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Individual idealism meets the social environment: the Civil War, realism and William Dean Howells

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INDIVIDUAL IDEALISM MEETS THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: THE CIVIL
WAR, REALISM, AND WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

Thesis

Submitted To

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The Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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ABSTRACT

INDIVIDUAL IDEALISM MEETS THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: THE CIVIL WAR, REALISM, AND WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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This thesis examines how the Civil War played a formative role in the development of American Realism, with respect to its emphasis on depicting the individual in the context of his or her social environment. Specifically it argues that the magnitude of the Civil War served to temper antebellum literary notions of ideal individualism and bring about a new focus on the individual's social circumstances. The thesis concludes by arguing that the emphasis on the social environment precipitated by the Civil War and fostered by American Realism contributed to the cult of the strenuous life at the beginning of the twentieth century. This trajectory is traced through the fiction and criticism of America's premier realist, William Dean Howells, whose literary career began shortly after the Civil War and lasted into twentieth century.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The acclaimed Civil War writer and historian Shelby Foote has argued that to understand America one must understand the American Civil War: “no one can pretend to understand the basic nature of this country unless he has some fairly profound notion of what the Civil War was about....It had far more to do with *the character of this nation* than, say, the Revolution” (emphasis mine, “Interview” 227). The end of the War marked the beginning of a new age in America. In 1865, the South lay in ruins, its industry and human resources decimated while the North, booming with vigorous industrialism, would soon test the power of its newfound economic strength. Just as economic power was now concentrated in Northern cities—industrial capitalism tolling the death knell of Jefferson’s agrarian ideal—the destruction of institutional slavery weakened the legitimacy of state’s rights and concentrated political power in Washington. Yet amidst these economic and political shifts, the War also proved to be a definitive force in the continuing evolution of America’s conceptions of individuality, moving away from an idealized vision of individualism toward a conception of individuality more informed by the social realities of the period.

From the onset of the War, Americans relied on printed versions of events to fashion their understanding of the conflict. For those not at the front, it was through print they learned of the War's horrors, and the unprecedented access that print media provided allowed the War's effects to influence such fundamental beliefs as the role of the individual in society. When the Civil War took place, Americans were some of the most literate people in the world. Estimates on literacy vary, but according to the US Census, the illiteracy rate for white males and females in 1850 was 10.7% (Folger and Nam 113). Additionally, new means of mass production coupled with an efficient distribution system rapidly dispersed reading material to the population. George Templeton Strong's diary illustrates the role played by the print media of the day. Take for example this excerpt, written on April 12, 1861:

War has begun, unless my extra Herald lies, and its Charleston dispatch is bogus. Busy downtown ... The streets were vocal with newsboys—"Extry [sic]—a Herald! Got the bombardment of *Fort Sumter!!!*" ... I sacrificed sixpence and read the news to Ogden and that galvanized pumpkin Mr. Dunscomb by the light of a corner gas lamp. (2: 118-19)

For those living through the War, print publications provided a level of access to current events unprecedented in human history. As this excerpt demonstrates, news was dispersed rapidly through a variety of channels.

Along with the great reach of the published newspaper, the literature of the day also depicted and explained the conflict. Periodicals of the time were filled with stories of the War, and scores of authors would take it for their subject. Just as Strong and his contemporaries looked to the printed newspaper to understand and explain the conflict, so stories written in the wake of the War codified its meaning and import to the nation. The following explores how William Dean Howells's writing reconceived the ideal of individualism in light of the disruptions in American social, economic, and political life in the aftermath of the Civil War. Through realism, Howells emphasized the importance of social forces in the formation of individual character, depicting them as consequential players in the drama of American life. This is not to say Howells depicted individuals at the whim of social upheaval, tradition, and institutions, but Howells made explicit the effect of social forces on individual lives, suggesting that the manner in which individuals faced such forces often determined their moral standing.

CHAPTER II

The Search for Significance: Criticism of Civil War Fiction

In the decades following the conflict, critics were quick to criticize fiction's inability to locate and codify the experience of the Civil War with any kind of authority. The complaint that fiction was unable to aptly depict the War was adopted almost immediately after the conflict ended. As early as 1867, William Dean Howells suggested the War presented a challenge to the national literature under which it "struggled very lamely" (Atlantic Monthly 121). Initially hopeful that literature would soon account for the War and its ramifications, Howells would write twenty years later that "The war has never fully panned out in fiction" (A Hazard of New Fortunes 303). Perhaps less hopeful about the prospect than Howells, Walt Whitman insisted, "the real war will never get into books" (107). Some might suggest that these early critics' conclusions result from their experience and philosophy— Howells's creed of realism resulting in an automatic rejection of much of the fiction dealing with the War and Whitman's struggle to aptly express the suffering witnessed as a volunteer in the Union hospitals. Yet as true as those assertions may be, Howells's and Whitman's criticism proved enduring.

Not surprisingly, the protracted, bloody nature of the conflict resisted a definitive work of fiction amenable to both sections of the country. While the War may have ended in 1865, the struggle over the War's meaning would endure for generations. The near-universal view of the War's centrality in American history disallows uniform interpretation. This discord was nowhere more true than in the years following the War. For example, Albion Tourgee, a union soldier and carpetbagger, protested the way Civil War literature romanced southern gallantry and chivalry, believing that such fiction presented an unjust depiction of the conflict by glossing over events with what Henry James described as "the syrup of romanticism" (qtd. in Aaron 245). Indeed critics' views of Civil War fiction were and are influenced by their political bent and understanding of the War's place in American history. Nevertheless, critics have unceasingly sought to locate fiction that provides readers access to the War. In this century-and-a-half long search, two strains of criticism have emerged, both seeking fiction providing access to the War but diverging in their method for reaching that end.

The first strain of criticism holds to a certain standard of literature and is quick to dismiss popular and sentimental Civil War fiction. Such criticism desires a single epic, but failing that, believes a small collection of authors adhering to appropriate literary standards provides the most suitable means of literary access to the conflict. The opening line of Edmund Wilson's Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (1962) encapsulates this position: "The period of the Civil War was not one in which the Belles Lettres flourished" (ix).

Considering the prodigious outpouring of “popular” fiction during the time period, Wilson’s opening assertion illustrates his adherence to a certain standard of what constitutes appropriate literature. While acknowledging the extensive literacy of the War generation, Wilson’s criticism focuses only on “legitimate” fiction and is exclusive in his consideration of thirty white authors who left “personal records of some angle or aspect of” the War (x). Wilson’s exclusion of minority voices, especially black Americans, is striking given his aim to remove the War from “the plane of morality and to give an objective account of the expansion of the United States” (xxxi). Any such account would by necessity require a greater spectrum of perspective.

Similarly, Daniel Aaron’s The Unwritten War (1972) proves unwilling to break with the Wilson’s literary parameters, despite admitting the need for a broader representation of authors and concerns when it comes to the critical study of Civil War fiction. Convinced of the War’s effect on the American character and aware of the voluminous nature of writing inspired by the War, Aaron nevertheless limits his study to authors established by critical tradition. While adhering to the same strain of criticism as Wilson, Aaron notes several weaknesses in Wilson’s work. Taking issue with Wilson’s narrow interpretation of the Civil War, Aaron writes, “Wilson’s overview...leaves too many questions unanswered, blurs or omits too much, and his zoological reduction of history is too sweeping and too simplistic” (331-32). Unsatisfied with Wilson’s approach to the conflict, which reduces all motivations regarding the conflict to issues of

power, Aaron argues that it fails to delineate the subtleties of the “rich and complex narrative” of the War (332). Aaron contends that Wilson “reduce[s] the War to an organized form of animal bellicosity comparable to battles waged by army ants” with any evidence of individual altruistic motivation dismissed as mere “rabble-rousing” (Aaron 331). While Wilson’s focus on authors who “lived through the conflict” suggests a belief that individual’s experiential narratives provide more meaningful access to the conflict, Aaron criticizes Wilson for the way in which he diminishes narratives that present characters motivated by something other than power or expansionism.

Both Wilson and Aaron search unsuccessfully for classic works of Civil War fiction, because to achieve iconoclastic status such fiction would necessarily have to give voice to the multi-layered narrative constituting the War’s experience—providing some form of representation to the many individual concerns of the War period. Failure to meet this demand would limit a work’s appeal, and its less-than-universal appeal would consign it a lesser appellation. Ironically, the effects of the War itself disallowed the possibility of such a classic. In the wake of the War, the rise of realism and its emphasis on individual circumstances prohibited the development of a classic capable of widespread appeal. With growing awareness of the social environment’s formative effects, individuals more easily interpreted their lives by virtue of their particular subjectivity rather than a more abstract unifying ideal. Not surprisingly then, in the attempt to find this elusive epic, critics bring together a wide variety of Civil

War stories, a move both revealing the premise that an epic requires inclusive representation and suggesting the elusiveness of that end. While contemporary critics have altered the terms and expanded their criteria, fundamentally, they continue this tradition.

While Wilson and Aaron's view of literary exclusivity was the norm during the majority of the 20th century, other critics did question the utility of this approach. A second strain of criticism advocated the inclusion of popular works of fiction as well as more critically acclaimed ones. In her 1932 dissertation on Civil War literature, Rebecca Smith comments on this entrenched position writing that the "body of fiction," which takes as its subject the Civil War, "has fared badly with the critics and literary chroniclers, who have most often dismissed it as trivial or ignored it entirely" (1). Robert Lively, who, though writing before Wilson, characterizes him when he states that "Literary historians [of the Civil War] seem, on the whole, to be snobs—or at any rate to be tediously repetitive in their dependence on a very few samples from our literature" (192). This tedious dependence, exemplified by Aaron and Wilson, would be slowly eroded by the close of the century.

Anticipating current criticism of Civil War literature in his book Fiction Fights the Civil War (1957), Robert Lively despairs his contemporaries' ignorance of popular Civil War literature and argues that there is much to be gained through an examination of the popular literature of the Civil War (5, 191-2). While Lively's emphasis is different from current critics informed by identity politics, he

foreshadows current critical trends that no longer find it necessary to seek out the transcendent elements of enduring works of literature, focusing instead on broadening literature's democratic appeal by emphasizing cultural studies and social history. Today, representation has become synonymous with inclusion.

Accordingly, criticism of Civil War literature has expanded to include the popular and periodical literature of the time. For example, Kathleen Diffley's To Live and Die compiles a selection of popular and periodical fiction written about the events of 1861-65 into what she describes as an "inadvertent novel" of the Civil War (2). Citing Aaron's lament for the lack of a transcendent work of Civil War fiction, Diffley writes that the problem with Aaron's approach was that he ignored "the one right place for unearthing the alarms, misgivings, and settling purposes of wartime life...midcentury magazines" (2). While Aaron argued that the War's contemporaries left it "unfaced," Diffley counters that popular periodicals faced the war and even made "sense of their readers' anxieties" (2). Diffley claims that her collection of stories embodies the various disparate individual experiences of the War:

They trace a "real" war that ultimately joins Northern and Southern allegiances with a Western slant, that integrates battlefield and home front, that reckons fitfully but insistently with race, that points to the ascendancy of paramount national citizenship, and that marks a new colloquial vitality in prose. (5)

Diffley's assertion that her work accounts for the concerns of individuals in various geographical locations, black Americans, and concerns of nationalism, while also demonstrating the changing face of American writing challenges the more exclusive literary tradition of the War established by Wilson and Aaron, doing away with the tedious dependence bemoaned by Lively. The current vogue of identity politics necessitates Diffley's inclusive approach. This inclusive representation, the notion that only individuals who are part of various subject positions can speak about those positions with any authority, moves away from Aaron and Wilson's search for epic representation.

Like Diffley, Alice Fahs's The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South 1861-1865 explores the "popular" literature of the time period, fostering what she describes as a greater sense of literary "inclusivity" (2). Fahs's purpose for this new emphasis is to add "an important chapter to cultural histories of the war that [in the past] have focused primarily on elites" (Fahs 2). Again, Fahs, Diffley, and other contemporary critics expand the parameters of legitimate criticism by advocating the exploration of fiction that the so-called "elite" of yester-year largely ignored such as children's fiction, black American fiction, and fiction focusing on the home front. Fundamentally, however, these two strains of criticism, both the now-antiquated generation's desire for an epic and the current generation's desire for inclusivity, search (albeit with conflicting standards) for works able to account for the vast array of individual motivations and outcomes that led to and were the result of the conflict.

Current criticism of Civil War literature seeks to include the countless disparate individual narratives of the War, guided by the premise that greater inclusivity leads to greater understanding of the real War. This thrust is premised on the understanding that individuals are defined by their circumstances and social environment. Consider the quote above from Diffley; the individual narratives woven together in her "inadvertent novel" are descriptions of circumstances outside of individual control: geography, race, home front, and battlefield. In varying degrees, all this criticism rests upon the premise that circumstances or social forces define an individual's narrative, not the individual will. Ironically, the importance placed on circumstance and social forces as determining factors in individual lives can be traced back to the American experience of the Civil War. Examining fiction written in the wake of the conflict can reveal the expanded role circumstances and social forces played in defining individuality. In the limited scale of this exploration, William Dean Howells's fiction and philosophy present an obvious site to examine the evolving interplay between social forces and the individual. As the father of American realism and the first American writer to make a living by writing alone, William Dean Howells developed literary philosophy and promulgated it. Through contrasting the worldview underpinning antebellum literature with Howells and the rise of literary realism in the wake of the War, it is possible to suggest how the conflict shaped conceptions of individuality.

Viewing fiction as a rough gauge of public sentiment, study of the War's literary impact can be suggestive of the dominant trends within the national consciousness. Two strands of thought from the aforementioned criticism underpin this approach. First, it assumes with Aaron that "the paucity of 'epics' and 'masterpieces' is no index of the impact of the War on American writers" (xix). And, while the war was perhaps "unfaced" it was not "unfelt" in American fiction (328). The War's impact on literature, and by extension American culture, can be traced through a selective examination of differences appearing between post and antebellum fiction, viewing these differences as sites of disruption caused by the trauma of the War. This reading of Aaron maintains Fahs's assertion that the literature written during and after the War was shaped by the experience of it and characterizes the cultural impact and meaning of the War. By focusing on a single area of study, I hope to explore how this event shaped conceptions of individuality within American culture. The consideration of Howells's fiction does not so much analyze what he said about the War as observe how the experience of that social upheaval shaped his characters' and the reading public's conceptions of individuality. The upheaval of the War affected American literature, and observation of the War's effects helps determine the cultural impact. In order to realize the War's effect on conceptions of individuality, it is first necessary to understand antebellum America's emphasis on individuality.

CHAPTER III

The Search for Glory: Individualism in Antebellum America

For antebellum Americans, the idea of individualism was dynamic, moving to destroy "traditions and conventions, by isolating man and throwing him upon himself," actions that would "liberate him" (Walters 195-96). Freedom, in this sense, refers to freedom from the coercion of others. Freedom existed to the extent that the individual could rise above the dictates of impersonal society. The primacy of individuality was recognized in light of "the progressive movement of history, whose goal was the liberation of individuality" (Walters 196). Popular belief during the antebellum period held that a new age of individual autonomy and control, able to trump social forces, had come about. The men who volunteered to fight in the War evidence the self-assurance of the period. As Stephen Berry observes, "The conflict's staggering casualty rates—suffered in repeated charges on well-defended positions—speak not to the soldiers' collective discipline but to their individual self-motivation. Ultimately, these men fought because, if in nothing else, they believed in themselves" (10). Berry suggests that these men were convinced that their individual actions would return tangible results. This assertion can be further illustrated by the words of

encouragement Joshua Chamberlain offered his men before charging (and subsequently being repulsed from) a well-defended confederate position:

I feel that you will all go in manfully and make such a record as will make our loyal American people grateful. I cannot but feel that our action in this crisis is momentous, and who can know but in the providence of our action today may be the one thing needful to break and destroy this unholy rebellion. (qtd. in Trulock 207)

The effectiveness of Chamberlain's oratory depends on the assumption that his men believe in their ability to effect change and bring about results. What may be interpreted today as merely the rhetoric of war, spoke to the common soldiers' belief in their own efficacy. At the battle of Fredericksburg, the same sentiment motivated Union troops to repeatedly charge the stone wall at the base of Marie's Heights, an action incurring terrible casualties without returning any results. These convictions were challenged, however, by the War's unprecedented scale and destruction.

The Civil War was a total war in its pervasive effects. As Hawthorne wrote, "There is no remoteness in life...into which the disturbing influences of the war do not penetrate" (Atlantic Monthly 43). More Americans lost their lives in the Civil War than any other American conflict. The economic ripples affected everyone. The War coincided with the advent of photography and a burgeoning print industry that provided civilians unprecedented access to the horrors of the front. The insignificance of the individual in the face of mass warfare and mass

casualties challenged antebellum America's conceptions of individuality. As Stephen Crane's protagonist in The Red Badge of Courage notes at the moment he realizes his insignificance, "It was war, no doubt, but it appeared strange" (99). This "strangeness" arises from the disconnection between the War's reality and the protagonist's earlier Homeric conception of war as an event where great individuals routinely dare greatly in their search for and achievement of individual glory.

The experience of Crane's protagonist reflects the experience of the nation. More than just the movement from innocence to experience, the War led to a more nuanced perception of the relationship between individuals and life's circumstances and how those circumstances in turn affect individuals, a change mirrored in the literary shifts of the time. The War coincided with the death of both Hawthorne and Thoreau, the former America's romanticist, the latter a celebrated proponent of individualism, who believed that neither the state nor the majority should hold sway over the individual. This literary dénouement, coupled with the new realities engendered by the War saw literature become a battleground for competing ideas of individualism. In the end, the ascendancy of realism, the denunciation of sentimental fiction, and the waning of romance provided a re-conceiving of the American individual—more aware and affected by social realities. In 1865, the time was ripe for a new emphasis in literature, and Howells would find himself at the forefront of it

CHAPTER IV

The Rise of Realism: Individualism and the Social Environment

As a literary term, realism was first mentioned in the Atlantic Monthly in 1862 (McMahon 12), and in its American form, was largely defined by William Dean Howells. In 1866, the year Howells went to work for the Atlantic Monthly, criticism celebrating authors' attempts to depict real life and natural scenes was receiving frequent attention (McMahon 13). While the years 1866-72 were formative ones for Howells's development of literary realism (Carter 96), the core of American realism can be seen in his first review at the Atlantic Monthly, in which he praises an author's "strict fidelity to place and character," writing that "nothing can be better than the faithful spirit in which Mr. Taylor seems to have adhered to all the facts of the life he portrays" (Atlantic Monthly 777). Adherence to the "facts of life" would form the central tenant of literary realism. Near the end of the 1880s, Howells would insist that the "greatest" authors were those "who have the courage and ability to paint humanity and its affairs just as they are" (Interviews 289). This standard argues for the truthful depiction of individuals' relationships with society at large and demands an accounting of their

interactions with their social environment, a requirement revealing social realities as interactive and consequential players in the unfolding narrative.

The realist position rejected the sentimental idealism of antebellum fiction, fiction that failed to acknowledge the real and, as Emerson said, chose to view the "ideal" as "truer than the actual" (qtd. in Shi 21). Popular antebellum fiction used a character's circumstances or expedient social forces to reveal the ideals he or she exemplified. In other words, the authors of antebellum America "refused to limit their attention to the present material world and its social imperatives" (Shi 24). Social reality provided a story's backdrop only insofar as it operated as a foil revealing the protagonist's ideal nature. Amy Kaplan describes the hero of American romance as an individual who "embarks on a melodramatic quest though a symbolic universe, unformed by networks of social relations and *unfettered by the pressure of social restraints*" (emphasis mine 44). It was not the individual's interaction with reality that drew the artist's attention, but rather the illumination of a character's ideal nature. The "larger-than-life antagonist," often possessing "unusual mental or physical abilities" took center stage in idealized sentimental fiction (Scheick 36). This antebellum emphasis reflects the wide-held belief of the period that the individual shaped social circumstances and could purposefully direct those circumstances to his or her own ends (Walters 3, 16). Not only was it widely held that individual actions were capable of producing change and improving the body politic, there was also a strain of distrust concerning any social institution that threatened to subvert the will of the

individual: "the old American fear of power and the Jeffersonian bias against strong political authority predisposed many [antebellum] conservative Americans toward an extreme individualism that verged on anarchism" (Walters 115-6). Rejection of government authority and any social force impinging on individual autonomy was common during the antebellum period. The election of Andrew Jackson, the so-called "age of the common man," and the period's various religious and social upheavals all testify to the emphasis placed on individualism during this period.

However, the antebellum narrative template of ideal individualism relegating social reality to a secondary role proved incapable of addressing the social concerns left in the wake of the most destructive conflict in American history. At a time when social forces were taking center stage, fiction relegating social forces to a secondary role was ripe for criticism. Such fiction proved unable to address the concerns of a nation staggered by the War's destruction, a burgeoning industrialism and urbanization, the growing failure of reconstruction, and the ramifications of the emancipation proclamation. The complex social circumstances that generated the conflict and which the conflict generated in turn necessitated a narrative form attempting to deal with the reality of those circumstances. The realists concerned "themselves with ordinary human lives seen in the context of normal social relationships," concentrating, "on what people are rather than what they ought to be, on men rather than Man" (Kolb 40). The realists avoided platonic idealism, ignoring it as something unknowable in

the reality of human experience. And, it was the reality of experience that informed the realists' conceptions of what should and what should not be the subject of fiction, a position offering a clear contrast to idealized sentimental fiction.

Not surprisingly then, attacks on sentimentalism's inability to address the historical moment constituted realism's "initial force" (Carter 45). Realism's rise was marked by a vitriolic and sustained attack on sentimental fiction's untruthfulness. Realism proposed an experiential truth focusing on the reality of everyday individual experiences, while idealistic sentimentalism portrayed characters representing ideal virtues. Realist critics derided sentimental fiction's inability to inform a truthful accounting of society or suggest a viable course of action for the individual navigating that society. For Howells and other realists, sentimental fiction's failure to truthfully consider the role social forces played on individuals was a moral one:

The novels that tickle our prejudices...lull our judgment, or that coddle our sensibilities, or pamper our gross appetite for the marvelous...they are innutritious, and clog the soul with unwholesome vapors of all kinds. No doubt they too help to weaken the mental fibre [sic], and make their readers indifferent to 'plodding perseverance and plain industry,' and to 'matter-of-fact poverty and common place distress'. ("Realism" 99)

For the realist, the idealized sentiment of such fiction did nothing to gird the reader against the harsher realities of life. For Howells and other realists, fiction should strengthen readers' mental fiber and improve their understanding of the social forces surrounding them. Such knowledge, Howells argued, "it behooves us to know and to understand, that we may deal justly with ourselves and one another" ("Realism" 99). Howells argued that it no longer made sense to view the world through the lens of sentimental idealism as it did not help people make sense of the world they found themselves in; if anything, it hindered. For the realists, viewing sentimental idealism as a guide was a puerile exercise for a nation grown old in the bloody experience of war and its aftermath.

Developing Realism: William Dean Howells and the Civil War

In his memoir Years of My Youth, Howells would reflect back on 1861, the outbreak of war, and the riot of associated emotion by positioning himself as a spectator—the clear-eyed realist:

The time had a sublimity which no other time can know, unless some proportional event shall again cause the nation to stand up as one man, and the spectacle had a mystery and an awe which I cannot hope to impart....I recognized [the boys] for what they were, but in their straggling ranks, with their young faces flushed the red of their blouses and their young eyes flaming, I beheld them transfigured. (201)

From the vantage point of retrospection, Howells claims to have seen and felt the moment through observation not direct experience, presenting himself apart from “the boys” altered by the emotions of the moment. Indeed, he would further explain that at one time he thought he would like to craft the “spectacle” into a novel capturing that “supreme moment when the volunteering began” (Years of My Youth 200). While Howells is careful to portray himself as the observer of a “spectacle” recognizing the boys’ transformation into eager volunteers by separating himself from them, he was not the realist observer his memoir suggests (Crowley 19).

Howells’s philosophy of literary realism developed as a response to social change and did not spring fully-grown out of the antebellum social milieu. Despite the fact that Howells never served in the War, he did not merely observe the patriotic fervor that swept the country; he offered his own contribution to it. His work produced at the onset of the War suggests an early allegiance to the antebellum literary order. These early examples of his writing reveal an idealized sentimental vision of the coming conflict, which, painting the social circumstances as a melodramatic backdrop, display examples of ideal individualism. Howells wrote two poems that would not be out of place in a collection of sentimental war poetry. The first, “Old Brown,” published in November 1859, commemorates John Brown’s October raid at Harper’s Ferry. Brown fascinated Howells. In one letter to his father, he writes that “If I were not your son, I would desire to be Old John Brown’s –God Bless him!” (Letters 1:26). Howells further explained that

"Brown has become an idea, a thousand times purer and better and loftier than the Republican idea," and he concludes claiming, "I don't know what to write. I think Brown all the time" (26). The glowing terms with which Howells treats Brown he put into verse a few weeks later exclaiming, "Thy shouted name abroad shall ring, / Wherever right makes war sublime" (qtd. in Crowley 20). Here war clarifies the motives of the individual; the ground necessary to reveal the heroic figure. The War did not fashion Brown's idealism, but revealed it. More than that, for many Brown proved to be the War's lightning rod, the decisive, heroic individual inculcating a nation into war. Thoreau, the champion of individualism, would characterize him saying, "no man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments" (Thoreau 40); the social forces of the moment did not fashion Brown, they revealed him for who he was.

Two years later, after the outbreak of hostilities, Howells wrote a second sentimental poem entitled "For One of the Killed," which commemorated the battlefield death of an acquaintance's son, mistakenly believed to have been killed at Manassas. The poem presents death in battle as a path to immortality, a noble end always to be praised by the cannon's volley "down through the far-off days!" (qtd. in Crowley 20). While this early position quickly faded, vestiges of this romanticized vision of the War and the opportunity it offered for self-validation can be found in his correspondence. For example, in a letter written to his sister Victoria in early 1862, prior to the bloody summer of Second Manassas

and Antietam, Howells suggests that he may shortly return from Venice to enlist: "I still hope to go back and engage in the strife and combat, which make America so glorious a land for individuals" (Letters 1:47). Both this letter and early poetry suggest that war provides a backdrop by which the individual may be celebrated. At this juncture, there is no suggestion that Howells's writing was concerned with the reality of social forces and their effects on individuals. Rather, Howells can be seen as part of the Antebellum order, positioning social forces as compliant in the hands of individuals.

Nevertheless, Howells did not long suffer the thought of enlistment. Having secured the consulate in Venice, Howells sat out the War. Reviewing Howells's correspondence from this period, the War is rarely mentioned. Rather, it appears that Howells was intent on pursuing his literary career and honing his writing skills. Perhaps Howells's desire to write, his new marriage, and the allure of Venice coupled with the War's remoteness, length, and destructiveness quelled his initial more-emotional reaction. By 1864, Howells's sentimentality regarding the War had eroded to such a degree that even after the victories of Gettysburg and Vicksburg Howells believed the War "would cost more than the union is worth especially if we should get beaten, as seems likely" (qtd. In Goodman 93). By the time he returned to America, four months after Appomattox, Howells, the "one time dabbler in sentimental poetry" (Carter 48), struck out on the path of realism. Howells pursued the sentimental vein only so long as his experience warranted it. Having sat out the War in Europe and

returning to a much-altered country, Howells soon became the standard bearer of American realism.

CHAPTER V

Competing Worldviews: The Movement from Sentimentalism to Realism in A Fearful Responsibility

Upon his return to America, Howells found employment at the Atlantic Monthly where he worked for the next fifteen years, first as assistant editor (1866-70) and then as editor (1871-81). In this capacity, Howells developed and refined his philosophy of literary realism. In 1881, Howells quit the Atlantic Monthly to write novels full time. A Fearful Responsibility, considered a minor work, was published serially in Scribner's during the summer of 1881. Eclipsed by his more acclaimed work A Modern Instance (1882) and the The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885), A Fearful Responsibility depicts the shifting literary climate of the War years by contrasting two individuals' interactions with their social circumstances and showing their different views of individualism. Owen Elmore and Lily Mayhew represent two generations that went through the War, the former with a worldview formed by the antebellum order and the later fashioned by the experience of War and its aftermath. These characters reflect the differences between antebellum idealism and post-bellum realism.

At the outbreak of the War, Owen Elmore, a professor, finds himself jobless due to the enlistment of nearly all the students and faculty. Despite a troubled conscience, Elmore and his wife, Celia, travel to Venice to wait out the War. After nearly two years in Venice, their routine is interrupted by the news that a family friend, Lily Mayhew, will be visiting them at her elder sister's behest. En route to the Elmore's, Lily meets an Austrian officer who becomes smitten with her and follows her to Venice hoping to meet her again. Convinced that the officer has acted improperly, Elmore proceeds to end the budding association. Years later, having returned to America, guilt plagues Elmore as he believes his action ruined Lily's one chance at true love. Lily and Owen's interactions, their view of emotion, and their interpretation of their social circumstances contrast sentimental and realist worldviews. Elmore's conduct throughout the novel adheres to a worldview shaped by the idealized sentimentality of antebellum America, failing to see the world "as it is." Having experienced the reality of War, Lily reflects the post bellum spirit of realism.

John Crowley and Allen Stein offer the most comprehensive critical explorations of the novel. Taking a biographical approach to the text, Crowley's essay "Howells's Obscure Hurt" cites the novel as a testament to the guilt Howells felt for not seeing military service during the War. Yet Crowley argues that Elmore's response to the conflict "redounded to [Howells] credit" as Elmore's reaction was "an unillusioned—a realistic—response to the war" (26). This interpretation, conflating Howells with

Elmore, demands that Elmore be interpreted as the cool-headed realist. Like Crowley, Stein also sees Elmore as a reflection of Howells. However, for Stein, interpreting Elmore as an adherent to a realistic pragmatism results in Elmore's failure as a character: "he cannot rise above a concern with prudence and common sense to idealism, passion" (125). Stein argues that the addition of idealism, a "dose of moral fervor bordering on the quixotic" (131), would redeem Elmore's character. However, the desire of these critics to read the text biographically, results in the mischaracterization of Elmore's temperament. Elmore's sentimental idealism (perhaps complicated by a desire for pragmatism) is at the root of his missteps and mischaracterizations of his circumstances throughout the novel.

Elmore's avoidance of the War does not necessitate a realistic vision of it. The feelings of shame and guilt that Elmore experiences throughout the novel arise from a disconnection between his actions and his idealized belief of how individuals faced with such circumstances should act. Throughout the work, Howells emphasizes this disparity between Elmore's sentimental belief and inaction. The novel begins by establishing that Elmore's conscience cannot atone for his sense of guilt for having left the country in its hour of need (3). Unable to be convinced of the practical necessity of positioning himself apart from the War, Elmore feels that he would "have been truly glad of any accident that forced him into the ranks" (5). Unwilling to make the decision himself, Elmore hopes for an act of destiny, some propitious circumstance, to reveal his battle-ready character.

When talking to the Venetian consul, Hoskins, Elmore feels the “old shame” as the consul describes the “infernal clatter inside about going over and taking a hand [in the War] again” (22). Additionally, in response to Lily’s news of the wartime sacrifices at home Elmore exclaims, “I’m *dishonorably* out of the way; I can never forgive myself for not going to the war” (26). Elmore believes that war reveals ideal virtues in individuals such as service and sacrifice. Having chosen to remain apart from the conflict, Elmore’s dishonor results from the fact that he is “out of the way” and not in the context of the conflict. Removed from the context of the War Elmore cannot help but doubt his virtuousness, leading to his exclamations of inferiority. This failure to act in light of his allegiance to a romantic vision of the War, results in his perpetual emotional distraction precisely because he holds to a romantic vision rather than a realistic pragmatism.

Elmore’s avoidance of the War results from a timid and ineffectual nature rather than a realistic vision of the nature of war. Consistently adhering to idealized notions of war, Elmore only circumstantially aligns himself with the position of cool-headed realist. In actuality, Elmore is representative of antebellum sentimentality in that he sees the War as an opportunity for self-validation. For example, on route to Venice, while musing about the conflict he just left, he remarks to his wife that he should have enlisted even if it were only to die “on the way to the field” for such a display “would encourage others” (6). By romanticizing a dull, insignificant death Elmore argues that death in war, no matter the circumstances, has value and significance. The precise manner of

death is not as important as its context. Death in the pursuit of duty no matter how banal is glorious because it idealizes virtue. Elmore believes this sentimental idealism, as he is convinced that such an act of self-validation would encourage others to do their duty. In another instance, Elmore becomes "sick at heart" upon learning that the students and other faculty members "had not thought that he should go to the war" (4). Given the clear demarcation of gender roles in sentimental images of warfare—the battle versus the home front—this rejection becomes all the more painful as it calls his manhood into question and makes expatriation the only other viable option. Throughout the novel, Elmore's adherence to an idealized and sentimental vision of war remains intact. The narrator notes that long after the War's conclusion Elmore would excuse his failure to serve by appealing to his ill-health, saying "it was not his idea of soldiership to enlist for the hospital" (5). This justification of inaction assumes a romantic ideal of military service, one that can only be played out on the battlefield. Not only does Elmore exhibit these sentiments in connection with the War, his conduct throughout the novel represents the idealized sentimentality of antebellum America.

Elmore's antebellum worldview, evident in his conception of the War at home, is also evident in his understanding of local Venetian tensions. At the time the story is set, the Austrians controlled the province of Venetia, a result of the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 (Goodman 75). Arriving in Venice, Elmore's romantic sensibilities contribute to his heightened sense of the division that exists between

Austrian and Venetian society. Viewing the Austrian system as tyrannical and "bound to abhor oppression in every form" because of the "sacred" nature of the war ongoing at home (9), Elmore sees this split in the European population as an extension of the Civil War and an opportunity to align himself with the cause he left behind. Accordingly, Elmore splits the Austrians and Venetians into two camps, the oppressor and oppressed. While subsequent interaction with the "amiable-looking people [Austrians]" made it "hard to make the application of their hatred" (9), nevertheless, Elmore, "able to idealize the situation" (10), insists on his view of the Austrians as tyrannical, deciding "it would be a sort of treason to associate with [them]" (10). Idealization demands a singular focus unwilling to treat with differing perceptions. Applied to the social dynamic he finds himself in, Elmore's sentimental gaze glosses over the social realities of the situation reinforcing his vision of oppressed and oppressor rather than engaging with the social realities and enlarging his perspective. Howells establishes Elmore's narrow, idealized perspective by contrasting his position his wife's: "To [Elmore's] eyes their...long patience of their hope and hatred under foreign rule ennobled them, while to hers they were too often only tiresome visitors" (12). The gloss of romanticized history conceals the plodding and tiresome conversation of his dinner guests. Elmore is not focused on the reality and practicality of his situation, but on idealizing tiresome visitors by viewing them through their romanticized past. For Elmore, the backdrop of romanticized history reveals the Austrians' ideal character.

Elmore's sentimentalized perspective proves culpable of misrepresenting reality throughout Lily's visit and her encounters with the Austrian, Captain Earhardt. Elmore casts Lily's chance meeting with Earhardt in terms of the conflict between the Austrians and Venetians. After relating the story of how Lily and Earhardt met on the train, Celia asks Elmore if he can see "anything romantic" in the affair, to which he responds, "I see nothing but vulgar impertinence in it" (48). Because Elmore views the Austrian as oppressors, he assumes that Earhardt views the matter "as an adventure, to be bragged of and laughed over at the mess table and the *caffè*" (48). For Elmore, the affair must be understood in terms of his established sentimental perspective; therefore, when discussing the matter with his wife, Elmore cries, "It's a piece of high handed impudence! ...Now, Celia, you see what these people are!" (35). Interpreting Earhardt's action as impertinent, a violation of propriety, Elmore positions himself as the moral superior. At the same time, Elmore feels victimized by the chance encounter, believing it to be proof of the high-handed, oppressive Austrian character. Elmore's sentimental gaze interprets a chance innocent encounter as proof of the Austrians' tyrannical system.

As soon as Elmore believes the possibility for contact between the two young people has been eliminated, his view of Earhardt begins to change. Elmore's resolute purpose erodes when, believing that the situation between Lily and Earhardt to be satisfactorily concluded, "he was not unwilling to see a certain poetry in it...[seeing a] fellow who had overstepped the conventional proprieties

in the ardor of a romantic impulse, and he could see how this very boldness, while it had a terror, would have a charm for a young girl" (51). To cast Earhardt and Lily's interaction in terms of certain "poetry," "terror," and "charm" is a contrivance suggestive of a stock sentimental romance: the over-eager suitor who terrifies and charms the object of his affections. Through this shift in Elmore's perspective, Howells exposes the untenable nature of Elmore's idealized worldview; revealing that, at its base, sentimentalism relies on nothing more than emotional whims rather than objective consideration of the situation. Unwilling to account for the complexity of social situations, the sentimentalized worldview proves unsustainable and only mischaracterizes and misinterprets reality.

Where Howells's depiction of Elmore reveals the hypocritical psychology of an individual tied to an outdated sentimentalism, the younger Lily Mayhew represents the coming of a new American age of realism. By the novel's end, Lily eschews romanticism and rejects the primacy of emotion, thereby situating herself in the realist tradition of post bellum America. Based upon Lily's description of the Union officers stationed in Patmos, it is initially tempting to also see her in the sentimental tradition:

Frank Halsey's in command, you would never know by the way walks that he had a cork leg. Of course he can't dance, though, poor fellow. He's pale, and he's perfectly fascinating. So's Dick

Burton, with his empty sleeve; he's one of the recruiting officers,
and there's nobody so popular with the girls. (26)

The girls' interest in the veterans results from their amputations. Halsey's paleness objectifies him as a porcelain doll-like object. By portraying the girls' fascination with the amputations, Howells alludes to a literary trend of the War that idealizing the War's amputees. Lily and the other girls, by defining their interest towards the veterans' amputations, suggest that they view the veterans through the lens of that idealized fiction. For example, the contemporary story, "Hopeful Tackett—His Mark," exemplifies this type of fiction. In this brief sketch, published 1862 in the Continental Monthly, protagonist Hopeful Tackett, a simple hard-working apprentice cobbler, joins the Union cause when recruiters come to his town. The tale follows Tackett's involvement in the army and his triumphant return home, a return precipitated by an amputation. Tackett is shot in the leg during a "a bush-whackin fight for the possession of a swamp" (Wolcott 90), and has the leg promptly amputated. The author describes the wound that Hopeful receives, despite the fact he was not involved in a famous battle, as "a badge of honor, worn by many a brave fellow who has gone forth...won by unflinching nerve and unyielding muscle; worn as a badge of the proudest distinction an American can reach" (Wolcott 91). Amputation becomes a mark indicative of the highest ideals, a physical sign idealizing the bearer's courage. Indeed, upon his return, Hopeful's fiancé's eagerness to marry increases with the knowledge of Hopeful's amputation. Similarly, the girls of Patmos laud the returning amputees

objectifying them for their distinguished marks. Yet Lily is not a Mrs. Tackett. While Lily's recollection of Patmos alludes to this type of sentimentalized fiction, such sentimental conceptions of the War are quickly challenged and undercut during the subsequent conversation, and it becomes clear that her engagement in the day-to-day reality of the home front has tempered her early inclinations towards sentimental idealism.

Listening to Lily's description of Patmos and caught up in his own idealized conceptions of the War, Elmore reacts to Lily's description crying out that he is "dishonorably out of the way" (27). Rather than playing the part of the sentimental heroine and encouraging his involvement, Lily rejoins, "Why, how ridiculous!...Nobody feels that way about it *now*! As Dick Burton says *we've come down to business*" (emphasis mine 27). While Elmore's feelings were commonplace at war's outbreak, Lily establishes that the struggle is now a matter of business, an enterprise valuing practicality and efficiency rather than idealized notions of honor and duty.

This departure from sentimental idealism can be seen in the changing attitudes of not only Lily but also the other young people from Patmos. Lily recounts to the Elmore's that initially there were many engagements between volunteers and their sweethearts, but notes that such arrangements are now rare, suggesting a more realistic understanding of the nature of the conflict in which they are engaged. The rationale is brought up later in the story when Lily explains why she cannot marry Captain Earhardt:

...we oughtn't to let our feelings carry us away. I saw so many girls carried away by their feelings, when the first regiments went off, that I got a horror of it. I think it's wicked: it deceives both; and then you don't know how to break the engagement afterward. (81)

Lily sees the danger that can accompany action informed only by feeling. Her horror results from contrasting engaged couples' emotional convictions of a heroic conclusion against the reality of the War's veracity. Emotional reactions interpreted in light of sentimental idealism promise a heroic conclusion that may not come to pass. An example of such a heroic conclusion can be seen in the popular song of the time "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." In the song, the singer exclaims that upon Johnny's return the treasures of love and friendship will be on full display to warm the warrior's heart, the exhibit of faithfulness fulfilled. Yet such cases were not the norm. Rather, individuals who had made such commitments in the heat of the moment under the auspices of a sentimental worldview, found themselves faced with a different reality once the War's reality drained their emotional reserves.

Lily's understanding of emotion's fleeting nature, and specifically her observation that heightened emotions falsify and "deceive," coincides with Howells's argument against sentimental literature as literature that worked to "falsely" evoke emotion. Howells focused much of his critical ire against such artists who wrote merely to produce "grand and immediate" emotional effects, deriding them as "vulgar" ("Effectism" 166). Lily's alignment with Howells, her

refusal to allow emotion to dictate her decisions marks another contrast with Elmore, who increasingly contemplates the spurned suitor, "whose pain he luxuriously fancied in all its different stages and degrees" (104). Elmore's sumptuous enjoyment of the imagined pain of Earhardt's unrequited love, results in an "indolent pity" for him, which "developed into a sort of self-righteous abhorrence of [Lily's] hardness" (104). Elmore is unable to understand Lily's reaction. He fails to understand the effect of witnessing the failure of the war-engagements, with their false sense of destiny and self-centered emotion. This "hardness" is merely Lily's unwillingness to value sentimental, emotion-evoking fantasy. In her conception of relationships, Lily allows the consideration of reality's circumstances to shape her actions rather than trusting to emotion and an inadequate sentimental narrative template.

Howells's allusion to two Civil War battles also marks the conceptual shift from sentimental idealism to realism. The battle of Fort Donelson was a fairly major Union Victory, General Grant's first step leading to his eventual command over the entire Union force, and meant secured supply lines for the Union. Mentioned in the context of the initial war-fever and the mobilization of Patmos College, it suggests the possibility of an idealized military death in a consequential engagement, a fitting sentimental template. Later, Lily mentions Balls Bluff as the site where Tom Friar, a Patmos local, was killed. Ball's Bluff was a relatively minor engagement that had some far-reaching political consequences. Having crossed the Potomac to attack what they mistakenly

believed to be a Confederate camp, Union troops were flanked and forced back to the edge of the bluff. Their colonel, quoting Sir Walter Scott and unaware of the pending disaster, was shot dead (Foote, The Civil War 106), while his panicked soldiers were forced over the bluff into the Potomac. In the gray morning after the fight, slain Union soldiers' bloated bodies floated into Washington. This ill conceived, error-riddled, and inglorious engagement destabilizes any idealized view of the War. Lily is not even certain that this is where Friar was killed, as she qualifies herself saying, "I think it was Ball's Bluff" (27). Her uncertainty further suggests a realistic viewpoint that recognizes the potentially inconspicuous nature of wartime death. Reacting to Lily's narrative Elmore exclaims, "Good heavens! Is the child utterly heartless, Celia, or is she merely obtuse?" (29). Lily is unfeeling in the sense she fails to interpret the War through an emotionally based sentimental worldview. This interpretation of wartime death seems "obtuse" to Elmore who repeatedly proves unable to interpret events with anything but a sentimental worldview. For Elmore, even death on the way to the battlefield would be heroic and encourage others, so it comes as no surprise that Lily's casual dismissal of a war-time death upsets Elmore's established understanding of the value of individual sacrifice in war.

Near the end of their sojourn in Venice, both Celia and Owen note what they describe as Lily's fading energy (142). The only stated explanation for this change comes from Elmore's point of view, a perspective not to be trusted.

Throughout the story, Howells consistently casts doubt on Elmore's interpretation of events focusing on his less-than-acute powers of perception. For example, when Lily retires to her room on her first night at the Elmore's, the narrator notes that "a keener eye than Elmore's" may have noticed certain subtleties in her manner that would suggest she had something else on her mind (28). Likewise, in response to Elmore's position regarding Earhardt, Celia exclaims, "if you can't see the matter for yourself Owen, I don't know how any one is to make you" (35). Similarly, he is not initially cognizant of Lily's beauty (39), nor can he discern that Hoskin's sculpture is a likeness of Lily (111), or that Mr. Anderson's flowers are meant for Lily and not himself (94). When coming to visit the Elmore's, long after their return to America, Lily would "look at Elmore with a regard which he found hard to bear: a gentle unconscious wonder *it seemed*, in which *he imagined* a shade of tender reproach" (emphasis mine 157). No corroboration of Elmore's perspective is offered; his interpretation of Lily's look is substantiated only in his imagination. Lily "seems" to look at Elmore in such a way because he views Lily as a stock sentimental heroine, who having lost her chance at love, declines in health and vivacity.

As a result of her experience of the War, Lily becomes a more mature, sober, and realistic individual. As Howells notes, Lily has grown not declined, and "the sound sense which she had always shown became more and more qualified with a thoughtful sweetness" (156). References to Lily's "sound sense" contrast Elmore's overly emotional and sentimental perspective. Lily has developed a

more mature and realistic outlook on the world, an outlook, which, caught in his romantic antebellum worldview, Elmore cannot fully understand. Elmore, unable to realize "that the tragedy of this romance [between Lily and Earhardt], such as it was, remained to him alone," seeks to "fret his remorse and keep it poignant" years after the event's conclusion (163). Here Howells present a direct argument against sentimentalism. Elmore's choice to live in fantasy world that evokes false emotion depicts an effect of sentimentalism, which Howells decried.

While Howells depicts Elmore's allegiance to sentimentalism leaving him trapped in the past, Howells shows Lily striking out West. The move occurs after another rejected marriage suit from Major Burton. Having seen through the veneer of romance that his empty sleeve offers, Lily decides it would be unconscionable to marry him on that account alone (162). Instead of fulfilling the stock role of a sentimental heroine, she moves to Omaha to open her own business. The imagery of the West suggests a break from the past, a movement toward a new frontier, and a life of greater challenge than what would be found on the more settled East coast. Her move into the frontier represents a break with the past and symbolically positions her as the future of American life.

Howells's handling of both Elmore and Lily expresses his distrust of the sentimental, defining it as a position tenable only within the confines of inexperience such as Elmore's. Elmore is the caricature of sentimentalism's "stock hero" "prey [to] his passions and delusions, full of obsolete ideals ("Realism" 100). The curtain closes on Elmore as it opened, a character trapped

by an allegiance to the romantic idealism of his time. In Lily Mayhew, Howells's suggests a new practical realism borne out of her experience of the Civil War. The differences between Lily and Elmore are punctuated by the events of the Civil War. It is the pivotal point marking a new direction in the development of the American character. Of course, the War did not promote realism wholesale. Innumerable romances and sentimental stories would celebrate and idealize the War, but it did provide the initial incident that drove the promulgation of realism. As one commentator wrote a few months after Appomattox, "No ideal nobleness, no invented sacrifices, no romantic adventures, equal the realities we have known" (qtd. in Shi 65).

CHAPTER VI

New Conceptions of Heroism: The Individual and the Environment in The Rise and Fall of Silas Lapham

The discrepancy created when popular expectations of the War met reality planted the initial seeds of American realism. While A Fearful Responsibility associates sentimental idealism's decline and the rise of realism with the War, it glosses over the reasons behind this move and fails to explicitly suggest what the ramifications of this shift produced. In the conclusion of A Fearful Responsibility, Howells describes Lily moving into a hopeful but unknown future. Howells's later work, The Rise and Fall of Silas Lapham, written in 1885, moves into that future telling the story of a Civil War veteran's life ten years after the War ended. Silas Lapham, Civil War veteran and paint magnate, illustrates the discrepancy between antebellum America's expectations and the actual experience of the War; furthermore, he represents the shift away from the sentimental use of social forces as a backdrop toward the notion that social forces fashion character. To better understand how Howells positions Silas, it is necessary to outline the popular expectations the promise of War initially encouraged. In antebellum America, individuals held that they could affect significant change in their society

(Walters 3). George Frederickson writes, "many antebellum Americans seemed to be striving for ...a society of free individuals, operating without institutional restraint" (9). For antebellum America, there was a deep-seeded sense that individual autonomy held sway over any institutions or impersonal social force. In her book, Victorian America and the Civil War, Alice Rose argues that this greater sense of individuality coupled with the decline of institutionalized Christianity led to a commitment to self-interest that tended to obscure social duty (71). Antebellum emphasis on the individual propagated a desire for a challenge or crisis that would provide opportunity to define one's self and show mastery over one's circumstances (Rose 98, 107). This desire for glory bought into sentimental idealism that presented individual glory as something lacking only the proper dramatic backdrop to be revealed.

In the search for such definitive moments, the prospect of war offered antebellum America a panacea. Troubled by the conflicting demands of the older generation's emphasis on social values and the self-interest required in the emergent market, antebellum American's welcomed the prospect of War (Rose 70). For both North and South, military service, couched in Christian motifs, symbols, and language seemed able to reconcile social values while offering ample opportunity for individuals to pursue their ideals of glory (Rose 71). Rose notes that Americans viewed the War as a "vehicle of spiritual resolution" and a "self-validating event" (236). With the outbreak of hostilities, many believed that

their romantic idealism was about to be realized. As Henry Higginson, a Union officer, wrote, "thank God that we were born in these days" (qtd. in Rose 99). For many in antebellum America, the crisis of Civil War promised to provide a foil for their mettle.

Believing in their ability to change the matter quickly and to their satisfaction, the majority of combatants did not expect a protracted engagement and enlisted with the belief that the conflict would end soon. However, the romantic image of clashing armies wielding swords and brandishing bayonets settling differences in face to face combat was not to be realized. New rifling technologies increased the accuracy and distance at which fighting occurred and consigned such romantic imagery to the past. Due to the soldiers' closely packed ranks and the smoke of the gunpowder, the majority of casualties never even saw the enemy they were fighting. This suddenly impersonal war also saw the advent of mass casualties, turning individual tragedies into anonymous numbers. As the war dragged on, the number of casualties ballooned. In the summer of 1862, the second battle of Manassas saw 25,251 casualties. A few months later at the battle of Antietam, there were a total of 26,134 casualties. This wholesale loss of life initially propitiated an outpouring of sentimental and romantic literature attempting to appropriate the tragic reality within the sentimental tradition.

Sentimental literature of the time attempted to combat the dehumanizing force of the War and loss of individuality that came with it by championing individual sacrifice. Fahs notes that during 1863-4, sentimental literature

asserting soldiers' individual actions acted as a counterpoint to literature stressing the subordination of individual interests to the needs of country (Fahs 94). Poems personalizing anonymous inconsequential deaths on the battlefield became tremendously popular, as many writers "protested the idea that soldiers were alone or even anonymous when they died" (Fahs 96). Predictably, sentimentalism proved unable to account for and recognize every individual sacrifice. The destructive scale of the War overshadowed the individual sacrifices it generated; the War was no longer merely an illustrative background, but an implacable social force. In his book The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union, George Fredrickson notes that the battles of 1862 brought to the fore the dehumanization of modern warfare and cast into question the idealistic assumption that individuals could make their sacrifices "beautiful and instructive" in the sentimental tradition (83). For many veterans, the sheer force and size of the conflict rejected the notion that their individual effort could be capable of directing and surmounting such powerful social forces. The expectant and idealistic population of 1861 was faced with an entirely different reality by 1865.

The War's tamping of antebellum idealism created a rupture between expectation and reality resulting in a sense of absence and an uncertainty about how to appropriate such experiences. Howells illustrates this breakdown in the opening pages of The Rise and Fall of Silas Lapham, which begins with a journalist, Bartley Hubbard, interviewing Silas for an article in the "Solid Men of

Boston" series. Hubbard casts Silas as the quintessential, successful American by contrasting his present success with the difficult circumstances of his upbringing; Silas's circumstances provide the backdrop necessary to illuminate his present success. This approach, however, fails to signify when they begin to discuss Silas's experiences of the War. Not only does Silas's sparse description offer a stark contrast to the trumpeted vibrancy of antebellum expectations, it also suggests that Silas's service failed to realize the expectations antebellum Americans placed in it:

"So I went. I got through; and you can call me Colonel, if you want to. Feel there!" Lapham took Bartley's thumb and forefinger and put them on a bunch in his leg, just above the knee. "Anything hard?"

"Ball?"

Lapham nodded. "Gettysburg. That's my thermometer. If it wa'n't for that, I shouldn't know enough to come in when it rains."

Bartley laughed at a joke which betrayed some evidences of wear. "And when you came back, you took hold of the paint and rushed it." (15)

Reflecting back, Silas views the War as simply something to get through. Silas offers no embellishment, nor does Hubbard prompt him to do so. Howells makes this silence more pronounced by placing Silas at Gettysburg, rather than a fictional battleground as he does later in the novel. As a native of Vermont at

Gettysburg, Silas would have been part of the 2nd Vermont Brigade, which saw action on Cemetery Ridge. Despite being placed at the most celebrated location of the War's most famous battle, Silas's only commentary consists of a "well-worn" joke.

If the War were a tool of self-validation, an opportunity to triumph over dire circumstances and attain individual glory, then service in such an engagement would certainly be the place to achieve it. Silas's silence belies antebellum expectations. Amanda Claybaugh interprets this scene in terms of trauma theory and explores the metaphor of the bullet imbedded in Silas's thigh: "Still present and thus prior to representation, the bullet can be felt, but it cannot be described" (46). Claybaugh notes that failure to represent the War hints at the traumatic experience of combat. While this may be the case, the inability to describe his experience also suggests the lack of a narrative template with which to structure his experience. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Hubbard, the un-traumatized noncombatant, is also unable to detail, or even encourage Silas to detail his experience of the War. Perhaps more noteworthy than Silas's silence is Hubbard's. Given his position as a journalist painting Silas as the stereotypical successful American, his failure to determine the nature in which Silas's wound was received, suggests a feeling of ambivalence about the place of the War in this "successful" biography. Rather than attempting to depict the War as an episode of self-validation, Hubbard retells Silas's joke, which, by Hubbard's own admittance, betrays some evidence of wear. Their silence suggests that the War,

unlike the other circumstances of Silas's life, resists interpretation as a stock backdrop revealing the successful character of the protagonist. Indeed, the War is an ill-suited backdrop in the narrative Hubbard is attempting to write, threatening to reveal the uncertainty and ambivalence of individual effort amidst powerful social forces.

Throughout the novel, Silas seems uncertain about his experience of the War. Attending a dinner party later in the story, Silas participates in a conversation reflecting on the apparent absence of heroism in the current generation as opposed to the generation that fought the Civil War. Prodded by a discussion of the apparent absence of heroism in the present day, Silas relates a story about Jim Millon, a soldier who died when he willingly took a bullet intended for Silas. After relating Jim's loyalty to his wife and the fact that "he died hard," Silas attempts to draw his narrative together to some larger moral. Unfortunately, when the critical moment comes, "he was aware of a certain want of clearness. He had the idea, but it floated vague, elusive, in his brain" (181). Taking some wine in an attempt to give cogency to his thoughts Silas finds that the "cloudiness in his brain disappeared...but a mere blank remained" (181). Here, in a narrative that could easily be presented as the quintessential story of "beautiful and instructive" battlefield sacrifice, Silas proves incapable of eloquence. The inability to appropriate the experiences of the War into a meaningful experience betrays an anxiety regarding the War's value or purpose. Rather than showcase the

individual's propensity for greatness, the War revealed the individuals insignificance in the midst of powerful social forces.

The dinner company expected sentimental idealism but received a vignette of realism; however, realism was not without a propensity for idealism. While Silas cannot elucidate the moral of his war experience, the manner in which he lives his life places him in the company of those who believed in the ideal of the strenuous life. The term, borrowed from Roosevelt's speech of the same name, can be defined as an existence willingly lived amidst the "stern strife of actual life" following the "law of work [and] strife" (Roosevelt 9). Adherents to this code argued that full engagement in life's harsh realities breed nobility of character. For example, Francis A. Walker, in an address to the students of Harvard in 1893, stated that the Civil War produced "a vast change in popular sentiments and ideals, as it showed how much nobler are strength of will, firmness of purpose, resolution to endure, and capacity of action, than are the qualities of the speech-maker and the fine writer" (qtd. in Frederickson 223). Walker argues that the writer of romance and sentimental idealism, by definition, has no access to the attributes listed above because their profession removes them from the plain of reality. Only in the crucible of "real" life, adhering to the "law of work [and] strife" produces noble virtue. This philosophy gave rise to a new view of heroism: "This new ideal of heroism was grim and stoical; it partook little of the dashing and chivalric and conveyed no image of the hero of romance...[it] broke all the conventions of literary treatment of war" (Fredrickson

167-68). Howells supported this view of heroism that accounted for the shaping force of social circumstances and emphasized endurance over platonic idealism.

Howells celebrated this conception of heroism as early as 1866 in his review of De Forest's Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Succession to Loyalty. In the review, Howells writes, "[De Forest's] soldiers are the soldiers we actually know...the warped stuff of men torn from civilization and cast suddenly into the barbarism of camps, the hard, dry, tough, true fibre of the veterans that came out of the struggle" (Atlantic Monthly 1867, 121). Howells argues that the veterans' fiber, inherent attributes constituting moral and ethical behavior, was fashioned by enduring the crucible of combat, an experience that burned up the dross of their character. Where sentimental idealism positioned social forces as a foil for individual achievement, realism with its ideal of the strenuous life positioned social forces as actively and positively fashioning individual character. Horace Greeley's assertion that the young should "go west" in order to be shaped by the hardships of frontier life celebrates this new philosophy—the difficulties of frontier life becoming a fitting substitute for the experience of War (Fredrickson 222). This social Darwinist model of heroism posits that heroes are not those who achieve gloriously, but those who survive the crushing weight of social forces and are tempered by the ordeal.

Silas's unadorned assertion that he "got through" the War hints at his adoption of this dogged philosophy, and is confirmed by his subsequent action. Despite being at the height of his success, Silas continues to work tirelessly, as

his wife expresses with familiar hyperbole, "the man slaves harder every year...he hardly ever seems to breathe now away from his office" (131).

Unremitting toil and effort defines Silas's work ethic. Labor and sustained effort provide the hardship necessary for the fashioning of character. The individual marked by the strenuous life engages in arduous activity for its own sake. As Silas asserts, he "won't stand a loafer" (52) not because a "loafer" fails to be productive, but because to be idle, to shirk one's duty, reflects a moral failure and a lack of character.

Howells establishes Silas's position by contrasting him with the Bromfield Cory, a moneyed Bostonian representative of old, cultured New England gentility. Howells uses Bromfield as a foil to further illustrate Silas's position. Growing up the son of a successful merchant, Bromfield, always careful to avoid engaging in any productive exertion (62), travelled Europe for ten years before settling down with his inherited wealth to start a family. Howells depicts Bromfield's lifestyle as losing currency in post bellum America. Howells describes Bromfield as a foreigner in his own city: "hardly any figure could have looked more alien" to the city's life, as he "glanced up and down the facades and through the crooked vistas like a stranger" (126). Bromfield's position of ease uncomplicated by exertion sets him apart from the life of the city and troubles Silas who does not understand Bromfield's genteel values. Thinking of Bromfield, Silas comments to his wife, "I made *my* money. I haven't loafed my life away" (105). The value Bromfield places on cultured aestheticism is completely lost on Silas, who

believes that toil and effort alone provide the necessary force for fashioning character. Failure to engage in toil and effort suggests an unbecoming failure of character emasculating the culpable individual as a coward unwilling to engage in the harsher realities of life.

Tom Corey, Bromfield's son, along with Silas reflects the new spirit of the age. Like Lily Mayhew in A Fearful Responsibility, he strikes out west in an attempt to make something of himself, but unlike Lily he returns without having done so. Nevertheless, Tom resolves not to live the life that his father lived: "I must do something. I've wasted time and money enough. I've seen much younger men all through the West and Southwest taking care of themselves... I am ashamed to come back and live upon you, sir [Bromfield]" (59). Tom's attitude, reflective of the post-bellum generation, causes no little consternation among his now-antiquated parents. Conversing on his future prospects in the mineral paint business, Mrs. Corey argues that he "needn't earn his living" that "there's still enough [money] for all of us" (83). However, Bromfield informs his wife that he has argued the same to Tom with no effect, for "it appears that he wishes to do something—to do something for himself. I am afraid that Tom is selfish" (84). Tom does not desire wealth for its own sake, rather he desires to take care of himself amidst the hardships and uncertainties of life. Living on his parents' wealth would suggest an inability to face the hardships of life. Tom's wish to "do something for himself" stems from a desire to see his character

formed and strengthened by attempting to live amidst the toil and strife of everyday life.

Both Silas's wife and Tom's parents mistakenly believe that wealth is the object of Silas's and Tom's labors. Howells makes clear, however, that wealth and social position are subject to social forces outside of individual control and not necessarily the desired end. Wealth, while enjoyable, is not the purpose of their toil. If it were, then once the opportunity for wealth dissipated, so also would the motivation to work. There is no monetary reward for Silas having endured ruin for the sake of his character. The day after his house, the symbol of his wealth, is destroyed, Silas wakes and "in that moment he wished that he had not wakened, that he might never have wakened; but he rose and faced the day and his cares" (277). Ruin now guaranteed, Silas's defining moment comes in his willingness to endure the consequences rather than defraud a group of British investors. Howells's purpose is to point out that the manner in which individuals endure and respond to overwhelming circumstances forms their moral character. This position is suggested in the title itself which asks the reader to interpret Silas's rise as a result of staying true to his convictions despite enduring so much. Just as his most valuable paint must be tempered with fire, so must his character be fashioned by adversity. This resolve argues for the interpretation of social forces as active agents in the individual's life. Indeed, the engagement with such forces allows for the production of Silas's heroic and rugged individualism.

Howells makes certain to remove any possibility of interpreting Silas in terms of sentimentalized individual glory. His willingness to endure financial ruin induced a permanent physical decline: "For his nerves there was no mechanical sense of coming back; this was as much the end of his proud, prosperous life as death itself could have been" (310). The circumstances of life have affected Silas socially, emotionally, and physically. Howells confirms the conclusion's irrevocability stating that Silas's past triumphs cannot be revisited due to "the very nature of things" (310). The effects of Silas's circumstances are inescapable and the effects on his life are apparent. The choice to face those circumstances despite the cost facilitates Silas's rise and reveals Howells's belief that heroism is developed through the endurance of life's circumstances.

The novel ends as it began: with an interview. These two interviews offer contrasting interpretations of the role social forces played in Silas's life. The initial interview celebrates Silas as an ideal individual revealed by the backdrop of his difficult circumstances, an interpretation called into question by the ambiguous experience of the War. In the concluding interview, the interviewer, Reverend Sewell, has no intention of forcing Silas's life into a pre-determined narrative template, but wants to observe Silas's reaction to his much-altered position. Living a much harsher life on the old family farm, Silas welcomes the visit from Reverend Sewell. Desirous to know how Silas feels, Sewell asks if he has any regrets to which Silas replies, "Well, it don't always seem as if I done it....I don't know as I should always say it paid; but if I done it, and the things was to do over

again, right in the same way, I guess I should have to do it" (321). Where the novel's initial interview attempted to establish Silas as an entirely self-made man in control of the social forces surrounding his life, in this more candid conclusion, Silas seems far more uncertain about his role. His claim that "it don't always seem as if I done it" suggests his actions were precipitated by the circumstances in which they were carried out. Furthermore, he cannot see any course of action that would have returned a different result. Just as he went to the War and "got through it," so should he have to live through the same events again he should to do it just as it was done. Silas understands that his actions were often responses to the circumstances that he found himself in, circumstances that also limited his choice of action. The novel's conclusion presents Howells's hero as an old broken man redeemed by a moral character tempered by the endurance of social forces.

CHAPTER VII

The Return to Sentimental Idealism: The Strenuous Life and the Spanish American War

In Howells's realism, heroism is presented as a characters' ability to endure the social forces of their environment; bearing circumstances not defining or overcoming them determines the hero of realism. Silas's choice to endure his ruin exemplifies this standard. Silas is "not proud of [his ordeals], and certainly not glad; if they were victories of any sort he bore them with the patience of defeat" (The Rise 308). Placed within the context of the strenuous life, this conception of heroism argues that endurance of circumstances positively shapes individual character. While at the movement's height, Howells deprecated those "noisy fames of the strenuous life" ("Cambridge Friends"); realist fiction contributed to this ethic's popularity by revealing the interplay of individuals and their environment.

Howells's contemporary and friend, George Pellew, conceptualized the shifting emphases of individualism in relation to social forces when he wrote that prior to the Civil War "the dependence of the individual character upon the social environment...[was] not understood" whereas their time has revealed "the

comparative unimportance of exceptional men" (qtd. in Cady 40). Howells and adherents to the strenuous life held that there exists a symbiotic relationship between individuals and their environment. Both saw the social environment shaping individual character. However, these forces did not threaten autonomy, as one's response to the environment remained the crucial element in his or her moral development. By the close of the nineteenth century, Howells's nascent depiction of the strenuous life in The Rise of Silas Lapham had developed into an ideal, which presented the strenuous circumstances of war as ideally suited to mold individuals into strong, moral citizens.

The idealization and re-popularization of martial themes grew as the passage of time dissipated the reality of the Civil War. For twenty years following the War, publication of material dealing with the conflict almost completely subsided (Fahs 313). In 1881, Scribner's ran a series on the campaigns of the Civil War, the success of which marked the popular return of the Civil War to print (Fahs 314). With the failure of reconstruction, Civil War stories focused on how the exigencies of war fashioned the character of both Union and Confederate soldiers, affirming their common experience and avoiding the political post-reconstruction minefield of emancipation and state's rights (Blight 175). This new generation idealized the War casting it as the elemental force responsible for their fathers' heroism. With the popular and growing notion that the Civil War developed the men who took part in it (Hoganson 12), the Spanish-American War at the close of the nineteenth century offered adherents of the strenuous life

an opportunity to live out their ideals. This time, war did not provide the foil for ideal individuals but promised to be a social force capable of culling society of weakness and imperfection.

While the Civil War's early popularity owed in part to the opportunity for self-validation, the Spanish-American War offered a character-forming event, an opportunity to be shaped by the necessities of war. Senator Hernando De Soto Money offers an example of the jingoistic rationales for going to war arguing that "a wholesome war...will have its purgatorial effect upon this nation" (qtd. in Hoganson 73). Purgatory presents an apt metaphor for how jingoists of the period conceived of the conflict. Just as the individual's sufferings in purgatory lead to purity and wholeness, so the rigorous demands of war were perceived to have the power to curb the moral laxity and indulgent luxury of the gilded age. While Howells recognized the power of social forces to shape individuals, he rejected the notion that war could bring about positive change in people.

Howells was a fierce opponent of the Spanish-American War deriding it as a "stupid and senseless" undertaking (Letters 2: 89). Howells had no patience and even less belief in the idealistic rationales for going to war, writing that this war "for humanity" would degenerate into a war for "coaling-stations" (Letters 2: 89, 95, 96). Acknowledging the Spanish-American War as minor, he nevertheless saw it as the beginning of a return to an older age: "the cannonading and trumpeting which then penetrated our political substance left its particles as irrevocably reasserted as if they had lasted a generation...Americans

since the war are not the Americans they were before it" ("The Editor's Easy Chair" 334). Roosevelt's procurement of the presidency further affirmed to Howells that the age of realism was being replaced by a new-old order. He saw Roosevelt as an "Aristocrat du jour" and with his ascendancy a return to ideals popular prior to the Civil War. Of this modern aristocrat and his understanding of social forces, Howells wrote, "He may see them [the people] a little too dramatically, a little too heroically, in that perspective which nothing but experience of their lot could make perfectly correct" ("The Editor's Easy Chair" 338). While rugged individualism was arguably predicated on the philosophy of realism, Roosevelt's interpretation idealized the endurance of social forces to a degree of sentimentalism never intended by Howells. Howells was fatalistic about this shift comparing it to the predictable patterns of nature: "it is possible that the physical and the moral forces are convertible, and in the last analysis are identical" (336). Nevertheless, Howells attempted to combat this resurgent tide of sentimentalism.

"Editha," published in 1905, was Howells's response to the new-old order he found himself living in. It addresses both his concerns with the martial strain of the strenuous life and the resurgence sentimental idealism. The story focuses on the Spanish-American War, though it is never mentioned by name. The story centers on a young jingo named Editha who persuades her fiancé, George Gearson, to volunteer and fight despite his scruples. In the first minor skirmish of the conflict, George is killed. Learning of his death, Editha falls ill, quickly

recovers, and then visits Gearson's mother. Her expectation of playing the part of grieving fiancée is disabused by Mrs. Gearson's denunciations of her conduct. Despite being shaken by Mrs. Gearson's attack, the story closes with Editha dismissing Mrs. Gearson as "vulgar" and returning to "live in the ideal" (168). The story mocks romantic convention and criticizes sentimental idealism while leaving it in the ascendancy, a marked change from A Fearful Responsibility and The Rise of Silas Lapham. Where A Fearful Responsibility shows Lily striking out West to begin a new life and The Rise of Silas Lapham depicts Silas's engagement with the social forces of his environment, "Editha" offers no recourse to the realist philosophy. Editha's sentimental worldview remains ascendant.

The Gearsons' position is emblematic of the place Howells saw realism occupying at the beginning of the new century, suggestive of a change in the literary tide. Unable to consent to Editha's view of the war as glorious and ennobling, George characterizes her faith in the war as a "pocket providence that blesses butchery" (161). George views Editha's interpretation of events as resting on a simplistic interpretation based not so much on reflection but emotion, no doubt agreeing with the narrator who notes, "before her reasoning went her emotioning" (157). Despite his reservations about the conflict, George becomes the victim of Editha's idealism for the sake of his feelings of love for her. By choosing to enlist and speak out in support of the war, George compromises his earlier convictions (Crowley 32). Unlike Silas, who stayed true to his convictions

in spite of his circumstances, George's actions attest to a failure of integrity (Crowley 32), which ultimately costs him his life.

In order to combat the allure of sentimental idealism, Howells connects the experience of the Civil War to realism asking his readers to remember the suffering it caused and its tempering effect on idealism. Returning from the Civil War with an empty sleeve, George's father and mother raise their son to abhor warfare. Having grown up experiencing War's destruction, George cannot celebrate the coming war as Editha does. The clash between the competing visions of sentimentalism and realism culminates in the exchange between Editha and Mrs. Gearson. These individuals—the one old, decrepit and experienced in life, the other young, naïve, and inexperienced—represent the competing visions of sentimentalism and realism. Mrs. Gearson's inability to stand suggests a loss of support for realism in the contemporary literary climate. Nevertheless, she speaks with a voice strong enough to startle Editha (166), suggesting the author's opinion that though realism may be losing support, its argument still reverberates. Despite the power of her voice, Mrs. Gearson does not shake off Editha's sentimental stupor. Editha returns to her ideal and sentimental idealism remains in the ascendancy.

In the final analysis, for Howells, realism was to be democracy in literature the revelation of the common man and his circumstances. Early on, Howells's success and popularity suggests he struck a nerve with an American public shocked by the power of the Civil War, the social forces that followed in its

wake, and a sense of insignificance in the face of such circumstances. Yet this emphasis on environment coupled with evolutionary theory and humanity's propensity for idealism led in part to the cult of the strenuous life and the popularity of the Spanish-American War. Though these ideas have been presented as moving from compartmentalized box to compartmentalized box, these notions of individuality and environment reflect popular tendencies of Americans at the time and were not true for all people. The purpose then was not to aim for absolute understanding of the people of that time, but to look to the movement of events and human reaction in order to better understand how the changing emphases on individual and environment helped fashion how individuality was and is perceived.

Even in the strenuous life the locus of concern is still the individual; however, the role of environment in this interplay of individual and environment would only grow throughout the twentieth century. The naturalists would posit an environment in which humanity is subject to the whim of indifferent and even cruel natural circumstances beyond their control. With the popularizing of psychology and the disillusionment of the First World War, literature would take a psychological turn, presenting a new internal environment positioning individuals as subject to the unknowable and uncontrollable unconscious. One's particular subjectivity has become all-important with ethnic, physical, social, and cultural characteristics defining individuals. Consideration of individual ability and will is an afterthought, if considered at all; the suggestion of an ideal individual is an

absurdity. To return to a claim made at the beginning of this thesis that the experience of the Civil War itself disallowed the production of an epic, or representative novel, I suggest that the Civil War catalyzed an awareness of social forces, and as the emphasis on the social environment grew and knowledge of what constitutes the human environment grew individuals became further and further separated, increasingly defined by differing circumstances rather than shared commonalities making the writing of an epic impossible. Howells, however, maintained a balance between individual autonomy and the environment's effect on shaping individuals. While Howells was sensitive to shaping effects of the social environment, he recognized individual responses were as important as the circumstances an individual faced. His insight into the human experience bears studying in our own day, where the emphasis on social forces often ignores individuals' power to act.

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