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

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Members, Please Update Your Email Address
Please send your email address for confirmation or update to the Society’s secretary, Professor Mischa Renfroe (mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu).

To save on mailing costs and conserve natural resources, the Society has recently moved to electronic publication of this newsletter via email, with follow-up posting to the Society’s website.

Recent mailings have revealed significant gaps in our email address list for Society members.

William Dean Howells Society Executive Committee
President & Program Chair: Daniel J. Mrozowski, Trinity College (Connecticut)
Vice President: Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University
Secretary / Treasurer: Mischa Renfroe, Middle Tennessee State University
Webmaster: Donna Campbell, Washington State University
Howellsian Editor: Paul R. Petrie, Southern Connecticut State University
William Dean Howells Society Panels for ALA May, 2016


Panel 1: Neglected Works

We are seeking papers on the neglected works of William Dean Howells. We are especially interested in papers that address his output as an essayist, a poet, and a playwright. Papers on his lesser-known novels, such as *The Undiscovered Country* or *New Leaf Mills*, would also be appreciated.

Panel 2: Open Topic

We are looking for insightful, original papers that address any aspect of Howells's work.

Please submit your 200-250 word abstract and a current CV (or any questions) to Dan Mrozowski at Daniel.mrozowski@trincoll.edu by January 15th.

Daniel Mrozowski
Department of English
Trinity College
115 Vernon St.
Hartford, CT 06106
612-670-5016
Call for Entrants
Howells Essay Prize
2015 Competition

The Howells Society Essay Prize is awarded each year for the best paper on Howells presented at the annual ALA conference. The winning essay may have been presented in any session on the program of the conference, including but not limited to panels sponsored by the Howells Society. Papers are judged by members of the Executive Committee, who have the option of appointing additional readers as necessary.

The author of the winning essay will receive a cash award of $250, and the winning essay will be published (with the author’s permission) in a future issue of The Howellsian. Copyright remains with the writer of the essay, so publication here does not preclude later publication elsewhere of a revised version of the essay.

2015 presenters who wish to enter their papers in this year’s competition must submit them by January 16, 2016 to the Society’s President, Dan Mrozowski. You are welcome to revise your paper before submitting it, but please keep in mind that the essay should be a “conference length” paper and should not exceed 12-15 pages, maximum. Please send the papers as e-mail attachments, in MS Word format, to daniel.mrozowski@trincoll.edu.

2014 Howells Essay Prize Winner
Redemptive Realism: Liberation Soteriology in the Novels of William Dean Howells
By Andrew Ball
Lindenwood University

After undergoing a profound conversion experience in 1887, William Dean Howells chose to devote all of his celebrity and artistic energy to exposing the modes of exploitation and oppression intrinsic to the emerging system of industrial capitalism. Howells was convinced that capitalism had been consecrated and established as the new, dominant American religion; during the Gilded Age, he argued, capitalism had superseded Christianity as the source of the sacred norms guiding Americans’ thought and behavior. Despite the blessings of prosperity and progress that capitalism appeared to bestow on the people in a time of unprecedented national growth, Howells contended that it was an idolatrous faith predicated on the subjugation of the masses. Over the next decade, he composed a series of “economic novels” – Annie Kilburn (1888), A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890), The Quality of Mercy (1891), The World of Chance (1893), and A Traveler from Altruria (1894) – in which he developed the most sophisticated literary critique of modern capitalism to date and elaborated, from a theological perspective, a course of action aimed at liberating the American people from forms of bondage imposed by the industrial system. In these works, Howells examined the process of refication which led the attributes and aims of capitalism to be exalted and imbued with divine significance, causing a reversal of normative values to take place in American culture. Howells hoped to deliver Americans from their idolatry by revealing how the economic order was unduly sacralized and by elucidating the dire political consequences of this process. Capitalism, he argued, necessarily causes national disunion, inequality, and the slow decay of our moral sense, and is therefore antagonistic to the fundamental ideals of both Christianity and American democracy. However, he also believed that “the author was the prophet of better things; he was a Moses, who, if we followed him, would lead us up from” bondage, towards the progressive redemption of modern American culture (WC 349).

Howells contends that the redemption of America is contingent on delivering the nation from industrial slavery, from the estrangement of the classes, and from the moral degradation that is produced by capitalist society. And he believes that literature is a potent, and indeed, necessary catalyst for initiating the kind of concrete systemic reform that liberation requires. He populates his novels with characters who undergo a gradual awakening that leaves them disillusioned with modern American society and driven by a desire to bring their lives into greater conformity to the ideals they so readily espouse but rarely practice. Their progressive conversion is typically initiated by an encounter with Christian socialist characters who want “the whole world to be free” and use forms of “altruistic agitation” in their attempt to redeem American society (WC 186, 140). In response to their social conditions, these characters develop a proletarian Christology which depicts Jesus as Christ the Liberator. In their eyes, “Christ Himself came as a labouring man” who fought to liberate the poor from want and the oppression of the Roman Empire, and, as a result, was executed as a revolutionary (AK 756). They argue that Gilded Age Americans find themselves in a similar social environment, where the masses are tyrannized by a system of industrial slavery and abject poverty, where insecurity, dependence, inequality, and ignorance stand in the way of authentic freedom. They argue that, though the nation boasts of the liberty it affords its citizens, “there can be no freedom where there is the fear of want”, therefore to redeem society, for Americans to be truly free, the working-class must be liberated from poverty and from the form of political economy that systematically exploits them (WC 185). In his economic novels, Howells attempts to convince his readership that Christian socialism provides the means to redeem American society from these conditions and to establish a robust democracy. His liberation soteriology is written into the economic novels in an effort to not only criticize the established order, but to provide a positive solution to forms of social sin and to outline, indirectly, a liberatory praxis.

In 1887 Howells became disillusioned with “the evils of post-Civil War industry” and the commercial culture of Gilded Age America (Taylor 108). The same man who had risen to fame as the quintessential bourgeois American novelist would, during the mature stages of his career, become “our most politically radical writer,” and one of the Gilded Age’s most adept advocates of Christian socialism (Parrish 25). Just as the case had been for Transcendentalists and antebellum labor activists in the pre-Marxian era of Ameri-
can socialism, the foundation of radical social thought in America in the 1880s and 1890s was Christian rather than materialist. Though American socialists were often well-versed in theories of political economy, they advanced their cause in primarily theological and moral terms; their reading of economic conditions was determined by those conditions’ relative adherence to or transgression of ethico-religious principles of justice and responsibility. And so, joining in a long line of American authors, Howells began to endorse practical Christianity, a liberation theology founded upon a theory of economic justice. Like its modern day counterpart, this form of social Christianity called its proponents to literally and concretely emulate the life and ethical teachings of Jesus and to militate for their implementation in society as a whole; the morality and social order adherents affirmed took economic justice as their first principle and primary aim. For these believers, the sins of individuals were merely a symptom of a social ailment, and therefore it was society itself which needed salvation, not merely individuals; the redemption of humanity, they argued, required the amelioration of the poverty and extreme economic inequality wrought by capitalism. Moreover, Christian socialists argued that laissez-faire capitalism promoted the single-minded pursuit of self-interest and therefore codified selfishness as a good that resulted, as did the accompanying values of commercial culture, in the moral degradation of humanity. Social salvation, then, necessitated the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a just economic system, which they believed would be socialistic; a truly authentic adherence to the teachings of Christ, they argued, required nothing less. The theology of practical Christians was predicated on a socialist theory of political economy and therefore Howells’ religious conversion was, at the same time, political; it was an ideological shift that put him directly at odds with the culture and form of life that he had long championed.

Beginning in 1887, Howells, who had only a year before advised American authors to focus their creative attentions on “the individual rather than the social interests”, turned his own intellectual sights on exclusively social, ethical, and religious concerns; he would write only novels with a social and religious purpose, only those which satirized the “smiling aspects of life” and revealed the injustice and misery these concealed. Over the next ten years he would produce a number of works that explored the nature of “Christianity as a system of economics as well as a religion”; it is in these works, now famous for their critique of bourgeois American culture, that Howells would fully realize his realist aesthetic (HNF 277). Once he began to approach fiction as a means of dramatizing and giving form to the ethics and theology of practical Christianity, his realism reached a level of political and intellectual sophistication that was without equal at the time. Howells’ conversion to practical Christianity formed the ethical basis of his mature aesthetics and his ongoing critique of American capitalism. His attempt to translate the ethical and social ideals of practical Christianity into fictional form was a mode of literary praxis that sought to endorse and realize the goals of this American liberation theology.

Howells was perhaps the most pivotal figure in the early post-war revival of social Christianity, which arose in response to the same cultural exigencies that had initiated the first wave of enthusiasm for the theology in the 1830s and 40s. As had been the case in the antebellum era, literature would be an essential component of social Christians’ indictment of Gilded Age American culture. Howells, more than any other author, would master the craft of giving literary form to their theology; he later recalled that the work of Tolstoy played a large part in this endeavor. In an article on Tolstoy’s novels, Howells writes that he prefers “aesthetics which are ethicized” to “ethics which are not ethicized” (“Tolstoi” 856). He admired that in Tolstoy’s work, “perfect aesthetics resulted from...perfect ethics” (qtd. in Budd 298). Ultimately, after his conversion, Howells insisted that the “finest effect of the ‘beautiful’ will be ethical and not aesthetic merely” [Criticism and Fiction 233-234]. This first aesthetic principle is a product of Howells’ post-conversion perspective. From this point forward Howells, America’s most renowned critic, would measure the aesthetic merit of the novel on the basis of an author’s ability to aestheticize an ethic. Edward Bellamy once wrote that “any economic proposition which cannot be stated in ethical terms is false”; for Howells, the artist must, in turn, aestheticize this economic ethic and in his later novels he attempted to do precisely that (qtd. in Trimmer 15). In Tolstoy, Howells admired the unity of the literary and spiritual search for truth” (Budd 298). He attempted to emulate this tactic in his own work, developing a unique form of redemptive realism that sought to give literary form to the ethics of practical Christianity and its liberation soteriology. That is, Howells’ economic novels are the result of giving aesthetic form to the ethics of applied Christianity and to the critique of the established order that is developed on the basis of that ethic.

Despite being one of the most well-known socialists of his generation, today Howells is largely remembered as the consummate novelist of the bourgeois climber, who championed “the smiling aspects of life” and pulled American literature into the kind of complacent register that Sinclair Lewis would mockingly refer to in his Nobel acceptance speech as “Howellian timidity.” Not only is this characterization wholly inaccurate, it serves to falsely diminish the radical nature of the American intellectual tradition that Howells represents, and to effectively put it under cultural erasure. As Walter Fuller Taylor put it, Howells advanced “more radical and far-reaching” “criticisms of American economy” “than had hitherto appeared in the American novel” (Taylor 103). A review in the December 23, 1888 edition of the New York Daily Tribune described Annie Kilburn, Howells’ first economic novel, as “Tolstoi dashed with Anarchy”; in the eyes of the American public, Howells’ work was anything but timid (qtd. in “Carpenter” n16 190). The fact that his novels appear rather toothless by contemporary standards is a testament to their aesthetic excellence. Today we often forget that “social criticism and Christian social reform had always been a part of American fiction,” but unlike the crude polemics, propaganda, and didacticism that characterize the Christian problem novel of the era, Howells forwards a critique of modern economy with superior artistry (Suderman 45-46). Both the secular problem novels and the works of social Christianity that pre-date Howells lack the intrinsic literary merit that Howells’ novels first exemplify.

Rather than forwarding a one-sided indictment of bourgeois culture, Howells offers a holistic, panoramic view of the Gilded Age and the manifold experiences, commitments, and perspectives of those who inhabited it. The bourgeois characters, as much as the proletarians, are objects of the reader’s empathy, and are depicted as being embroiled in a common system of oppression, alienation, and moral degradation, from which they must all be emancipated. True to the social soteriology of his forebears, Howells communicates the exigent need to redeem institutions and social structures, and to deliver individuals from them, rather than to redeem individuals themselves.

By taking a broad view of Gilded Age America, Howells effectively encompasses multiple class perspectives, revealing each character’s interestedness, in order to show how their social, political, and religious opinions tend to serve the interests of their own class. Howells does this to demonstrate how class, soci-
ological conditions, and existential power relations shape religious and social beliefs. But Howells is out to do more than convey how our opinions on fleeting political matters are constituted; his realism illustrates how each American’s embeddedness in the existent network of power relations conditions the religious truth they affirm, particularly, their soteriological truth. With his redemptive realism Howells portrays the interestedness of all Americans in order to show that their religious and social ‘truths’ are fundamentally shaped by their station, or class; to show that one’s salvation ethic is determined by one’s place in a network of material relations that are, in turn, constituted by the existent economic system. In doing so, Howells lays bare the economies of redemption determining the religious beliefs of all Americans.

After his conversion, and in the midst of the fierce class antagonism and economic inequality that defined the Gilded Age, Howells insisted that his literature must always already function to facilitate the redemption of America. In A World of Chance, David Hughes, a one-time resident of Brook Farm and life-long Christian socialist, admonishes the young Shelly Ray for writing a sentimental novel rather than a “novel with a purpose” (WC 62). He asks, and what is your justification for writing a novel at a time like this, when we all are trembling on the verge of a social cataclysm?... How does it justify itself? How does it serve God and help man? Does it dabble with the passion of love between a girl and boy as if that were the chief concern of men and women? Or does it touch some of the real concerns of life—some of the problems pressing on to their solution, and needing the prayerful attention of every human creature? (WC 154)

Here, in Hughes’ censure of Ray, Howells claims that any work of art worthy of the name must, in this time of “social cataclysm,” pay “prayerful attention” to the “real concerns of life” in order to best “serve God and help man.” Howells wants to ensure that his literature is concerned with something more pressing than the mere romantic entanglements of its characters, as many of his previous novels had been.

In his attempt to convince Ray that literature must always be in service of economic reform, Hughes expresses Howells’ new aesthetic theory. We read, “Hughes took a vivid interest in the management of Ray’s department of Every Evening, and gave him advice about it, charging him not to allow it to be merely aesthetic, but to imbue it with an ethical quality; he maintained that literature should be the handmaid of reform” (WC 290, 153). Casting the polemics of Christian socialism in the form of fiction gives them a “charm” that is more palatable to the public interest. Literature adds humanity to the political economy that the Christian socialists espouse, investing it with the faces and lives, the sights and smells of the poverty they wish to ameliorate. The public cannot simply be told about poverty and economic inequality and the consequences of sacralizing selfishness, but must be shown the faces of the people who need to be emancipated. Howells’ liberation soteriology requires a narrative; that’s the aim and challenge of his redemptive realism. For Howells, realism is not about mimesis or verisimilitude, but about working towards the liberation, the redemption, of the enslaved through literature; after his conversion, fiction is a means to a religio-political end, it’s never an end in itself.

However, despite his earlier indebtedness to Tolstoy, in The World of Chance, Howells develops a critique of the utopianism that had defined Christian socialism for the last half-century, arguing that the communal separatism of Tolstoy and the Transcendentalists is an inadequate means of redeeming American society. He writes that Tolstoy “gropes for a hopeless reversion to innocence through individual renunciation of society instead of pressing forward to social redemption” (“Lyof N. Tolstoy” 851). Howells objects to all forms of utopian “comeouterism” because its adherents simply quit “the scene of the moral struggle” without attempting to change the structures of society that are predicated on the exploitation and oppression of the popular classes. Howells’ critique of utopianism marks a clear ideological transition from the romanticized, comeouterist return to the soil that he had formerly endorsed through such characters as Silas Lapham, Matt Hilyar, and Annie Kilburn; here, he begins to renounce the agrarian, separatist ethics of the utopian Christian socialists of the antebellum period in favor of a more immersive, radical, agitating urban activism.

Howells argues that neither violent insurrection nor separatism are the proper routes to founding a Christian republic; only the full political participation of the working-classes can establish a lasting Christian socialism. By the 1890s, Howells’ liberation theology moves beyond the utopianism of the previous generation, emphasizing the need for solidarity and a willingness to suffer with the underclass; moreover, he stresses the importance of establishing an active praxis that works to liberate the masses by peaceful, democratic means. Certainly, the utopians were an outspoken voice for reform, but Howells contends that they remained on the sidelines, theorizing and eloquently advocating for change without attempting to produce it on the front lines of the struggle for freedom. Hughes states, “I abhor dreamers; they have no place in a world of thinking and acting” (WC 92). Here, Howells asserts that mere contemplation, planning, and idealistic posturing will never liberate the oppressed. Rather, their freedom can only be won through “deeds,” through concrete, peaceful political action.

Howells’ democratic brand of Christian socialism, one which stresses that America must be redeemed “the political way,” will come to be the dominant ideology of both the labor movement and the social Christianity of the following generation. The liberation theology that Howells develops in the economic novels, over a ten year period, signifies a turning point in the history of social Christianity and the campaign for economic justice in America. The tactics, principles, and aims that Howells expresses in these works will come to constitute much of the dogma guiding the work of these movements during the Progressive Era. The importance of Howells’ mature liberation theology and his critique of communitarian socialism lies in the fact that it signals, and appreciably contributes to, a reorientation of social Christian values, which were shifting from the rural, agrarian separatism of the utopians to the concrete, politicized urban activism of the Social Gospel.

As had been the case with the literature of the Transcendentalist ministers, Howells’ fiction functioned as the vehicle for disseminating values that would set the terms of the next generation’s social struggle. Instead of passive separatism, or simply opting out of capitalist society, social Christians began to use full political participation, shoulder to shoulder with the underclass, as a means to liberation. Howells’ literary endorsement of democratic socialism over both its revolutionary and utopian counterparts played a major role in promoting a political philosophy and a theory of redemption that would gain broad acceptance in years to come. The liberation theology he devised in the economic novels inspired the next generation of social Christians and would come to constitute much of their platform for the redemption of American society.

Works Cited


Howells Society Annual Business Meeting

Minutes submitted by Mischa Renfroe, Secretary/ Treasurer

The William Dean Howells Society convened at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association in Boston, Massachusetts on May 23, 2015. Members Andrew Bell, Sarah Daugherty, Paul Petrie, and Mischa Renfroe attended the meeting.

The treasurer, Mischa Renfroe, reported that the Society has $1,341.32 in the bank account and $700.34 in the PayPal account for a total of $2041.66. The only expense last year was the Howells Essay Prize of $250.00 to the winner Christine D’Amico.

New business included the following items:

Session Topics for ALA 2016: The society decided to sponsor two sessions. The Call for Papers will include a traditional “open topic” session because that approach has worked well for the past few years. The second topic will address “Neglected Works” by Howells with an emphasis on essays, poetry, drama, and lesser-known fiction. Dan and Andrew will organize these sessions.

Future Topics for ALA 2017 and beyond: The Society may pursue a joint session with another author society at the 2017 meeting in Boston. A session on “Howells and his Circle” might facilitate papers on links between Howells and other writers such as James, Twain, Jewett, Freeman, and Garland. Members also discussed organizing a roundtable discussion to vary the format. Ideas included “A Retrospective Look at Howells Scholarship” featuring established Howells scholars and “New Directions/ New Voices in Howells Scholarship” featuring advanced graduate students and early career scholars.

Other conference-related matters: The Society decided not to organize sessions at regional conferences at this time but may revisit this issue in the future.

Howells Society Growth: Since the Society does not mail a print version of the Howellsian, the Society’s funds continue to grow. Members discussed the use of funds to grow the Society. Suggestions included providing a small conference travel grant to help graduate students and new scholars attend the conference and planning a social event at the next Boston conference (Paul will ask Susan Goodman’s advice based on her work with such events at previous conferences). Members also discussed contacting established Howells scholars to determine who is still working on Howells, directing dissertations and theses, etc., and using social media to actively recruit strong new scholars to the Society.

Membership Issues: Members discussed formalizing the dues payment process with a specific dues call at the same time each year. At present, most members pay dues around ALA and the newsletter publication dates, but other payments trickle in throughout the year. We will revisit this issue. Also, many members have not updated their email addresses and may not receive the newsletter. The newsletter now provides a reminder to contact Mischa to confirm email addresses.

The Howells home at Kittery Point: Several members expressed concern about the apparent sale of the Howells home at Kittery Point. For instance, Howells’s study was intact in the home, but no one knows if those items returned to the Houghton. Paul will contact the curator of the Houghton Library.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned.
Essay Abstracts
Howells Panels at the American Literature Association Conference
Boston, May 2015

‘Dynamite Talk’: William Dean Howells, The Haymarket Affair, and a Legal Theory of Literary Complicity,” Jesse W. Schwartz, LaGuardia Community College

Ever since the 1887 Haymarket trial, it has been difficult to alloy William Dean Howells, the “Dean of American Letters”—at the very peak of his influence, power, and fame—with the fiery activist who chose to stand alone against a remarkable monolith of public opinion by defending the accused, denouncing the probity of the court, and appealing for clemency. Yet, as Howells made clear from the start, his sympathies were not with the radicals themselves but against the “political murder” committed in the courtroom, and his convictions arrived “through reading their trial” in verbatim reproductions of the proceedings.

While nearly all scholarship on Haymarket agrees that the verdict was “for Socialism and not for murder,” this near-unanimity makes it easy to ignore the actual content of the case—and, most importantly, the means through which the prosecution produced the verdict—as a mere miscarriage of justice. However, once we take Howells at his word and examine the testimony itself, his fervid response as a writer of “socially concerned” literature becomes much more legible: In sentencing the radicals to death, the prosecution had manufactured a frightening juridical reconciliation between words and deeds that effectively collapsed all conceptual space between the two, exploding the boundaries of literary complicity, and leaving all writers potentially liable for the social lives of their texts.

‘Our Western Friend’: William Dean Howells, John Hay, and The Bread-Winners Affair Revisited,” Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University

In 1883, John Hay, the former personal secretary to Abraham Lincoln and future Secretary of State, anonymously penned one of the first and “perhaps the best-known anti-labor novel in the American literary tradition”. The novel became an instant literary phenomenon, not least for its mysterious authorship, as well as for its vitriolic demonization of labor organizers and the American working-class in general. The novel has since been credited for inaugurating the literary stereotype of the walking-delegate as a sinister and violent vagabond, a figure that would be well-born by the end of the century. And indeed, the novel was one of the first to treat the newly emergent labor question. Amidst the tide of controversy and criticism over the novel’s portrayal of the working-class, Hay’s longtime friend, William Dean Howells, published a laudatory review of the novel, also anonymously. And when many began to speculate that Howells was responsible for the novel, he went on record to say, “I wish I had written it”. Critics have pointed to the anonymity of Howells’ review to explain what emboldened him to come to the defense of a position on labor that was entirely antithetical to his own developing radicalism. However, in 1905, following Hay’s death, and decades into his radical period, Howells went even further in his defense of the novel, this time on record in a retrospective of Hay’s oeuvre.

In this presentation, I examine how we’re to reconcile Howells’ defense of a notorious anti-labor novel in light of his own burgeoning radicalism. Are we to regard this merely as an act of loyalty on the part of a dear friend and fellow midwestern climber? Or, if we’re to attribute this to the vestigial conservatism of one who’s radicalism is still nascent—as many critics have—then how do we account for Howells’ 1905 redoubled defense? Or, are we to interpret the affair as largely neglected evidence of Howells’ emerging radicalism, as Robert Falk does? Falk reads the affair as “a long step forward for Howells,” “the first definitive indication of the preoccupation with social and economic conditions which was to dominate his thinking in the late Eighties and Nineties”. This presentation offers a long-overdue reassessment of the The Bread-Winners affair to determine its place in the narrative of William Dean Howells’ radicalism.
“A Woman’s “Brand” of Success in William Dean Howells’s The Rise of Silas Lapham,” Carrie Johnston, Quincy University

William Dean Howells’s The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) indicts a culture in which an honest family businessman is faced with extreme and unattractive options in a marketplace of booming corporate growth and questionable ethics. This paper traces a narrative that begins at the height of Lapham’s career, in which Lapham points to the company's top-shelf product, “The Persis Brand,”—named for his wife—as the basis of his success, paying close attention to Lapham’s increasing rejections of his wife’s influence in an attempt to accumulate more wealth and rise through the ranks of society.

I argue that the novel’s direct correlation of Lapham’s professional missteps and his emphatic rejections of his wife’s input illustrates the curse of Gilded Age prosperity to be the exclusion of women—more specifically, the traditionally feminine traits of restraint and good character—from the masculine public sphere. After Lapham’s extravagant house has burned down and he faces financial ruin, Lapham and his wife have similar epiphanies, regretting “how much [Persis] had left herself out of his business life. That was another ‘curse’ of their prosperity.” By presenting the Persis “brand” as a potential solution to the contradictory impulses of both achieving success in the Gilded Age corporate economy and maintaining one’s integrity, this paper reveals the ways Lapham demonstrates the damaging results of excluding women from the public sphere, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional notions of the feminine qualities of virtue and honor that are central to ideas such as “true womanhood” and the doctrine of separate spheres.


"I feel something must be done; but I don’t know what," laments Howells’s protagonist in Annie Kilburn (1887/8), the most intimate investigation in nineteenth-century American literature of the phenomenon now termed "liberal guilt." In Annie’s anxious desire to "be of some use in the world" and utter uncertainty of how to be, her conflict between enjoying and despising her class privilege, Howells presents his most sustained treatment of a subject that haunts much of his work from the late 1880s and 1890s. Howells’s representation of genteel unease about inequality and social responsibility is central to his social criticism and to his continuing relevance, particularly as wealth disparity in America today rivals that of the Gilded Age.

As Julie Ellison observes in "A Short History of Liberal Guilt," "[i]n the throes of liberal guilt, all action becomes gesture, expressive of a desire to effect change or offer help that is never sufficient to the scale of the problem." This paper argues that, in Annie Kilburn, Impressions and Experiences (1890) and A Hazard of New Fortunes (1896), Howells portrays aesthetic engagement with poverty as both engendering sympathy and diverting it into sentimentalism; sentimental responses to suffering or injustice are figured as self-serving replacements for emotional or practical ones. Guilt is the self-flagellating gesture that his characters perform instead of trying either to understand their implication in oppressive social structures or to help those in need. Howells’s work depicts the limitations of genteel sympathy to produce meaningful social engagement, yet also suggests that the failure of sentiment to produce useful action can generate for the genteel a sense of the alterity of those whom they desire to help, making possible a less romanticized and more ethical relation.

Panel 2: New Approaches to Howells’s A Hazard of New Fortunes
Chair: Dan Mrozowski
Trinity College

“The Voice of the Veteran in W.D. Howells’s A Hazard of New Fortunes,” Liam Corley, United States Naval Academy

Claims of authority in America have from the colonial period been more frequently based on epistemology than on tradition or socioeconomic status. Experiential knowledge, in particular, has been privileged over speculative or received insights, a bias I trace to influential writings by Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin. My larger project, The Voice of the Veteran: Epistemology and Authority in American Literature, traces the genealogy of epistemological authority claims from its religious roots in the colonial period through its compression into the specific figure of the combat veteran following the Civil War.

William Dean Howells includes more than one veteran in A Hazard of New Fortunes, but I focus on Berthold Lindau, the immigrant amputee veteran. Postbellum literary depictions of veterans navigated the dangers of investing too much authority in a
single figure by using various strategies. For instance, Melville's poetic enlightened veterans were silent or dead, undeceived by the same bullet that killed or maimed them. Howells engages in a double displacement with Lindau. This veteran is articulate only when speaking in German, and his strongest criticisms of the political order that benefited from his military service are conveyed in dialect and are framed with an implicit critique by the novel's emotional locus, Basil March. Yet Lindau's fractured authority to critique the American system of capital contrasts positively with the nouveau riche Dryfoos's past history of having paid for a substitute to fulfill his military service. Even with linguistic handicaps, Lindau expresses more about the meaning of his wartime experiences than Howells's earlier veteran character, Silas Lapham. Lindau's various displacements in the text contain the force of his epistemological authority as a veteran and indicate the way Howells attempted to ameliorate the reasons that, in the character Fulkerson's words, "[t]he war has never fully panned out in fiction." As such, Lindau demonstrates how the trope of a veteran could be deployed to gain authority and insight to critique American society.

“‘Dere iss no Ameriga any more’: Unintelligible Subjects in Howells’s A Hazard of New Fortunes,” Jeremy McFarlane, Queen’s University

As Henri Lefebvre notes in Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 3, discourse that challenges the status quo lacks intelligibility, as it is “pure information – a total surprise and an utter disordering of the code” (70). It is, therefore, appropriate that William Dean Howells literally disrupts the linguistic codes of standard English when the German socialist Lindau speaks in A Hazard of New Fortunes. In The Social Construction of American Realism, Amy Kaplan suggests that Lindau is “represented as a translation” (56-57); however, this paper suggests that the use of non-standard spellings in Lindau’s dialogue underscores the unintelligibility of the ideology he expresses and argues that Lindau becomes, rather, a text in need of translation by others who are not necessarily adept at doing so. He represents, first and foremost, an epistemological problem; however, as the novel progresses, what is foreign becomes familiar, and what is familiar becomes foreign. The novel demands that a reader learn this language of the Other, and the process allows Lindau’s foreign logic to first exist alongside the commonplace “knowledge” represented by figures such as Fulkerson and Dryfoos, then supersede it. It allows readers to see the coherency of the claim that, under conditions of late-nineteenth century capitalism, “Dere iss no Ameriga any more.” Consequently, it also exposes the bitter irony that the civic murder of the Haymarket anarchists was not, in fact, an affirmation of national ideals but, rather, a service to a new aristocracy masquerading as patriots.

“‘Feeling like Populace’: Public Transportation and the Doctrine of Complicity in Howellsian Realism,” John Sampson, Johns Hopkins University

Wai Chee Dimock has argued that two of the central concepts in Howells’ realist project, voiced by Reverend Sewell in The Minister’s Charge and The Rise of Silas Lapham, are a complementary pair: the doctrine of complicity describes our interconnection in urban-industrial society while the economy of pain releases our obligation to certain (kinds of) people. Like many influential claims in Howells criticism, Dimock’s argument is unduly focused on the conservative aspects of Howellsian realism. This paper seeks to disrupt this narrative by first pointing out that the line Dimock attaches to Sewell’s sermon on complicity—“everybody’s mixed up with everybody else”—is actually spoken by a horse-car conductor, suggesting a new genealogy for the concept of complicity, one centered on public transportation. Tracing this genealogy from the horse-car in The Minister’s Charge to the elevated train in A Hazard of New Fortunes, this paper demonstrates how a representation of urban interconnection on public transportation succeeds in breaking through realism’s economizing, self-limiting barriers.

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