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# Confronting the Modern Literary Marketplace: William Dean Howells Between 1900-1920

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**Modern Edebiyat Dünyası ile Yüzleşmek: 1900-1920 arası William Dean Howells**

ÖZET

Kanonik bir Amerikan roman yazarı ve Amerikan gerçekçi edebiyatının en önemli kuramcılarından biri olmasına rağmen, William Dean Howells'la ilgili çalışmalarda yazarın son dönemi yeterince incelenmemiştir. Howells, 1900 yılında *Harper's* dergisinde her ay yazmaya başlamış ve yazılarına 1920'deki ölümüne dek devam etmiştir. Howells bu yirmi yılık dönemde, edebiyat dünyasındaki değişimlerin hem sanatçı hem de edebiyat eleştirmeni üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerine maruz kalmış; reklam sektörünün edebî beğeni üzerindeki nihaî etkisini fark edip kendi sanatçı konumunu gözden geçirmiş ve durumunu "maaşa bağlanmış kazançlı kölelik" olarak betimlemiştir. İronik olan, bu dönemde, Howells'ın edebiyatçı kimliğinde oluşan bölünmenin, yazara "Amerikan Edebiyatının Dekan"ı denmeye başlanması ile daha da derinleşmesidir. Bu çalışmada Howells'ın kariyerinin son döneminde yazdığı romanları ve edebiyat eleştirileri üzerinde durulup özellikle edebiyat eleştirileri üzerinden Howells'ın yirminci yüzyılın sonunda edebiyat dünyasında meydana gelen değişimleri nasıl karşıladığı, kendi edebiyat anlayışını ve pratiğini nasıl şekillendirdiği incelenecektir. Howells'ın modern edebiyat dünyasıyla karşılaşması, hem entelektüel ve ahlâkî hem de sanatçı olmakla ilgili bir kriz, bir dönüm noktası olarak görülmeli ve yazarın son dönemini inceleyen-gecikmiş de olsa-her tartışmanın çerçevesini oluşturmalıdır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler***: *William Dean Howells, Yirminci Yüzyıl Amerikan Edebiyatı, Edebiyatın Ticarîleşmesi, Edebî Beğeni, Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Amerikan Demokrasisi, Gerçekçilik.*

ABSTRACT

Although William Dean Howells is a canonical American novelist and one of the foremost theorists of American literary realism, his later phase receives little scholarly attention. In this period, Howells experiences the negative effects of the rapidly changing literary marketplace on both the artist and the literary critic, realizes the defining force of the advertiser on literary taste, and revises his own artistic status, which he now calls "prosperous slavery to a salary." Ironically, the epithet 'Dean of American Letters' is bestowed upon him in this final period, rendering Howells's private literary self more at odds with his public literary persona which has assumed iconic properties. In this analysis, Howells's selected later fiction and non-fiction will be considered. Many of his later critical essays will help define his literary program in the twentieth century as he confronts the modern literary marketplace. This confrontation, in the manner of an intellectual, moral, and artistic crisis, must frame any investigation of what constitutes the belatedness of later Howells.

***Keywords***: *William Dean Howells, Twentieth-Century American Literature, The Commodification of Literature, Literary Taste, Literary Criticism, American Democracy, Realism.*

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**Introduction: American Literary History and Literary Revivals**

A non-chronological look at American literary history offers remarkable instances of literary revivals in which classic writers and most of the established canonical works have been recuperated from oblivion. The most significant may be the so-called Melville Revival.[1] Until the centenary of Melville's birth in 1919 when interest in his work began to grow, *Moby-Dick* (1851) remained "unread and undiscussed . . . something like a nonexistent book." [2,3] Melville's entrance into the canon of American literature took place in the 1930s as American literature began to be taught in colleges. By the late 1940s, *Moby-Dick* was in the "classics" syllabus. In other words, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Melville was (re)discovered and now he is acknowledged to be "*the* monumental writer of nineteenth-century America."[4]

If there is a possible oversight with regard to literary revivals it might be the removal of certain groups of writers and works that are equally representative and important from a recuperated work's period. Perhaps the best known case of such revivals, F. O. Matthiessen's 1941 classic *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, which paves the way for the (re)discovery of America in its antebellum literature, has been taken to task for such omission. By "American Renaissance," Matthiessen emphasizes the coming of age of art in America. He writes,

> *it may not be precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a re-birth; but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art.*[5]

Because Matthiessen limited his discussion to five writers, namely, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, he was taken to task for "exclud[ing] the significant contributions of women and minority writers, especially African American writers, and consequently clos[ing] off considerations of the wide range of writing developing in the United States during this time."[6]

Notwithstanding American pluralism, one other problem might be the flawed contention that a classic becomes a classic because it has been recovered from obscurity and has achieved, though belatedly, its commendable status. There are, however, some writers and works whose historical significance have not—at least

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[1] See Clare L. Spark's *Hunting Captain Ahab: Psychological Warfare and the Melville Revival*, Ohio, Kent State University Press, 2006. For a discussion on the careers of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, see Mark Greif's "'The Death of the Novel' and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the 'Big, Ambitious Novel'", *boundary 2*, Vol: 36, No: 2, 2009, pp. 11-30,

[2] Richard Brodhead (ed.), *New Essays on "Moby-Dick"*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.17.

[3] It is worth noting that at the centenary of Melville's birth, there was a sudden outburst of articles written on Melville in England. In a sense, the Melville Revival began first in London with the help of the "scattered but long-sustained" interest in Melville (Selby 5). The Melvillians of England spread their enthusiasm and Melville's name began to appear extensively in American newspapers, magazines, and books.

[4] Robert S. Levine, *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 2.

[5] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941, p. vii.

[6] Nina Baym (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Volume II, Seventh Edition, New York, London, 2007, p. 929.

yet—been crowned by revivals but who have received sustained acknowledgement of literary merit and value. The case of William Dean Howells (1837-1920), whose formative influence on American realism as well unwavering faith in American literature's commitment to democracy are touchstones in American literary history, may be a rewarding example. Howells is that rare canonical literary figure who, despite noteworthy and persistent interest in him, has not yet had a proper revival of his own. Yet when we reassess the centrality of Howells to our understanding of American literature's development at the turn of the twentieth century through a close look at the final years of Howells—transformative both of Howells's own career and the modern American literary scene, we also reassess the necessity of the notion of a literary revival along with non-literary factors effecting the contemporaneous and future reception of a writer.

Two preliminary points might serve this claim. First, in his 1951 essay "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," acclaimed American critic Lionel Trilling writes, "[e]very now and then in the past few years we have heard that we might soon expect a revival of interest in the work of William Dean Howells."[7] Referring to the increasing attention to the works of Henry James and Mark Twain at the time, Trilling notes that "[i]t would make a pleasant symmetry if we could know that William Dean Howells has become the object of renewed admiration, that he is being regarded, like his two great friends, as a large, significant figure in our literature."[8] Drawing on the possibilities of such renewal, Trilling discusses the strengths as well as weaknesses of Howells's literary career and evaluates the merits of "the position [Howells] attained in the institutional life of American letters."[9] In Trilling's assessment, Howells's novels, especially *A Modern Instance* (1882) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), are outstanding in their grasp of late nineteenth-century's "social and moral facts."[10] In addition, through "his wit and humor" alone Howells could be saved from the "background of American literature."[11] Nevertheless, Trilling admits that Howells's relentless focus on "the family life of the middle-class" makes his otherwise "engaging" novels unfit for the "modern taste" of mid-twentieth century America.[12]

Second is the sustained scholarly interest in Howells. For instance, Howells emerges as a recurring figure in the revisionary works of the Americanists like Jonathan Arac and Donald Pease. While Howells is a reappearing figure in Arac's works,[13] Pease edits a volume of essays on *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in 1991. In addition, devoted Howells scholars have founded the William Dean Howells Society in 1997 and the Society organizes annual conferences and holds panels on the work of

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[7] Lionel Trilling, *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, Leon Wiseltier (ed.), New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000, p. 203.
[8] Ibid., pp. 203-204.
[9] Ibid., p. 206.
[10] Ibid., p. 208.
[11] Ibid., p. 209.
[12] Ibid., pp. 212, 204, 211.
[13] See especially "Babel and Vernacular in an Empire of Immigrants: Howells and the Languages of American Fiction", *boundary 2*, No: 43, Vol: 2, 2007, pp. 1-20, and "The Age of the Novel, the Age of Empire: Howells, Twain, James around 1900", *Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol: 41, No: 2, 2011, pp. 94-105.

Howells as well as publishing a journal called *The Howellsian* twice a year. It is also worth noting that every five years since 1925, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awards the *William Dean Howells Medal* to outstanding literary achievement and honors both the old and new literary master, the latter including, among others, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, E. L. Doctorow, and John Updike.

Perhaps the most important thing we have to account for is the fact that unlike important writers rescued from indifference, Howells's later decade manifests an undeserved drift into oblivion rather than a career that begins and ends in negligence to be reversed later. Although of course his historical importance is acknowledged by literary critics—especially in the second half of the twentieth-century, it is still not possible to speak about a Howells Revival per se. The contention of this study is to investigate the later career of Howells that definitely transformed the upward trajectory of his career and assess Howells first as a man of letters, second as a man of literary revolution before we understand Howells's dire position vis-à-vis the emerging cultural environment of the early twentieth century. What makes him worthy of constant attention may thus be presented in a comprehensive manner while suggesting the necessity of a discussion on the nature of literary revivals at large.

**Discussion: William Dean Howells at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

It is a critical commonplace to consider the final twenty years of William Dean Howells to be marked by a weakening of his literary authority and a qualitative decline in his fiction. However, as Howells scholars like Paul Abeln and John William Crowley note, Howells maintains a remarkable literary productivity in the final decades of his career. In criticism, he becomes a rather sharp cultural critic who examines a wide range of topics such as marketing, advertising, politics, and the moral function of art in society.[14] In fiction, he never abandons his early commitment to realist aesthetics and a belief that the ethical standards of art could unite a society. There is, however, a flip-side to this productivity; it is Howells's manifold frustrations at the turn of the century that shape his later works, such as the commodification of literature, his darkening sense of the prospects for American democracy, his despair with respect to the anticipated gradual evolution of literary taste in America.

This study follows the assumption that 1900, the year Howells begins penning his monthly columns in *Harper's Magazine* until his death in 1920, marks the onset of Howells's final phase. In this period, Howells experiences the negative effects of the rapidly changing literary marketplace on both the artist and the literary critic, realizes the defining force of the advertiser on literary taste, and revises his own artistic status, which he now calls "prosperous slavery to a salary."[15] Ironically, the epithet 'Dean of American Letters' is bestowed upon him in this final period, rendering Howells's private literary self more at odds with his public, or iconic, literary persona. Before moving on to our discussion on the final years of Howells, it is useful to take note of his literary background and importance in American letters.

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[14] John William Crowley, "William Dean Howells 1837-1920", *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Paul Lauter (ed.), Volume II, Lexington, Massachusetts, D.C. Heath and Company, 1990, p. 255.

[15] William Dean Howells qtd. in Paul Abeln, *William Dean Howells and the Ends of Realism*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 63.

Howells was the leading figure in American literature from the 1870s to the 1890s. Through his "Realism War" and his argument that realistic representation was a theory of democracy, Howells attempted to define the characteristics of American literature that was free from the province of "academic aesthetes or aristocrats," and absolved from the idealizing tendencies of romance and the escapism of sentimental and popular literature.[16] Both in fiction and criticism, his motto was "fidelity to experience and probability of motive."[17] In other words, his insistence on objective, lifelike representation was combined with his belief that art should not belong to the territory of entertainment. In this way, Howells also defined the social, moral, and educative responsibilities of the novelist and the critic towards the reader. The educated and refined novelist and literary critic's duty was to set the standards of literary taste, to improve and promote them, and thereby raise the level of "average morality."[18] Thus, the didactic project of Howells meant a "seamless" fusion of ethics and aesthetics.[19]

His literary practice was faithful to his literary theory. For instance, he wrote some of the best realistic, politically and morally committed novels of the nineteenth century that depicted "the quotidian fact of existence."[20] As Lawrence Buell notes in his 2014 book *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Howells championed "an aesthetics of ordinary middle-class experience, for which he was honored in later years for having produced the Great American Novel, 'if not in any one volume, still in the general mass of his work.'"[21] What Buell dubs the "Howellsian tradition of descriptivist middle-class realism" has been the self-declared alma mater of many important American novelists, from Sinclair Lewis to John Updike.[22]

Howells has always been prolific in his non-fictional endeavors. First in the *Atlantic* (1866-1881), then in the *Harper's* ("Editor's Study", 1886-1891), Howells became the nation's most influential magazine editor, literary critic, and reviewer. The provocative and polemical expressions of his literary values from his *Harper's* column 'Editor's Study,' which Rob Davidson calls "a bully pulpit," changed the course of American literature from romanticism to realism through sustained arguments on the merits of realism.[23] With his reviews, Howells shaped American literary taste and used his editorial position efficiently to "educate the public and expand its literary horizons."[24] For example, he introduced, promoted, and discussed the most

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[16] Ronald Gottesmann, "Introduction", *W. D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, Volume III, 1898-1920, David J. Nordloh (ed.), Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. xiii.

[17] William Dean Howells qtd. in Donald Pizer (ed.), *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1998, p. 74.

[18] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters: The Late Career of William Dean Howells*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, p. 26.

[19] Ronald Gottesman, p. xiv.

[20] Delmar Gross Cooke, *William Dean Howells: A Critical Study*, New York, Dutton and Company, 1922, p. 81.

[21] Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Harvard, Belknap, 2014, p. 34.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Rob Davidson, *The Master and the Dean, The Literary Criticism of Henry James and William Dean Howells*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2005, p. 48.

[24] Michael Anesko, "William Dean Howells and the Bourgeois Quotidian: Affection, Skepticism, Disillusion", in Lamb, Robert Paul and G.R. Thompson (eds.), *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914,* Malden, Blackwell, 2005, p. 511.

important writers of American and European literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Mark Twain (both his confidantes), Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, Abraham Cahan, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles W. Chesnutt, Frank Norris, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Samuel Richardson, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Henrik Ibsen, Èmile Zola, and Thomas Hardy. In his introductory note to *The Heath Anthology*'s Howells selection, John William Crowley emphasizes Howells's "unerring ability to recognize new talent" as well as his role as "an important disseminator of European art and ideas."[25]

After 1900, Howells's career suffered many changes which eventually affected his national literary influence and his success as a novelist. During this time of "sudden eclipse," as Goldman calls it, Howells was frustrated both by the changing literary marketplace and his perception of the failure of American democracy in the twentieth century.[26] For him, both were "corrupted by immense economic pressures and interests."[27] His own artistic status was among the things that Howells discovered to have been changed, corrupted, disintegrated by the modern publishing industry and this happened, as Crowley suggests, in the mode of a division between his private and personal literary personas.

One example that discloses Howells's divided persona is an event that takes place on March 2, 1912, when Colonel George M. Harvey, the literary agent of the House of Harper and Brothers, organizes a party on the occasion of William Dean Howells's seventy-fifth birthday. The party was "a Babylonian extravaganza reminiscent of P.T. Barnum."[28] Four hundred well-known guests, among them President William Howard Taft, gathered at a posh New York restaurant for a feast and "The Dean of American Letters" was honored with generous praises. Taft's sincere flattery of Howells, however, cast doubt on the President's knowledge of Howells's novels. Stranger yet, the tribute speeches were made not by serious admirers of Howells's forty years of output, but, for instance, by a writer of best-sellers—the genre Howells deplored the most—and by one of the harshest critics of Howells's masterpiece, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). The party, which celebrated "the cult of personality that grew around" Howells was covered extensively on the newspapers and was considered a very important social, not literary, event.[29]

For Howells, the frothy ado of the newspaper coverage felt something like a "public death."[30] As he explained to Henry James in a letter, what was prominent in his consciousness was "the divine madness of an affair in which I still struggle to identify my accustomed self."[31] His "accustomed self" was apparently not unproblematically equal to "The Dean" that was the designated receiver of all the praise. More likely, it was something that corresponded to Howells's perception of

[25] John William Crowley, "William Dean Howells 1837-1920", *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Paul Lauter (ed.), Volume II, Lexington, Massachusetts, D.C. Heath and Company, 1990, pp. 510, 511.
[26] Laurel T. Goldman, "A Different View of the Iron Madonna: William Dean Howells and His Magazine Readers", *The New England Quarterly*, Vol: 50, No: 4, 1977, p. 563.
[27] Paul Abeln, p. 67.
[28] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 86.
[29] Rob Davidson, p. 162.
[30] Paul Abeln, p. 87.
[31] William Dean Howells qtd. in John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 89.

himself as a veteran novelist of his 1870s realism crusade, a former arbiter of national literary taste, and an advocate of morality in fiction. At the time of the birthday party, Howells was no longer as influential or impressive in terms of his literary endeavors. His sales were low, he was not a master arbiter defining literary standards. In addition, the naturalistic novels of the early twentieth century were transgressing Howellsian boundaries of propriety in fiction with their frank depictions of the brutal, animalistic drives of amoral people in sleazy circumstances, hence exposing readers to unrefined, vulgar sides of life. Howells was made The Dean of American Letters, supposedly commanding a cultural life that was increasingly alien to him, and he was tormented with a split that threatened to damage his artistic integrity.

Two years after the birthday party, Howells confided in James again: "I am comparatively a dead cult with my statues cut down and the grass growing over them in the pale moonlight."[32] Here, we might ask whether Howells is nostalgic for a literary influence of the sort from his earlier years, a power of persuasion that depended solely on the unquestionable standards of the literary connoisseur. Or, is he lamenting the lack of a substantive literary authority to match the grandness of his newly-awarded Deanship? Paul Abeln states that after 1900, Howells "slip[s] into obscurity."[33] He was not widely read or found culturally relevant in the consumer culture after 1900 as his critical theory and practice continued its ethical campaign, making him seem backward and conservative to the new generation. The decrease in his literary prestige contradicted his celebrity status. The public focused mostly on his iconic status rather than showing intellectual interest in his ideas.

In his introduction to the third volume of Indiana University's collection of Howells's literary criticism, Ronald Gottesman writes something along this line. According to Gottesman, reading the various interpretations of Howells gives "the impression that Howells died about 1900 and was cleverly preserved for display at occasional honorific functions."[34] For instance, between 1900 and 1920, Howells was honored with a library edition of his works—which sold poorly, became the first president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was awarded honorary doctorates which he refused to receive. One reason for his refusal might be the distance he wished to maintain from the academy. Another possibility might be, as Davidson suggests, that Howells felt that the various awards and honors bestowed upon him late in his career were "unwarranted."[35] Howells sadly recognized the symptoms of his "cultural deflation and stoically accepted them."[36] Gottesman's words lead us to a central paradox in the career of later Howells: while the modern literary marketplace made an icon out of Howells for the general public, his literary relevance was in decline and the modernists attacked Howells for his so-called Victorian prudishness, turning the celebrated Dean into some kind of "historical artifact."[37]

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[32] William Dean Howells qtd. in Michael Anesko, *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 460.
[33] Paul Abeln, p. 50.
[34] Ronald Gottesman, p. xii.
[35] Rob Davidson, p. 162.
[36] Michael Anesko, "The Bourgeois Quotidian", p. 499.
[37] Paul Abeln, p. 91.

A number of the younger intellectuals of the turn of the century were trying to attack puritanical America, and for them, Howells was one of the strongest representatives of a way of thinking whose impact, it seemed, would never leave the cultural scene. The attack is epitomized in Sinclair Lewis's 1930 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In the speech, Lewis depicted Howells as one of the foremost among Victorians who had, in Lewis's words, "the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage."[38] Ten years after he passed away, Howells's so-called complicity in bourgeois values, and his aversion to political progressivism were still irritating the next generation. Yet Howells, whose "Realism War" was found to be quite radical with its departure from nineteenth century romanticism, had apparently paved the way for the emerging naturalism of the new century. Lewis can be seen as one of the heirs of Howells. Referring to the protagonists of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and Lewis's *Babbitt*, Anesko writes that "if not a lineal descendent of Silas Lapham, George Babbitt has got to be his second cousin."[39] Thus, as Abeln explains, "the radical had become the conservative almost overnight, and the turn-of-the century enthusiasm for newness and intensity left Howells looking—and probably feeling—old beyond his years."[40]

It is important to note that contrary to his alleged conservatism and prudishness in his final years, Howells was "liberal, at times even radical, in his social and economic views."[41] Beginning in the late 1890s, Howells criticized capitalistic society, and was considered a socialist due to his insistence on socioeconomic equality. His readings of Tolstoy, which experience Howells likens to "the old-fashioned religious experience of people converted at revivals," are an important element in later Howells's agenda of social concerns.[42] In Tolstoy's fiction, Howells found an example of the treatment of the poor and the miserable with an artistic complexity that demanded "moral introspection."[43] This fitted his notion of art's equalitarian attitude and uncompromising aesthetics.

He also criticized America's passionate and sometimes mistaken protection of its values. For instance, he argued that the so-called anarchists who were later proved innocent of the 1886 Haymarket Riot were hanged merely for the perceived threat of their political views.[44] Significantly, he was the only major literary figure to say something against the court decisions regarding the riot, and his loud protest against the politically biased judgment was not welcomed in literary circles. Howells had to be careful in his public posture and restrain the intensity of his personal views in order not to offend the interests of his publishers.[45] Put differently, although he never gave up his protest against specific evils and his indictment of American society, he had to consider the reputation of those he represented.[46] This resulted in a cynicism that he

[38] Sinclair Lewis qtd. in John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 108.
[39] Michael Anesko, "The Bourgeois Quotidian", p. 501.
[40] Paul Abeln, p. 51.
[41] Ronald Gottesman, p. xii.
[42] William Dean Howells qtd. in Daniel Aaron, *Men of Good Hope: A Story of America's Progressives*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 184.
[43] Rob Davidson, p. 190.
[44] Paul Abeln, p. 7.
[45] Ronald Gottesman, p. xii.
[46] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 9.

tried to hide and it reflected "his very private feelings of betrayal, his notion that 'America'—or more precisely his potential readership—would not accept a literature dedicated to the day-to-day construction of the moral life of the democratic individual."[47]

Having established Howells first as a man of letters who has always been against the impact of marketing and popular taste on art and artists but one who was aware of his publicity-based transformation to The Dean, and second as a man of literary revolution, sophisticated taste, far-sighted criticism, who was undermined by modernist critics for being a conservative and *boring* writer behind the times, we may move on to a discussion of Howells's reaction to the emerging cultural environment of the early twentieth century. If something significantly Howellsian vanished in the cult of The Dean, it was Howells's "sense of himself as a bold inventor and avant-garde thinker."[48] And what survived was an icon, a monument: a writer that belonged to the modern, publicity-driven, profit-oriented literary marketplace and celebrity-loving public, and a victim of literary patricide.

Perhaps the most important factor in Howells's discomfort in the twentieth century is the rapidly evolving marketplace of the twentieth-century which replaced the critic and the magazine editor with the advertiser as the prime arbiter of national literary taste. In "The Functions of the Critic," which appeared in Howell's column "Editor's Easy Chair" in *Harper's Monthly* in May 1911, Howells attempts to define criticism in an age of advertising and exposes its unethical, commercial practices. For Howells, criticism ought to be impartial as it charges or praises, but he warns that contemporary "criticism has sat at the feet of Advertising" in its praise and blame.[49] One reason is the financial good that advertising generates. Another is that, having established itself as a school, advertising creates a "persuasive rhetoric."[50] This rhetoric impresses the public who follows its suggestions obediently. Perhaps more dangerously, it inspires the critics and their adherence to it eliminates the objectivity of literary criticism.[51]

This new rhetoric offers valuable lessons regarding the craft of writing, such as "a habit of shrewd analysis, lightning swiftness of thought, a diamond brilliancy of diction, and an adamantine poignancy of application, together with an unfailing divination of the public's mental possibilities."[52] Inevitably, the ad-writer who possesses these gifts writes "pulsing and sparkling announcements" that render the honest and capable work of the older critics "lifeless."[53] The critic who wants to survive through his art is forced to comply with the standards set by the advertiser. This, for Howells, annihilates the critic's chances to fulfill his obligations such as objective and ethical evaluation of works of art, performing the duty of "book-noticing" solely for literary purposes, and praising or criticizing only when the quality

[47] Paul Abeln, p. 32.
[48] Paul Abeln, p. 47.
[49] William Dean Howells, "The Functions of the Critic", 1902, David J. Nordloh (ed.), *W. D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, Volume III, 1898-1920, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 189.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Rob Davidson, p. 171.
[52] William Dean Howells, "The Functions of the Critic", p. 189.
[53] Ibid., p. 190.

of a work requires it. Seen in this way, the true functions of the critic stand in utter opposition to the demands of the advertiser who wants him to "praise the faults and condemn the virtues" of a particular book depending on the desired level of its public impact.[54] If the critic complies with the advertiser, he shall betray the calling of his vocation: moral responsibility to art and to readers.

The exhaustion of the critic's true function is detrimental to the cultivation of public literary taste. Howells writes, "At present the public gullet seems to engulf anything flung to it from the press; things are tried on a dog, as the actors say of a country audience before which a play has its first performance, and is then revised; but in the case of books the dog's taste seems to be final."[55] The uncontrolled, unethical, impulsive, commercial book reviews tend to fix a book's fate for survival or destruction without any justifiable literary grounds, without any reasoned notion of standards and taste. For Howells, the advertising mind must not be a part of the evaluation of literary production or the directions it will take in the future.

In order to counter the dangers he identifies, Howells suggests the formation of a 'Belles-Lettres Commission' to control not only the impact of advertising on literary taste but also to "forbid the publication of abortive or monstrous poems, novels, essays, histories."[56] In "The Art of the Adsmith" (1902), Howells makes a similar argument. In the essay that reads like a story, two authors discuss the 'merits' of the enormously expanding book-advertising industry which has advanced "almost to the grade of an art, or a humanity."[57] Its growth is so excessive that Howells fears that if the advertising industry keeps on growing at the present rate, there will be "no room in the world for things; it will be filled up with the advertisements of things."[58] One of the authors seems to prefer the book-advertisements that fill magazines and newspapers for their gripping style, and the other, possibly Howells himself, considers it a cunning plot taking advantage of and manipulating people's potential wants, and derides its lack of interest in higher aesthetic and ethical standards. Further, he considers the abundance of advertisements to be nothing less than an attack on democracy. Howells writes, "it is like a crowd of people trying to make themselves heard by shouting each at the top of his voice. A paper full of display advertisements is an image of our whole congested and delirious state of competition."[59] Such pandemonium damages democratic communication and solidarity. For Howells, in American literary culture, the *art* of the adsmith is to spread an attitude of indifference to literary values and to establish the importance of material success. The proof may be authors who turn from "brother-authors" into "rival-authors" in their wish to receive the adsmith's praise which is bound to guarantee sales.

The "advertising expert" has perfected his well-paying trade to the level of a craft: 'hearing' or 'sensing' the lucrative, catching "the American business tone, as

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[54] Ibid., p. 191.
[55] Ibid., p. 192.
[56] Ibid., p. 192.
[57] William Dean Howells, "The Art of the Adsmith", 1902, reprinted in *Literature and Life,* Charleston, Bibliolife, 2008, p. 241.
[58] Ibid., pp. 242, 245.
[59] Ibid., p. 245.

perfectly as any of our novelists have caught the American social tone."[60] Howells feels that just like the advertiser who replaced the critic, the adsmith, with his claim to be the pulse-bearer of American society, is about to replace the fiction writer. Howells writes, "[t]he adsmith may be the supreme artist of the twentieth century. He may assemble in his grasp, and employ at will, all the arts and sciences."[61] This is a very dark view of the direction advertising is taking, especially given the fact that realist or naturalist fiction seems to have found its facile yet grotesque match in advertising that purports to take a revealing and usable snapshot of the 'now.'

The inevitable disintegration of the literary artist's role in an age of adsmithing entails ambiguity regarding the determination of literary value. In an earlier and well-known essay, "The Man of Business as a Man of Letters" (1893), Howells discusses where the value of art lies, and insists that "value, both literary and economic, is a function always of making and never of marketing."[62] Only the uncompromising, idealist writer is able to "produce" art. The fact that this essay precedes the two essays we discussed above is revealing in at least two senses. First, it shows that Howells's initial response to the commodification of the literary marketplace was in the mode of an insistence on the primacy of literary value over popularity. Second, it makes clear his somewhat aggressive reaction to, as well as his reluctant acceptance of, the blurring of such distinctions. That is to say, Howells acknowledges the impossibility of producing pure art in the new century and he determinedly attacks the conditions that lead to it. He continuously attacks national advertising, the book publishing industry, and the mass media that turn literature into "a consumer item" and reading into "an act of consumption."[63] In addition, he disdains writers who give in to commercial values and forget that the ideal of democracy and morality has to inform any literary activity.

Amid all these changes, Howells's literary career and artistic status change, too. In terms of the artist's relation to the literary market, the best case in point might be the epithet The Dean of American Letters which was bestowed upon Howells in the final phase of his career. In order to understand the later Howells's transformation into, as Crowley puts it, "a strange new creature of modern publicity," we might look at his 1899 Lecture Tour.[64]

Before Howells signed a lifetime contract with the House of Harper and Brothers in 1900, he worked as a freelancer for a few years and had serious difficulty in getting his work published. The *Atlantic*, which he had presided over in the past, was among those that refused to accept the materials Howells sent for consideration for publication.[65] In order to alleviate the financial precariousness of his freelancer status, Howells thought of lecturing at clubs or schools. He went on a lecture tour in the Midwest in 1899. In his lectures, he delivered his essay "Novel-Reading and

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[60] Ibid., p. 244.
[61] Ibid., p. 246.
[62] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*, California, University of California Press, 1987, p. 81.
[63] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 17.
[64] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 4.
[65] Ibid., p. 48.

Novel-Writing" where he criticized the use of sentiment to create intensely lifelike situations, talked about the necessity and importance of the intellectual and moral influence of novel-reading on people's lives, admitting his failure yet to write a novel that matched his conception of the ideal novel.

His lectures were financially satisfying but he was extremely disappointed with the attitude of the audience. As Crowley explains, "drawn in by the heavily advertised promise of an author 'in person,' the public was not satisfied merely to read his books, or read about him in the papers, or even watch him speak. They had a claim upon communion with his 'real' presence: the transubstantiation of the author's flesh and blood into a mystical authorial aura."[66] At the parties after the lectures, Howells had to respond to compliments with unwilling appreciation and a forged smile that he confessed almost stuck to his face when he went to bed. Inevitably, Howells felt like a "damned fraud," responding to praises which mostly came from people who had never read his works but admired him anyway.[67] This was not his ideal reading public and he had to pretend he did not detest what he did. During the tour that lasted a couple of months, Howells suffered from insomnia, intemperance, and likened the total experience of the tour to a trip to hell.[68] During the lecture tour, Howells's middle name gradually "drifted into casual use" as the media's definitive epithet for the conscientious writer turned mysterious celebrity: "The Dean."[69]

In a few months, Howells, who the press now called The Dean or The Dean of American Letters in the heat of the publicity of the lecture tour, was back at the magazine he had left nine years ago. In 1900, he signed a lifetime contract with the House of Harper and Brothers who offered him a generous salary. Contracting Howells after his tumultuous freelancer period, they worked to "revamp him into a revered elder statesman."[70] Besides penning the "Editor's Easy Chair" in *Harper's Monthly,* Howells contributed with fiction, memoirs, poetry and travel writing to other Harper magazines such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and the *North American Review*. The strong association of Howells with *Harper's* made him a "trademark" of *Harper's* and secured him a permanent place in American cultural life.[71]

Although Howells preferred to sign his name as W. D. Howells or William D. Howells, in the post-1900 period, his publisher uses his full name, William Dean Howells, for deluxe editions or editorial projects.[72] While *The Leatherwood God* (1916) is the only novel that was published with his full name when he was alive, nearly all the anthologies he edited, or reprints of novels to which he wrote introductions, were published with his full name.[73] His full name, including the grandiose epithet "The Dean" right in its center, was established as a forceful sign in the marketing of books. In addition, a facsimile autograph always appeared on the covers of his books and it

[66] Ibid., p. 53.
[67] Ibid., p. 53.
[68] Ibid., p. 54.
[69] Edwin Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years, 1885-1920, of William Dean Howells*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1958, p. 223.
[70] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 55.
[71] Ibid., p. 50.
[72] Ibid., p. 59.
[73] Ibid., p. 59.

was frequently accompanied with a photograph of Howells: a photograph of the male writer with the moustache sitting in his comfortable study. Augusta Rohrbach claims that his publishers deliberately blocked the public use of any photograph of Howells without the moustache. In an attempt to maintain the "dignified representation of the quintessential American author," it was apparently deemed necessary to hang a moustache on Howells's lip.[74]

A point that needs to be illustrated briefly is how Howells's later aesthetics is marked by an obsession with the failed aspirations of democracy. The possibility of a democratic unity, a socially blended community of different classes which has informed his mature fiction gives way to the pessimistic view of an inevitable social fragmentation. Howells's sequential utopian novels, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907) can be counted among his late works where his criticism of class distinction and social inequality take a sharper turn in contrast to his earlier works. The protagonist in both novels is Aristides Homos. In *A Traveler from Altruria,* Homos is a first-time visitor from the socialist utopian country Altruria. He comes to America full of expectations about the democratic American civilization he had read about, but what he witnesses disappoints and confuses him. He challenges his American hosts to explain, why, as a democratic country, they treat labor as inferior, and asks how they justify the pervasive social inequality. His hosts cannot even make the connection between his questions and the requirements of democracy. They seem unaware of their undemocratic habits. Howells looks like "a disillusioned idealist clinging to his utopia with scarcely the remotest hope of its accomplishment."[75] Howells's loss of faith in American democracy and his bitterness about class discrimination, about the fallacy of "equality" that first appears in *A Traveler from Altruria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle* gains a sharper critical tone in his posthumously published novel, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* (1920).

*The Vacation of the Kelwyns* was originally titled *Children of the Summer* and the title we now have was adopted by the publisher. Howells had begun the novel in the 1870s but laid it aside at his wife's request (she disapproved of the novel's representation of the Shaker community). In 1907, Howells took up the novel again and worked on it from time to time between 1905 and 1920.[76] At the time of his death, the novel was completed but still unpublished after endless revisions and many postponements because Howells "was convinced that he had finally lost his touch" writing fiction.[77] However, according to Richard Chase, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* is "one of Howells's last and quite possibly his best."[78] The novel takes place in the mid-1870s, in a big farm house that belongs to the Shaker community in New Hampshire. Mr. Kelwyn, a professor of sociology, his wife and their two young sons rent the house for the

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[74] Augusta Rohrbach, "You're a Natural-Born Literary Man': Becoming William Dean Howells, Culture Maker and Cultural Marker", *The New England Quarterly*, Vol: 73, No: 4, 2000, p. 626.

[75] William F. Ekstrom, "The Equalitarian Principle in the Fiction of William Dean Howells", Edwin H Cady and Louis J. Budd (eds.), *On Howells, The Best from American Literature*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 30-40.

[76] Paul Abeln, p. 94.

[77] John William Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters*, p. 84.

[78] Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Baltimore, Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957, p. 177.

summer. The rent holds that the household labors such as cooking and cleaning are to be done by the local farmer family, the Kites. The Kites fail to match the standards the Kelwyns expect and the dissatisfaction of the Kelwyns with the Kites' services and manners shape the novel. The Kelwyns' initial efforts to understand and improve the Kites lead to a lifestyle conflict based on class differences. Finally, the Kelwyns decide they have to replace the Kites with another family and this causes a moral dilemma. "Are the Kites really guilty of malfeasance? Or are they to be regarded as merely the victims of their own ignorance and of the narrow horizons of their degenerate, post-Calvinist provincialism?"[79] The problem with the Kelwyns is that, as Chase points out, "they are more overtly and admittedly jealous of their genteel social position than their more modern counterparts would be."[80] The Kelwyns cannot tolerate to have "unenlightened", "backward", "slovenly, and inefficient" people to do the labors they feel would lower their social status if they did them themselves.[81] Through this class conflict, Howells pictures America's failed aspirations of democracy, and imagines an anti-thesis of the American ideal of the pastoral as "the source of ideals and practices which are capable of unifying and healing society, or one's own being."[82]

In this sense, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* is perfect for a discussion of Howells's revision of his position on the moral role of literature and its power for social reform. The depiction of social problems in the later Howells reveal a sense of the fragility, or of the outright failure of democracy in America, whereas the earlier mature novels always showed a more optimistic approach to possible solutions. For example, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) voices Howells's "belief in the soundness of American democracy, so long as class distinctions are not allowed to crystallize."[83] The attempt to eradicate the differences in the manners and lifestyles of social classes turns out to be hazardous as demonstrated in the famous dinner scene of the novel when the 'upstart' businessman Silas Lapham humiliates himself in front the Coreys, a family of old money. Lapham's admiration for and wish to belong to the upper class, when coupled with the contempt he receives from that class's members, proves to be dangerous for the future of democracy in America. In an essay titled "Matthew Arnold and 'Distinction' in America" (1988), Howells defends the necessity of mutual understanding and respect among classes. Yet, in his later fiction, he strives to show how a contrived form of aristocratic "distinction" permeates and poisons the possibility of democracy in America. In "Matthew Arnold and 'Distinction' in America" (1888) Howells responds to Matthew Arnold's observations of American life, especially his remarks on the democratic lack of "distinction" in America. This, for Howells, is a chance for celebration. Howells writes, "[o]ur whole civilization, if we have a civilization of our own, is founded upon the conviction that any such distinction is unjust and deleterious, and our whole political being is a protest against

[79] Ibid., p. 179.
[80] Ibid., p. 178.
[81] Ibid., p. 178.
[82] Ibid., p. 184.
[83] Marburg Kirk Clara, *American Writers Series, William Dean Howells*, New York, American Book Company, 1950, p. 49.

it."[84] In contrast to the "snobbishness . . . [of] evil communications of the Old World, . . . or conditions, which we have said were the best in the world, have evolved a type of greatness in the presence of which the simplest and the humblest is not abashed."[85] Yet *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* contradicts these words of Howells. The type of man Howells feels contempt for in this essay is embodied by the Kelwyns and their endless contempt for the Kites seems to leave no possibility of social harmony in a society of unembarrassed and unstigmatized authenticity, without any class resentment or snobbery.

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells's diagnosis of the persistence of the undemocratic within democracy is augmented with possible solutions such as the bringing together of different social classes.[86] This humanitarian vision is embodied in the marriage of the Lapham daughter with the Corey son. By this marriage, Howells "suggests the interdependence of social classes in democracy."[87]The later Howells takes up the same issue with a completely different approach in his *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* where he laments the impossibility of interdependence of social classes. In other words, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* stands almost as a refutation of the solution Howells offers in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. As Abeln puts it, the novel is "an experiment in democratic cohabitation, in the possibilities or impossibilities of communication between people of different social classes and origins . . . If interclass communication was impossible, then, in fact, his hopes for realistic fiction as a functional democratic art form were futile."[88] Unfortunately, the experiment fails. Considering the novel a eulogy for Howellsian realism, Abeln writes that it manifests Howells's feeling of "powerlessness" in an American milieu that is "hopelessly overwhelmed by its own social inequities and failed ideals" of democracy.[89] Thus, the later Howells seems to realize that the lack of solidarity among citizens of different classes, or the failure of democracy, is as hazardous as aristocratic distinction is. The novel is an indictment of "the absence of communal feeling between socially separated groups."[90] The countryside is just another area of intense class conflict that pervades twentieth century American society.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, what we refer to as the later years of Howells marks a period of immense changes in American society. The later Howells is confronting the degradations of the ideals that had made him a literary and moral authority, and the works of this period criticize America more sharply and severely than his earlier works did with a marked pessimism and disappointment in contrast to his earlier optimism and faith. At the end of his career, Howells was no longer comfortable with art's

[84] William Dean Howells, "Matthew Arnold and 'Distinction' in America", 1888, reprinted in David J. Nordloh (ed.), *W.D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, Volume II, 1886-1897, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 95.
[85] Ibid., pp. 95-96.
[86] Paul Abeln, p. 91.
[87] Marburg Kirk Clara, p. 49.
[88] Paul Abeln, p. 94.
[89] Ibid., p. 93.
[90] Stephanie Palmer, "Realist Magic in the Fiction of William Dean Howells", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol: 57, No: 2, 2002, p. 219.

direct influence on the morality and literary taste of the nation. "Art, he had come to understand, held only a limited capacity for moral instruction. Art was a better vehicle for moral introspection, for investigation and the raising of difficult questions."[91] The transformation of 'W.D. Howells' first to 'William Dean Howells' and then to 'The Dean of American Letters' is as much a chronicle of his career, his faith in the office of literature and democracy as it is a chronicle of America's social and cultural transformation from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In other words, the later phase of Howells's career is the period that he drifts into oblivion as American culture and literary production go through massive changes. Meanwhile, Howells's rise into a symbolic but ineffective literary authority seems to be symptomatic of "the canonization of the literary marketplace" at the turn of the century.[92] As we witness in this account, Howells's influence on American Realism as well his faith in American literature's loyalty to democracy may place him securely in the American literature anthology. But when the absence of a Howells Revival is considered, the key point might be to understand the curious interrelationship of his agonies as well as his so-called triumphs in his final twenty years.

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[91] Rob Davidson, p. 298.

[92] Randall Knoper, backmatter to Crowley, John William, *The Dean of American Letters.*

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