WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

Called by one commentator "pre-eminently the novelist of late nineteenth century American mating and marriage," William Dean Howells is also the first American author to explore in any detail in his fiction the actual "ever after" in which newlyweds presumably live happily once their vows are spoken. From his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1871), which depicts newlyweds (no longer terribly young or passionate ones, at that), until his last, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* (1920), which delineates three marriages and closes with a fourth in the offing, a major portion of Howells’s work examines marriage in America. Further, unlike those who touched on married life before him—Hawthorne, Poe, Cooper, and Irving among them—marriage for Howells is neither nightmarish nor treacly but, as Wendell Stacy Johnson, describing marriage as presented in English Victorian poetry, puts it, "an institution and an experience to be analyzed, questioned, perhaps redefined, and an idea that has deep social . . . implications." In his analysis of these implications, Howells concludes initially with his first two significant treatments of wedded life that matrimony can be of inestimable worth to society in that by providing a man and woman with the comforts of a relationship built on quiet affection and civility it educates them to an awareness of their responsibilities to men and women at large. This initial view is one that Howells still maintains at the end of his long career, but with a significant difference. Having passed through a period in which he was troubled deeply by the suspicion that marriage might be for many a relationship actually retarding the growth of either a profound social conscience or a mature awareness of the existential chaos generally of which social inequity is one manifestation, Howells could never maintain as unquestion-
ing a commitment to the institution as his earlier career indicated he might. Consequently, the later works affirming marriage, even though largely no longer marked by explicit doubts about the institution, reflect some uneasiness in their inability to depict convincingly that marriage can bring about any substantive diminution of evil and in their penchant for casting over the happy marriage a haze of ideality, an aura of the idyllic, as if Howells did not fully believe, finally, that a marriage at once happy and productive of social good was realizable as a sharply delineated fact of common life. Thus his career manifests a gradual darkening of his views of what husbands and wives are capable of in reality both toward each other and toward society, a darkening that leads him to what is little less than a consignment of marriage in his fiction to the realm of sentimentality, divorced from failure but also from life.

For Howells marriage can offer, above all, a means of liberation from the prison of self. This is the burden of perhaps the most explicit characterization of marriage to appear in Howells's work, one offered by a minister in the minor novella *The Day of Their Wedding* (1896), when he declares that "heaven is imaged in every true marriage on earth; for heaven is nothing but the joy of self-giving, and marriage is the supreme self-giving." The "self-giving" he describes has little in common with those grandiose acts of self-sacrifice so typical of the popular sentimental fiction that Howells loathed. Rather, it involves "the adjustment of temperaments, the compromise of opinions, the reconciliation of tastes" that day-to-day living together over the years demands. Hence, the successful marriage is an unending, basically pragmatic process of mutual accommodation between the partners, conveying to each the lesson that the welfare of one is finally indistinguishable from that of the other. This relationship, which Howells usually characterizes as more one of "affectionate comradery" than one of passion (which he regards as having self-gratification as its goal), fashions for the fortunate couple a little sphere of civility and order in a world that otherwise is often chaotic and threatening.
Moreover, as Howells comes increasingly to see, by teaching the pair that they are responsible for each other, marriage can render them far more receptive to the doctrine that they are responsible for others in the community. So crucial is this aspect of marriage to Howells that in his utopian society of Altruria the state tries to ensure that prospective marrieds are well-matched, warning them repeatedly “against the danger of trusting to anything like a romantic impulse,” which ultimately is antisocial in its promptings. Good marriages make it more probable that the Altrurian system, based on a pervasive sense of complicity among the citizenry, will continue to flourish. Conversely, Howells, like his Altrurians, is fully cognizant that bad marriages not only fail to help the community but indeed wreak pernicious effects on it by bringing ever-increasing numbers of those nearby into their disruptive orbits of unhappiness.

Though Howells doubtless feels that escape from mere concern with self can occur without marriage, and for a period is troubled by the suspicion that even good marriages might retard the development of selflessness, it is apparent that he regards marriage both early and late in his career as the most likely means “poor Real Life” has to offer for this personal growth to occur. More often than not, the characters he most admires in his work—such persons as Basil and Isabel March, Silas Lapham, Judge and Mrs. Kenton—are happily married and continue to grow through their marriages. On the other hand, the characters about whom he has the greatest misgivings—the Bartley Hubbards, Angus Beatons, James Langbriths, and Clarence Bittridges—are all either unmarried or caught up in bad marriages. Indeed, in Howells’s work the extent to which a character is presented as worthy of respect is usually in direct proportion to the success his or her marriage enjoys (or is likely to enjoy if he or she is a newlywed or soon to marry). Similarly, rare in Howells’s novels is a good person who is trapped in a bad marriage or a bad person fortunate enough to be in a good one. Thus, although other routes out of the prison of self do exist, so often for Howells’s characters “marriage,” as Isabel March notes sententiously, “is all that there is.”
Not surprisingly, given his sense of the potential of marriage for good or ill, Howells throughout his career regards the institution with a sense of wonder and fascination. Like Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, he might conclude, “Marriage is unlike anything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings.” Certainly, Howells too approaches marriage with the awe that the presumably sacred, totally intimate union of two people ought to inspire, awe that is apparent despite his realization that so much of every marriage is inextricably bound up in the pedestrian. Indeed, the notorious lack of passion in most of Howells’s happier marriages may well result less from his supposed priggishness, or capitulation to the taboos of the market, or even from his belief that the passions are inevitably linked with selfishness, than from a fundamental awe in the face of the intimacy of the marriage union. In any case, so significant a relationship is marriage to Howells that in shaping and refining his vision of it over the years, he is shaping and refining as well, to a great extent, his vision of what men and women are capable of.

*Their Wedding Journey* and *Doctor Breen’s Practice* (1881), Howells’s first significant treatments of marriage, are widely dissimilar in plot and tone, but both works have as their central themes the notion that marriage enables one to deal with disorder and hence makes one happier and more civil. Failure to note Howells’s intentions in them long led critics to misinterpret both works, regarding the first as a pleasant but largely insipid travelogue and the second as a poorly executed and finally evasive problem novel on the question of whether a woman ought to be a doctor. Only recently have commentators noted the inherent grimness of the scenes through which the honeymooning Marches travel and the moral hysteria at the root of Grace Breen’s decision to become a doctor, an emotional instability that ought to disqualify this woman from the medical profession but that clearly is not presented by Howells as typical of women doctors as a group. In each of these novels, marriage is presented by Howells as a key means of mitigating the threat of
the confusion that lurks both in the external world and within oneself.

The disorder that the Marches confront may well seem out of place on a wedding journey, but Howells's point here is that despite sentimental views, coming through a stormy courtship as the Marches have done (anti-romantically enough, before the novel begins) and choosing to live together forever after does not exempt a couple from misfortune. Indeed, one might almost see the Marches' less than idyllic honeymoon as little more than a telescoping of years of marriage and the exigencies attendant upon them. Further, he wants to show that although marriage cannot render people invulnerable, it can make it easier to bear what must be borne. And, from the first, he keeps constantly before his readers reminders of just how much there is to be borne. He begins by even declaring it "not particularly sane" to take a wedding journey or, in fact, any journey, in a world as chancy as ours. Certainly the prospect facing the Marches is, as Howells describes it, not an enticing one: "The drawbridges that gape upon the way, the trains that stand smoking and steaming on the track, the rail that has borne the wear so long that must soon snap under it, the deep-cut where the overhanging mass of rock trembles to its fall, the obstruction that a pitiless malice may have placed in your path."  

The Marches manage to survive their journey, but not before undergoing experiences which show that Howells's litany of the dangers of traveling across America (and obviously of traveling through life generally) does not overrate the possibilities of unpleasantness. New York City, where they spend a miserably hot day, is a disquieting urban wasteland peopled by belligerent multitudes whose daily routine involves carrying out mindless tasks without purpose or respite, even under a merciless summer sun. Their nightboat trip up the Hudson to Albany is marred first by the "cheap spectacle" (p. 45) of their sordid fellow passengers and then by a collision with a smaller vessel in which a man is mortally wounded. Niagara Falls, mecca of honeymooners, strikes them as less beautiful than menacing, "an awful homicide" (p. 88). So menacing is it, in fact, that the suggestible Isabel
succumbs briefly to hysteria, and exasperates Basil by refusing fearfully to leave a little island near the falls because it would involve recrossing some (perfectly safe) bridges over which they have strolled just minutes before. Later, at Montreal the irrationality unleashed in Isabel by the ominous beauty of the falls momentarily traps both of them as they have their first quarrel, one sparked by the inconsequential question of how many horses the carriage they hire for a tour ought to have. Finally, after dangers, irritations, and disappointments, the Marches return, “dustier than most of us would like to be a hundred years hence,” to a Boston that “was equally dusty,” where “the trees . . . before their own door [were] gray with dust” and the Virginia creeper under their window “hung shrivelled upon its trellis” (p. 178).

Little as there is in all this that bespeaks affirmation either in marriage or life, Their Wedding Journey is nevertheless not a pessimistic work. Keeping it from becoming so is the Marches’ marriage itself, which, although not without its own difficulties, as glimpsed at Niagara and Montreal, is a good one because Basil and Isabel are always willing to reconcile their differences with love, common sense, and an ability to laugh at themselves—traits that ensure a civility that will inevitably serve them well in their dealings not only with each other but clearly with all the rest of the world. Consequently, punctuating his account of the grimmer aspects of life the Marches encounter are reminders by Howells that their relationship with each other keeps them from being unduly cast down. In New York City, as they stroll past a small churchyard, they smile at “the absurdity” of the thought that they shall ever join those in the ground whose “wedding-journeys are ended” (p. 20). Later, trudging through the midtown tumult, they regard themselves as “in it” but not “of it” (p. 33). Even on the nightboat, after the accident, Basil stands apart from the other passengers, “amused and shocked” to see that his pity for the injured man is merely “quite an abstraction.” He tries “dutifully” to “imagine another issue to the disaster of the night, and to realize himself suddenly bereft of her who so filled his life,” but to no avail; his effort turns into a “revery” (p. 50) that concludes with a long catalogue of Isabel’s charms.
Although Howells’s portrayal of Basil and Isabel as believing they are somehow invulnerable to the dark forces of life simply because they love each other adumbrates his suspi-
cion in subsequent works that married life too often turns a
pair inward, away from the world and social responsibility,
here his tone is affectionate and untroubled, as he sees
merely a fond delusion of newlyweds and their touching faith
that marriage makes life better, a faith that he himself shares
unabashedly at this point. And thus, with no misgivings, he
simply establishes that when two persons come to accom-
modate themselves to each other’s foibles, petulances, and
even foolishness, and learn to question themselves and make
the necessary compromises, they do, in fact, learn to bear
more easily the grimmer aspects of life. In this vein Howells
declares of the Marches, “I find nothing more admirable in
their behaviour than their willingness to make the very best
of whatever would suffer itself to be made anything at all of”
(p. 59). This applies, of course, not merely to the events of
their journey but to those of their marriage as well. Thus,
their ability to come through their less than idyllic wedding
journey with their good natures intact augurs well for the
years ahead. Fittingly, Howells notes on the Marches’ return
to Boston and home, “Their holiday was over to be sure, but
their bliss had but begun; they had entered upon that long
life of holidays which is happy marriage” (p. 179).

The idea that existence might be regarded as a “long life of
holidays” would be utterly alien to Doctor Grace Breen,
whose “New England girl’s naturally morbid sense of duty”
keeps her “in the irritation of perpetual self-question.” Re-
jected in love, she considers her misfortune somehow a fail-
ure of character on her part and has become a physician
because of an ill-conceived notion that the profession will
serve an expiatory purpose; “I wished to become a physician,”
she confesses, “because I was a woman, and because—be-
cause—I had failed where—other women’s hopes are” (p. 43).
Grace’s self-accusatory nature and her idiosyncratic motiva-
tions reveal that Howells’s primary focus in Doctor Breen’s
Practice is not on the controversial issue of whether women
should enter professions that hitherto have been the pre-
serves solely of men. Rather, it is on Grace Breen herself and
the means by which she might become a less tormented woman. In examining Grace's problem, however, Howells is, in fact, dealing with a large social question, one that actually encompasses the controversy over women doctors, and that is whether women (and, by implication, men) stand much of a chance of leading fulfilling lives if unmarried or if isolated from their husbands.

Setting *Doctor Breen's Practice* at a fashionable resort as he does, Howells is able to present a sufficient number of dissatisfied unattached women in addition to Grace to justify his conclusion that a close marital relationship affords the best possibility of fulfillment for most people. Although none of the other women are under the obvious nervous strain that Grace is, being unattached has nonetheless had unfortunate effects on them. Her friend, Mrs. Maynard, separated from her husband and considering divorce, is hypochondriacal, flirtatious, and chronically dissatisfied. Though ostensibly happy in their marriages, the other wives at the resort are content to vacation, idling away their days in gossip and silly chatter about clothing and hairstyles, while their husbands remain in the city, laboring at their desks in careers about which the wives have little knowledge and less interest. The only unmarried young woman in the novel, apart from Grace, is the unremittingly romantic Miss Gleason, who idolizes Grace as a feminist heroine and is given to such febrile declarations as that it would be better for Mrs. Maynard to die in Grace's care than to be given over to a male physician as the terrified woman desires.

The likelihood that a good marriage can rescue women from either hysteria or frivolity is stressed through Howells's portrayal of the changes brought about in Mrs. Maynard and Grace by their commitments to marriage that end the novel. Mrs. Maynard's husband effects a reconciliation with her, and, almost immediately, she seems more sensible, as revealed in her statement to Grace about the difficulties of dissolving a marriage:

"We had broken into each other's lives, and we couldn't get out again with all the divorces under the sun. That's the worst
of getting married: you break into each other's lives. . . . We
don't either of us expect we can have things perfectly smooth,
but we've agreed to rough it together when we can't. We've
found out that we can't marry and become single, any more
than we could die and come to life again.” (P. 265)

Mrs. Maynard's new level-headedness foreshadows the im­
provement in Grace after she weds Libby. The brief glimpse
Howells provides of their marriage indicates that it is a suc­
cessful one and, as such, one that benefits not only wife and
husband but society at large. Grace, though still a daughter
of the Puritans, no longer lacerates  herself. She has found
repose, is happy with Libby, and is even practicing medicine
contentedly by treating the sick children of her husband's
employees. Although some who think "that she ought to
have done for the sake of women what she could not do for
herself" regard her as "sacrificed in marriage" (p. 271), nei­
ther she nor Howells thinks this way.

It is important to note too that Libby has grown through
the marriage. A rather light sort when single, with his mar­
riage he has taken over his father's factories, which he runs
intelligently and humanely. Thus, Howells's doctrine in Do­
tor Breen's Practice that a good marriage makes for happier,
more useful people is, ultimately, not limited in its application
solely to women. Nor in dealing with this larger question of
the effect of a good marriage on the people in it has Howells
evaded or forgotten the specific aspect of the "Woman Ques­
tion" with which the work at first seems to deal. Grace, as
noted, is still practicing medicine (at her husband's sugges­
tion, significantly) after her marriage, so Howells obviously
finds nothing untoward about women in the professions. His
major point, however, is that, regardless of a career, regard­
less of sex, being well-married is better than being alone.

After Their Wedding Journey and Doctor Breen's Practice,
with their portrayals of marriage as virtually an unmitigated
good for the married and all with whom they come into con­
tact, Howells's significant marriage fiction for the next de­
cade suggests that he is caught up in a deeper analysis than
heretofore of American morality and its ramifications for the
social and economic scene. Beginning with *A Fearful Responsibility* in 1881 and reaching fuller fruition in *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Minister's Charge* (1887), and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Howells shifts his major emphasis in his depiction of marriages almost exclusively to an inquiry into the effects of matrimony (both at its best and worst) on society. During this period he seems increasingly to doubt that even the best of American marriages can do anything to ameliorate the crisis in American morality reflected in an inhumane social and economic structure. Still more pessimistically, he suspects at times that even the ostensibly good marriage—the union of a pair who love and comfort each other—only perpetuates the crisis by turning the pair away from active participation in the cause of social reform.

*A Fearful Responsibility*, the short novel with which this period of social inquiry in Howells's career begins, is less a study of any specific social problems than an examination of what Howells sees as a particularly troubling orientation toward the world, one that, though it manifests itself in a narrow context here, has far larger implications. In his ironical account of the timid Professor Owen Elmore, a man whose deadening influence blights the lives of those around him, Howells presents not only his first predominantly bleak novel but his first indication of profound doubts about marriage and its effects on society. Though Elmore seems constitutionally a weak, self-indulgent man who, single or married, would be incapable of vital commitment to the welfare of others, it is clear in any case that his marriage exacerbates his shortcomings by providing him with a context of comfort and solace into which he can readily retreat to avoid responsibilities to others. More, the particular nature of his marriage is significant here, for it is manifestly an unromantic one, built on an essentially pragmatic accommodation by each mate to the needs of the other—a marriage, in short, that seems, like that of the Marches, to avoid the passions that Howells thinks such dangerous lures to destructive selfishness. When this sort of marriage becomes, as it does here, a producer and perpetuator of sterility for all of those whom
it touches, it is an indicant of the strength of Howells’s doubts about both marriage and the largely prudential, commonsensical assumptions about life on which he bases his views of what matrimony is at its best.

From start to finish, Elmore’s sojourn in Venice, where the central action of *A Fearful Responsibility* takes place, marks him as a man singularly unresponsive to life and the needs of people. The sojourn begins with an escape from commitment, when Elmore, who “almost volunteered” to join the mass of his colleagues and students in the Union Army, decided prudentially that his “bronchitis was a disorder which active service would undoubtedly have aggravated.”17 His stay is characterized throughout by his ineffectuality, as Elmore, who attempts to convince himself that his service to his nation though not active is yet valuable, works desultorily on his *Story of Venice in the Lives of Her Heroes* and in conversation “fought for our cause against the English, whom he found everywhere all but in arms against us” (p. 5). And, ultimately, it is a sojourn destructive of love and vitality, as ironically the only efficacy manifested by Elmore in Venice or elsewhere is a life-denying one. Thrust, even amid the comforting beauty of Venice, into what he regards as a “fearful responsibility”—that of taking charge for some weeks, with his wife, of the beautiful, vibrant Lily Mayhew, younger sister of the woman who brought the Elmores together, Elmore destroys the romantic possibility in the girl’s life and with it her vibrancy. Frightened by the possibility of complication in his own life when the girl and a young Austrian officer to whom she has not been properly introduced fall in love, Elmore chooses to disregard the Austrian’s obvious personal merits (and even the further credential, a disquieting one to Elmore, of having a brother who is a volunteer in the Union Army) and puts the quietus on the blooming love by drily refusing it his approval. Because he desires to live “in that safety from consequences which he chiefly loved” (p. 104), Elmore opts for the comforts of rigid formalism and avoids the real involvement and the necessity of showing some real courage that allowing the unconventional love to have a chance would demand. From this time on, Lily is changed. A
sober young woman for the rest of her stay, a sober young woman she remains on her return to America and through a long spinsterhood, which ends at last with an unexceptionable, if unexceptional, marriage to a clergyman.

With the end of the war, Elmore, back in America, remains as he was, dead and deadening and comfortable. Though his *Story of Venice in the Lives of Her Heroes* is completed only in a version much scaled-down from his original plans and "fell into a ready oblivion," with its sole reviewer noticing it "with three lines of exquisite slight" (p. 155), his career has nonetheless advanced, as his college, now a university and military institute, has named him president—the former president "fell at Fort Donelson" (p. 4). As the years pass, he has occasional misgivings about the part he played with Lily and the Austrian, wondering whether he may have "spoiled two lives" by venturing to "lay sacrilegious hands upon two hearts that a divine force was drawing together, and put them asunder" (p. 159); but he is quick to conclude that since "Lily could console herself" with a marriage, then maybe the Austrian too had "'got along'" (p. 164) and is just as quick to remind himself that he "had really acted the part of a prudent and conscientious man" and "was perfectly justifiable at every step" (p. 162).

Thus is Professor Owen Elmore revealed as a man whose conscientiousness seems unfortunately to reside most in his prudence about his own welfare, a man whose ability to commit himself to his country, his profession, his friends or acquaintances is highly suspect. Significantly, in light of Howells's developing views on matrimony, Elmore's marriage is not a troubled one. Typically, though he is a Casaubon sort who can "endure ennui" that makes his wife "frantic" (p. 11), he and she do not jar—they merely accommodate by accepting, largely with good humor, each other's ways. Part of his wife's habitual accommodation to Elmore's needs is her effort to keep him comfortable, even if this means kissing him "patronizingly ... on the top of the head" or patronizing him when he is troubled about the part he has played in Lily's life by telling him reassuringly that "he has done the best anyone could do with the responsibilities
that ought never to have been laid upon a man of his temperament and habits’ (p. 162). It is also, in part, her comforting persuasiveness that helps convince Elmore that remembering his tendency to bronchitis is the better part of valor during the Civil War. This is a marriage, then, that retards the development of any possibility within Elmore for real commitment to anyone outside the marriage. By fostering a basically prudential and narrowly pragmatic orientation toward human relations, one devoid of idealism and a capacity for romantic commitment, this relationship encourages a selfish, timid isolation from life and from the responsibilities that being a member of the human community thrusts upon one. The lifelessness of this marriage and its effects is pointed up by the childlessness of this pair, often a sign for Howells of a union that in some signal way is a failure. Certainly, idealism and romance are always exceedingly dangerous as Howells sees them, but in *A Fearful Responsibility*, as he embarks on a decade of close scrutiny of social problems, it is clear that he fears that marriages of the sort he most values may by totally eschewing idealism and romance have blighting effects on the capacity of those in them to make the courageous commitments necessary to effect social good in a time of moral difficulty for the nation.

*A Modern Instance*, a larger scrutiny of American social problems than *A Fearful Responsibility*, focuses on a whole society in moral chaos. The old religious life of New England and, apparently, of America itself is nearly extinct, and with it has gone a major means of leading man to a higher love than love of self. In this novel, at once a chief manifestation of this chaos and an exacerbation of it is the unhappy marriage, one that bears little resemblance to any marriage heretofore presented by Howells. The dismal union of Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord reflects the shortcomings of the society from which Bartley and Marcia spring, indeed, is virtually predestined to failure by those shortcomings; but it in turn has its own damaging effects on the social fabric by harming those unfortunate enough to come in close contact with it. Thus, their marriage is indubitably a “modern instance,” a knot of misery that may well involve particular
strands of sorrow all its own, but whose general configuration Howells sees as all too indicative of the way his countrymen live. He planned at one point to call the novel An American Marriage, a revealing title in that it makes the pain of the Hubbards no less representative and reveals once more his growing realization in this period of the pivotal relationship between society and marriage.

Always in judging the Hubbards, therefore, and in trying to assess how accountable they are, together and individually, for the ugliness in which they become entangled, one must bear in mind that at least partially extenuating their culpability is the social background that helps shape them, one with no lasting values. The town of Equity in which Marcia grows up and in which her destructive passion for Bartley is spawned is one that has put behind itself the legacy of religious faith and moral seriousness that is the worthwhile part of its otherwise stultifying Puritan heritage. Instead, it has embraced a fashionably modern, liberal religious outlook that seems compounded of little more than church socials, “popular lectures,” and the cheerfully held dogma “that the salvation of one’s soul must not be made too depressing, or the young people would have nothing to do with it.” No less incapable of offering Bartley and Marcia real guidance is the more complex world of Boston in which they settle after their elopement. The city is heartless and fragmented, a mélange of disparate lives, all going their own feckless ways. Moreover, Bartley’s career with the venal Boston newspapers that pander to the worst elements of the urban scene is as unfortunate a one as he could have fallen into, encouraging as it does his cynicism about human nature and cheapening his goals.

Even the few with whom the Hubbards come in contact who have values are incapable of serving as moral guides. The most vigorous moralists in the novel, Squire Gaylord and Eustace Atherton, apply their codes too rigidly and uncharitably, having long since lost a compassionate Christian basis for their ethical beliefs (though Atherton, unlike the squire, still professes to be a Christian). More poignantly, the Hallecks, who indeed reveal qualities of compassion and
grace that seem to mark them as the last remnants of an earlier, more admirable period, are able to maintain their way of life solely by avoiding extensive participation in the contemporary scene. When Ben Halleck becomes involved with that most typically "modern" of couples, the Hubbards, he is destroyed.

Consequently, given the bleakness of their society, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of morally rudderless characters like Bartley and Marcia meet and mate. But as much an outgrowth of the Zeitgeist as these marriages may be, they too wreak pernicious effects that will make the scene even grimmer. Lest this point be missed, Howells makes it twice in A Modern Instance. One of the most important aspects of this novel that has gone largely unnoticed is that it contains two bad marriages, each of which hurts those who come in contact with it and indirectly damages the larger social body.

Though it is the Hubbard marriage on which the work centers, this union has been in large measure blighted even before it begins by a disastrous earlier marriage, that of Marcia's parents, Squire and Mrs. Gaylord. The inability of this ill-matched pair to maintain a real marriage makes it all but impossible for Marcia ever to establish a relationship of mutual accommodation with Bartley. The headstrong, passionate, yet oddly withdrawn father who rarely leaves his office and the cowed, quietly selfish mother who has "involuntarily come to live largely for herself" (p. 102) are present psychologically and spiritually in every confrontation their daughter has with Bartley, even as they are absent in her younger years, when they find it more convenient to allow Marcia her own way rather than to guide her. As a result of the influences exerted on her by her parents' marriage, Marcia's demeanor as wife becomes a series of pendulum-like swings between slavish submission and passionate outbursts of possessiveness, reflecting her desperate desire for the affection that she never received in adequate measure from her parents and revealing as well her curious inheritance of both her father's overweening will and her mother's humiliating self-effacement.
Marcia is thus rendered incapable of giving the morally weak Bartley (himself an orphan, with no worthwhile example of marriage before him to emulate) the probing, compassionate criticism he needs. With a less unstable wife, Bartley might have turned out better, as Howells notes several times. Early in the novel, when Bartley is with the decent, honorable drifter, Kinney, Howells comments, "A curious feeling possessed him; sickness of himself as of someone else; a longing to be something different; a sense of captivity to habits and thoughts and hopes that centered in himself and served him alone" (p. 116-17). And shortly after Bartley marries Marcia, her father warns her, "You can make him worse by being a fool" (p. 189). Undoubtedly, then, for all his failings, Bartley at the start of his marriage is capable of being both better and worse. With a wife less hampered by the failed marriage of her parents, a wife who could regard him not as a possession to be at once jealously guarded and humbly worshipped, Bartley might grow, might rise beyond a love of mere comfort. Instead, he becomes ever more corrupt, ever more deeply immured in the prison of self-gratification, where he is joined by his wife, who, damaged by the past and betrayed by the weak husband whom she is powerless to aid, is no more able to free herself than he.21

Pursuing their mutually destructive courses of self-gratification, Bartley and Marcia have deleterious impact on those about them, as Howells shows that the effects of a bad marriage are visited not merely on the children conceived in it and their future mates. Others too are immediately caught up in the disaster of the Hubbards and hurt by it. Kinney's idea for an autobiographical narrative is stolen by Bartley. Ben Halleck, whose unrequited, illicit passion for Marcia is fired by her evident unhappiness, ends miserably as a fundamentalist minister afraid to think. Finally, Marcia's own father destroys his health with his virulent attack on Bartley at the divorce trial. Though less obvious than the pain brought to those close to the Hubbards, the indirect effects of the wreckage of their marriage are no less sinister. It is almost impossible to note what all the unfortunate manifestations might be, but some are readily apparent. The Halleck
family and Atherton are deeply troubled by Ben's unhappiness, Mrs. McAllister's dangerous flirtatiousness is encouraged by Bartley, the readers of Bartley's newspaper articles presumably have their baser instincts encouraged by them, thereby lowering further the general social tone. Some such catalogue as this might be drawn up of the cancerous effect of one failed marriage on the people around it, and even this cannot nearly be all-inclusive. What, for instance, of the future effect on Bartley's own child? Do the ripples circling out from a bad marriage ever cease? Howells seems to have his doubt that they do.

Also given to such doubts is Atherton, who alone in *A Modern Instance* sees that it is the crucial role of marriage to help maintain the well-being of society by repressing the "natural man," who is little more than a "wild beast" (p. 472). Marriage does this, Atherton believes, by promoting the "implanted goodness that saves—the seed of righteousness treasured from generation to generation, and carefully watched and tended by disciplined fathers and mothers in the hearts where they have dropped it" (p. 472). Should any marriage fail to do this, all of society is damaged, for "no one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state. . . . Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together . . . ." (p. 474). Hence, divorce, to which the Hubbards resort, is for Atherton a heinous modern innovation that tempts "people to marry with a mental reservation," and weakens "every marriage bond with the guilty hope of escape whenever a fickle mood, or secret lust, or wicked will may dictate" (p. 451). Though Atherton is more than a little pompous and unyielding through much of the novel, the dire consequences for society wrought by an unhappy marriage are all too apparent a confirmation of his dark vision for one to dismiss it lightly.

It is worthy of note that the only mitigation of the dominant bleakness of *A Modern Instance* resides in a successful marriage, that of Atherton himself, to the Boston socialite Clara Kingsbury. The marriage is a good one, for, like all of Howells's happy couples, they are already obviously caught up in a process of mutual accommodation. They talk out their
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ideas freely and affectionately criticize each other’s foibles and crotchets, indicating that together they will learn and grow. Clara, gaining some ballast from Atherton’s conservatism and solemnity, no longer resembles the flighty, slightly fatuous, rich girl do-gooder she seemed to be early in the novel. Atherton, under the influence of Clara’s constitutional warmth and kindness, is no longer the arbitrary moralist he was before the marriage. Nevertheless, the mitigation here is slight at best, for the marriage is seen but briefly, a flicker of brightness in the midst of an overwhelming gloom. Consequently, Atherton’s final words, “Ah, I don’t know! I don’t know!” (p. 514), which close the novel, though perhaps a healthy acknowledgment on his part of the folly of attempting to apply his long-held principles categorically and without charity, are also a sign of his inability even in the midst of what seems to be a good marriage to see any applicable system of values for coping with the wreckage caused by bad marriages and the moral emptiness that spawns them.

Thus, both the ostensibly happy marriage of the Elmores in *A Fearful Responsibility* and the hideously unhappy one of the Hubbards in *A Modern Instance* reflect Howells’s growing worry about the impact of marriage on American life in a time of moral difficulties. Further doubts surface in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, in which Howells explores at greater length the possibility touched on in *A Fearful Responsibility* that even loving husbands and wives may lead each other farther astray from a healthy social consciousness than the general moral decline has already led them.

That the Lapham marriage has long been a good one is obvious. In its early years, Persis, a former schoolteacher with a strong Puritan resolve, was Silas’s moral and commercial mentor. It was she who both encouraged him in starting his business and persuaded him to set it aside to fight for the Union during the Civil War. It was Persis too who instilled in Silas his crucial sense of moral compunction about having forced Rogers out of the partnership with him. Thus, the marriage was indeed, as Howells puts it, “a rise in life for him.” Nor has Silas alone risen. Persis’s comment that she
wishes Irene "was going to marry such a fellow as you were, Si, that had to make every inch of his own way" (p. 181) reveals how fully she admires her husband and derives comfort from his strength. Moreover, their openness with each other, their frequent banter, and their willingness to share the responsibility and grief for Irene's unhappiness and for their imminent financial ruin all indicate a strong marriage. Lest readers overlook its success, Howells begins the novel by quickly contrasting the Lapham marriage with the disastrous Hubbard marriage, in which there is no such close communion between a pair of equals as there is here.

Nevertheless, for all of the happiness of this marriage, there are, increasingly, disquieting elements in it. George N. Bennett notes aptly that the strong mutual affection of the Laphams has contributed to their social ignorance. This seems at first to manifest itself merely in terms of comic gaucherie (witness their house furnishings, described in lavish detail by Howells for full humorous effect), but ultimately its results are far more sinister. For Howells, the probing social observer, manners are often reflective of morals, and Silas's lack of the social amenities is ultimately a function of parochialism, a commitment solely to himself and his family. His crass patronizing of Bromfield Corey when that Brahmin visits his office, his boorish bragging at the Corey dinner, even his frenetic buggy driving are of a piece with his painting of his name all over the landscape, his forcing of Rogers out of the partnership, and his willingness at least to consider a shady deal. All indicate that Silas is so devout a husband and father that he has never gained an adequate awareness of the necessity of concern with others outside the family (save for Zerilla Dewey, whose father once did him and his the service of saving his life).

Further pointing up how effectively strong commitments to one's spouse and to a pleasant marriage may have antisocial tendencies are the other marriages glimpsed in The Rise of Silas Lapham. The comfortable Corey marriage offers Bromfield every incentive to continue his easy course of wry dilettantism and to ignore the promptings of his own incipient social conscience, which is manifested by his remark that
if he were poor he would break into a rich person’s home that is vacant for the summer “and camp out on the grand piano” (p. 194). Similarly unmoved by a social conscience is Milton Rogers, who uses his wife’s illness as an excuse for his dishonest business scheme. Even Zerilla Dewey is contemplating a divorce so that she can marry Mr. Wemmel, who “stands ready” to “provide a comfortable home” (p. 296) for her and her mother.

In this vein, it is particularly noteworthy that, despite the closeness of Silas and Persis, Silas’s climactic moral rise is initiated not by his marriage as it currently exists but by the atavistic promptings within him of the waning Puritan moral heritage that Persis instilled in him in the early days of their marriage. The “economy of pain” doctrine that Silas adopts from the resolution of the Pen-Tom-Irene triangle and applies to the moral question in the business sphere is simply a renaming of the old New England moral imperatives. (This is why the “Wrestling Jacob” allusion used to describe Silas in the throes of moral struggle is so apposite, establishing as it does a traditional religious frame of reference otherwise absent in this novel.) Moreover, Persis herself has long since lost this heritage with the rise in Lapham prosperity and wavers crucially on the question of Rogers’s shady proposal, while revealing mere querulousness and undue suspicion in dealing with Silas’s relationship to Zerilla. Despite her devotion to Silas, then, Persis offers him little help when the moral crisis comes; and this makes for some disquieting implications in what, finally, is an otherwise affirmative novel. One is left to ponder gloomily whether most Americans, who are farther removed than Silas from the old religious doctrines, might have the capacity to rise that he has, particularly if they are devoted to wives similarly out of touch with those doctrines. 24

Certainly no reassurance on this score is offered in Howells’s next novel, The Minister’s Charge, in which the inequities, the ugliness, and the pervasive failure in compassion that characterize the Boston scene lead the Reverend Mr. Sewell to deliver his compelling sermon on “complicity” (adumbrated earlier, as we have seen, by Atherton in A Modern
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*Instance*. In it Sewell admonishes his congregation that “no man sinned or suffered to himself alone” and, further, that it is “the virtuous who fancied themselves indifferent spectators” who are most blameworthy.\(^{25}\) Admiraible as his declaration of this principle may be, it is obvious nonetheless that Sewell, a modern, liberal minister with no ties to the earlier New England zeal, lacks the moral energy to bring himself to act on it. Moreover, it is significant that the major force discouraging Sewell’s efforts to live up to the demands of his own sermon is the influence exerted on him by his doting wife.

Nowhere is the necessity for Sewell to act with a sense of complicity more apparent than in his dealings with his “charge” Lemuel Barker, who has come to Boston from the country on the strength of Sewell’s ill-advised and dishonest praise of his poetry. Unfortunately, Sewell’s commitment to Lemuel is an uneasy and intermittent one at best, and one with which his wife has little sympathy. Convinced (probably wrongly) that her husband taxes himself too much with the concerns of others, she refuses one evening to allow Barker to see him for advice, an action that leads to devastating repercussions. Impulsively, Barker leaves Bromfield Corey’s employ and goes to work as a streetcar conductor by way of irrevocably committing himself to marry Statira Dudley. On his new job, he suffers a severe injury that nearly kills him. Thus, Mrs. Sewell’s intervention, regret it though she subsequently does, reveals just how damaging a failure to acknowledge one’s complicity can be.

In his vacillating on the question of complicity, Sewell contrasts most markedly with Lemuel himself, before whose rigorous latter-day Puritan vision of morality the minister quails, confessing, “He has an eye of terrible and exacting truth. I feel myself on trial before him. He holds me up to a standard of sincerity that is killing me” (p. 143). Given Howells’s continuing concern with the relations between marriage and society, it is not surprising that the contrast between the two is most clearly delineated in their differing views about a promise of marriage. Trying to convince Lemuel that it is an act of misguided self-sacrifice to honor his
engagement to the seriously ill factory girl, Sewell is arguing from an awareness of what makes for a pleasant marriage. To him Lemuel's refusal to break the engagement obviously seems little more than quixotic. However, it is nevertheless the only example in *The Minister's Charge* of someone attempting, at the real cost to himself that the doctrine demands, to put complicity into action. Though the marriage might not be as comfortable a one as Sewell's, it would be one in which Statira's presumably brief life might run its final course without the pain of rejection, and one in which Lemuel might advance even further in character and in his sense of complicity through the test imposed by renunciation. Though in modern New England such a decision would make him as incongruous a figure as his old diehard feminist mother is in her militant bloomer costume, it also would reveal him as a man of moral stature surpassing that of most of his contemporaries. In any case, Howells, perhaps unable to face the bleakness of such an affirmation, has Statira beg off in a totally unconvincing ending that does not do credit to the discomfitting implication of the rest of the work.

Consequently, those commentators who believe that *The Minister's Charge* is flawed because of the apparent absence in its plot of an application of the doctrine of complicity have been looking in the wrong place. Lemuel, who reveals a sense of what complicity involves, is the very character toward whom the minister should be directing more wholeheartedly his own sense of complicity. In fact, as Corey notes ironically, Lemuel "could formulate Sewell's theology a great deal better than Sewell could" (p. 387). Unfortunately, Sewell, somewhat reminiscent of Owen Elmore, is a fundamentally weak man whose lack of conviction and love of ease are encouraged by his wife and who is unable to learn fully his own lesson. As with *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, then, Howells reveals here that in fallen times even as potentially redemptive a relationship as marriage can hinder the growth of an active social consciousness.

With *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells's examination of the impact of marriage on society takes on an added dimension as the novel reflects his strong suspicion that the social and economic chaos of late-nineteenth-century America is
perhaps a manifestation of cosmic disorder or mismanage-
ment. 27 Though Howells continued in the face of this reali-
zation to fight the good fight for social reform, as his
personal activities and his Altrurian novels reveal, 28 A Haz-
ard of New Fortunes and other non-utopian novels to come,
such as The Shadow of a Dream, The World of Chance
(1893), and The Landlord at Lion's Head (1898), display a
deep sense that much of the pain, injustice, and evil in life is
inexplicable and irremediable. Thus, in A Hazard of New For-
tunes, Howells turns to the existential question of how a per-
son should live in a world in which suffering seems
unavoidable and large-scale reform inevitably ineffectual. In
answering this question, nowhere does Howells pull back
from his advocacy of his central doctrines of complicity and
the economy of pain. However, he does emphasize that their
application, if it is to be even marginally successful, must be
limited in scope, that is, limited to those within one's imme-
diate ken. 29 If A Hazard of New Fortunes proves anything, it
proves that one's legitimate sense of responsibility for oth-
ers must be channeled toward those for whom one can have
some real prospect of doing good. One suspects that the large
hope behind this thinking for Howells, one that he would
readily admit is a slim one in an inequitable universe, is that
if enough people are decent to those nearby them, in the long
run a more humane society—like that of Altruria—might
evolve.

With this new awareness of the limited scope in which
complicity must be operative comes for Howells a renewal of
his faith in marriage, which he now presents for the first
time as a union that at its best instills in the partners not
merely a sense of comfort in a troubled world but an aware-
ness of complicity. In learning to care for each other, they can
see more readily that they need to care for others about
them. Certainly this is what occurs for the Marches through
their extended initiation into the facts of life as they move to
the most chaotic, most modern, hence most American of cit-
ties, New York.

Though the house-hunting adventure with which the
Marches' New York residence begins is probably overlong, as
most commentators have noted, it is not as devoid of signifi-
cance as it might at first seem. Rather, the mutual support of husband and wife (apparent even under the badinage) as they look for a stable home in a cold and menacing city establishes the central tension that Howells portrays throughout the novel: complicity and an attempt to establish order in conflict with chaos and selfishness. Moreover, the mutual support manifested by the Marches in this episode prefigures the tenor of their relations as they confront a more important crisis later, Basil’s threat to resign if Lindau is fired from the staff of Every Other Week. At first, Isabel, full of misgivings about their economic future, berates Basil shrilly for his decision; but almost immediately thereafter she defends him, acknowledging, “I had to have my say out.” Her response and Basil’s refusal to indulge in recriminations of Isabel for her outburst display vividly how marriage encourages a sense of complicity, as a willingness to help each other makes them more receptive to the notion that they must help others with whom they come in contact. Presumably, had Basil not learned this lesson through years of marriage to Isabel he would be less likely to fight for Lindau.

The stability and the sense of what complicity involves that are developed in the Marches’ marriage contrast strongly with the chaos and irresponsibility in which many of the other characters are caught up and which they, in fact, tend to perpetuate. Significantly, each of the more troubled (and troublesome) characters is either unmarried or trapped in a bad marriage. The selfish ass Beaton, the incurably romantic and histrionic Miss Vance, the dilettante writer Kendrick, and the absolutist exponents of apocalyptic reform Lindau and Conrad are all unmarried. The Dryfoos marriage has long since gone to pieces, with Dryfoos so dominating his wife that, like Mrs. Gaylord in A Modern Instance, she retreats from ties to others, leaving her daughters, Christina and Mela, to grow up with no guidance that will inculcate goals greater than self-gratification. Conrad, the one member of this unfortunate family who attempts to act with a sense of complicity, sees no evidence at home of how it can be operative in a limited context and mistakenly comes to believe that the doctrine is applicable only on a grandiose scale.
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Through much of the novel, Fulkerson reveals a commitment to self as glaring as that shown by some of the most misguided characters in the book, but his willingness (albeit halfhearted) to heed Miss Woodburn's urging and stand by March during the Lindau crisis convinces her to marry him and leads one to suspect that his long-dormant good traits will continue to awaken and grow under her wifely tutelage. (Somewhat heavy-handedly, Howells notes that the honeymooning Fulkersons take the same "line of travel that the Marches had taken in their wedding journey" [p. 429].) Thus, Howells again suggests that a successful marriage will probably serve to make one more humane, more civil, more responsible in a disordered world. The existential chaos, doubtless, is real for Howells, but he nevertheless does not intend Basil's hope that somehow all that occurs "means good" (p. 423) to be mere sentimentalism. Basil's own marriage is calculated by Howells to indicate that people can attain some order and goodness here, and if this does not ensure that in the long run the universe means good, it is meant to offer one grounds for at least the encouragement offered by a slender hope.

The problem with all this, though, is, I suspect, that the hope here may just be too slender. For all his obvious intentions to turn this exceedingly grim novel somewhat in the direction of affirmation through the March marriage and the implicit prospects of the Fulkerson marriage, the effect just does not come off. As with the Atherton union in A Modern Instance, one perceives at best a terribly slight mitigation of the prevailing darkness, but nothing more. The pointless deaths of Conrad and Lindau, the destruction of the Dryfoos family and, symbolically, of the whole stable rural way of life that produced them, the growth of huge cities that, permeated by injustice, are a place of apparently overpowering instability and lovelessness, and, finally, the universal absurdity of which all of these may ultimately be manifestations cannot in any meaningful way be offset by the marriage of Basil and Isabel March. Further, the effect of their marriage, paradoxically, is to heighten the horror here rather than to lessen it as Howells obviously wishes to. By establish-
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ing with the March marriage what is essentially an ideal standard of behavior that most are unable to meet, Howells inadvertently makes the human failures in this work all the more telling and painful. Clearly, the March marriage is meant to represent countless numbers of similar marriages that exist, presumably, even in the America of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and perhaps, taken together, countless numbers of them might balance or offset the absurdity and horror depicted here; but we do not see these marriages. We see only one in this novel, and it is not enough. And, one suspects, we do not see more because Howells at this stage of his career is too overwhelmed by the darkness to really believe in such marriages or their efficacy save as ideals. Finally, despite his efforts to present the March marriage as an unadulterated good, Howells does reveal some continuing suspicion that the good marriage might restrict one's full development, as Basil, seeking to follow a line of bleakly deterministic thought at the close, a line that might lead to some insights of moral significance, is warned away from his possibly heterodox speculations by a fearful Isabel, forcing him to his response, "I don't know what it all means, Isabel, though I believe it means good." Viewed in this context, his remark seems less the affirmation that Howells probably intended than a sentimental sop that Basil throws his wife—and himself, really—at her urgings. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, then, remains a dark novel, its darkness in no way substantially lessened by Howells's essentially unconvincing reaffirmation of the value of marriage.

After *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells restricts his treatments of major social injustice and of plans for social reform to his utopian novels. Responding, it seems, to his suspicion that the larger-scale suffering, injustice, and evil in the world are inexplicable and irremediable—a suspicion he held despite his continuing personal efforts for various reforms and despite his utopian novels—Howells in the main body of his fiction after 1890 focuses on the timeless failings of men and women and explores ways in which individuals can make an often painful existence more tolerable for them—
selves and those close to them. In keeping with this shift of emphasis, Howells, as with his first marriage works, *Their Wedding Journey* and *Doctor Breen's Practice*, seeks to show simply that marriage at its best can make those in it more comfortable as well as more humane to those with whom they come into contact. However, the problems evidenced in that reaffirmation in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* persist, as Howells is not always quite as convincing from this time on as he intends to be in portraying marriage as a force for good.

Though *The Shadow of a Dream* presents the Marches at a stage of their lives before their move to New York, it was written after *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and shows its influence. The sense of complicity Howells depicts as awakened in the Marches during their experience in New York is in evidence here, as Basil and Isabel find themselves increasingly drawn into the torment caused the Faulkners and Nevil by Faulkner's recurring dream that his wife and his best friend Nevil are only waiting for his death to declare their love for each other and marry. At first the Marches have misgivings about their involvement, but Isabel's remark that perhaps they have held themselves "too much aloof—tried to escape ties" is a reminder of Howells's conclusion in the earlier novel that a good marriage can readily encourage an awareness of complicity. Though the Marches cannot retard the seemingly inevitable process of disaster in which Faulkner, Hermia, and Nevil are all at last caught up, their effort to do so is clearly intended by Howells to speak well for the effect their pleasant union has on their sense of responsibility for others.

Unfortunately, the Faulkners have no such marriage. Kept from it as they are by their excessive romanticism, obscure psychological difficulties, and (perhaps initiating all) what appears to be nothing less than a dark fate in a frightening universe, they serve in their married relations, like the Hubbards, as a telling example of how a bad marriage can increasingly turn a pair not only from each other but from all meaningful contact with the world about them. Though the Marches themselves finally do not know what to make of the Faulkner marriage and its horrible aftermath and even disa-
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gree in their tentative attempts to come to some understand-
ing, with Basil wanting to absolve the unfortunate trio from
all responsibility for what has occurred and Isabel tending to
believe that the Faulkners and Nevil are indeed morally ac-
countable, their effort to struggle to meaning together is a
reminder at the close of the work of the sort of shared rela-
tionship a good marriage can develop, one that, further, may
lead the married pair to a sense of close ties with others.

Consequently, the March marriage here, as in *A Hazard of
New Fortunes*, is calculated to provide a modicum of affir-
mation in a work of otherwise unremitting bleakness. How-
ever, here as in the earlier work and as with the Atherton
marriage still earlier, Howells's effort is not entirely success-
ful.36 Because the horror Howells presents is again so over-
whelming, involving as it does here the awful destruction of
three essentially good persons, the quintessentially common-
place March marriage once more is dwarfed in its impact on
the reader by the darkness with which it comes into contact.
And, ironically, it again works—against, one assumes, How-
ells's intentions—to enhance the grimness by grounding the
horror in which the Faulkners and Nevil are caught up in a
context of everyday reality and making everyone and every
marriage seem all too vulnerable to the terror that can lurk
in life. Further, this marriage once again seems to blunt Bas-
il's efforts to confront painful truths and to grow, perhaps,
by doing so. When he suggests, contemplating the pain
undergone by his unfortunate trio of friends, that "exis-
tence" may be "all a miserable chance, a series of stupid,
blundering accidents" (p. 59) and, later, that "they were all
three destined to undergo what they underwent, and . . .
what happened to them was not retribution, not pen-
alty . . . but simply fate" (p. 114), Isabel will have none of it
and cuts off his speculations effectually. So, as before, How-
ells does reveal some residual suspicions that even the good
marriage might keep one so insulated from hard clashes with
reality as to prevent the development that might make even
a good man a better one. Certainly, the last March tales, the
late minor works, *A Circle in the Water* (1895), *A Pair of Pa-
tient Lovers* (1901), *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy* (1897), and
Their Silver Wedding Journey (1899), reveal no further development in the Marches. In them they are a contented and kind but essentially uninspiring couple, reflective of Howells's regained faith in the power of matrimony to lead a pair to happy and moderately useful lives, and portrayed in a pleasant haze of sentimental affection and gentle amusement as a likable pair who have their silly but lovable foibles and crotchets.

Like A Hazard of New Fortunes, The Shadow of a Dream, and the final March narratives, Howells's last extended treatments of marriage, The Kentons (1902), Miss Bellard's Inspiration (1908), and The Vacation of the Kelwyns, all are geared to present the regained faith in marriage as a potential means of benefiting society by providing people with comfort and stability in an often chaotic world, restraining their dangerous impulses of romantic individualism, and encouraging the growth of a sense of complicity. Also, given Howells's renewed faith in marriage, it is not surprising that each work ends with either a marriage or one impending that should bode well for those in it (though Lillias Bellard's marriage may be more liable to pitfalls than Ellen Kenton's or Parthenope and Emerance's, which close the other two novels).

In each of these three works, characters given to dangerously romantic outlooks or unrestrained, destructive self-assertiveness are contrasted with those in long-established happy marriages, whose learned willingness to support each other lends itself to a sense of social responsibility. In The Kentons Ellen Kenton, who pines morbidly for the worthless suitor Bittridge; her younger brother, Boyne, who is prone to fairy-tale fantasies of performing chivalric deeds; and her younger sister, the frivolous and flirtatious Lottie—all are incapable of the self-restraint and sense of commitment to others that their level-headed parents, Judge and Mrs. Kenton, have attained through years of marriage. How marriage operates to instill these traits is shown vividly when Judge Kenton wants to horsewhip Bittridge for his insufferably insolent behavior: his wife talks him out of it. However, his son, Richard, who fails to talk to his own wife beforehand, administers the public whipping and then must face the
physical and spiritual revulsion this ugly act inspires in him (and face, as well, his wife's quiet disapproval as she comforts him). Hence, as usual, marriage restrains the irrational and works for social decency. In like manner, the Crombies in Miss Bellard's Inspiration attempt to minister to the Mevisons, whose marriage is being destroyed by the unfortunate Mrs. Mevison's crazed behavior; and they counsel Lillias Bellard, whose own future is endangered by her penchant for romantic self-dramatization. Finally, in The Vacation of the Kelwyns, the somewhat silly idealist, Parthenope, and the impulsive Emersonian individualist, Emerance, differ distinctly from the Kelwyns and Kites, who, whatever limitations they may have, are not foolishly romantic. Moreover, the "mundane working relationship" as George N. Bennett calls it, that these two couples establish in their marriages renders each pair better able to be at least civil to the other despite their differences and their lack of understanding of each other's ways. Like all the successfully married couples in Howells's later works, then, they learn (however imperfectly) to consider more than just themselves.

All of these last three major marriage novels are conceived by Howells to be, as he wrote of The Kentons, "flowers picked from the fruitful fields of our common life"; and through them he seeks to teach, as Judge Kenton tells his daughter, that "wherever life is simplest and purest and kindlest, that is the highest civilization." Certainly, the happy marriages that he depicts in them are made of husbands and wives who are basically simple, pure, and kind persons, men and women whose marriages do reflect well on the institution—and yet the works just do not convince. The Kentons, in great part a tribute to the Ohio and Ohioans of Howells's youth, is imbued with an affection for Judge and Mrs. Kenton and the bucolic, Midwestern values that shaped them that is touching but that also consigns them and their marriage and all both represent to a realm of ideality linked inextricably with an earlier, less complex America than that of 1902. Obviously sincere and unstinting in his approval of this pair (and their son and his wife, as well) as Howells is, his own conviction here is never in doubt. But even if such mar-
riages as those of the Kentons do exist, he fails nonetheless to convince that they do, that the sort of marriage depicted here, compounded as it is of unfailing mutual understanding and accommodation and unfading love, is a product of anything but his own fond, idealizing memories. The Crombies, in Miss Bellard's Inspiration, whom George N. Bennett notes "might be described as cousins to Isabel and Basil March," are rendered with some affection and with a quiet, humorous tolerance for their ineffectuality and their penchant for self-isolation. But they are a palely drawn and rather tedious couple withal, and the Mevisons in their collapsing marriage are, unfortunately, despite Howells's obvious intentions otherwise, a far more telling argument against marriage than the Crombies are for it. Finally, The Vacation of the Kelwyns, subtitled An Idyl of the Middle Eighteen-Seventies, does present two moderately successful marriages; but, like the marriages in The Kentons, they are presented in a haze of ideality that renders them less than entirely convincing. Nearly forty years before this novel, Howells presented a union similar to that of the Kelwyns. It was the marriage of the Elmores in A Fearful Responsibility. Here as there, a fumbling, timid, pedantic type is secured from having to confront things as they are by a patronizing wife. In the earlier work, the marriage was treated with a probing irony and helped initiate a decade of close scrutiny of marriage and its role in society. Here, in Howells's final treatment of matrimony, the marriage is, like that of the Kites, only a mildly diverting bit of gentle comedy in an "idyl" of long ago.

In The Vacation of the Kelwyns, his last published novel, Howells presents a Shaker preacher who delivers a vitriolic attack "on marriage and giving in marriage." One who seems most likely to concur with this diatribe is Mrs. Allison, the much put-upon wife of the town drunkard; but she does not. Instead, she tells Parthenope, who is considering marriage with Emerance, "Don't you let them Shakers get around you with their talk. I've had a hard time as any, but it's more of an even thing than they say, marryin' is. I know, and they don't" (p. 168). For Howells too, both at the start of
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his career and the close, marriage is "more of an even thing" than any of its detractors might say. As early as 1869, in a review of Horace Greeley's *Recollections of a Busy Life*, Howells regards marriage as central to "all that really holds human society together for good." And this is a view to which he seeks to return with *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, striving to admire the institution as a source of comfort, order, and, most importantly, of the moral strength that can enable one to rise above humanity's chief besetting evil, the unrestrained commitment to self. His inability to be entirely convincing in portraying this view is obviously in no way attributable to lack of effort, as he returned to it again and again. It *is* attributable, one suspects, to his development in the eighties of a real sensitivity to the horror in human existence, a horror that overweighed, as he rendered it in his works, the affirmation of his happy marriages. As a concomitant of this, his failure to be entirely convincing is also perhaps attributable to his tendency to retreat from the horror to the creation of an essentially sentimental perspective of marriage—a highly romantic, highly personal vision of an enduring relationship built on quiet happiness, gentle humor, willing accommodation, and unfailing love. The vision is poignant but, unfortunately, one that as he presents it fails to compel belief.

2. Howells worked on *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* periodically over many years and may have finished it several years before leaving it as a completed manuscript at his death.
6. William Dean Howells, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 397. This point is also made in Howells's novel *April Hopes*. 

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7. Two of these rare exceptions are Arthur Mevison (in Miss Bellard’s Inspiration) and Mrs. Royal Langbrith (in The Son of Royal Langbrith), both of whom are good (though rather weak) people who have had miserably unhappy marriages because of difficult mates.


11. William Dean Howells, Their Wedding Journey (1872; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 13. For this and the others of Howells’s novels, all page references after the first to each will be to the edition cited and will appear in the text.

12. Gary Hunt argues, with little real evidence, I think, that this scene reflects Isabel’s fear of sexuality and is one of several in the work that reveal the sexual terror of both Marches (“‘A Reality That Can’t Be Quite Definitely Spoken: Sexuality In Their Wedding Journey,’ Studies in the Novel 9 [Spring 1977]: 17-32).

13. Alfred Habegger suggests that in the nine works in which the Marches appear, “Isabel finds more of a refuge than does Basil,” who usually “acts as the senior partner, protector, rescuer” (p. 83). Actually, I suspect, Their Wedding Journey and the subsequent works show that Basil finds marriage to be as much of a refuge as does Isabel and that Basil’s assumption of the senior partner’s role is far less consistent than Habegger asserts it to be. Certainly, Basil seems anything but a “senior partner” when, in A Hazard of New Fortunes, he returns home to tell Isabel of his refusal to submit to Dryfoos’s demand that Lindau’s work be dropped from Every Other Week.


15. Bennett aptly notes that it is a mistake to assume that Howells’s social consciousness developed only after 1885, when he first read Tolstoy (p. 114). For Howells to have been as affected by Tolstoy as he was, there must have been a number of ideas he held to which Tolstoy’s teachings had a kinship, ideas that inevitably shaped the works of the early eighties.


18. For instance, Isabel March notes in The Shadow of a Dream that because the Faulkners have no children they “are not really a family.”

19. Ellen F. Wright, in “Given Bartley, Given Marcia: A Reconsideration of Howells’ A Modern Instance,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 23 (Summer
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1981): 214-31, has a dissenting view here. Regarding the Gaylord marriage as "to some degree salutary" (p. 216), she notes that it, the Halleck marriage, which she sees as "definitely successful" (p. 216), and the Atherton marriage, which, she suggests, is "a direct counterpoint to the Hubbard marriage," all indicate that the quality of American life in A Modern Instance is not in any significant way to blame for the failure of Bartley and Marcia's marriage. "The blame for the Hubbards' divorce," Wright observes, "lies squarely with the Hubbards" (p. 226).


21. Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau observes that "rather than regulating [Bartley and Marcia's] unbridled appetites, marriage only encourages darker, crueler, more pathologic expressions of them" (The Circle of Eros: Sexuality in the Work of William Dean Howells [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1983], p. 58). Hilfer notes perceptively that all that holds this hideous marriage together is the "powerful force of habit" (p. 64).


24. Howells's personal difficulties at the time of the composition of The Rise of Silas Lapham, when, as he put it, the "bottom dropped out," give one further reason to believe that the novel is a grimmer one than it usually has been taken to be. For the fullest discussion of these difficulties, see Cady, The Road to Realism, and Kenneth S. Lynn, William Dean Howells: An American Life (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).


26. Among those who see the novel as flawed because it fails to dramatize complicity effectively are Firkins, p. 121, and Bennett, pp. 164-71.

27. For the fullest discussion of A Hazard of New Fortunes as a work depicting existential chaos, see George C. Carrington, Jr., The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), pp. 82-100.


29. This is the point made implicitly through Annie Kilburn's marriage to Morrell and their adoption of Idella Peck in another of Howells's novels of social criticism, Annie Kilburn.

30. Among the few commentators who see this episode as significant is Carrington, who regards the house-hunting adventure—rightly, I think—as the Marches' initiation into a sense of existential chaos.


32. Typifying this suspicion are some remarks in a letter Howells wrote to Howard Pyle in 1891, responding to Pyle's laudatory comments on The Shadow of a Dream. Howells answers, "Happy for all if [like Nevil] they could die out of their difficulties! But even this is not permitted to many, to most. Perhaps we can only suffer into the truth, and live along, in doubt whether it was worth the suffering. It may be an illusion, as so many things are (maybe all things) . . . ." The letter appears in Mildred Howells's compilation, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, Volume Two (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), p. 11.

34. See, for example, George Spangler, “The Shadow of a Dream: Howells’ Homosexual Tragedy,” American Quarterly 23 (Fall 1971): 110–19, and Prioleau’s discussion of this novella.


36. The Quality of Mercy (1892), which closes with the marriage of Northwick’s daughter, and The World of Chance (1893), which contains the successful marriage of the Brandreths, are also bleak novels whose bleakness Howells attempts to mitigate somewhat with these happy unions. Both are only briefly glimpsed marriages, though, and the horrible marriage of the Dentons in the latter work—though also seen only briefly—is conveyed with greater force than the Brandreth union.


40. See George C. Carrington, Jr., on this in his Introduction to the edition of The Kentons cited above.

41. The Realism of William Dean Howells 1889–1920, p. 213.


43. William Dean Howells, Atlantic Monthly 23 (February 1869): 261. Particularly difficult to credit in the face of this and of all we have seen are the remarks in passing by Earnest that “Howells regarded marriage as more of an ordeal than a joy” and that “marriage to a man with Howells’s views on women and sex could be a major disaster” (p. 245).