

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS: DRAMATIST

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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS: DRAMATIST

Thesis

**Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements**

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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Fort Worth, Texas

August, 1954

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Primarily William Dean Howells is recognized today as the author of the novels Indian Summer, A Hazard of New Fortunes, A Modern Instance, and The Rise of Silas Lapham. But he began and ended his literary career as a journalist, and, though his novels appeared almost every year from 1872 to 1921, he managed to write six autobiographical studies, more than a dozen travel books, four volumes of poetry, over thirty plays, numerous memoirs, biographies, and reviews. After being introduced to Howells in an American literature class where naturally his work in fiction and criticism was stressed, I was visibly surprised, as many others are, I am sure, to find that he wrote plays. My interest, first, was curiosity, but in reading some of his plays, I became fascinated by his delightful and humorous creations. Therefore, my interest became enlarged, and after an abbreviated study of the subject, I discovered that very few writers have considered Howells as a dramatist. Then, after making a rather intensive investigation, I arrived at the conclusion that a study would prove valuable, for William Dean Howells did write many plays, which, though they were not completely successful on the stage in his

day, were the beginning of a new drama--that which began the realistic vein in America. Although his dramas do not compare with his fiction, they do establish the fact that he should be not only considered but also acknowledged as a dramatist.

His contribution to American dramatic literature is especially important not only because of his own achievement in this field but also because of his influence upon other dramatists. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to demonstrate the importance of Howells as the leader of the movement toward realism in American drama, both by revealing in a critical analysis of his plays the presence of the same familiar realistic elements so evident in his novels, and also by showing the extent of his influence upon later dramatists. Although in his plays Howells was a leader in the treatment of the commonplace and the approach to realism, his real greatness lies in his influence upon other playwrights who developed the ideas which Howells had only begun. These playwrights are better known today in American drama than Howells, but it was he who first influenced them in the new realistic drama.

It is important in a study of this kind to show the extent of influence caused by a discovery Howells made in the early 1860's, that of the Italian dramatist, Carlo Goldoni. Howells had been writing

poetry which contained romantic elements, but Goldoni turned him toward realism. However this study must, first, present the background of Howells' interest in the drama.

CHAPTER II

HOWELLS' EARLY INTEREST IN DRAMA

As versatile as Howells was--a writer of novels, poems, criticism, essays, sketches, and travel books--it seems inevitable that he would be a writer of plays, if only for the purpose of proving that he could write in that particular form. However, Howells' first interest in the drama seems to have begun when he was very young, for he says in My Literary Passions (1895) that at a certain period during his young life his acquaintance with the drama was enlarged. As a result of his fairly regular attendance of plays in this early period of his life, Howells became familiar with the works of Shakespeare before he had read them, especially Richard II, Macbeth, and Hamlet, which he saw "again and again." However, he adds:

. . . and rapt as I was in them I am not sure that they gave me greater pleasure, or seemed at all finer than 'Rollo,' 'The Wife,' 'The Stranger,' 'Barbarossa,' 'The Miser of Marsailles,' and the rest of the melodramas, comedies, and farces which I saw at the time.¹

As evidenced by these statements, Howells' critical acquaintance with drama, thus far, was meager. His dramatic interest increased considerably, however, when he went to Europe, for from 1861 through

¹William Dean Howells, My Literary Passions, p. 29.

the duration of the Civil War, he served as consul to Venice, and since his duties were neither numerous nor oppressive, he was able to use his time in learning and studying Italian dramatic literature. It is the opinion of James L. Woodress that "Howells' interest in the drama had its beginnings in Venice when he was using the theatre as a laboratory for learning a new language."² This opinion seems logical, for in Italy "he found a well-developed dramatic tradition and had abundant opportunity to see plays. After his return he remained an enthusiastic play-goer and subsequently became a dramatist in his own right."³

It seems logical to assume that Howells began and continued to write plays with a definite purpose in mind, or he would not have written so many plays, but whether it was to prove his ability to write in such a form, or whether it was to aid his novel-writing by experimenting in other forms of literature, we will probably never know. He never gave his reasons why he wrote plays, although in a letter to Mark Twain he said that "I would ten times rather write plays than anything else."⁴ However, it seems probable that one of Howells' main interests in drama lay in its close association with literature.

²James L. Woodress, Howells and Italy, p. 142.

³Ibid.

⁴Mildred Howells, editor, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, I, 255-256.

Howells believed that it was impossible to separate drama from the main currents of literature. Concurrent with the time that he was leading the field in realistic fiction, Howells was the leader in realistic dramatic literature. Therefore, it is only natural that many of the beliefs and attitudes he had concerning fiction would parallel those he had concerning drama. However, he did hold a definite attitude toward drama.

Of his second play, Out of the Question (1877), Howells remarked that

the play is too short to have any strong effect, I suppose, but it seems to me to prove that there is a middle form between narrative and drama, which may be developed into something very pleasant to the reader, and convenient to the fictionist. At any rate my story wouldn't take any other shape.⁵

Except in form, Howells saw little or no difference between drama and narrative. He not only believed this very strongly, but he put this principle into practice. As a result, his plays have come to be known by many critics as closet-dramas; that is, they were intended primarily to be read, not acted. In The American Dramatist, Moses states that

it is false. . . to separate literature and drama. While it is legitimate to accept the closet-drama as a form in itself, it is not legitimate to consider it as in any way necessary to the theatre.⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 64.

⁶Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist, 1917 edition, p.61.

Moses also maintains that Howells' view of drama was "theoretical," that he was interested in the stage from the narrative and inventive standpoints. Howells is pleased, Moses asserts:

. . .with the inventions, the ideas, the characterizations, the moral problems, the philosophy, the social attitudes, but the dramatic manner does not concern. . .him. He disdains the theatrical, not realizing that consistent theatricalism may enter the realms of literature.⁷

Howells' attitude toward drama was concealed in his realistic approach. O. W. Firkins declares that ". . .Howells' principle is truth. He believes in the transference of life to the page with as little alteration as is compatible with the difference between being and discourse."⁸ His advocacy of truth was something new in the field of American drama. His main purpose was to break away from the viewpoint of the romanticists, which then prevailed in the drama of the mid-nineteenth century. To see and report life as it really is was his aim. Howells asserted that an author should consider his work in relation to human nature. From the beginning he was determined to act upon this principle even to the point of risking dullness. Considered a literary radical in his time, Howells declared that to him "Realism is nothing more or nothing less than the truthful treatment of material. . ."⁹ This statement was his creed, and he applied it

⁷Ibid., p. 64.

⁸Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist, 1925 edition, p.210.

⁹William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 73.

to all his writings, both fiction and drama. His realism was much under criticism in his day, but though it may have been dull at times, it was never gaudy or disgusting. In his plays he did not propose to exploit the seamy side of life or to be harsh or cynical; it was his wish to portray his characters in the making and to bring them to closer grips with life. He felt that in removing himself from the romantic and the unusual, he was getting away from the unreal and that in presenting ordinary men and women, the kind the average person is likely to meet and know, he was reflecting life more truly. He was trying to portray in his plays the commonplace experiences and conversations of ordinary people in natural environments. He refused to make his characters too intellectual or sophisticated, and he was very sparing in his use of psychological analysis. He insisted on seeing and portraying American life with its own atmosphere. He kept his dialogue toned down almost to a pitch of everyday conversations, although he shows he is a master of adroit and witty talk in his comedies and farces. Therefore, the plays of Howells were a new kind of drama.

The fact that this new drama meant a real break with the old was recognised by William Archer, who wrote to Howells on October 13, 1890, urging him to turn all his attention to the new drama. He suggested that Howells be the leader and develop his new technique. Archer also maintained that he understood that Howells' plays were

not meant for the stage. To Howells, plays should not only be actable but also readable, and he emphasized the latter quality. He wisely realized "that his farces were directed to a reading public, interested in amateur theatricals."¹⁰

Howells' attitude toward drama is made considerably clearer in one of his essays in the series entitled "Editor's Study," which was a regular feature of Harper's Magazine from 1886 to 1892, and in which he expressed his views on literature in general. In the "Editor's Study" of July, 1889, he discusses several of the plays of his day. He praises two dramatists, in particular, who wrote plays which brought nature to the stage, which dealt with the commonplace, and which expressed nothing sensational or unusual, only the truth. Howells also praises their efforts toward breaking away from the old theory of what a play should be; that is, their plays were designed for themselves and not for the general stage. Howells believes that America will never have

a national drama till the playwrights approach social and psychological problems in the spirit of their liberal art, and deal with them simply, freely, and faithfully. . . and that a national drama can arise with us only. . . out of wilding native growths.¹¹

¹⁰ Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk, William Dean Howells, Representative Selections, p. xcvi.

¹¹ William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIX (July, 1889), 315.

Howells admits that neither of these two dramatists produced a great drama. But he does state "that in such prolongations of sketches as they have given they have made the right beginning of an American drama."¹²

Comments on why Howells first began writing plays are varied and novel in their content. Clara and Rudolf Kirk maintain that Howells wrote plays only as a pastime:

It is significant that throughout these strenuous novel-writing days, when Howells was thinking most seriously on social problems, he amused himself by writing thirty-three plays, farces, dramatic sketches, and comic operas.¹³

But Van Wyck Brooks believes his purpose was practical and utilitarian:

Howells tried his hand at plays, as if to make sure of his proper form before he committed himself to novel-writing. He had tested himself, just so, as a poet and critic, and he carried on all these to the end of his life. He knew they were minor lines, but he was competent in them all, and no doubt his experiences with them enriched his mind.¹⁴

Brander Matthews, however, affirms that

As he taught himself to write novels, beginning with the simple sketch of Their Wedding Journey, until he reached the almost tragic climax of A Foregone Conclusion, so now he is teaching himself to write plays.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., p. 319.

¹³Kirk and Kirk, op. cit., p. xciv.

¹⁴Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p. 211.

¹⁵Brander Matthews, "Bret Harte and Mr. Howells as Dramatists," The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics, Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown, editors, p. 148.

A study of this kind requires the consideration of a discovery which Howells made in dramatic literature which influenced him as a dramatist. In Italy, where he was consul to Venice, he discovered the works of Carlo Goldoni, the eighteenth-century Italian dramatist, who convinced him that realism is more satisfactory than romanticism. Much of the vast reading which Howells did during his lifetime was centered upon Goldoni and Italian dramatic literature. It will be observed that almost all the familiar elements of Howells' beginning and continued interest in drama and of his attitude toward drama are revealed in the following discussion of the influence of Goldoni upon Howells as dramatist:

Criticism so far has discounted or ignored the literary influence exerted on Howells by the writer whom he called "one of the greatest realists who has ever lived"--Carlo Goldoni. There is, however, abundant evidence that the Venetian dramatist, more than any other writer, turned him from Romantic poet into prose Realist. . . . Goldoni's plays exerted a powerful and lasting effect on his literary career. Between 1861 and 1865 the Goldonian drama helped mold the opinions which later solidified into the Howells doctrine of literary Realism. Through Goldoni's eyes Howells first saw the possibilities of prose fiction based on the commonplace events of contemporary life. Later these plays provided direct inspiration for his own comedies and farces. Despite the general failure to recognize this influence, the American's debt to the Italian is freely acknowledged in his writings.¹⁶

Howells' first acquaintance with the Italian dramatist's work was in 1861 when he went to Venice as consul. He began reading Goldoni's

¹⁶Woodress, op. cit., pp. 131-132.

plays during his first year in Venice, and his interest continued throughout his lifetime. During his second year in Venice while learning Italian, Howells and a friend spent much of their time roaming Venice, talking literature, and attending the theatre. Night after night they would go the Malibran Theatre, where they saw Goldoni's plays performed. The theatre proved to be Howells' classroom for learning Italian. As he was learning the language, he was also becoming more thoroughly acquainted with the dramas of Goldoni. The fascination which Howells had for the Italian dramatist is revealed in a statement Howells made in 1894:

It seemed to me at the time that I must have read all his comedies in Venice, but I kept reading new ones after I came home, and still I can take a volume of his from the shelf, and when thirty years are past, find a play or two I missed before.¹⁷

One of the clearest and frankest statements concerning Howells' introduction to Goldoni and the acknowledgment of his influence upon Howells is found in an interview between Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen and Howells in 1893:

Howells: . . . of all the Italian authors, the one I delighted in the most was Goldoni. His exquisite realism fascinated me. It was the sort of thing which I felt I ought not to like; but for all that I liked it immensely.

Boyesen: How do you mean you ought not to like it?

Howells: Why, I was an idealist in those days. I was only twenty-four or twenty-five years old, and I knew the world

¹⁷Ibid., p. 156.

chiefly through literature. I was all the time trying to see things as others had seen them, and I had a notion that, in literature, persons and things should be nobler and better than they are in the sordid reality; and this romantic glamour veiled the world to me, and kept me from seeing things as they are. But in the lanes and alleys of Venice I found Goldoni everywhere. Scenes from his plays were enacted before my eyes, with all the charming Southern vividness of speech and gesture, and I seemed at every turn to have stepped unawares into one of his comedies. I believe this was the beginning of my revolt. But it was a good while yet before I found my own bearings.¹⁸

This interview explains explicitly how Goldoni turned Howells toward realism. The attraction of the art of Goldoni became irresistible and drew Howells into the scope of commonplace realism. This kind of realism was a new experience for him, and it exerted an indeterminate amount of influence.

In My Literary Passions Howells, once again, declares his discovery of Goldoni:

I learned to know all the dramatists pretty well, in the whole range of their work, on the stage and in the closet, and I learned to know still better, and to love supremely, the fine, amiable genius whom, as one of them said, they did not so much imitate as learn to imitate nature.

This was Carlo Goldoni, one of the first of the realists, but antedating conscious realism so long as to have been born at Venice early in the eighteenth century, and to have come to his hand-to-hand fight with the romanticism of his day almost before that century had reached its noon.¹⁹

¹⁸H. H. Boyesen, "A Dialogue between William Dean Howells and Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen," McClure's Magazine, I (June, 1893), 7.

¹⁹My Literary Passions, p. 155.

Though a writer of the eighteenth century, Goldoni seemed to Howells to present a more realistic picture of Venice than did any other later writer.²⁰ Howells tells us in My Literary Passions that his first stay in romantic Venice changed the whole course of his literary life and turned him into a realist.²¹

In order to give a complete picture of Howells' interest in Goldoni and the influence of Goldoni upon Howells, it seems necessary to add that Howells was perfectly willing to be rated low in taste for his preference of Goldoni to Moliere. Howells makes this confession:

. . . I am far from defending myself for liking the comedies of Goldoni better than the comedies of Moliere, upon purely aesthetic grounds, where there is no question as to the artistic quality. Perhaps it is because I came to Moliere's comedies later, and with my taste formed for those of Goldoni, but again, it is here a matter of affection; I find Goldoni for me more sympathetic. I cannot do otherwise than find him more natural, more true. . . . Moliere has a place in literature infinitely loftier than Goldoni's; and he has supplied types, character, phrases, to the currency of thought, and Goldoni has supplied none. . . . I think that if it had been Goldoni's luck to have had the great age of a mighty monarchy for his scene, instead of the decline of an outworn republic, his place in literature might have been different.²²

Some qualities of Goldoni which more clearly point out the similarity between the Italian dramatist and Howells are discussed by James Woodress in his book, Howells and Italy. This discussion follows in part:

²⁰Ibid., p. 207.

²¹Ibid., p. 206.

²²Ibid., p. 160.

Although Goldoni was a serious artist and desired to improve the theatre and society, his method was not to reform with ridicule and scorn but to laugh his audiences out of their foibles. His perpetual lightheartedness makes him gay company; his plays are always amiable, and one never feels that there is a sharp edge of bitterness lying beneath the fun. This ready good humor, however, has its limitations, making his contribution to the drama shallower and less substantial than the achievements of the greatest playwrights. He is a lesser figure than Moliere, to whom he bears the most resemblance, but he is, nonetheless, a great artist and a natural man in a century that was often artificial.²³

Even as early as 1876 in Howells' first play, The Parlor Car (1876), one can see that the elements of his realism, which Howells defines later in his book, Criticism and Fiction (1891), are the same elements that the plays of Goldoni possess. Howells' theory of realism in summary is, as Woodress words it, "(a) the truthful treatment of (b) commonplace material, which produces (c) proper moral effect."²⁴ As I have previously stated, in My Literary Passions Howells calls Goldoni "one of the greatest realists who has ever lived" and also refers to him as "the first of the realists." Since he was the first, his plays were produced before realism had been so named. Yet as Howells points out, the material for Goldoni's plays was treated truthfully because he disliked artificiality. It was in the early sixties of the nineteenth century when Howells first went to Italy that he affirms:

²³Woodress, op. cit., pp. 135-136.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 138-139.

I was no more conscious of his realism than he was himself a hundred years before; but I had eyes in my head, and I saw that what he had seen in Venice so long before was so true that it was the very life of Venice in my own day; and because I have loved the truth in art above all other things, I fell instantly and lastingly in love with Carlo Goldoni.²⁵

After Howells returned from Italy and when he read Goldoni's plays over again, which he often did, he was aware of his commonplace material:

. . . there is seldom anything more poignant in any one of them than there is in the average course of things. The plays are light and amusing transcripts from life, for the most part, and where at times they deepen into powerful situations, or express strong emotions, they do so with persons so little different from the average of our acquaintance that we do not remember just who they are.²⁶

Howells might very well have been discussing his own plays, for these critical remarks aptly describe Howells' plays also. Therefore, it will be observed that the first two points of Howells' theory of realism were anticipated by Goldoni: truthful treatment of commonplace material. The third aspect, the proper moral effect, is also present in Howells' discussion of Goldoni in My Literary Passions.

Howells writes:

I know of none of his plays that is of wrong effect, or that violates the instincts of purity, or insults common sense with the romantic pretence that wrong will be right if you will only paint it rose-color. He is at some obvious pains to 'punish vice and

²⁵ My Literary Passions, p. 155.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

reward virtue, ' but I do not mean that easy morality when I praise his; I mean the more difficult sort that recognizes in each man's soul the arbiter not of his fate surely, but surely of his peace. He never makes a fool of the spectator by feigning that passion is a reason or justification, or that suffering of one kind can atone for wrong of another. That was left for the romanticists to discover, even the romanticists whom Goldoni drove from the stage. . . . He deals with society as something finally settled. How artfully he deals with it, how decently, how wholesomely, those who know Venetian society of the eighteenth century historically will perceive when they recall the adequate impression he gives of it without offence in character or language or situation. This is the perpetual miracle of his comedy, that it says so much to experience and worldly wisdom, and so little to inexperience and worldly innocence.²⁷

To form a better statement of the moral effect for which Howells himself aimed in his novels would be difficult.

The similarity between Howells and Goldoni in their theories of realism is evidenced by the fact that the three elements which Howells included in his own theory of realism--truthful treatment, commonplace material, moral effect--are expressed not only in his critical writings, My Literary Passions and Criticism and Fiction, but also in his discussion of the writings of Goldoni in his essay on Carlo Goldoni in 1877 and in his review of H. C. Chatfield-Taylor's biography of Goldoni. Therefore, as Woodress asserts: "It seems reasonable to conclude that Goldoni played an important part in shaping Howell's theory of Realism in fiction."²⁸ However, he continues,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Woodress, op. cit., p. 142.

Goldoni's guiding genius was even more apparent when Howells turned from novel-writing to drama, for it is difficult to see a more logical or direct influence on his farces and comedies than the Venetian dramatist.²⁹

It is the opinion of Woodress that "the similarity between the Goldonian theater and Howells's more modest collection of comedies and farces is hardly accidental."³⁰ Both possess the same amiable and lighthearted tone, and both range from farce to subtle comedies of manners. "The transference of the scene from eighteenth-century Venice to nineteenth-century Boston precludes the possibility of exact parallels, but in so far as the limitations of time and place may be reconciled the likeness is striking."³¹

Both Howells and Goldoni made extensive use of the same farcical devices: mistaken identity, practical jokes, intrigue, fortuitous complication, and slapstick comedy. The mistaking of a stranger for a long-separated brother in The Sleeping Car (1883), for example, recalls a similar failure of mutual recognition between a father and son in La Putta onorata (1749); and in . . . The Garroters (1889) and Un Curioso accidente (1775) . . . the humor derives from mistaken identity. In both Le Morbinose (1758) and The Mouse Trap (1886) a practical joke is used to initiate the action. . . . Intrigue, which Goldoni used more frequently than Howells, is present in A Likely Story (1888) and Le Morbinose. . . . A multitude of complications stemming from an accidental happening provides the fun in The Elevator (1885) and Il Ventaglio (1785). . . .

These approximate parallels of situation and incident in the farces carry over into the plays which reach the level of social comedy. Howells' The Unexpected Guests and Goldoni's best-known play, La Locandiera (1753), are examples of this.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

³¹ Ibid.

. . . Repartee between husband and wife was frequently employed by both Goldoni and Howells, and good examples are found in the opening scenes of La Putta onorata and Evening Dress (1893). . . ³²

Another possible influence of Goldoni upon Howells, Wooddress suggests, may be observed in the recurrent use of the same characters:

Not only did Howells like best the recurrent characters of Goldoni, but he gave his own brightest efforts to detailing the antics of the Roberts and the Campbell quartet. His repeated use of these figures is thoroughly Goldonian in spirit, and in view of his demonstrable debt to the Italian dramatist his stock figures too may be considered Goldonian in inspiration. ³³

Thus it is interesting to note that in 1877, in his essay on Carlo Goldoni, Howells had written:

The comedy of art was simply the outline of an action supplied to the players. The characters in every plot were drawn from the same stock. . . . Goldoni wrote some one hundred and fifty comedies, and in quite half of them, I think. . . standard characters appear. ³⁴

This Goldonian preference for stock characters is obvious in the plays of Howells. In eleven of twenty of his plays the inimitable quartet of Bostonians delight the readers with the lighter moments of their lives. The activities of the Robertses and the Campbells on Pullmans, at teas, and in elevators range from slapstick farce to sophisticated comedy.

³²Ibid., pp. 144-146.

³³Ibid., p. 147.

³⁴William Dean Howells, "Carlo Goldoni," Atlantic Monthly, XL (April, 1877), 610.

It has been pointed out that the influence of Goldoni upon Howells guided him in formulating his own theory of realism, which he expressed in both his fiction and drama. As previously noted, Howells states in the interview made by H. H. Boyesen, concerning his turning toward realism under the influence of Goldoni, that ". . . it was a good while yet before I found my own bearings." This statement, which was made concerning the period when Howells was in Venice during the early 1860's, seems to have been true, for it was not until more than ten years later, in 1876, that he wrote his first play.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMATIC QUALITIES OF HOWELLS

When his editorship of the Atlantic Monthly reached its halfway point in 1876, after he had already written three novels and a book of poems in addition to numerous articles and essays, Howells wrote his first play. This occurred at the time when he was recognized as a journalist, as a poet, and as a promising novelist. It had been ten years since his return from Italy, where he had discovered the works of the Italian dramatist, Carlo Goldoni, whose influence is evident in all of Howells' plays. Howells published his plays first in the Atlantic Monthly, then in Harper's Weekly, and finally in Harper's Magazine, where they became one of the attractions of the Christmas number. In a paper Howells wrote to J. H. Harper when he was asked to contribute to the history of the publishing house, he described his association with the House of Harper. It appears in part as follows:

I now began to write frequently for the Magazine, or rather, regularly, sending a farce in time for every Christmas number. The farces really began in the Atlantic Monthly and my first Harper farces were printed in the Weekly. . . . They made me a very amiable public there with the youth who played in drawing-rooms and church parlors; they never got upon the stage, though they were represented over the Union

in private theatricals, and, as Mr. Alden [editor of Harper's] gratifyingly told me, were asked for in the advance sheets months before their publication.¹

The qualities of Howells as dramatist were not as obvious in his first play, The Parlor Car (1876), as they became in his later plays, but they are in evidence there. Over-all naturalness of all the elements of a play--setting, characters, dialogue--is the most prominent quality in his plays. This element makes his plays fresh and alive even today. The settings of his plays include a summer hotel, a New York apartment, a parlor car of a train: natural places where people may easily meet. The incidents are those of real, rather than fictional, drawing room comedy and depend for their effect on the subtle contrast of social values. These settings and events produce scenes in which one meets probability everywhere, from the catching of the heroine's polonaise in the window to the jar that throws her into the hero's arms at the right moment, as in The Parlor Car.

The language of Howells' plays is never literary. It is the casual, natural talk of everyday conversation.

That which is apparent in all of Howells' writings, particularly in his one-act plays, is his economy of words and his ability always to choose exactly the right word. Mark Twain, an artist himself in

¹J. Henry Harper, The House of Harper, p. 320.

the choice of words, in a tribute to Howells very clearly praises his "perfect English":

For forty years his English has been to me a continual delight and astonishment. In the sustained exhibition of certain great qualities--clearness, compression, verbal exactness, and unforced and seemingly unconscious felicity of phrasing--he is, in my belief, without his peer in the English-writing world. Sustained. I intrench myself behind that protecting word. . . .

In the matter of verbal exactness Mr. Howells has no superior, I suppose. He seems to be almost always able to find that elusive and shifty grain of gold, the right word. Others have to put up with approximations, more or less frequently; he has better luck. . . .

There is a plenty of acceptable literature which deals largely in approximations, but it may be likened to a fine landscape seen through the rain; the right word would dismiss the rain, then you could see better. It doesn't rain, when Howells is at work.

And where does he get the easy and effortless flow of his speech? and its cadenced and undulating rhythm? and its architectural felicities of construction, its graces of compression and all that? Born to him, no doubt. All in shining good order in the beginning, all extraordinary; and all just as shining, just as extraordinary today, after forty years of diligent wear and tear and use. He passed his fortieth year long ago; but I think his English of today--his perfect English, I wish to say--can throw down the glove before his English of that antique time and not be afraid.²

Perhaps it is this sensitiveness to diction that supports his ability to present his characters in such a way that they are never overshadowed by situation, even when the situation is dominant.

²Mark Twain, "William Dean Howells," Harper's Monthly, CXIII (July, 1906), 221.

In reading Howells' plays one can immediately observe the unlimited variety of stage directions used. As Mark Twain has pointed out, they are done "with competent and discriminating art,"³ sometimes conveying a scene clearly without the accompanying dialogue. Mark Twain also maintains that Howells' stage directions "are faithful to the requirements of a stage direction's proper and lawful office, which is to inform."⁴ Howells very seldom repeats a stage direction, for it seems he can invent new ones without limit. Therefore, they are never monotonous, and they lend themselves to more refreshing information.

These qualities--naturalness, variety of settings, characters which are not overshadowed by incident, non-literary dialogue, economy of words, and variety in stage directions--are apparent in all of Howells' plays, even in his first one.

The Parlor Car (1876), the first play of Howells, involves only two people primarily, with a porter entering only at infrequent intervals. Allen Richards, who had been jilted by Lucy Galbraith the night before for apparently no reason at all, is naturally surprised when he finds that she is the only other person in the parlor car of the train with him. The play is a farce, for the situation dominates, even though the two principals have a chance to provide some delightful

³Ibid., p. 224.

⁴Ibid., p. 224.

conversation. The situation which at first appears to be an accident is finally made clear at the closing of the play, the fact being that Lucy had planned to take another train until she saw Allen in this particular one. Most of the delightful conversation is concerned with Allen's trying to evoke the reason for Lucy's jilting him, in which he finally proves successful. However, their problem is not alleviated until situation rather than attitude dominates. The cars of the train become unattached, and the two are left alone in the parlor car. The play ends on a happy note which has Lucy concluding: "Only think, Allen! If this car hadn't broken its engagement, we might never have mended ours."⁵ The clever yet simple situations are built around real people, for Howells presents them in a vivid, natural manner. The natural situations are displayed against an out-of-the-way setting, that of a parlor car, and the characters express themselves in everyday conversation.

Howells' ability always to choose the right word, particularly in his description, is aptly exemplified in the following amusing excerpt from his first play. Also evident in this selection is Howells' ingenious ability never to repeat stage directions. Lucy had just tried to rise from her chair and leave, for because of their argument she feels that one of them must leave, and Allen remains in his chair.

⁵William Dean Howells, The Sleeping Car and Other Farces, p.48.

. . . (She rises haughtily from her seat, but the imprisoned skirt of her polonaise twitches her back into her chair. She bursts into tears.) Oh what shall I do?

Mr. Richards, dryly: You shall do whatever you like, Miss Galbraith, when I've set you free, for I see your dress is caught in the window. When it's once out, I'll shut the window, and you can call the porter to raise it. (He leans forward over her chair, and while she shrinks back the length of her tether, he tugs at the window-fastening.) I can't get at it. Would you be so good as to stand, --all you can? (Miss Galbraith stands up, droopingly, and Mr. Richards makes a movement toward her, and then falls back.) No, that won't do. Please sit down again. . . . I've just thought of something. Will it unbutton?

Miss Galbraith: Unbutton?

Mr. Richards: Yes, this garment of yours.

Miss Galbraith: My polonaise? (Inquiringly) Yes.

Mr. Richards: Well, then, it's a very simple matter. If you will just take it off, I can easily --

Miss Galbraith; faintly: I can't. A polonaise isn't like an over-coat.

Mr. Richards; with dismay: Oh! Well, then-- (He remains thinking a moment in hopeless perplexity.)

Miss Galbraith, with polite ceremony: The porter will be back soon. Don't trouble yourself any further. . . .

Mr. Richards, without heeding her: If you could kneel on that foot-cushion and face the window--

Miss Galbraith, kneeling promptly: So?

Mr. Richards: Yes, and now--(kneeling beside her)--if you'll allow me to--to get at the window-catch, --(he stretches both arms forward. . .)--and pull, while I raise the window-- . . . Well, now then, pull hard! (He lifts the window with a great effort, the polonaise comes free with a start, and she strikes violently against him. In supporting the shock he cannot

forbear catching her for an instant to his heart. She frees herself, and starts indignantly to her feet.)

Miss Galbraith: Oh, what a cowardly--subterfuge!

Mr. Richards: Cowardly? You've no idea how much courage it took.⁶

The preceding passage is typical of Howells in presenting natural dialogue, especially that which takes place between a boy and girl such as Lucy Galbraith and Allen Richards.

Howells introduces a larger number of characters in his next play, which is a comedy, for interplay of character, instead of incident, is emphasized. This comedy, Out of the Question (1877), is concerned with social values. Blake, the hero, is "out of the question" as a husband because his social status is lower than the Bellingham's. Quinn maintains that "in this play Howells had a theme that he loved to treat, the contrast of the natural gentleman with the girl who is the product of breeding, and who is held back by her traditions, made concrete by her family, but who triumphs over them."⁷ At first Mrs. Bellingham, Aunt Kate, and even Leslie, the daughter, cannot overlook the fact that Blake had been a steamboat engineer and was now just a poor inventor with no background, for having once been a steamboat

⁶ Ibid., pp. 18-20.

⁷ Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, p. 69.

engineer, one can never be a gentleman. Howells approaches the situation from the satiric viewpoint, and Quinn affirms that "some of his best shafts at the artificial standards of human conduct are contained" in this comedy.⁸

The setting is the Ponkwasset Hotel, where in the adjoining woods Blake rescues Leslie from some aggressive tramps. Throughout the first scenes he continues performing numerous favors for the three ladies. Therefore, the Bellinghams feel indebted to him and admit that he has acted very gentlemanly toward them. The situation becomes involved when Leslie offers to go into partnership with him by offering financial assistance. The result is rather painful because Blake believes it to be a partnership other than a business one. This situation is soon smoothed over when Blake reveals his love for her, but Charles Bellingham, the son, is summoned to do his duty as head of the family and, by using his diplomacy, explain to Blake why a marriage is "out of the question." The situation is further complicated when it is learned that Blake is the one who had rescued Charles from drowning five years before. However, since it is his duty, no matter how much he dislikes it, Charles performs his task, but he does so needlessly, for Leslie has convinced her mother, in the meantime, that her happiness depends upon this so-called ill-assorted marriage. The comical element of the scene in which Charles attempts

⁸ibid.

to play the diplomatist is enhanced by the reader's ironical awareness that the marriage has already been agreed to.

In this play is an example of Howells' variety in stage directions; however, examples could be found on every page of his plays.

Blake, walking up and down, and stopping from time to time while he speaks in a tone of passionate self-restraint:
 Bellingham, reluctantly:
 Blake, with suppressed feeling:
 Bellingham, at first confused and then with a burst of candor:
 Blake, bewildered:
 Bellingham, hastily:
 Blake, with hardness:
 Bellingham, hastily interposing:
 Blake, gravely:
 Bellingham, abruptly:
 Blake, with a ~~dad~~, musing tone:⁹

The preceding examples illustrate the ability of Howells never to repeat a stage direction; they also follow the purpose of a stage direction, as Mark Twain defines that purpose, to inform. In fact, the stage directions almost convey the scene without the accompanying dialogue.

To Howells, as the play Out of the Question reveals, the question of social inequality is no light matter. He deals with it very seriously. Howells' ideas are expressed in the words of Blake, when he is discussing with Leslie what a gentleman really is:

Blake: It made me think of the notion of a gentleman I once heard from a very nice fellow years ago: he believed that you

⁹William Dean Howells, Out of the Question, pp. 158-165.

couldn't be a gentleman unless you began with your grandfather. I was younger then, and I remember shivering over it, for it left me quite out in the cold, though I couldn't help liking the man; he was a gentleman in spite of what he said, --a splendid fellow, if you made allowance for him. You have to make allowances for everybody, especially the men who have had all the advantages. It's apt to put them wrong for life; they get to thinking that the start is the race. I used to look down on that sort of men, once--in theory. But what I saw of them in the war taught me better; they all wanted an emergency, and they could show themselves as good as anybody. It isn't safe to judge people by their circumstances; besides, I've known too many men who had all the disadvantages and never came to anything. Still I prefer the tramp's idea--perhaps because it's more flattering--that you are a gentleman if you choose to be so. What do you think?

Leslie: I don't know. (After an interval long enough to vanquish and banish a disagreeable consciousness); I think it's a ¹⁰ very unpleasant subject. Why don't you talk of something else?

This romantic comedy, which almost changes to farce because of the manner used in the conference between Bellingham and Blake, was written in 1877, a year after he wrote his first play.

A Counterfeit Presentment, his next play, was written during the same year. Though it has been observed that the majority of Howells' plays never reached the stage, this play was produced by Lawrence Barrett at the Grand Opera House in Cincinnati, October 11, 1877. The unusual situation of this play proves to be extremely interesting.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 82-84.

The scene is again the Ponkwasset Hotel, where Bartlett, an artist, is painting. He is naturally abashed, disturbed, and confused when three new arrivals--General Wyatt, Mrs. Wyatt, and their daughter, Constance--appear and display the greatest abhorrence upon meeting him. This painful scene is soon explained by the extraordinary resemblance that Bartlett has to a scoundrel who has been engaged to Constance, and who, after General Wyatt has learned of his actual crimes, has been forced by Wyatt to break the engagement. However, the General, who is completely ignorant of feminine psychology, prefers to conceal the real truth of the broken engagement from Constance, deciding that it is better for his daughter to believe that her fiance jilted her in favor of someone else than to know how unworthy he is of her love, and hoping that her pride will carry her through the indelicate situation. Instead she falls into a nervous collapse, which is not improved by her seeing Bartlett, for to her he looks and acts exactly like her former fiance.

Quinn observes that

. . . this situation is presented to us by the most uncompromising realist of his day without apology, and his defense might well be that he provides a dramatic situation which, once the initial difficulty is surmounted, is developed logically enough. ¹¹

¹¹Quinn, op. cit., p. 69.

When the "initial difficulty" has passed, Bartlett naturally falls in love with Constance, and her attraction and repulsion of a man of his temperamental nature and the problems of a woman struggling out of a nervous breakdown caused by disappointed love provide some clever though sometimes embarrassing scenes. The most amusing scenes are those in which Bartlett and Constance are left together and in which she is constantly comparing him with her lover of the past. She begins to see certain differences, and this observance surprises her. Then in the last part of the play Constance discovers that the two men are "not at all alike." Finally, General Wyatt has to tell her about the crimes of the man who had jilted her in order to convince her of his unworthiness, for she thinks she is still in love with him.

In his descriptions of his characters, in his revealing their characteristics, and in his non-literary dialogue, Howells makes his characters seem real and natural. The main theme of A Counterfeit Presentment is serious and even tragic at times. Firkins maintains that

There are three grades of seriousness in the play: the coincidence is inherently light; the situation of Constance is essentially tragic; but the treatment occupies a middle zone, lightening and darkening as occasion serves. As often happens in Mr. Howells, the depth of the suffering exceeds that of the story.¹²

¹²O. W. Firkins, William Dean Howells, A Study, pp. 236-237.

A Counterfeit Presentment is not farce. The characters carry the main interest, and as Quinn points out, "the dialogue reveals Howells' powers of implication,"¹³ as shown in the following scene, which succeeds the dialogue in which Mrs. Wyatt assures Constance that Bartlett does not know of her earlier engagement:

Mrs. Wyatt: But what made you think he knows?

Constance: (Solemnly) He behaved just as if he didn't.

Mrs. Wyatt: Ah, you can't judge from that my dear.
(Impressively) Men are very different.

Constance: (Doubtfully) Do you think so, mamma?

Mrs. Wyatt: I'm certain of it.¹⁴

There have been several comments made by critics concerning the first three plays of Howells. Brander Matthews, in 1877, wrote:

. . . He began with the dainty and delicate little comedy, The Parlor Car, which he maligned greatly in calling a farce. And before writing A Counterfeit Presentment, now appearing in the Atlantic, and destined for the stage, he produced Out of the Question. Whether it would succeed or not in the theatre, we cannot of course tell; no test is sufficient short of the ordeal by fire--the glare of the footlights. Its story is simple and well handled; the interest is well sustained, the characters are well contrasted. But perhaps the effects are not quite broad enough; perhaps there is not color enough; perhaps the tone of the whole piece is too quiet; perhaps it is all too slight for the stage. Possibly, indeed, it was never intended to be acted. If this be so, if it were only a tentative essay in a new form, its success can

¹³Quinn, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁴William Dean Howells, A Counterfeit Presentment, p. 92.

be called complete. Mr. Howells has never worked with a lighter hand or a firmer touch than in many passages of this little comedy.¹⁵

Firkins pointed out that "Out of the Question and A Counterfeit Presentment are perhaps the best examples, not of comedy, but of literature in comedy, that America can offer."¹⁶

However, it is needless to say, that these three plays, The Parlor Car, Out of the Question, and The Counterfeit Presentment, whether farces or comedies, do represent Howells' first period as dramatist, and with their natural and refreshing characterization and realistic dialogue began Howells' pursuit of realism in drama.

As has been previously pointed out, Howells' theory of realism includes the truthful treatment of commonplace material. This theory is exemplified in all his writing. Kirk points out that "while Howells was preaching his doctrine of realism in The Atlantic Monthly and in Harper's, he was illustrating his ideas in his novels. He was also practising realism in a series of farces which began with The Parlor Car. . . ."¹⁷ In all his plays Howells presents characters and situations in which there is seldom anything more moving and effective than what one finds in the average course of things. Usually his

¹⁵ Brander Matthews, op. cit., p. 148.

¹⁶ Oscar W. Firkins, "William Dean Howells," Dictionary of American Biography, Dumas Malone, editor, p. 309.

¹⁷ Kirk and Kirk, op. cit., p. 83.

plays are light and amusing transcripts from life, for if they ever do express strong emotions, they use people who are so much like the average people we know that it is difficult for us to remember exactly who they are.

Although one does not remember the characters of The Parlor Car, it is difficult to forget the play's clever transcripts from life; that is, the situation in which the parlor car becomes unattached from the rest of the train and an engagement is mended, or the difficulty in getting loose a polonaise which is caught in the window.

One does not easily forget the painful scene of Out of the Question in which the heroine offers a partnership in the form of financial aid to the hero, who, for an awkward moment, interprets it to be a partnership other than a business one; or the uneasy scene in which Bellingham tries to convince the hero that the proposed marriage is "out of the question."

It is impossible to forget the humorous situations caused in Howells' third play by a "counterfeit presentment": the temperamental nature of the hero which is aroused when the heroine is shocked almost to a faint at her first sight of him; the recurring scenes as the heroine discovers the differences and distinctions between the hero and her former lover; and the almost emotional scene when the heroine learns of the real reason she has been jilted.

All these are transcripts from life. Howells believed that he could make his writings interesting and exciting by taking characters and incidents from life. His truthful handling of characters combined with his lifelike incidents produce realism according to his own definition. The realism, therefore, in Howells' plays is supported not only by the interaction of the characters, but also by the selective detail of his descriptions.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAYS OF HOWELLS

Quinn maintains that "to have done one thing extremely well is enough to justify any dramatist, and Howells is surpassed by no one who has written in English in the creation of the farce comedy, which depends for its effect upon the delicate contrast of domestic and social values."¹ At the height of his creative power in 1883, Howells wrote his first play involving his inimitable quartet--the Robertses and the Campbells. The eleven plays which include the activities and antics of this delightful four represent Howells' most productive endeavors and cover the period from 1883 to 1900. Although Howells calls these eleven plays farces, the characters are almost never overshadowed by incident. It is in The Sleeping Car (1883) that Howells introduces the characters which entertained almost two generations. The characters are all of the same social set and are fairly consistent. Mrs. Agnes Roberts, the first of the quartet, is unrivaled. From her first word to her last, as she gives expression to her every thought, she is a continual source of humor. Her specialization is exaggeration. However, Howells presents her as a real and living

¹Quinn, op. cit., p. 67.

individual whom we have all heard and known, thinking aloud in private and public. Her husband is the absent-minded Edward Roberts, who is candid and usually unresourceful. Her brother, Willis Campbell, a tease and trickster, but usually sensible and witty, enjoys completely the predicaments of others, especially those of Edward Roberts. Mrs. Amy Somers, a widow, and later Mrs. Willis Campbell, who does not appear until a later play, Five O'Clock Tea (1889), is the chief representative of inconsistency and illogicality. Howells introduces his characters by delightful touches of description.

For mirroring his characters and situations, Howells, it seems, has reveled in the utilization of out-of-the-way settings. In his plays he uses the sleeping car, the elevator, the railway station, and the smoking car. Howells combines his delightful characters and his amusing situations with his unusual settings in the form of the one-act play, though the scene changes are numerous. The number of scene changes range from three in The Sleeping Car (1883) and in The Elevator (1885) to twelve in Five O'Clock Tea (1889) and fourteen scene changes in The Unexpected Guests (1893). Even in his first play concerning the Robertses and the Campbells, Howells uses the unusual setting of a sleeping car.

The amusing situations which involve Mr. and Mrs. Edward Roberts in The Sleeping Car are united by the incessant talking of

Agnes Roberts. The first incident concerns Agnes while she is on the train traveling to meet her brother, Willis Campbell, whom she has not seen in twelve years. Her brother's trip from California provides her with conversation through the wakening hours while she destroys mercilessly the silence of the sleeping car. The moment that she enters the car she begins expressing her every thought. Then she discovers that the man across the hall from her is from California, which is the only evidence she needs for conversation. Comments by other passengers who are disturbed run simultaneously with the conversation and finally become mockery, though often humorous. In the second scene Edward Roberts, in the hope of surprising his wife, boards the train. This incident causes more disturbance, for the first curtain he opens, seeking his wife, is to the berth of the Californian. Other scenes follow in which the Californian is disturbed. Finally Agnes decides that the Californian is her brother, but her investigation proves her wrong. In the last scene a new passenger enters the car, and the Robertses discover that this, finally, is Willis. The play, however, does not end until the Californian is disturbed again, for Willis thinks he is a friend of his. Willis pulls him out of his berth and then sees his mistake. The play contains continuous humorous situations involving mistaken identity; actually there is never a dull moment. The play, which is only a series of sketches, serves its

purpose well in introducing three of the four characters who never cease to enliven the remainder of Howells' plays.

It seems that in each play one particular person of the quartet is dominant, though the others appear at the same time and are important. In The Sleeping Car Mrs. Roberts dominates the scenes, but in The Elevator (1885) Willis Campbell seems to be the chief character, especially in the last scene in which his practical nature is revealed. It is he who saves the Robertses' guests, who are enclosed in the elevator which has stopped between two floors and will not go up any farther. The first scene pictures the gathering of part of the guests and the puzzlement and wonder at the lateness of the absent ones. The reader or hearer is carried to the point in which he just begins to feel the nervous tension of Mrs. Roberts. In the second scene the observer is transferred to the elevator and finds all the missing guests. Everyone from Aunt Mary to the elevator boy reveals his nature by his reaction to his uneasy position. After becoming panicky the guests in the elevator begin screaming. In the third scene the prisoners are finally discovered.

The ingenious device of having the second scene contemporaneous with the first scene brings the third scene at just the right moment. In the third scene the uneasiness and anxiety of the guests in the elevator make them react humorously to the pointless questions of Mr. and Mrs. Roberts and the others, which are spoken

through the grating of the elevator shaft. Willis Campbell arrives and makes the most sensible and practical suggestion: why do they not try running the elevator down since it will not go up and then walk up to the Robertses' apartment. It is a simple and logical suggestion, but the reader has been kept from making the same suggestion by Howells, who cleverly and carefully guides the conversation away from the obvious solution.

Not only do the Robertses and the Campbells appear again and again, but also their friends reappear over and over, as in The Garroters (1886). Edward Roberts is the principal character in this play, although Mrs. Roberts is important, for the extent of her conversation envelops the action. Arriving in his drawing room disheveled and completely exhausted, Roberts announces to his wife that he has been robbed on the Common and is met with continuous exclamations of sympathy from his wife as well as with her praise for his courage in retrieving his stolen watch. Both Edward, a quiet, mild-mannered gentleman, and his wife are surprised that he would ever take such a risk. Interest and curiosity are enlarged by the appearance of the touselled Mr. Bemis, who also announces that he has been robbed on the Common. The sickening moment when Roberts goes to his room and discovers that his watch has never left his dressing table and that the upset Mr. Bemis, who is a guest at Mrs. Roberts' dinner party, has been his victim is matched only by the futile effort of Roberts,

at Campbell's suggestion, to tell the truth but carry it off as a joke.

The following excerpt from the play exposes Edward's lack of success:

Roberts, entering the room before Campbell, and shaking hands with his guests: Ah, Mr. Bemis; Mrs. Bemis; Aunt Mary! You've heard of our comical little coincidence--our--Mr. Bemis and my--(He halts, confused, and looks around for the moral support of Willis, who follows hilariously.)

Willis: Greatest joke on record! But I won't spoil it for you, Roberts. Go on! (In a low voice to Roberts): And don't look so confoundedly down in the mouth. They won't think it's a joke at all.

Roberts, with galvanic lightness: Yes, yes--such a joke! Well, you see-- you see--

Mrs. Crashaw: See what, Edward? Do get it out!

Willis, jollily: A, ha, ha!

Mrs. Bemis: How funny! Ha, ha, ha!

Bemis: Excellent!

Willis: Go on, Roberts, do! or I shall die! Ah, ha, ha!

Roberts, in a low voice of consternation to Willis: Where was I? I can't go on unless I know where I was.

Willis, sotto voce to Roberts: You weren't anywhere! For heaven's sake, make a start!

Roberts, to the others, convulsively: Ha, ha, ha! I supposed all the time, you know, that I had been robbed, and-- and--

Willis: Go on! go on!

Roberts, whispering: I can't do it!

Willis, whispering: You've got to! You're the beaver that clomb the tree. Laugh naturally, now!

Roberts, with a staccato groan, which he tries to make pass for a laugh: And then I ran after the man--(He stops, and regards Mr. Bemis with a ghastly stare.)

Mrs. Crashaw: What is the matter with you, Edward? Are you sick?²

Mrs. Roberts is out of the room during the preceding episode and also when Edward confesses; therefore, we miss the delightful pleasure of observing her when she learns of Edward's mistake.

In this play Mrs. Roberts' powers of exaggeration are clearly manifested in her retelling to her other guests the story of her husband's encounter with the supposed robber. The following is an example of her exaggeration:

Mrs. Roberts: . . . The idea of being robbed at six o'clock on the Common made him so furious that he scorned to cry out for help, or call the police, or anything; but he just ran after them--

Roberts: Agnes! Agnes! There was only one.

Mrs. Roberts: Nonsense, Edward! How could you tell, so excited as you were? --And caught hold of the largest of the wretches--a perfect young giant--

Roberts: No, no, not a giant, my dear.

Mrs. Roberts: Well, he was young, anyway! --And flung him on the ground. . . . All the rest were tugging at him, and snatched his watch, and then--and then just walked coolly away.

Roberts: No, my dear; I ran as fast as I could.³

²William Dean Howells, The Garroters, pp. 48-49.

³Ibid., pp. 13-14.

The last member of the quartet appears and dominates the scene in Five O'Clock Tea (1889). Mrs. Amy Somers, a young widow, is the heroine of both Five O'Clock Tea and Howells' next play, The Mouse Trap (1889). Contrasting our two ladies, Mrs. Somers is more clever than Mrs. Roberts, yet just as feminine. In Five O'Clock Tea Mrs. Somers serves tea daintily to her guests against a delicate setting of falling snow outside the window. The setting is perfect for the quiet and incessant fall of wit in the parlor. Delightful dialogue between Mrs. Somers and Mr. Campbell is the main element. A proposal of marriage has to get itself made, heard, and answered amid the social interruptions caused by five o'clock tea. The sophisticated tête-à-têtes between Campbell and Amy Somers take place during the intervals of a tea party, for the tea room is emptied and refilled almost constantly. The amusing repartee, which is continuously interrupted by guests, is exemplified in the following passage:

Mrs. Somers: Well?

Campbell: Well, what?

Mrs. Somers: Nothing. Only I thought you were--you were going to--

Campbell: No I've got nothing to say.

Mrs. Somers: I didn't mean that. I thought you were going to--go. (She puts up her hand and hides a triumphant smile with it.)

Campbell: Very well, then, I'll go, since you wish it. (He holds out his hand.)

Mrs. Somers, putting hers behind her: You've shaken hands once. Besides who said I wished you to go?

Campbell: Do you wish me to stay?

Mrs. Somers: I wish you to--hand tea to people.

Campbell: And you won't say anything more?

Mrs. Somers: It seems to me that's enough.

Campbell: It isn't enough for me. But I suppose beggars mustn't be choosers. I can't stay merely to hand tea to people, however. You can say yes or no now, Amy, as well as any other time.

Mrs. Somers: Well, no, then--if you wish it so much.

Campbell: You know I don't wish it.

Mrs. Somers: You gave ~~me~~ my choice. I thought you were indifferent about the word.

Campbell: You know better than that, Amy.

Mrs. Somers: Amy again! Aren't you a little previous, Mr. Campbell?

Campbell, with a sigh: Ah, that's for you to say.

Mrs. Somers: Wouldn't it be impolite?

Campbell: Oh, not for you.

Mrs. Somers: If you're so sarcastic, I shall be afraid of you.

Campbell: Under what circumstances?

Mrs. Somers; dropping her eyes: I don't know. (He makes a rush upon her.) Oh! here comes Mrs. Curwen! Shake hands as if you were going.⁴

⁴William Dean Howells, Five O'Clock Tea, pp. 86-87.

The art is far more delicate in Five O'Clock Tea than in The Mouse Trap, but the picture of Mrs. Somers and the other ladies perched upon chairs, sofas, and a piano stool in dread of the mouse that exists only in Campbell's imagination is unforgettable. The play opens with Campbell and Amy Somers discussing women suffrage, and Campbell, wishing to reveal the real weakness of women, imagines he sees a mouse. He does not completely foresee the final result, for Amy becomes almost hysterical as do the other ladies who drop by on their way to a reception. The ladies finally perch on the furniture and will not move, even after Campbell tries to convince them there is no mouse, for they insist that it is merely the idea that is so horrible. After Campbell devises a method of escape--for all to rush out together screaming, all of the ladies escape except Amy, who remains on the chair. He convinces her that his seeing the mouse was just a trick, and there is much clever scolding from Amy. The very amusing scene ends on the following note:

Mrs. Somers: Nothing. But if I were a man--

Campbell: Well?

Mrs. Somers: Well, in the first place, I wouldn't have got you wrought up so.

Campbell: Well, but if you had! Suppose you had done all that I've done, and that I was up there in your place standing on a chair, and wouldn't let you leave the room, and wouldn't get down and walk out, and wouldn't allow myself to be carried, what would you do?

Mrs. Somers; who has been regarding him attentively over the top of her fan, which she holds pressed against her face: Why, I suppose if you wouldn't let me help you willingly--I should use violence.

Campbell: You witch! (As he makes a wild rush upon her, the curtain, which in the plays of this author has a strict regard for the convenances, abruptly descends.)⁵

Almost the top mark of Howells' effortless ease is reached in the opening conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Willis Campbell in A Likely Story (1889), a play in which both the Campbells are dominant. A letter is used as the mechanical means for a delightful play. A lover puts a love-note into an envelope, which he unintentionally sends to Mrs. Campbell, whose invitation to a garden party he intends to refuse. The arrival of the letter is the subject of the breakfast-table repartee between the Campbells. The ensuing selection reveals the effortless ease of the amusing conversation:

Mrs. Campbell: . . . Mr. Phillips, . . . Mr. Small, Mr. Peters, Mr. Staples. . . , all accept, and they're all charming young fellows.

Campbell, around his paper: Well, what of that?

Mrs. Campbell, with an air of busy preoccupation: Don't eavesdrop, please; I wasn't talking to you. The Merrills have the pleasure, and the Morgans are sorrow-stricken; the--

Campbell: Yes, but why should you care whether those fellows are charming or not? Who's going to marry them.

Mrs. Campbell: I am. Mrs. Stevenson is bowed to the earth; Colonel Murphree is overjoyed; the Misses Ja--

⁵ William Dean Howells, The Mouse Trap, pp. 135-136.

Campbell, putting his paper down: Look here, Amy. Do you know that you have one little infinitesimal ewe-lamb of a foible? You think too much of young men.

Mrs. Campbell: Younger men, you mean. And you have a multitude of perfectly mammoth peccadilloes. You interrupt. (She goes on opening and reading her letters). . .

Campbell: You pay them too much attention altogether. It spoils them; and one of these days you'll be getting some of them in love with you, and then what will you do?

Mrs. Campbell, with affected distraction: What are you talking about? I'd refer them to you, and you could kill them. . . (She goes on with her letters.)

.
And--yes! here's one from Mr. Welling! Oh, how glad I am! . .

Campbell: . . . What does he say?

Mrs. Campbell: I haven't looked yet. He writes the most characteristic hand. . . And he has the divinest taste in perfumes! (She presses it repeatedly to her pretty nose. . .)

Campbell: Oh, hello!

Mrs. Campbell; laughing: Willis, you are delightful. I should like to see you really jealous once.

Campbell: You won't, as long as I know my own incomparable charm. . . .

.
Well, is he coming? I'm not jealous, but I'm impatient. Read it aloud.

Mrs. Campbell: . . . Indeed I shall not. (She opens it and runs it hastily through, with various little starts, stares, frowns, smiles of arrested development, laughs, and cries): Why, why! What does it mean? Is he crazy? Why, there's some mistake. . . . Oh, Willis! What does it mean? . . .

Campbell: Well, let's see. (He reads the love-note aloud). ⁶

⁶William Dean Howells, A Likely Story, pp. 147-151.

Mrs. Campbell, later, in a glow of inspiration, sends the letter to the girl for whom she thought it was meant in an envelope supposed to bear the girl's name. Mrs. Campbell discovers, however, that she has directed the love-note to the wrong girl, and this mistake causes a series of complications. But a blunder saves her from embarrassment, for the letter has been sent on its mission in an old envelope which is addressed to Mrs. Campbell. It is returned with the seal unbroken, and explanation restores happiness. The comedy of character exhibited in the opening dialogue combined with the succeeding comedy of intrigue make a truly humorous appeal.

Edward Roberts is once again the principal character and is placed in an embarrassing situation in The Albany Depot (1892). By his wife he is left at the train station to look for the cook that she has hired. Campbell appears, and since he enjoys the predicaments of others, especially those of Roberts, he thinks it is hilarious that his friend is looking for a cook he has never seen before. After securing courage from Campbell, Roberts approaches and questions a woman to see whether she is the cook. A farcical scene follows in which the enraged woman summons her husband--a tipsy Irishman--because she has been affronted. For the first and only time in his plays Howells inserts Irish dialect. The Irishman keeps returning to Roberts, and Campbell smoothes over the situation each time. A problem in social values enters after the insulted woman, Mrs. McIlheny, declares

that because she is a lady she could hardly be a cook. Then, to Mrs. McIlheny's discomfort, the real cook, Maggie, who happens to be her cousin, appears. Maggie settles the problem by saying that she is as good as her cousin any day. The writer's emphasis on the thin line which separates Mrs. McIlheny and Maggie is a subtle hit at the artificialities of all social rifts.

In the next two plays, A Letter of Introduction (1892) and The Unexpected Guests (1893), there seems to be the perfection of Howells' art and the peak of his pursuit as dramatist. In the first, Edward Roberts is in the spotlight again in another embarrassing situation. Longing to get rid of a traveling Englishman, Mr. Westgate, Roberts gives him a letter of introduction to his uncle. He also writes another letter to his uncle explaining his opinion of the Englishman and asks the visitor to mail it. After his departure Roberts returns to his writing, but is interrupted by his wife's constant verbal flow of sympathy for his wasted time, and by a visit from the Campbells. Roberts, the absent-minded one, is made to believe, by Campbell, that he has affronted the Englishman by mistakenly giving him the wrong letter. Mr. Westgate's return seems to confirm the supposition, and in the ensuing conversation they all try to distract the Englishman from the dreadful topic. Finally, Mr. Westgate reveals the quite unforeseen mistake; he mildly displays the envelope with nothing in it. The

The absence of any inclosure in the envelope not only surprises the Robertses and the Campbells, but the reader as well. This play of character and humor exhibits many completely charming scenes, as the following in which the empty envelope is disclosed:

Campbell: Oh, when it comes to joking, Americans are all alike. Roberts is a little more alike than the rest of us; that's all. So's Uncle Phillip, for that matter. He'd take it right even if Robert hadn't written anything at all.

Westgate: But that's just what Mr. Roberts has done.

All the others: What!

Westgate, handing the envelope to Roberts, who finds it empty, and passes it to his wife, who in turn hands it silently to Mrs. Campbell: Of course I wished to read the kind things you'd said of me, as soon as possible, and I was greatly surprised to find no letter in this envelope. I wasn't sure whether you intended me simply to present the envelope to your uncle, or whether-- At all events, I decided I'd better come and ask. .

Roberts: . . . Really, Mr. Westgate, I don't know what to say.

Campbell: Roberts, you're incorrigible! When will you give up this habit of practical joking? Really, old fellow, you ought to stop it. You and Uncle Phil have kept it up long enough. And I think you owe Mr. Westgate an apology. The joke's on Uncle Phil, of course; but you ought to see that it's rather embarrassing to Mr. Westgate to find himself the bearer of an empty envelope instead of a letter of introduction. Come, now, you must explain; and we'll all apologize for you. (Roberts waits with a foolish face of deprecation, turning to horror at the suggestion of an explanation.) Come! You owe it to yourself as a joker.⁷

⁷William Dean Howells, A Letter of Introduction, pp. 58-61.

The same group which appear in The Elevator assemble again in The Unexpected Guests, though this time it is at a dinner party given by Mrs. Willis Campbell. All the guests arrive late, but Mrs. Campbell meets the delay with more ease than Mrs. Roberts did in The Elevator. The cunning workmanship of Howells in this amusing play is exhibited in the first scenes. Amy is met with the necessity for social falsehood on the arrival of two guests, the Belforts, whom she thought had declined her invitation. She undertakes to hide her surprise. Her skill in trying to keep her shock a secret is to no avail, for the guests one by one learn of the situation. As a background, which serves during intervals as a chorus to everybody's evasions, comes the sound of the reading of a poem from a phonograph, which many of the guests are hearing for the first time. In the next room the phonograph is chanting: "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again." Mrs. Campbell's attempt at concealment is finally ended when suddenly there comes from below the especially loud voice of a man calling the Iroquois Club to send a dozen more quails for the unexpected guests. She seems to be trapped, but she meets the blow triumphantly. The situation of the unexpected guests is explained; it seems that Mrs. Campbell's hasty misreading of Mrs. Belfort's note of acceptance has been the cause of all the difficulty. This discovery, however, is met by Amy Campbell with her usual complete composure;

in fact, it only brings out her reserves, for at the close she is still left the mistress of the situation, as shown in the ensuing dialogue:

Mrs. Campbell: Yes, I was just going out when your note came, Mrs. Belfort, and I read the first page--down to 'for the past fortnight'--and I took it for granted that the opening regret meant a refusal, and just dropped it into my desk and gave you up. It's unexcusable, perfectly unexcusable! I'm quite at your feet, Mrs. Belfort, and I shall not blame you at all if you can't forgive me. What shall I say to you?

Mrs. Belfort, amiably: Nothing, my dear, except that you will let me stay, now I'm here!

Mrs. Campbell: How sweet you are! You shall live with us!

Campbell: Truth crushed to earth! It's perfectly wonderful! Mrs. Campbell can't get away from it when she tries her best. She tells it in spite of herself. She supposed she wasn't telling it when she said there was no mistake on your part; but she was. Well, it's a feminine virtue, doctor.

Dr. Lawton: Unquestionably, I think that it came into the world with woman.

Mrs. Campbell, with ~~an~~ mounting courage: Yes, a pretty predicament I should have been in, Willis, if I had taken your advice, and told the truth, as you call it, in the beginning. But now we won't wait any longer. The quails will come in their own good time. My dear, will you give Mrs. Belfort your arm? And Mr. Belfort, will you give me yours?

Mrs. Curwen: And all the rest of us?

Mrs. Campbell: Oh, you can come out pell-mell.

Mrs. Curwen: Oh, dear Mrs. Campbell.⁸

In both the preceding plays, A Likely Story and The Unexpected Guests, social, formal conversation seems to be the essential element.

⁸William Dean Howells, The Unexpected Guests, pp. 53-54.

This element, combined with Howells' masterly depiction of his characters, makes these plays human and fashionable at the same time.

The Unexpected Guests, like many of the plays of Howells, displays social values and manners. To show the progress of Howells' social consciousness, one might very well compare one of his first plays about the inimitable quartet of Bostonians, such as The Elevator, with The Unexpected Guests, which represents the peak of Howells' creativeness as a dramatist. Both of these plays have as their setting a dinner party. In The Elevator, at Mrs. Roberts' apartment, social rules seem to have no bearing at all upon the plot, but in The Unexpected Guests, the setting being Mrs. Campbell's drawing room, the main importance of the play depends upon her upholding a social convention. In the first play there is physical danger, but in the second play, there is no danger except to the social feelings of Mrs. Campbell, and yet our attention is held with more real interest. The reason for this seems to be that Howells has pictured clever and skillful characters who determine the action and are real, living human beings. Therefore, The Unexpected Guests is actually a comedy of manners and not a farce, as is The Elevator, for in the former play there is an interplay of character rather than an acceleration of action by accident, as in the latter.

In the next play, Evening Dress (1893), Willis Campbell, who enjoys the predicaments of others, and the reader are allowed once

again to revel in the domestic difficulties of Edward Roberts, who, this time, is left by his wife to dress and follow her to a musicale. The opening dialogue and Mrs. Roberts' conversation, as she is leaving the apartment while she urges him to think of something else she should remember to tell him, is perhaps typical of married life. It follows in part:

Mrs. Roberts: Oh, if I could only stay and think for you, dearest! But I can't, and you must do the best you can. Do keep repeating it all over! It's the only way--

Mrs. Campbell: Agnes!

Mrs. Roberts: Amy, I'm coming instantly. . . . And if it turns out to be the grippe, Edward, don't lose an instant. Send for the doctor as fast as the district messenger can fly; give him his car fare, and let one come for me; and jump into bed and cover up warm, and keep up the nourishment with the whiskey. . . . And--

Mrs. Campbell: Agnes! I'm going!

Mrs. Roberts: I'm coming! Edward!

Roberts: Well!

Mrs. Roberts: There is something else, very important. And I can't think of it.

Roberts: Leibig's extract of beef?

Mrs. Roberts, distractedly: No, no! And it wasn't oysters, either, though they're very nourishing, too. Oh, dear! What--

Mrs. Campbell: Going, Agnes!

Mrs. Roberts: Coming, Amy! Try to think of something else that I ought to remember, Edward!

Roberts: Some word to the girls when they come in?

Mrs. Roberts: No!

Roberts: Willis, then; what Amy wants him to do?

Mrs. Roberts: Oh, no, no! I shall surely die if I can't think of it!

Mrs. Campbell, at the door of the apartment: Gone!

Mrs. Roberts, flying after her, as the door closes with a bang: Oh, Amy! How can you be so heartless? She's driven it quite out of my head!⁹

What she forgets to tell him is where he can find his dress suit.

Campbell appears and tries to assist him in solving the problem, for they both know how distressed Agnes and Amy will be if they do not attend Mrs. Miller's musicale. After searching in vain for the dress suit, they send Bella, the maid, to borrow one. The result is humorous, for Campbell has many comments to make on the tight fit of one borrowed suit and the loose fit of the other borrowed suit. Finally Agnes and Amy return and announce what a bore the musicale was, and the lost dress suit is explained. The characters are predominant, but the search for the lost suit is farce.

Before bringing to a close the discussion of the plays about the Robertses and the Campbells, leaving the one remaining play in which we say farewell to the inimitable quartet, it seems opportune, in

⁹ William Dean Howells, Evening Dress, pp. 12-15.

order to show Howells' versatility, to present in brief the other plays written during the period from 1883 to 1900.

In The Register (1884) a furnace register is used as a device to reunite the principal characters. In this play the heroine, Ethel Reed, had taken painting lessons from Oliver Ransom, but he had finally told her that she was just wasting her time, for he could not teach her anything more. He added, however, that if she wanted to continue the lessons for amusement, she could do so. She continued, and the hero, therefore, felt affronted when she had the audacity to offer to pay for all the lessons. Though he had never committed himself, he was in love with her. The setting is a boarding-house, and the play opens immediately after Ethel offers payment to Oliver for the painting lessons. Howells' ingenious plot soon begins to become involved, for while Ethel is telling her friend what Ransom will have to do before she will receive him, in the adjoining room happens to be Ransom, who can hear everything she is saying. The sounds float clearly through the register. Ransom later explains to his friend his association with Ethel, and by mistake, of course, Ethel, in the adjoining room, hears his conversation through the register. Ransom is unaware of this mistake until the close of the play, when explanations and confession restore happiness.

The thin plot of this farce is overshadowed by Howells' clever handling of the characters and his use of the device of the register as having significance in the shaping of their lives.

Howells' versatility is obviously in evidence in the play he wrote in 1888. A Sea Change or, Love's Stowaway, which he calls a "lyricated farce," is a comic opera; the only play, incidentally, which Howells divides into acts. The comic opera reveals Howells' fondness for the work of W. S. Gilbert. The play not only shows the versatility of Howells, but also his inventive ability. The libretto is delightful.

Although this play contains much satire, it does not seem to be directed toward any current frailty. The play is actually a satire on the illogical, capricious type of girl who rejects a lover for no reason at all. She finds her rejected lover on the steamer on which they have both taken refuge, and she promptly demands that he go ashore. Since the ship is already at sea, the captain solemnly suggests that he transfer to a floating iceberg. In the second act Howells introduces a dream scene of ingenious inconsistency in which nearly all the male passengers and the captain leave the ship for the iceberg to join the Ice Princess and her maidens. The absurdities of comic opera are skillfully woven into the plot. In the Epilogue Howells allows his characters to return to reality, and happiness is restored.

It is amusing to note one satiric incident in the dream scene in which chewing gum is served to the fairies at a ball. The Ice Princess explains the reason: "They were all sales-ladies once; and they're very nervous still, poor things."¹⁰

Howells did not write a play that concerned the Robertses and the Campbells for almost ten years. In 1897 A Previous Engagement, a comedy, appeared, and though it is a one-act play with only four roles, it includes seven scenes. This play is highly characteristic of Howells. A young girl, Philippa, has been asked in marriage by Mr. Camp, but she insists on making confessions and later on making Mr. Camp also confess. She tells of her previous engagement and insists that he also be honest; therefore, he tells of his previous engagement.

Philippa's uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Winton, and the attractive Mr. Camp are entirely pleasing, but in her courtship Philippa is often ill-tempered and unreasonable. The admirable comment, which could possibly be Howells' opinion and definition of women, is presented by the shrewd and subtle Mrs. Winton: "Women not only have to hoodwink men; they have to hoodwink themselves. A girl--such a girl as Philippa--enjoys putting herself through her paces before a man;

¹⁰ William Dean Howells, A Sea Change or, Love's Stowaway, p. 124.

she likes to exploit her emotions, and see how he takes it; though she may not know it."

In Howells' next play, Room Forty-Five (1900), there is actually no plot, just an incident, and it seems to be the broadest of all his farces. The incident describes the exaggerated suffering of a married couple disturbed by a man in the hotel room below them who sleeps, as Howells terms it, with passionate intensity. The farcical, yet humorous, descriptions appear in part:

Mrs. Trenmore: . . . Julian, what's that? Don't you hear it?

Trenmore: Yes, certainly, I hear it. It's nothing but the engineer trying the steam in the boilers. . . .

Mrs. Trenmore: Why, of course! . . . But what are they doing now? Listen.

Trenmore, listening and reporting with analytical conscientiousness: Well, they seem to be letting off steam. And--putting on coal. And--sawing kindling. And--planing. And--catching the plane in knots. And--chopping ice. And--now they're emptying out potatoes on the floor. . . . And--choking and catching their breath, and--

Mrs. Trenmore: They're killing somebody! I tell you they are; and we shall both be subpoenaed and cross examined, and I don't know what all. Go down and-- There, it's stopped again; it's all perfectly silent; they're every one of them dead. . . .

Trenmore; listening more closely: It isn't murder-- It's something much worse-- It's-- Don't you hear? Listen! (She stoops and listens with him; then she lifts herself and faces him.)

Mrs. Trenmore: You don't mean to tell that it's someone-- snoring? (He nods solemnly.) Julian, I can't believe it! That

any human being is making those horrible sheets and spurts, and chips, and shavings, and lumps, and hooks and bounces of noise in his sleep? (He nods as before.)¹¹

Bride Roses, which was written in 1900, apparently belongs to one of Howells' greater creative moments, and it further reveals Howells' versatility. This play, which Howells calls a scene, is his one serious prose play. The touching and original idea, molded by Howells into one scene, is enacted in a florist's shop where three various people order roses for a young girl whose death is known to only one of them. The first lady enters the florist's shop to order flowers for the young girl who is to assist her at a tea. Her indecision is rather lengthy, but she finally selects white roses, called Bride Roses. A young man enters and finally decides on Bride Roses, which he is sending a young girl. The second lady, who apparently is very upset, hastily orders Bride Roses for the funeral of a young girl. At the close of the play only the florist and the reader know that all the Bride Roses were for the same young girl. The touching and effective tragedy is intensified by the contrast between the typical indecision of the first lady, who is selecting flowers for a tea, and the hasty choice of the second lady, who is selecting flowers for a funeral. Howells' social consciousness is exemplified in this tragical yet enchanting and touching scene.

¹¹ William Dean Howells, Room Forty-Five, pp. 23-25.

The last play that Howells ever wrote is An Indian Giver (1900). This play contains some very pointed psychology. Mrs. Inglehart's determination to give away her lover is surpassed in naturalness only by the rapidity of her taking him back. James Fairford reflects: "If you wanted anything, would you put it out of your power, in order to realize your desire for it?" After Mrs. Inglehart, a widow, gives Fairford away to her house guest, she realizes that she is in love with him and that she wants him back. In the last scene there is a final twist which reveals that the house guest is already engaged and that she has gone along with Mrs. Inglehart's scheme only because she had not the courage to spoil it for her.

The preceding comedy exhibits definite interplay of character, but it lacks the freshness, the naturalness, the delightful repartee, and the realistic characterization of Howells' plays about his delightful Robertses and Campbells.

However, the last glimpse of the quartet of Bostonians is rather anticlimactic after Five O'Clock Tea, A Likely Story, and The Unexpected Guests. In The Smoking Car (1900) Roberts is caught in another of his numerous embarrassing and unavoidable situations, and he again is the principal character. Roberts is in the smoking car, waiting to be joined by his wife and the Campbells, when a young mother enters the car and after much hesitation leaves her baby with

Roberts because she needs to go back for her bag. Willis Campbell then appears on the scene and enjoys another Roberts predicament. The amusing dialogue between Roberts and Campbell exclaiming over the baby follows in part:

Campbell: . . . It's rather a nice little thing.

Roberts, with relief: Yes, and it's been very good.

Campbell: Oh, it hasn't had time to be bad yet, if its mother's just gone out. (After a moment) Besides, it's probably drugged.

Roberts, in alarm: Drugged?

Campbell: They usually drug them when they leave them that way.

Roberts: What do you mean by 'leave them that way'?

Campbell: Oh, nothing. Hello! it's going off!

Roberts, grappling with the child: Going off! Good Heavens! She was afraid I should let it fall.

Campbell: I don't mean that. It's going to sleep; don't you see? It is drugged! No wonder it's so good. Well, I congratulate you, Roberts.

Roberts, angrily: Congratulate me? What do you mean, Willis?

Campbell: I don't know what Agnes will say to your taking such a responsibility without consulting her, but if you would do it, why I don't believe you could have adopted a prettier child.

Roberts: Adopted?

Campbell: Do you mean to say you didn't know what you were about? In this paragraphic age, when every day you might read of young mothers getting unwary strangers to hold their babies a moment, and then walking off and never coming back, do you

mean to tell me you didn't know what game that woman was playing? Well, you ought to be left with somebody, and I've half a mind to adopt you myself. That's all. (He falls back against the seat, opens a newspaper, and makes a show of reading it. Roberts leans forward and desperately rends it from him.)

Roberts: Willis, do you suppose--do you think--¹²

After Campbell mildly suggests that the woman never intended to return for her baby, Roberts becomes upset, and we have a rather farcical scene with Roberts' running around the train station, carrying the baby, trying to find the mother. When Agnes and Amy appear, Amy becomes attached to the baby and wants to adopt it. Finally, the mother, who has been detained, returns for her baby, and all their suppositions and assumptions are in vain.

Eleven farces and comedies of manners of Howells are conspicuous for the persistence with which four characters, the Edward Robertses and the Willis Campbells, are brought to the spotlight with their friends in a variety of diverting situations. The entire quartet are in fashionable life. They are depicted with care and success. It is obvious that Mrs. Roberts and Mr. Campbell are the most amusing, but, on the other hand, Mrs. Campbell and Mr. Roberts are the most lifelike. At times there is almost too much cleverness and teasing from Mr. Campbell, and sometimes there is too much fluttering to accompany the incessant talking of Mrs. Roberts. Mrs. Campbell,

¹²William Dean Howells, The Smoking Car, pp. 20-22.

however, is very lifelike in the restraint with which she dignifies her recurring outbursts. Roberts is superb in the worldliness that shields his innocence, and mildness is a part of his whole disposition.

With the disappearance of the Campbells and the Robertses, Howells' best period of comedy was over. Evident in these plays is a variety in the material and method of Howells. For example, in The Sleeping Car he began with domestic farce. Next are The Elevator and The Garroters, in both of which a dinner party is the setting for the principal scenes, but the complications are still external. In The Mouse Trap Amy Somers, later Mrs. Campbell, enters, and with her entrance it seems that the rules and inhibitions of polite society begin to direct the action of the plays. Some very few plays, like Five O'Clock Tea, have no real complications, merely events. In several of the plays we meet no real external motivating force, just self-deception; for example, there is no mouse in The Mouse Trap. It is interesting to note that since Howells uses recurrent characters, it is amazing how little he repeats situations and incidents. The variety of settings, the various novelties he uses, such as conversations overheard through registers, unusual things happening when elevators are stopped between two floors, overheard telephone conversation-- these inventions which were excitingly new when Howells used them-- and all of his varied methods are combined with his clever dialogue to make a series of truly delightful farces and comedies.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Although William Dean Howells is considered today mainly as a novelist, it is this writer's opinion that he should also be recognized as a dramatist, not only because of the delightful and amusing farces and comedies he wrote which began the approach to realistic dramatic literature, but also because of his influence upon other playwrights. However, few writers have given much attention to the plays of Howells, and no one has given him the recognition that he seems to deserve as a dramatist. Of the few who have written about his plays, perhaps Arthur Hobson Quinn, more than any other writer, seems to consider Howells' plays as an approach to realism. Quinn makes the ensuing statements concerning Howells' rank and permanent value as a dramatist:

It is only by a consideration of his work historically as well as critically that its importance and its variety become apparent. We have seen how the great realist was one of the prime movers in the revival of romantic plays on the stage, and it must not be forgotten that A Counterfeit Presentment was played by Lawrence Barrett before Bronson Howard had passed out of melodrama into comedy. How much more permanent is Howells' work in its essential quality of timelessness can be appreciated most quickly by comparing this play with The Banker's Daughter [by Bronson Howard], Old Lavendar [by Edward Harrigan], or The Danites [by Joaquin Miller]. His sense for the

permanent is shown in his choice of those modern improvements, many new in his day, for the scene or the mechanics of his plays. He chooses the elevator, the sleeping-car, the phonograph, the telephone. . . , never any passing fad. Consequently they can be played or read today with little sense of outworn fashion. Of course they are based on eternal motives, love, marriage, the insistent clutch of the feminine upon the direction of personal affairs, the masculine carelessness and absentmindedness of Roberts, the masculine love of teasing in Campbell. Dwelling upon similar motives so often, it is surprising how little he repeats himself. . . .

Clyde Fitch has well said, the eighties and nineties were 'the Howells age,' and many who do not acknowledge it were affected by his unending struggle for truth in art. His plays taught manners and social values to thousands who played in them or saw them on the amateur stage. That they were played professionally so seldom was a loss to our stage which can hardly be estimated.¹

It seems important in a study of Howells as a dramatist to show that a few critics have discussed the permanent value of his farces and comedies. Nevertheless, the few commentators who determine the rank of Howells as dramatist in their remarks are varied in their opinions. Fred Lewis Pattee makes the following assertion:

Howells is not dramatic. . . , yet one may turn pages or chapters of his novels into dramatic form by supplying to the dialogue the names of the speakers. Howells, indeed, acquired a faculty in the construction of sparkling dialogue so brilliant that he exercised it in the production of a surprising number of so-called comedies: A Counterfeit Presentment, The Mouse Trap, The Elevator, and the like, dramatic in form but essentially novelistic in all things else. His genius was not dramatic. He evolved his characters and situations slowly. The swift rush and culminating plot of the drama are beyond him. His

¹Quinn, op. cit., pp. 79-81.

comedies are chapters of dialogue from unwritten novels-- studies in character and manners by means of conversations.²

As shown in the preceding comment, Pattee invariably notes Howells' talent for writing clever, incisive, realistic dialogue, which is an element which adds to the permanent value of his plays.

Delmar G. Cooke, who wrote one of the two biographies of Howells, has made several interesting and revealing observations in his study of Howells. He maintains that in some of his plays Howells has written his "most perfect work." He states that

They are like the sketches of travel in realizing completely the possibilities of the secondary genre. That they have appealed mostly to amateur actors is altogether due to their genre, for they are anything but amateurish in execution. They are parlor plays par excellence, and have been played privately everywhere.³

One of these plays, The Garroters, aroused the enthusiasm of Bernard Shaw, who recorded in his Dramatic Opinions and Essays that he discovered, "quite by accident, an amusing farcical comedy." He continues:

The little piece showed, as might have been expected, that with three weeks' practice the American novelist could write the heads off the poor bunglers to whom our managers generally appeal when they want a small bit of work to amuse the people who come at eight.⁴

²Fred Lewis Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870, p. 213.

³Delmar G. Cooke, William Dean Howells, A Critical Study, p. 168.

⁴Bernard Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, p. 266.

Another comment by Cooke reveals his attitude toward the success of Howells as a dramatist.

One reason for Howells' success with the form may be that the farces represent him in a fairly complete though evanescent state of liberation from his Anglo-Saxon heritage. . . . There are few things more interesting to observe in his work than the disappearance of the sentimentality of the longer comedies when the subtle psychologist goes out to play, unburdened of the necessity of making a comedy, and content to treat manners in their amusing aspects with unlimited indulgence.⁵

Cooke later states in a final examination of Howells as a playwright that Howells took the drama with less seriousness than any other form. However, Cooke continues:

In their artistic seriousness, the farces are at one with the novels; and the fact that the latter abound in protracted comic situations or pathetic situations that can be turned over with their comic uppermost, makes the similarity appear greater than it really is.⁶

It is interesting to note at this point that concurrent with the period of Howells' most creative and realistic novels is the period of his best plays. It was between 1882 and 1900 that A Modern Instance, The Rise of Silas Lapham, Indian Summer, and A Hazard of New Fortunes were written, and during the same period Howells wrote his plays concerning the Robertses and the Campbells, which represent his best period of comedy.

⁵Cooke, op. cit. p. 169.

⁶Ibid., p. 172.

Montrose J. Moses makes several remarks in The American Dramatist about Howells' rank as dramatist. He maintains that "Howells . . . never wrote successful plays because he would never recognize the technique of the drama, as different from and more difficult than the technique of the novel."⁷ He also states, however, that

Howells possessed 'dramatic sense'--even in his narrative he realized the essence of comedy--that essence which would be of greatest benefit to the American dramatist. In comparison with the early literary coteries, however, Howells . . . is nearer the real spirit of the modern drama.⁸

Concerning the lasting value of Howells' plays, Van Wyck Brooks declares:

. . . Howells disliked the theatre as much as he liked the drama. The conditions of the stage were repugnant to him. This indicated that Howells was not a playwright born; but he had a gift for private theatricals, --dramatic chamber music, as one might call them. In The Elevator, The Register, The Parlour-Car, The Sleeping-Car, he exploited the possibilities of these inventions. . . . In after years, Howells' farces recalled a moment of history when all these modern toys were new.⁹

In discussing his plays, Firkins observes that "in farce Mr. Howells was master and originator of a charming vein--the farce of high-bred, virtuous people embodying the psychology of the drawing-room."¹⁰

⁷Moses, op. cit., 1917 edition, p. 308.

⁸Ibid., p. 64.

⁹Brooks, op. cit., p. 212.

¹⁰Firkins, William Dean Howells, op. cit., p. 246.

Perhaps the most refreshing statement made concerning Howells as a realistic dramatist is made by Pattee.

The lightness of Howells' touch, his genuine wit, and his mastery of dialogue appear at their best in his little parlor comedies like 'The Mouse Trap,' 'The Garroters,' and 'The Elevator.' Nothing so good in their line is to be found in American literature. Had he written nothing else he would still be remembered as the laureate of the trivial, who with exquisite prose style and sparkling humor made classics from the ordinary experiences of human life.¹¹

As previously noted, Quinn seems to consider Howells' plays more significant than has any other critic; therefore, it is both interesting and appropriate to mention a critical comment made about Quinn and the manner in which he upholds Howells as a realistic dramatist who influenced other playwrights. The comment, which appears in A History of Modern Drama, follows in part:

Dr. Quinn has offered arguments to show that William Dean Howells, whom he calls 'a master playwright,' exercised considerable influence on the American drama, and to some extent foreshadowed the so-called realistic drama that was to come in later years. It is true that of the many plays written by Howells some were professionally produced, and a few were more or less successful; it is also true that they offered in their quiet and unemphatic way a pleasant contrast to the over-written and bombastic works of their time, and may have given an occasional hint to more than one playwright who sought to create his dramatic effects without going to extremes. On the other hand, the influence of Howells as novelist and critic, though difficult to trace, was without doubt far greater than his example as a practising playwright. It was his championship

¹¹Fred Lewis Pattee, A History of American Literature, p. 428.

of Tolstoi and other revolutionary social and literary writers of Europe that brought to the American literary world of his day a knowledge of forces and ways of treating them that gradually spread--particularly in the case of James A. Herne--to the drama.¹²

Although critics disagree with Quinn's argument that Howells was a realistic dramatist who influenced other playwrights, Quinn does cite appreciable concrete evidence for his view. He maintains that Howells, the dramatist, as "the leader in the realistic treatment of familiar life," by "his example and his critical judgments and inspiration, guided and encouraged Harrigan, Herne, Thomas, and Fitch, who have expressed their obligation to him directly and implicitly."¹³

The extent of the influence of Howells upon Edward Harrigan (1845-1911), James A. Herne (1839-1901), Augustus Thomas (1857-1934), and Clyde Fitch (1865-1909) is directly revealed in the type of plays in which each playwright excelled, for all these types are anticipated in Howells' plays. Harrigan is noted for the comedy of types, particularly comedies which are significant as social history. Herne is important in the development of realism of character. Augustus Thomas presented most clearly and effectively the picture of American life in his plays. Clyde Fitch is important in the development of social comedy; he was securely placed among the "foremost writers of high

¹²Bennett H. Clark and George Freedley, editors, A History of Modern Drama, pp. 648-649.

¹³Quinn, op. cit., p. 66.

comedy."¹⁴ Concerning Howells' influence upon Herne, who is known best for his realistic dramas, Moses has stated that "Howells' point of view struck Herne with force, and he began to put it into practice."¹⁵

In his book, The Print of My Remembrance, Augustus Thomas, in expressing his obligation to Howells, writes:

One day after our return to the states I found our boys in the smoking-car roaring with delight over a little comedy in Harper's Magazine. I joined them and listened to the smart dialogue of 'The Elevator,' by William Dean Howells. This was my first knowledge of him as a dramatist. The effects that he received in that little play, 'The Elevator,' and the others that followed soon after were very educational suggestions to a young writer as to what could be done in the theatre with restraint joined to precision.¹⁶

Recognizing Howells' inspiration and encouragement, Clyde Fitch writes in a letter to Howells concerning an article Howells had written discussing one of Fitch's plays:

No, --I don't think I was more pleased, or so thoroughly encouraged, to do more, & get close to the 'Real Thing,' than I have been by yr 'article' in Harper's Weekly. You see I really represent the Howells' Age! by wh I mean what you were in the first glory and flight of yr success, I was a boy beginning to 'take notice'-- . . . I grew up on you! And so I began to bump along the thirties I began to grow hungry to please you. . . . Thank you! & it was a real personal joy and exhilaration to me, yr article. I live my life in the mist of shams, & I get lost in the fogs sometimes, & strike wrong roads. But if ever I take a good strong & long walk on the Right I sha'n't forget to put 'So many miles to Howells,' always on the milestones ahead of me, as I go along.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 265, 296. ¹⁵Moses, op. cit., 1925 edition, p. 210.

¹⁶Augustus Thomas, The Print of My Remembrance, p. 178.

¹⁷Montrose J. Moses and Virginia Gerson, Clyde Fitch and his Letters, pp. 257-258.

It is clearly recognized, not only by the opinions of a few critics, but by the playwrights themselves, that Howells did exert influence as a dramatist in his approach to realism. Howells' main greatness as a dramatist lies in his influence upon other playwrights in beginning a new drama.

The importance of Howells, as the first American dramatist who sought to write realistic plays, and as the first who believed in and demonstrated a new drama--that which began the realistic vein in dramatic literature, has been here revealed in the following ways: in his beginning interest in drama, when he was in Italy as consul to Venice using the theatre as a laboratory for learning the language and at the same time seeing the plays of the Italian dramatist, Carlo Goldoni; in his discovery and intensive study of the realistic plays of Goldoni, who influenced Howells in beginning his approach to realism in his plays; in the qualities of Howells as dramatist, as revealed both in his early plays and in the plays which represent his most creative period as dramatist and his best period of comedy; and in Howells' rank and success as a dramatist and his direct influence upon Harrigan, Herne, Thomas, and Fitch, all important in the history of American drama.

Even though Howells' contribution to the history of American drama is recognized by very few, it is my belief that his plays are

highly pleasing, entertaining, and clever; that they deserve more recognition; and that today the plays would be read and presented on the amateur stage if they were but better known. His farces and comedies, which are delightful transcripts of life, began realistic drama in the early 1870's. Other playwrights, who were influenced by his realistic dialogue, characterizations, and settings, became better known in American drama because they combined these Howellsian elements in longer plays which were immensely successful on the stage. Yet it was Howells who first incorporated realistic situations into drama. His plays, however, were primarily one-act plays, which were not suited for the professional stage; therefore, Howells is omitted from many annals of American drama. It is my opinion that William Dean Howells should be recognized for the place in the history of American drama that he justly deserves. We must agree with Pattee's accurate summary remark that "had he written nothing else but his farces he would still be remembered as the laureate of the trivial, who with exquisite prose style and sparkling humor made classics from the ordinary experiences of life."

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