonged suffering from depression and untimely death in her early twenties in 1889 (she was treated unsuccessfully by none other than the famous S. Weir Mitchell), Bush suggests, that

turned Howells into an inconsolable parent. Bush then asks us to reconsider the influence of this personal tragedy on Howells's emerging political consciousness in the 1880s. He emphasizes that for too long literary critics have overlooked Winny's death as a major contributing factor that led to Howells's increasing dissatisfaction with the American social order. For Bush, an analysis of Howells's realism through the lens of parental grief is just as important as considering his exposure to the Christian socialism of Tolstoy, the aftermath of the Haymarket Riots, or his move from Boston to New York. While Bush remains silent on the extent of influence that Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* had on Howells's growing political consciousness (Howells's enthusiasm for the novel led him to join a chapter of the Nationalist Club at around the same time as Winny's death), nonetheless, Bush provides compelling evidence that parental grief profoundly shaped Howells's realism, most notably through his reading of the novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890).

In addition to his investigation of Howells's realism, Bush generates new readings of Howells's poetry collection *Stops of Various Quills* (1895) and the essay "A Counsel of Consolation" published in the collection *In After Days* (1910). Bush skillfully demonstrates that Howells's writing reveals an anguished yet sustained search for the promise that he would be reunited with his beloved daughter, which Bush describes as "a despairing dialogue between the doubting self and the hopeful believer" (104). For Bush, this "despairing dialogue" counters the "death of dying" philosophy popularized at the end of the nineteenth century by the funeral business and harkens back to an earlier Christian framework of grieving.

Another important avenue for Howells studies—largely overlooked by scholars—is the renewed friendship, late in life, between Howells and Twain. Because both authors shared a deep skepticism of the expanding American empire, Bush calls their friendship and correspondence an "anti-imperial friendship" (157). Yet while Bush acknowledges their mutual critique of American imperialism, he maintains that it is their unbreakable bond of parental grief (Howells and Twain each suffered the loss of a beloved daughter) that allowed their friendship to blossom and form the basis of their particular critique. While Bush's claim might sound too speculative, his comparative readings of Twain's "War Prayer" (1904) and Howells's "Editha" (1905) shake off any initial doubts: both stories focus on the devastating loss of life exacted by American overseas conquests. Bush succeeds in convincing readers that when writing about American imperialism, the writings of both Howells and Twain "were saturated with the grief of the survivors" (161).

Bush's provocative claims on the impact of parental grief for authors Stowe, Lincoln, Howells, Twain, and DuBois come to a satisfying fruition in this important new work of American literary criticism. Questions remain, however. While reading the chapter on Howells, one wonders: how did Howells's parental grief shape his work as an editor? Or as a mentor to many younger American writers? While the answers to these questions are perhaps outside the scope of the book, Bush's astute analysis of Howells's realism and his "anti-imperial friendship" with Twain has opened up fascinating and important new lines of critical inquiry into Howells's oeuvre.

Tara C. Foley
Baylor University

***Emotional Reinventions: Realist-Era Representations Beyond Sympathy*, by Melanie V. Dawson.**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. 309 pp. Hardcover \$85.00. Paperback \$39.95.

In her recent work, Melanie Dawson examines the ways that American realist authors revised the methods and aims of representing emotion that had prevailed in the sentimental fiction of the previous generation. She contends that realism defined itself as a new literary mode predicated on the reconceptualization of emotion and its representation. Realists led by William Dean Howells, such as Henry James, Charles Chesnutt, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Edith Wharton, gave emotion a “new design” and a new ideological orientation, rejecting sentimentalism’s idealism and belief that the literary evocation of shared feeling could result in greater social unity and understanding among alienated classes (15). Realists were skeptical of the “connective logic” that was fundamental to the “sentimental enterprise” (16). Namely, realists questioned sentimentalism’s concept of sympathy—its faith in a kind of emotional universalism that posited feeling as transferable or exchangeable through aesthetic means, thus making the literary representation of emotion a possible “solution to social conflict” (17). Realists rejected the notion that self and other could be unproblematically linked by fellow feeling through the representation of shareable emotions and experiences. Therefore, Dawson argues, for the realists, “the principal goal of emotional representations” was not to enact social transformation through fantasies of ontological sameness, rather, realists believed “that social change came through . . . the recognition of emotional differences” (16, 22). Realists, she writes, sought “to represent unideal emotions

that were beyond the realm of sympathy” (25). Realists wished to take a more modern approach to the examination and representation of affect, depicting emotions not as ideal universals and thus the means of mediating mutual understanding and fellow feeling, but as deeply individuated, variegated, detailed, complex, blended, and situated in a particular context and history. For example, realists’ representation of class alienation and the inability of individuals and groups to connect and understand one another rejected sentimentalism’s faith in the possibility of unification through shared feeling. Dawson identifies these new representational strategies as a “proto-modern trend” that foreshadowed modernists’ emphasis on alterity, the insularity of subjectivity, and an approach to selfhood as isolated, differentiated, and incapable of the kind of idealized intersubjectivity envisioned by sentimentalist authors (27).

Dawson’s text is bookended by two chapters that focus on Howells. In the first, Dawson argues that, for Howells, the shortcomings of sentimentalist representations of emotion were a “problem of scale” (35). Howells shared many of sentimentalism’s social objectives and remained, at least for a time, invested in the concept of sympathy, but employed a new aesthetic ethos to attain those ends. In order to break with sentimentalism’s emphasis on idealized notions of large-scale, universal feelings, Howells contended that realists should focus on “a limited and scaled-back representational approach to affect,” attending to the local, particular, individuated, and different, rather than the universal, shared, or objective (35). While the sentimentalists’ model of sympathy destroyed alterity by reducing all otherness to sameness, subordinating the individual to the collective, Howells proposed that realists should focus on difference “in the hope that

exposure to more detail would create the curious alchemy by which sympathetic feeling was evoked" (41). Howells believed that American readers could only be made to recognize their "shared humanity" if they "were encouraged to confront their material and cultural differences" (45). As such, Howells's "approach to sympathy remained revisionist rather than reinventive" (41). While sentimentalist representations of sympathy were "scaled" to overcome difference in an effort to create fellow feeling, the realists, led by Howells, offered a more modern rendering of emotion that honored difference and recognized "the full human complexity of others" (25). In his novels that confront the possibility of cross-class understanding—such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Minister's Charge* (1886), *Annie Kilburn* (1887), and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889)—Howells's characters find that broad fellow feeling is impossible or, at best, limited. While he thought sympathy "a worthy goal," the inability of those of different classes to come to know and understand one another made "emotional connection . . . virtually impossible" (56). Howells found that sympathy requires detailed knowledge of particular, individuated circumstances and therefore this made broad-scale social reform invoked on the basis of emotion impossible. Dawson offers a particularly adept reading of *Annie Kilburn* which shows the novel to be a rigorous examination of sympathy and "cross-class feeling" that ultimately finds it to be an unsustainable form of emotional appeal (57).

In Dawson's final chapter, she returns to Howells, this time focusing on *The Whole Family*, the "collective novel" he devised and serialized in *Harper's Bazar* from 1907 to 1908, in which "twelve authors composed chapters about twelve major characters, with each author adopting the

interests and . . . the perspective of the character in question" (201). The experimental, multifocal form of the novel was in keeping with realism's reinvention of emotional representation as it foregrounded experiential and affective difference. However, the novel ultimately subverts what sentimentalism assumes, namely that the representation of emotion has the capacity to mediate social difference. Dawson ably argues that the novel's portrayal of individuated subjects results in a competition for readers' empathy. Here, feeling for one character is necessarily predicated on the marginalization of another. Dawson contends that, by demonstrating that it is impossible for readers to empathize with each character equally, the novel wages "an assault on the unifying capacity of empathy," rendering sentimentalism's "vision of emotion's capacity to generate unity merely a naive fiction" (202, 207). The novel's fidelity to realism's aesthetic, which maintains "the integrity of each viewpoint," results in diverse characters vying for readers' empathy, thus proving that a unity of shared feeling is impossible (206). Dawson concludes that realist-era fiction not only reinvents the manner of emotion's representation, but the idealistic ends of sentimentalism as well by "underscor[ing] the impossibility of achieving any substantive understanding through imaginative effort" (248).

Among the many strengths of Dawson's exceptional text—which offers a thoroughgoing reassessment that places the revised representation of affect at the very heart of American realist literature and criticism—is its nuanced account of realism as a transitional discourse that stands at the threshold between the sentimentalism of the nineteenth century and the modernism of the early twentieth. At the helm of this reinvention is William Dean Howells, but the image Dawson draws is not the familiar and inaccurate portrait

of a stuffy Victorian throwback at the turn of the century, but that of an innovator who first initiates the aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations that will come to define American modernism. Dawson describes Howells's work by turns as "pre-modern," "proto-modern," and "fiction on the edge of modernity" (qtd. 203, 27, 248). In her reading of *Annie Kilburn*, for example, Dawson shows that Howells's focus on the insularity of subjectivity and his respect for alterity presages modernist epistemology and its skepticism about the possibility of intersubjective understanding. Similarly, the "antiomniscent," character-based narration of *The Whole Family*, with "its capacity to destabilize and decentralize" narrative authori-

ty, and its treatment of perspective in a way that suggests the relativity of truth would later be a defining "emblem of literary modernity" (qtd. 203, 212). Even as Howells laments the limitations of sympathy he reveals, and what this might mean for his own desire for social reform and a greater measure of fraternal feeling among Americans, Dawson shows that his "revision of empathy's emotional valence is perhaps the most modern of all realist-era interventions into emotional representation" (202).

Andrew Ball
Lindenwood University

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Howells @ ALA 2017

All Panels are Scheduled for Thursday, May 25

Panel 1: On the Neglected Works of William Dean Howells

Session 1-J—9-10:20am

Chair: Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University

1. "Howells's Critical Poetic Engagement with Race and Lynching," Patricia Chaudron, University at Buffalo
2. "'The slow martyrdom of her sickness malady': William Dean Howells' 'Sketch of Winnie's Life'," Lindsey Grubbs, Emory University
3. "Howells's *The Whole Family*: A Collaborative Failure?," Gregory J. Stratman, American Public University

Panel 2: Howells on Race and Class in the Gilded Age

Session 2-F —10:30-11:50am

Chair: Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University

1. "A Farce and Failure of a Novel: Farcical Realism in William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*," Lisa McGunigal, The Pennsylvania State University
2. "*An Imperative Duty* and the Idea of Race in the Late 19th Century," Naoko Sugiyama, Japan Women's University
3. "Marble Halls and Tenement Houses: Proxemics between the Middle Class and Working Class During the Gilded Age," Kirsten Clemens, Appalachian State University
4. "An Innocent Abroad: Mr. Homos, the Altrurian Traveler," M.M. Dawley, Boston University

Business Meeting: William Dean Howells Society

Session 3-L —12-1:20pm