WHAT IS HOWELISIAN NATURE?: AN EXAMINATION OF CRITICISM AND FICTION AND A MODERN INSTANCE

Satyam S. Moorty

(Southern Utah University, USA)

Young Frank Cowperwood is intellectually concerned with the struggle between a lobster and a squid - a reflection of Dreiser's portrayal of Darwinian concept of 'survival of the fittest' in nature.

> *Things lived on each other--that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course!... And what lived on men?*[1]

On the other hand, Frank Norris' Vandover reverts to the brute in man. Both Dreiser and Norris seem to ignore the beauty in life, but cling to the naturalist tradition of viewing nature as a force that controls man and determines his life. Howells would not have this one-sided belief in and examination of nature. Neither the struggle and survival nor the bestiality--the two facets of Nature of the naturalists--is the whole truth of what nature is, according to Howells. Also, Howells rejects the romantic celebration and idealization of a single passion, the passion of love. In Criticism and Fiction Howells operates on the levels of a critic and admonishes those writers who continue to lie about life.

> *Fiction would be incomparably stronger, incomparably truer, if once it could tear off the habit which enslaves it to the celebration of a single passion, in one phase or another, and could frankly dedicate itself to he service of all the passions, and all interests, all the facts.*[2]

Similarly, worshipping genius, worshipping heroism, in the romantic spirit, touches only the unrealistic aspects of life. To Howells the 'romantic' approach is both unethical and unbeautiful; while the study of nature by the naturalists "leaves beauty out." Commenting on McTeague Howells chastises Norris that he has "stressed the brutal side of his story... .Life is squalid and cruel and vile and hateful, but it is noble and tender and pure and lovely, too…"[3]

Stephen Crane echoes Howells' repeated insistence on 'truth' as the basis of 'art'. This is expressed eloquently in Criticism and Fiction: "We are most successful in art when we approach the nearest to nature and truth."[4] Having

dismissed the concept of nature of the naturalists and the romanticists, Howells both in his Criticism and Fiction and in his novels defines, though not in direct, precise terms, his view of nature. In A Modern Instance the lawyer Atherton, who is, like the Greek chorus, the conscience keeper of all the characters and who has "knowledge of human nature," and the weak and pious Ben Halleck, friend of Bartley J. Hubbard, echo the novelist's views on what nature is.

> *Ben: "Oh, but generalize! From what you know of women as Woman, what should you expect? Shouldn't you expect her to make you pay somehow for your privity to her disgrace, to revenge her misery upon you? Isn't there a theory that women forgive injuries, but never ignominies?"*
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> *Atherton: "That's what the novelists teach, and we bachelors get most of our doctrine about women from them." ..."We don't go to nature for our impressions; but do the novelists, for that matter. Now and then, however, in the way of business, I get a glimpse of realities that make me doubt my prophets. Who had this experience?"*[5]

While deprecating the attitude of most of the British and American novelists who tend to ignore the realities of nature--"which at the bottom of its heart is always human nature:--,[6] Howells appreciates Tolstoy's force of moral quality of truth to universal and human experience. "His great art is as simple as nature."[7] This suggests that it is necessary to represent life as one has seen and known and felt it, and to seek after truth in the new light of science. The ultimate value of this truth lay in its power to redeem the lot of the common man. The duty of both the novelist and the critic is to "classify and analyze the fruits of the human mind very much as the naturalist classifies the objects of his study, rather than to praise or blame them."[8]

In asmuch as a scientist cannot declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry, the novelist (realist) too cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice. Thus, Howells' literary credo champions realism and its truthful delineation of the motives, the impulses, and the principles that shape the lives of actual men and women. Howells is indebted not only to science but to democracy as well since he feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men. And to this concept Howells attaches certain dicta of his age: that art must serve morality, that it should teach rather than amuse, and that truthfulness to American life would inevitably picture the 'smiling aspects' of experience.

It is however essential to study the terms, 'common men,' 'moral principles,' 'the real', 'democracy', to arrive at a conclusive and definable understanding of 'nature' in Howells' works--criticism and novels.

Howells quotes Emerson to justify that the novelist ought to study the common man and common things in nature.[9] Concern for the 'common man' is reflected in Howells' review of Verga's novel, I Malaroglia The novel studies "the incidents of this simple and beautiful story of these common people whom vulgar people call common place. It has an incomparable grasp of Italian activities, as they present themselves on such a small stage-- social, political, domestic and religious."[10] There is a democratic pronouncement in Howells' criticism that the artist is "really of the masses" apart from the fact that study of nature is fruitful only in relation to the study of 'common man' and 'common beauty'. Bartley Hubbard's ideal and secular newspaper caters to every class of people. Bartley says: "I should cater to the lowest class first."[11]

Nature in Howells is not limited to the simple study of the average or common man. Howells embraces within the fold of his definition of nature the ethical elements as well.

> *….We ought to feel the tie that binds us to all the toilers of the shop and field, not as a galling chain, but as a mystic bond also uniting us to Him who works hitherto and evermore."*
>
> *Perhaps he will never be at home anywhere in the world as long as there are masses whom he ought to consort with, and classes whom he cannot consort with. The prospect is not brilliant for any artist now living, but perhaps the artist of the future will see in the flesh the accomplishment of that human equality of which the instinct has been divinely planted in the human soul.*[12]

The exterior nature is a moral force and man can establish rapport with nature only when he is in spiritual condition. The dialogue between Kinney, who is "buoyed up by a few wildly interpreted maxims of Emerson, and believes in other men, and their fitness for the terrestrial millennium," and Bartley, the selfish journalist, reveals the recondite traits of external nature in Howells.

> *Kinney: "Well, that ain't exactly what I meant to say; what I meant was that any man engaged in intellectual pursuits wants to come out and commune with nature, every little while.*

> *Bartley: "But nature's such a big thing, I think it takes two to commune with her." (Dismissing Kenney's suggestion that a girl might be a help, Bartley declares emphatically.) [This is my expression]*
>
> *"I mean that if you're not in first-rate spiritual condition, you're a to get floored if you undertake to commune with nature."*[13]

Howells' conception of nature then concerns itself, among other things, with moral judgment. The portrayal of Bartley Hubbard's decay in A Modern Instance is a moral judgment.

Howells rejects the ugly aspects of Darwinian nature, particularly the 'survival of the fittest' and 'struggle for existence', but accepts smilingly the smiling and beautiful traits. According to Edwin H. Cady, Howells is a follower of "soft Darwinian conviction."[14] This may be testified by a close reading of the philosophical discussion between Atherton and his wife Clara, toward the end of A Modern Instance.

> *"....The natural goodness doesn't count. The natural man is a wild beast, and his natural goodness is the amiability of a beast basking in the sun when his stomach is full. The Hubbards were full of natural goodness, I daresay, when they didn't happen to cross each other's wishes. No, it's the implanted goodness that saves-—the seed of righteousness treasured from generation to generation, and carefully watched and tended by disciplined fathers and mothers in the hearts where they have dropped it."*[15]

Yet, another reference by the novelist. Marcia and Bartley are now away from each other never to meet as husband and wife.

> *Yet all the mute, obscure forces of habit, which are doubtless the strongest forces in human nature, were dragging him back to her. Because their lives had been united so long, it seemed impossible to sever them, though their union had been so full of misery and discord.*[16]

The external nature--the visible exterior objects presents a picture of beauty which can enthrall the human being. Howells makes a passing reference to this aspect of nature as Squire Gaylord and his party consisting of his daughter, Marcia, Ben Halleck, Olive Halleck, are now on their way to Tecumseh to have the divorce case of Marcia settled.

> *They left Pittsburgh under the dun pall of smoke.... and ran out of a world where the earth seemed turned to slag and cinders.... Their train twisted along with banks of the Ohio... and losing itself in almost primitive wildness among its softly rounded hills. It is a beautiful land, and it had, even to their loath eyes, a charm that touched their hearts.*[17]

There is order in nature; and any violation of the order is sinful. This concept of nature is Elizabethan inasmuch as Shakespeare, particularly in his history plays, brings out this philosophy. Atherton, who seems to be the voice of Howells, echoes the orderliness and religiousness of nature.

> *"I agree with you," said Atherton (to his wife Clara. Clara disapproves of Bartley abandoning his wife Marcia; and on the top of it, she expresses her intolerance at Ben Halleck getting himself mixed up in such an affair) "You know how I hate anything that sins against order, and this whole thing is disorderly. It's intolerable... But we must bear our share of it. We're all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state--or religious state; it's the same thing. Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together in Christian society. It's strange that it should be so hard to realize a thing that every experience of life teaches. We keep on thinking of offences against the common good a if they were abstractions!"*[18]

One of the essential doctrines that Criticism & Fiction reveals is that "…In proportion as we gain a firmer hold upon our own place in the world, we shall come to comprehend with more instinctive certitude what is simple, natural, and honest, welcoming with gladness all artistic products that exhibit these qualities." Howells prefers the simple, natural, real-life grasshopper to the scientist's portrayal of a created or painted grasshopper.

Howells rejects the passions glorified by the romanticists in his study of human nature: "If a novel flatters the passions and exalts them above the principles, it is poisonous." Howard Mumford Jones traces the influence of Jeffersonianism and "Swedenborgian belief in a moral governor of the universe, in the existence of conscience as an intuitive moral guide, in social obligations, and in an egalitarianism...[19] For Howells as for Jefferson and William James and William Wordsworth the universe is fundamentally moral.

Howellsian conception of nature is not a single ray of light, but is like a spectrum. It is perhaps an amalgam of the philosophy of Emerson,

Wordsworth's view of nature as a moral instructor, Elizabethan attitude of order, Swedenborgian belief in a moral governor of the universe, Keatsian conviction of beauty--"Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty"--: all this is on the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic levels. As regards human nature, which is another facet of Howells' concept of nature as a whole, Howells seems to be in line with Alexander Pope's dictum that 'proper study of mankind is man;' and in fiction man can be studied as a character.

> *The true plot comes out of the character; that is, the man does not result from the things he does, but the things he does result from the man, and so plot comes out of character.*[20]

The inter-relationship of man--human nature--and nature--the universe--is yet another side of Howeilsian 'nature'.

The term 'realism' may not represent all Howells conceives of what 'nature is.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The Financier (New York:New American Library, 1981 ed.), pp.8-9.
2. Howells' Criticism & Fiction and other Essays, ed. with an introduction and notes by Clara Marburg Kirk & Rudolf Kirk (New York University Press, 1959), p. 74. Howells explains all the passions that need to be taken into account in the following terms: "The passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship...." Page 74.
3. Ibid., p. 282. This essay on Norris by Howells appeared in the North American Review of December, 1902. In his letter to Howells, Norris admits... . "I believe, too, the novel that is true to life cannot afford to ignore the finer things."
4. Ibid., p. 270. Crane continues: "I decided that the nearer a writer gets to life, the greater he becomes an artist." In this respect, Crane is close to Howells.
5. A Modern Instance (New York: The New American Library, 1964), Chapter 26, p. 264.
6. Mr. Howells's speech, North American Review, April, 1912. "... I thought I saw that while the English dramatists painted manners so wonderfully well, ours painted nature, our everyday American nature, which at the bottom of its heart is always human nature." Reprinted in Kirk & Kirk, p. 373.
7. Criticism & Fiction, ed. Kirk & Kirk, p. 166. "Exactly what this Tolstoyan truth was to Howells he tells us, as nearly as he can, when he says that Tolstoy taught him to see life not as the pursuit of personal happiness but as 'a field for endeavor toward the happiness of the whole human family.' The lesson Howells seems to have derived from Tolstoy, then, is that the moral force of such a writer is greater than any rules of art."
8. Ibid., Introduction to Part I, p. 7 (Quoted by the editors). This is a quotation from Howells' Criticism and Fiction.
9. Ibid., Chapter XVI, p. 40. "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic... .I embrace the common; I sit at the feet of the familiar and the low... .Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote... .The perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries... .The foolish man wonders at the unusual, but the wise man at the usual...."

10. The Editor's Study, Harper's Magazines1 November, 1886. This novel was translated by Mary A. Craig with the title The House by the Medlar-Tree. Howells quite appropriately wrote the introduction in 1890 which reads as follows: "Any one who loves simplicity or respects sincerity, any one who feels the tie binding us all together in the helplessness of our common human life, and running from the lowliest as well as the highest to Mystery immeasurably above the whole earth, must find a rare and tender pleasure in this simple story of an Italian fishing village."
11. A Modern Instance, Chapter 24, p. 246.
12. Criticism & Fiction, "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business," p. 308.
13. A Modern Instance, Chapter 9, p. 99.
14. Edwin H. Cady, The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885-1920 of William Dean Howells (Syracuse University Press, 1958), Chapter IV, p. 122. "It was the 'soft' Darwinian conviction that Man had climbed from bestiality to civilization by rising above the strong natural lusts--for battle and prey-making as well as sensual indulgences--which had armed him for victory over nature. The next ascent, vide, John Fiske, was to be of new spiritual heights. The old lusts were atavisms; they must be checked if not eradicated or man sinned against progress, and the Beast-man came again. Reference may again be made that Frank Norris deals with the reversal of human-man to Beast-man in Vandover and the Brute.
15. A Modern Instance, Chapter 38, p. 387.
16. Ibid., Chapter 31, p. 323.
17. Ibid., Chapter 39, p. 393.
18. Ibid., Chapter 38, p. 388.
19. Howard Mumford Jones, Jeffersonianism and the American Novel (Teachers College Press, New York: Columbia University, l966), Chapter III, p. 42.
20. Criticism & Fiction, pp. 94-95. This is from the essay on Dickens and Thackeray.

Summary

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Satyam S. Moorty
(Southern Utah University, USA)

Spearheading the 'realism' movement in American literature toward the end of the nineteenth century, William Dean Howells both in his critical documents and essays—Criticism and Fiction—and fiction such as A Modern Instance gently chastises naturalists writers such as Frank Norris for their focus on force that controls man and determines his life. Howells would not have this one-sided belief in and examination of nature. Neither the struggle and survival nor the bestiality—the two facets of Nature of the naturalists—is the whole truth of what nature is, according to Howells.

Moreover Howells rejects the romantic celebration of a single passion, the passion of love. To Howells the 'romantic' approach is both unethical and unbeautiful, while the study of nature by the naturalists "leaves beauty out." Howells believes that the novelist ought to study the common man and common things in nature. He embraces within the fold of his definition of nature the

ethical elements and moral judgment as well. He rejects the ugly aspects of Darwinian nature but accepts smilingly the smiling and beautiful traits.

Howellsian conception of nature is not a single ray of light, but it is like a spectrum. It is perhaps an amalgam of the philosophy of Emerson, Wordsworth's view of nature as a moral instructor, Elizabethan attitude of order, Swedenborgian belief in a moral governor of the universe, Keatsian conviction of beauty; all this on the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic levels. As regards human nature, which is another facet of Howells' concept of nature as a whole, Howells seems to be in line with Alexander Pope's dictum that "proper study of mankind is man;' and in fiction man can be studied as a character. The inter-relationship of man—human nature—and nature—the universe—is yet another side of Howellsian 'nature.'