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The “Enormous Fact” of American Life: Divorce in W. D. Howells’ *A Modern Instance*

“We all know what an enormous fact it is in American life,” wrote W. D. Howells of divorce, the subject of his 1882 novel *A Modern Instance*, in a letter to his editor James R. Osgood.¹ Such “facts” are a crucial element of Howells’ call to realism in his editorials, written during the 1880s and collected in 1892 in *Criticism and Fiction*: “When realism . . . heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too. Every true realist instinctively knows this, and it is perhaps the reason why he is careful of every fact, and feels himself bound to express or to indicate its meaning at the risk of over-moralizing.”² Howells’ interest in the fact of divorce reflects central tenets of his vision of the duty of the writer in postbellum America: the social and moral necessity of realism, the depiction of a distinctly American life and, consequently, the creation of a distinctly American tradition of literary realism. In comparison to romance, which looks at life as it might be, or sentimentalism, which looks at life as it ought to be, realism, says Howells, looks at life as it is.

After the Civil War, in which the United States was threatened with the divorce of the nation itself, many writers, historians, and artists sought still more actively to create an American tradition, indicative of a desire to reunite the nation by giving it a national character. Thus divorce has poignant figurative and literal meanings in American culture. Howells emphasizes the political and personal force of the word “divorce” when he writes that divorce is not only an enormous fact in American life but a theme he considers “only less intense and pathetic than slavery.”³ In his hyperbolic comparison of the theme of divorce with slavery, Howells invokes the horrific tension which sparked the Civil War and makes the awareness of divorce

“only less” central to American history and so to an American identity than the awareness of slavery and the Civil War.

In this essay, I shall explore Howells’ quest for America, to use Olov Fryckstedt’s terms, through his portrayal of divorce in *A Modern Instance*. Howells uses divorce to demonstrate his advocacy of an American realism as a corrective to popular sentimental and romantic fiction and scandal-hungry journalism. He also emphasizes the moral purpose guiding his advocacy of realism for, by linking divorce with the American West, Howells imagines the worst and best possibilities for autonomy and the American future. Howells ultimately casts divorce as quintessentially American, foreshadowing the worst of what modern America may become: fragmented, solipsistic, and nihilistic.

Responding to Matthew Arnold’s complaint that he found no “distinction,” a quality he considered vital to elevated civilization, in American life,⁴ Howells writes that an artist who can “catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romance, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things alone worthy of painting or carving or writing.”⁵ Howells sought to redress this problem of superstition by creating an American fiction that could deal with the issues of contemporary America by realistic portrayals of manners.⁶ One of his first major attempts to study American manners is the novel *A Modern Instance*; it is also the first treatment of divorce by a canonical author.⁷

Most critics read Howells’ attempts to define realism as a response to changes taking place in post-Civil War America, specifically the expansion of industrial capitalism. In late nineteenth-century America, as Daniel Borus demonstrates, the prospects and perceptions of writers changed significantly. Writing itself became an industry and writers, perhaps none more than Howells, strove to create and define writing as a profession rather than an art.⁸ This transformation was due in part to changing perceptions of the American reading audience.⁹ One of the results of this transformation was a heightened awareness of the role of the novelist in the creation of a national identity.¹⁰ Not only was the writer a professional but a professional with a duty toward the building of the national conscience.

Another consequence, argues Borus, is that a literary professional such as Howells casts the audience as passive and particularly susceptible to bad reading.¹¹ Thus Howells decries the effects of romanticism: “it must still be owned that the ‘gaudy hero and heroine’ are to blame for a great deal of harm in the world. That heroine long taught by example, if not precept, that Love, or the passion or fancy she mistook it for, was the chief interest of a life, which is really concerned with a great many other things.”¹² The

negative effects, writes Howells, can be easily measured “in the case of young men whose character they help so much to form or deform, and the women of all ages whom they keep so much in ignorance of the world they misrepresent.”¹³ Thus, as Alfred Habegger among others argues, for Howells the writer has a masculine, patriarchal duty toward his youthful and feminized audience; he must save and protect it from the misleading romantic ideas of popular novels.¹⁴

Howells makes the responsibility of the writer a central theme in *A Modern Instance*, if only by negative example. An editor and writer for newspapers, Bartley Hubbard lacks all sense of responsibility. Good writing for Bartley is writing that sells. His irresponsibility is juxtaposed with other writerly types in the novel, including Ben Halleck, Kinney, his editors Ricker and Witherby, and Atherton, most of whom have a much higher sense of morality. However, these other writers are also at times paralyzed by modern moral dilemmas and scandals, such as divorce. In contrast, Bartley thinks he can use such scandals, including divorce, to his benefit, both in his writing and his life. Although some critics, such as Joseph Allen Boone, have considered Bartley’s failures those of an individual rather than a type, his moral shortcomings in both his marriage and his career are intimately related.¹⁵ Rather than creating one flawed character, Howells suggests a flawed type, the irresponsible writer of the popular presses, and it was against this type that Howells sought to distinguish his own career as a writer aware of his duty toward his audience.

As Amy Kaplan has demonstrated, Howells draws a fairly explicit parallel between Bartley’s (ir)responsibility as a writer and editor and his (ir)responsibility as a husband or at least a fiancé.¹⁶ In the opening courtship scene of the novel, Howells depicts Bartley as a sort of editor or educator and Marcia as his audience, from whom he aims to draw a particular response. Pulling books from a table in the parlor, Bartley ridicules them, but such ridicule only entices Marcia, making her appreciative when he finally selects a poem worthy of reading.¹⁷ Marcia not only finds attractive what she views as Bartley’s intellectual prowess but she values it over her own. She looks to him for interpretation of romantic poetry (7). After instructing her in reading, Bartley instructs her in writing, and the instruction becomes more directive and physical. Inviting Marcia for a sleigh ride the following Sunday, he tells her he will put in writing her request for his advice. Bartley demands that she answer in writing. Marcia plays along, coyly writing “No.” Bartley ignores and rewrites her answer: “This is very nice. But you haven’t spelled it correctly. Anybody would say this was No, to look at it; and you meant to write Yes. Take the pencil in your hand, Miss Gaylord, and I will steady your trembling nerves, so that you can form the characters. Stop! At

the slightest resistance on your part, I will call out and alarm the house . . . ” (9). Howells then describes how Bartley takes her “soft fist” into his own and “changed the word, while she submitted, helpless with her smothered laughter” (9). This physically coerced revision continues as Bartley forces Marcia to sign the letter “Yours” (9). There is of course no real physical threat here nor any real education. In fact, the whole flirtation is a parody of the role of the instructor and editor. Both Marcia and Bartley use the hierarchy embedded in the teacher-student relationship as a vehicle to express their mutual sexual attraction, suggesting a hierarchical sexual relationship as well. Howells’ conflation of interpretation, response, writing, and sexual relations in this opening scene highlights the educative and masculine responsibility Bartley, as a writer and editor, should play. Bartley’s frivolity in this role seems harmless flirtation; however, Howells suggests that it is his very frivolity and ultimately the frivolity of the popular press that causes Bartley to shirk his roles as writer, editor, and husband.

Howells emphasizes Marcia’s role as a part of the audience by depicting her as an extremely sentimental young woman who has given too much to her beloved and thus is in need of the protection of the dutiful author. Howells consistently portrays Marcia as unrealistic and subject to emotional delusions like those of popular romantic heroines. Her romantic sensibilities are what attract her to Bartley, who is in her eyes the suave, urban, fashionable, and college-educated stranger (49). Even more suggestive that Marcia is under the influence of sentimental popular novels is her jealousy. Although many critics, including Boone, read Marcia’s jealousy as simply her personal failure¹⁸ or distinct character flaw, there is evidence to suggest that it has been fanned by popular literature. Commenting on Marcia’s unbalanced love for Bartley, Howells in a narrative aside writes,

The spectacle of a love affair in which the woman gives more of her heart than the man gives of his is so pitiable that we are apt to attribute a kind of merit to her, as if it were a voluntary self-sacrifice for her to love more than her share. Not only other men, but other women, look on with this canonizing compassion; for women have a lively power of imagining themselves in the place of any sister who suffers in matters of sentiment, and are eager to espouse the common cause in commiserating her. (48)

Although Howells does not directly refer to popular literature, his description of this self-sacrificing woman is certainly suggestive of literary heroines. The words he uses, such as “imagining” and “canonizing” and “sentiment,” are ones we have come to associate with literature and the creation of cultural myths. This passage could easily describe what Howells views as the female response to the sentimental heroine.

Howells portrays Marcia as a woman trying to live up to such a literary idea, which in practice leads her to be ridiculously jealous. Her idealization of Bartley and her own sense of sacrifice also lead to her disappointment in their marriage and the marriage's subsequent collapse in divorce. Although Marcia never gives up her illusions and expectations about marriage, her jealous anger is what causes Bartley to leave (275). Howells thus suggests a connection between the expectations encouraged by popular literature, the rising disappointment in marriage, and consequent increase in the divorce rate.¹⁹ The aim of realism was to curb such dangerous expectations by exposing and commenting on marriage and divorce as they really are in America and not to amplify expectations or valorize passionate suffering.

A parallel lesson in interpretation occurs between Atherton, the Boston lawyer who becomes the moral center of the novel, and Ben Halleck, Bartley's wealthy Bostonite college friend. A few years older and well established as a lawyer, Atherton takes on the role of the explicator for Halleck. In contrast to Bartley, Atherton does not approach interpretation lightly. Trained in the interpretation of law, Atherton realizes its moral significance.²⁰ Halleck asks Atherton how he should react to Marcia Hubbard, whom he thought he had humiliated unintentionally and unavoidably by rescuing a drunken Bartley from the police and bringing him home. Halleck is particularly perplexed because Marcia does not seem the slightest bit embarrassed the next time they meet, and so he asks Atherton, "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?" (225). Atherton replies, "That's what the novelists teach, and we bachelors get most of our doctrine about women from them" (225). He then closes the novel he has been reading and continues, "We don't go to nature for our impressions; but neither 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" (225–26). Not only does Atherton describe the novelists' function as instructive but he also distinguishes what the novelists teach from the "realities" of his own experience. Similarly, in *Criticism and Fiction* Howells writes that romanticism has "exhausted itself" and that it remains "for realism to assert that fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature."²¹ By putting the novel aside, Atherton suggests that it teaches vain and sentimental lessons and that he means to revise or correct these lessons for Halleck, who seems entirely under the novelists' influence. In turn, what Howells suggests by portraying the lawyer Atherton as the corrective reader in the novel is that more novelists should emulate

him and test theories against realities, not against romantic, sentimental, and fictional convention. Such a reality-based fiction is the foundation of the American realism Howells advocates.

This scene between Atherton and Halleck also reinforces and complicates the gender hierarchies undergirding the interpretation Howells introduces in the scene between Bartley and Marcia. Atherton offers numerous possible “readings” of the situation, continually testing his theories against the “realities” of this particular case. Halleck is not convinced by any of these theories, all of which tend to ennoble Marcia by depicting her as either a magnanimous or obtuse victim or the patient wife of a drunk (227–28). However, when Atherton suggests a theory less favorable to Marcia, that Marcia is using her forgiveness of Bartley’s drunken escapade as a sort of weapon in domestic warfare, Halleck ardently defends his romantic notions of female suffering, arguing that women cannot act as basely as men (228). Atherton points out that Halleck’s theory is a false double standard that does not reflect the cases he has observed and then he extends his theory to suggest that Marcia probably provoked Bartley’s binge. Both Atherton and Halleck realize that Halleck is making more of Bartley’s indiscretion than either Bartley or Marcia because he views it through a romantic lens. When Atherton comments that he is sorry Halleck has had to experience it, Halleck replies, “Am I a nervous woman, that I must be kept from the unpleasant sights and disagreeable experiences? If there’s anything of the man about me, you insult it!” (228). Halleck’s offense is based in the notion that there is a feminine audience who must be protected from certain realities and that it is a masculine duty to protect them. Atherton compromises Halleck’s masculinity by suggesting that he is among this vulnerable, feminine audience.

This sense of the duty of the writer to protect and educate his audience is enmeshed in gender ideology. While the role of protector and educator is certainly parental, Howells sought to emphasize the paternal and professional aspects of authorship in order to distinguish himself from the popular women writers of his day. Bell, among others, argues that gender and professional anxieties motivated Howells’ theories of literature: “The problem, for Howells as for many of his contemporaries and successors, was that the ‘artist’ was by accepted definition *not* a ‘real’ man.”²² A parallel sentiment is evident in *A Modern Instance*. Throughout the novel, Howells juxtaposes the “real” profession of law, through the characters of Squire Gaylord and Atherton, with various types of writers, including Bartley the newspaperman, Halleck the romantic poet, and Kinney the Emersonian philosopher. After Marcia and Bartley are officially engaged, Squire Gaylord, Marcia’s father, tells his wife that Bartley had “better give up his paper and go into the

law. He's done well in the paper, and he's a smart writer; but editing a newspaper aint any work for a *man*. It's all well enough as long as he's single, but when he's got a wife to look after, he'd better get down to *work*" (Howells' emphasis, 40). Gaylord links a man's profession with his marital status, making both measures of masculinity. While Gaylord only refers to newspaper writing, the failures of Halleck and Kinney, both of whom remain unpublished writers and bachelors, suggest that more artistic and philosophical writing provides no more virile a profession. The lawyers in the novel, both of whom marry, should represent paragons of masculinity. Bartley as a published and more "professional" writer, who constantly talks about going into law, hovers somewhere in between. Further, as a man who both marries and divorces in the course of the novel, his marital status reflects his ambiguous professional status and his ambiguous masculinity.

Alfred Habegger argues that, in addition to fearing that the writer was not masculine enough, Howells was suspicious of masculinity. Habegger contends that the American man lived with incompatible expectations of being the good boy, responsible to his family and community, and the bad boy, brave and responsible mostly to himself.²³ Howells, argues Habegger, was especially sensitive to the doubleness of gender expectations: "As a matter of fact, it seems that, because masculinity had come to signify a certain kind of jaunty aggression, Howells was fundamentally uncertain whether it was right to be a man."²⁴ Such a jaunty aggression characterizes Bartley Hubbard. With Hubbard, Habegger claims, Howells comes closer than any American writer before Dreiser to representing the true American man.²⁵ While it is doubtful there is any such thing as the true American man, the phrase is intriguing because once again, a critic seeks to define some peculiarly American ideal, and this Americanness is embodied in a character who gets divorced.

Bartley's masculinity is shaped by contrasting images of "American" masculinity in other characters, particularly Ben Halleck and Kinney.²⁶ Several critics have noted an ostensible retreat into genteel values at the end of the novel in Howells' focus on Ben Halleck.²⁷ Ben is representative not only of the failure of those genteel values but also of the limitations of European literary romanticism. In the first scene in which he appears, Halleck, recently returned from Europe, quotes Wordsworth (169). He harbors romantic notions about women and marriage and he unrequitedly loves Marcia Hubbard. Years before he had actually met Marcia, he had taken a picture of her on the street when she visited Boston and sent the picture home to his sister Olive, having marked the picture "My Lost Love" (166). Olive later teases him, "You don't want to marry any of those girls as long as your heart's set on that unknown charmer of yours" (166). The photo is a token of his

ideal woman, ideal not only because of her beauty but because she was pure image, unattainable and unknowable. Halleck casts himself as the romantic lover described by Denis de Rougemont: "Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by the life itself. What stirs lyrical poets to their final flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering."²⁸

When Marcia becomes a material reality as Bartley's wife, Halleck burns the photograph (240). "There is something in a young man's ideal of women, at once passionate and ascetic, so fine that any words are too gross for it," writes the narrator in describing Halleck's love for Marcia (197). Not even words can serve the "artistry" with which Halleck conceives of Marcia. Revering Ben as more of a brother than a lover, Marcia is never aware of his suffering nor does she appear to return his affection. Howells' manipulation of the myth of the ideal woman parodies the gentility of Halleck's romantic idealism. Finally, Halleck's unrequited passion for Marcia not only seems melodramatic but also renders him incapable of action and unsure of his own morality, effectively emasculating him. Atherton, the voice of law and arguably the voice in the novel nearest to Howells' own, even accuses Halleck of talking like a woman (332).

The Emersonian masculine ideal does not fare much better. Although Kinney, the woodsman cook, may be more sympathetic and charming than Halleck, Howells still depicts him as an ineffective, doddering old bachelor. Kinney has led the life of a romantic hero but has been domesticated even without marrying (80). As Kinney shows Bartley around his cabin, he leads him into the parlor and kitchen, traditionally feminine spaces: "This is where I compose my favorite works," Kinney tells Bartley. "That means pie, Mr. Hubbard" (83). Joel Porte has written a detailed and intriguing analysis of pie in *A Modern Instance*, tracing the Emersonian idealism of pie as a symbol of provincial American classlessness and community; eating pie can bring the high and the low together.²⁹ However appealing Kinney's ideals may be, they are more endearing than potent. Not only do we see little proof of Kinney's theories about pie and tea as brain food, but the woodsmen themselves do not seem to appreciate his ideals, wanting donuts and not his health food; he is forced to leave the camp, suggesting his ideals are outdated and ineffective (248). Further, the final image of Kinney is extremely maternal and yet impotent. In his last scene Kinney is feeding an immigrant woman and her children some coffee, still expounding his theories, though none of them can understand him because they do not speak English (345). Like Halleck's ideals, Kinney's are impotent and feminized; they lack the force of the dynamo era.

Prior to Kinney's revelation of his pie theory, we have already witnessed the indigestion pie has caused Bartley (17). Nonetheless, Bartley humors Kinney's assertions. Thus Howells not only undermines Kinney's ideals and hence those of Emerson by making them the object of Bartley's laughter, but suggests that his ideals have been ingested by Bartley but turned sour.³⁰ Hence Emersonianism has been perverted in modern American man, who has taken the premises of self-reliance and used them only for his own benefit. "Emotionally and economically," writes Habegger, "Bartley is a grotesque parody of self-reliance."³¹ Further, this indigestion is what leads Bartley to propose to Marcia Gaylord in the first place, perhaps suggesting that Bartley still feels some discomfort at the isolation his self-absorption costs him. He goes to the Gaylord house for feminine comfort and ends up agreeing that he and Marcia are engaged (27–31). Ultimately, their marriage ends in divorce, suggesting that Bartley's perversion of Emersonian ideals leads to solipsism and the isolation of the individual, to a fragmented society rather than a communal one.

Bartley's narcissistic approach to marriage mirrors his approach to his career. Bartley's journalism represents the worst aspects of realism, such as the reduction of issues to spectacle and appeals to marketability, as these aspects begin to appear in the mass journalism of postbellum America.³² Howells paints Bartley as a perversion of the ideal American writer, in that he writes solely for profit and not for art or edification.³³ An opportunist, Bartley lacks a moral, theoretical framework around which to structure his journalism. As Howells implies, Bartley approaches writing and publishing with a market mentality that is reactive rather than prescriptive. Bartley does not search for material that he believes needs to be covered from any sort of social or moral standpoint. Rather, he lets his interpretation of the market and the whim of events—as suggested by the title of his newspaper, *The Events*—guide his selection. For example, his awareness of the popular interest in the shipbuilding market enables him to sell his first article on logging camps to a Boston newspaper (129).

Further, Howells parallels Bartley's professional opportunism with his marriage, which is equally reactive. Bartley only asks Marcia to marry him the first time because Marcia pushes for it, then breaks off the engagement because Marcia wishes it. Finally, they marry only because Marcia has come running after him. In their haste to take advantage of the moment and marry, they forgo the legal document declaring their intent (257). Instead, Bartley offers the minister—who "seemed quite dazed at the suddenness of their demand" and notes that something, meaning the legal declaration of intent to marry, is missing (107)—a bribe of five dollars, though the minister runs the risk of a sixty dollar fee. Bartley's bribery commodifies

the ceremony, making it, as Marcia notes, “tainted with fraud from the beginning” (257). Their lack of intent to marry is similar to Bartley’s lack of purpose in his writing. Both suggest Bartley’s reactive opportunism, in which convenience and money are the primary motivations.

In contrast, Atherton advocates realism not for sales, as Bartley does, but for edification. Howells demonstrates this contrast through Atherton’s commentary upon divorce. Halleck contends that a marriage in which “self-respect perishes with resentment, and the husband and wife are enslaved to each other,” ought “to be broken up!” Atherton replies, “I don’t think so. . . . The sort of men and women that marriage enslaves would be vastly more wretched and mischievous if they were set free. I believe that the hell people make for themselves isn’t at all a bad place for them. It’s the best place for them” (229). Atherton’s conviction does not seem to be based on religious beliefs. Rather, Atherton suggests that couples should not get divorced because they need to confront and deal with the realities of their marriage, even if that marriage is a hell. To divorce is to surrender to romantic notions of an ideal marriage or to what one wants a marriage to be for selfish reasons. As a realist, Atherton recognizes the social function of marriage. Atherton’s theories predictably affect Halleck. Passing the Hubbards’ house on his way home, Halleck “wished to rehabilitate in its pathetic beauty the image which his friend’s conjectures had jarred, distorted, insulted; and he lingered for a moment before the door where this vision had claimed his pity for anguish that no after serenity could repudiate” (230). Despite his desire, Halleck is unable to resuscitate his romantic illusions. Atherton’s morally grounded realism has begun to vitiate Halleck’s ideals.

Although Howells seems to be characterizing Atherton as the voice of morality and realism in this novel, even his masculinity and responsibility finally come into question in the face of the type of man Bartley represents, the worst of what the American man and the American writer might become. Bartley’s career and his marriage to Marcia comprise the focus of the first two thirds of the novel; however, Howells seems much less interested in Bartley after he loses his job and his marriage. No longer do we hear of Bartley’s struggles and development; instead, the focus shifts to Halleck and Atherton. Many critics consider this shift in *A Modern Instance* a failure. Kaplan offers an intriguing reason:

When Hubbard loses his job and leaves his wife, he abandons the moorings of character and is banished from the novel, from the direct realism of realistic representation. Howells cannot make this suddenly anonymous figure, divorced from the institutions of domesticity and work, the focus for his representation. . . . Bartley’s decision to leave his wife takes him outside the structures of character and beyond the pale of representation.³⁴

This idea that Howells has grown bored in representing Bartley once he has divorced his wife complicates his theory of realism. Severed from the realms of “domesticity and work” that characterize the realist novel, Bartley runs the risk of becoming the “gaudy” demoralized hero Howells believed he needed to protect his audience against. It is as if there is no place for Bartley in the novel as Howells has defined it. Yet neither is there a place for him in romance. In his portrayal of Bartley, Howells suggests a new type of American male, a self-absorbed protagonist who has neither a place in the woods, in the house of marriage, nor in the American realist novel.

Divorce also reflects Howells’ increasing concern about the popular press’s invasion of privacy in the late-nineteenth century. He was not alone. Writing in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1890, Samuel D. Warren and Lewis D. Brandeis call for the need for legislation insuring the right to privacy:

Recent inventions and business methods call attention to the next step which must be taken for the protection of the person and for securing to the individual what Judge Cooley calls the right “to be let alone.” Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that “what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops.”³⁵

Warren and Brandeis could be describing Bartley Hubbard’s practice of journalism. In fact, the press’s invasion of the wedding of a daughter is the incident that prompted them to write this call to action. The institution of marriage itself marks one boundary between the public and private. On one level, a wedding is a very public ceremony and declaration, but it is a public declaration of a private relationship. It marks the end of public and chaperoned courtship. Weddings and divorces are, of course, common subjects of journalism such as Bartley’s. As Howells depicts it, divorce and scandal pages invite the outsider into the home, making a spectacle in court of what should remain private. Ironically, Howells himself reveals the private dynamics of the dissolution of a marriage in *A Modern Instance*.

Both Marcia and Bartley are public figures, albeit in different ways. Marcia is public in that she both functions as a spectacle and is obsessed with spectacle. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen emphasizes the importance of the visibility of class, especially for the wife who is supposed to represent the household’s standing: “the office of the woman [is] to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view.”³⁶ Marcia is continually described in terms of the image she impresses on others. Her beauty is a significant factor in Bartley’s decision to marry her (23). When Marcia first arrives in Boston with Bartley, however, she fears that she fails as a spectacle and that failure

is enough to make her fear that she has lost Bartley. Bartley responds sympathetically, “There wasn’t a woman in that room that could compare with you,—*dress* or looks” (Howells’ emphasis, 113). While Bartley may be distinguishing Marcia’s physical attributes from her clothes, he still fails to distinguish Marcia from the spectacle or image she projects.

Bartley continues to exploit Marcia’s image as he uses the family: “It was rather Bartley’s ideal, as it is that of most young American fathers, to go out with his wife and baby in that way; he liked to have his friends see him; and he went out every afternoon he could spare” (195). The Hubbards’ leisurely and conspicuous afternoon strolls, to use Veblen’s terminology, are calculated. Similarly, Bartley seems indifferent to the idea of purchasing a house until he sees how fruitful it is to have others witness his domestic bliss. He is most in love with Marcia when others are looking at her, as when Ben Halleck and Atherton first visit the Hubbards in their rented house and he and Marcia give them a tour of the house: “His heart swelled with satisfaction in Marcia; it was something like having fellows drop in upon you, and be asked out to supper in this easy way; it made Bartley feel good, and he would have liked to give Marcia a hug on the spot” (173). Marcia and Bartley are especially proud of the décor of the house, which illustrates Marcia’s ability to stretch dollars and remain fashionable (173). Their house is as much a spectacle as their marriage; they show off the interior just as they show off while walking through the park.

Yet Bartley pushes publicity beyond spectacle; he bases his career as a journalist on “spicy” stories that expose private issues to the public. From early in his career, Bartley is a public man: “He kept himself, from the beginning, pretty constantly in the popular eye” (19). Bartley uses his talent as a public man to advance his career as a journalist. After Bartley’s initial successes with exposing the inner workings of the logging camp and an exposé on the problems of boarding houses in Boston, he is hired by Witherby at *The Events*. One of his first assignments is to take over the paper’s “Solid Men” series, in which prominent citizens are portrayed through intimate interviews, a new feature at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Bartley’s first assignment for the “Solid Men” series pushes the boundaries of public and private. As a college friend of Ben Halleck, Bartley uses his familiarity to get Ben’s father, a prominent businessman, to trust him for an interview. The elder Halleck initially thinks it will all be about leather, his industry. Bartley explains otherwise: “You may depend upon my not saying anything that will be disagreeable to you, Mr. Halleck. . . . We usually say something about the victim’s private residence, but I guess I’ll spare you that, Mr. Halleck” (162). As he says this, Bartley slips his notebook back into his jacket, encouraging Mr. Halleck’s trust. Halleck responds, “You can

say whatever you think best. There's a good deal of talk about the intrusiveness of the newspapers; all I know is they've never intruded upon me. We shall not be afraid that you will abuse our house, Mr. Hubbard, because we expect you to come there again" (162). Bartley recognizes the threat underlying this comment: if he abuses the rules of hospitality by public exposure, he will not be invited back to the house.

Neither of the elder Hallecks is offended by the interview or by their portrayal in the newspaper; however, their daughter is. Like Ben, Olive Halleck has grown up with more refined tastes than her parents and is more of a snob, but is also more sensitive to issues of propriety. Mr. and Mrs. Halleck do not seem to feel that their privacy has been invaded, as they have no reaction to the story. In fact, they are impressed that a man as modern and fashionable as Bartley seems kind enough to come visit "such plain folks as [they] are, whenever [they] ask him" (284). The more cynical and perhaps more perceptive Olive recognizes that paralleling her father's story with the other scandalous tales that fill the paper is about as degrading as the revelation of their private lives. When Marcia's mother praises Bartley's ascent at *The Events*, Marcia responds, "The Events has got to be perfectly horrid, of late. It's full of murders and all uncleanness," recognizing the parallel titillation of a peek into the lives of the wealthy in Bartley's article (184).

Bartley's most serious offense in revealing the private to the public is his scurrilous adaptation of Kinney's biography, which Kinney had planned to use in his autobiography. After Kinney tells his life story to Bartley and Ricker, one of Bartley's peers and rival editors, Ricker jokes with him: "What's to prevent our interviewing you on this little personal history of yours, and using your material any way we like? It seems to me that you've put your head in the lion's mouth" (250). Echoing Halleck's assumption, Kinney replies that he is "amongst gentlemen," a status increasingly anachronistic in the modern era. Not long after, when Kinney has ventured west, Hubbard approaches Ricker to sell Kinney's story, overstepping boundaries of trust set by both Kinney, the subject, and Withersby, his editor at *The Events*. Ricker protests that he thought Kinney was to use the material himself sometime. Bartley counters that Kinney can't write "any more than a hen," that "he can make tracks on paper, but nobody would print 'em, much less buy 'em" (253). In other words, Kinney can't make the story marketable. Bartley supports his claim by asserting that he knows Kinney and that Kinney will be "tickled to death" if he ever sees the piece (253). Ricker accepts Bartley's justification and the story, for which Bartley charges a high price, winking that he "can't afford to do a dishonorable thing for less money" (253). Exposing Kinney's private story without his permission proves to be Bartley's undoing, both in his career and in his marriage.

As Bartley exposes others' private lives, divorce exposes his. The divorce process slowly turns the marriage inside out, continually making it more public. Marcia attempts to keep secret Bartley's desertion of her, but she cannot. After Bartley leaves, bill collectors hound her; one even threatens her with the law. In fear, Marcia goes to Atherton for help. Atherton's questions force her to admit that she does not know where Bartley is or when, if ever, he will return. Marcia allows that she tells Atherton only because he is a lawyer and will not tell anyone: "I want it kept a secret" (303). Marcia would rather believe Bartley is dead than that he has deserted her (303). Atherton, however, tells Marcia that it cannot remain a secret: "you have done well in coming to me, but let me convince you that this is a matter which can't be kept. It must be known. Before you can begin to help yourself, you must let others help you" (304). The divorce gradually forces itself into the open.

The notice of divorce itself is wholly public. Through the mail system, the notice first reaches Ben Halleck, not Marcia. Further, it arrives not in a letter, but as an advertisement in a newspaper. Howells emphasizes the accident of Halleck's receiving the paper by describing its battered and "veteran appearance": "it was tied up with string, now, and was scribbled with rejections in the hands of various Hallocks and Hallets" before it finally reaches Ben Halleck, who is still an outsider to the Hubbard marriage (322). The notice of divorce thus passes through countless spectators, both known and unknown, before Marcia, the wife being sued for divorce, ever hears of it.

The unusual privacy of their marriage ceremony, an elopement, contrasts with the publicity of the divorce court: there is nothing private about it. At first, as Marcia and her entourage enter the courtroom, there are only a few spectators, who watch them walk up the aisle in an ironic reversal of a wedding (348–49). The suit for divorce is about to be decided in Bartley's favor because the defendant has failed to appear, but just at that moment Squire Gaylord announces their arrival and prepares to present a countersuit, taking full advantage of the role of spectacle in court: "Squire Gaylord turned with an old-fashioned state and deliberation which had their effect, and cast a glance of professional satisfaction in the situation at the attorneys and the spectators" as he announces that he will be the defense in this case (350). Thus Howells suggests Gaylord's interest in the case is not just familial or moral but also professional. Further, he implies that a major part of Gaylord's attraction to the law is its dramatic possibilities, undermining Gaylord's moral stance and professional status. As he rises on the bench, he pauses before speaking, heightening the effect of his image: "His lips compressed themselves to a waving line, and his high hawkbeak came down over them; the fierce light burned in his cavernous eyes, and his grizzled

hair erected itself like a crest. He swayed slightly back and forth at the table, behind which he stood, and paused as if waiting for his hate to gather head" (352). The pause is effective and the crowd responds: "In this interval it struck several of the spectators, who had appreciative friends outside, that it was a pity they should miss the coming music, and they risked the loss of some strains themselves that they might step out and inform these *dilettanti*" (352). The announcement runs throughout the town.

The crowd's excitement and curiosity is roused further by Squire Gaylord's pronouncement: "Sir, I think it will prejudice our cause with no one, when I say that we are here not only in the relation of attorney and client, but in that of father and daughter, and that I stand in this place singularly and sacredly privileged to demand justice for my own child!" (353). Rather than suggesting an inappropriate bias, Gaylord's status as Marcia's father enhances his claims to defend her legally; his claims are cast as singular and sacred because they fuse the public and private. But Howells undercuts the sacredness of Gaylord's claims by his manipulation of public image. Gaylord continues pushing and pulling the crowd, only stopped by Marcia's screams "No, No, No!" (355). Marcia's exclamation reveals that she is the only person in the courtroom who does not want this divorce. Her resistance arouses the crowd still further; their expectations of drama have been met. Gaylord's manipulative oratory is exceeded by the dramatic action of his collapse. Marcia's refusal of her father's claim seems to shock Gaylord, exposing the falsity of his oratory, a falsity of public spectacle here based on private relationship. Again, the image is not what it seems. This is the final blow for Gaylord; his last public performance leaves him silenced, fetching "his breath in convulsive gasps" (355). It leaves Howells' readers perplexed and gives Bartley the chance to escape.

Bartley's end is entirely public, a poetic justice of sorts. He becomes a story in the very tabloid journalism in which he made his career. In contrast, Marcia ends up entirely private, a recluse who will not leave her father's house. The divorce has turned their lives into a dark parody of the ideal of the domestic economy where the public male world is supported by the private, domestic female world. In their divorce, finally, the public and the private are antithetical. Bartley is consumed, ultimately killed, for publicizing another man's "domestic relations," as Howells so respectfully, demurely, and ambiguously calls them. Marcia is effectively buried by extreme privacy. However, Howells the novelist is also responsible for exposing the private to the public. Thus Howells must kill Bartley off, as Kaplan and others have argued, to exorcise his own culpability.

It is fitting that Howells has Bartley travel west in to obtain his divorce. Much of the association of the west with divorce is based in legal history.

Divorce laws were much more liberal in the West than they were in the East in the late-nineteenth century.³⁸ Cities such as Sioux City, South Dakota, and Reno, Nevada, developed reputations as divorce mills. Glenda Riley has even suggested that divorce laws in the West were more liberal in order to encourage men to move west, enabling them to leave a family behind in the East.³⁹ Thus divorce is associated with the myth of the American frontier and the self-reliance and individualism that myth inspires, as it is embodied in the cowboy, pioneer, and such literary heroes as Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn. The western frontier also comes to symbolize the American future, both its best and worst possibilities.⁴⁰ At its best, the future of the western man or woman is the Emersonian self-reliant, self-made individual who is independent but still concerned with others, with duty and morality, such as Kitty Ellison in *A Chance Acquaintance*, as Fryckstedt has argued.⁴¹ At its worst, the West prophesies a decrepit modernity in which individualism is overly encouraged, leading to a solipsism in which self is valued over social duty. At its worst, the West becomes home to such characters as Bartley Hubbard, who places himself before all others without any sense of compunction.

At the initial mention of the West in *A Modern Instance*, divorce is immediately evoked. Upon his first visit to Bartley and Marcia's home in Boston, the Emersonian Kinney tells Bartley he is heading west to Illinois (245). Bartley responds immediately, "For a divorce?" While this is not the first mention of the West in the novel, this exchange does contain the first explicit use of the word "divorce."⁴² Bartley teases the bachelor Kinney, whose true aim is to make money. After Kinney has made his pile, he might consider marriage (245). The difference in Bartley's and Kinney's visions of the West is telling, suggesting the West at both its capitalist American "best"—the self-made fortune—and its American worst—quickie marriages and divorces.

To witness the divorce, the novel must travel west to Tecumseh, Indiana. The name "Tecumseh" ironically invokes the decimation of Native Americans that made the settlement of the West possible. Tecumseh resisted white settlement but lost. That settlement is not exactly the ideal West that Howells remembers from his childhood, nor is it the "blended hideousness of Sodom and Gomorrah" that Olive Halleck imagines (348). Tecumseh is "certainly very much more like a New England village," though it is has a "more careless and unscrupulous air than the true New England village" (348). Further, "all aspect of village quiet and seclusion ceased, and a section of conventional American city, with flat-roofed brick blocks, showy hotel, stores, paved street, and stone sidewalks expressed the readiness of Tecumseh to fulfill the destiny of every western town after Chicago, and

become a metropolis at a day's notice, if need be" (348). The character of the village is as changeable as its residents, as ready to reinvent itself and start anew as Adam. The result is that Tecumseh is simply another "conventional city," paving the way for homogenous modern urbanity.

Howells emphasizes Tecumseh's western novelty by contrasting it with Boston's eastern tradition. He delights in having his characters describe the established homes and neighborhoods of Boston, taking his readers on verbal walking tours with both Bartley and Halleck (123, 169). Although Howells' Boston is certainly thriving and modern, it is a modernity tempered by characters such as the Athertons and the Hallecks; even the Boston newspapermen Ricker and Witherby, Bartley's early colleagues, have a stronger sense of morality and social duty than does Bartley. Having overstepped the bounds of social duty in his own self-interest, Bartley must leave Boston and move west. Thus the modern western city has as changeable and empty a character as Bartley Hubbard, the divorced man. Bartley drifts further and further West, all the way to Arizona where he pitches a tent in which he lives and prints a spicy paper (359). His travel west only ends with his death by shooting, suggesting that the West of the divorce town points not toward the future but toward death.

Many critics have read Bartley's death in the desert of Arizona as Howells' moral commentary on divorce: Bartley, the abandoning husband, meets his deserved end. Even the narrator suggests that Bartley's shooting is "penalty or consequence as we choose to consider it" (359). The killing of Bartley is not, however, as reductively moral as it seems at first because the novel ends on an ambiguous note: Atherton's exclamation "Ah, I don't know! I don't know" (362). Specifically what Atherton does not know is how to advise Ben Halleck, who written to ask whether it is ethical for him to propose marriage to Marcia now that she is widowed. Halleck fears he may have desired Bartley's death. This admission comes as a surprise from a character who has had a definitive moral position on each ethical dilemma in the novel. As George Carrington argues, the profundity of Atherton's proclamation is undercut by the descriptions of the domestic scene around him.⁴³ In the final scene in their drawing room, his "hard" (to use Clara Kingsbury's word) judgments of Ben Halleck and his love for Marcia Hubbard are softened by a feminine environment. Finally, not even Atherton, seemingly the model of masculine success and the voice of morality, realism, and law in the novel, can say anything definitive. The law, too, seems powerless and emasculated in dealing with the modern issues of morality and marriage and the ethics of divorce.⁴⁴

In contrast to many critics, I do not consider the inconclusive ending a failure. Howells' own prescriptions for realism require a dramatic method

in which narrative intrusions are kept to a minimum so that readers may reach their own conclusions.⁴⁵ This is not to say, of course, that the narrator can or does remain objective in *A Modern Instance* but that Howells undercuts the judgments cast by the narration by ending with the admission by Atherton that he does not know how to respond to Ben Halleck. In doing so, Howells suggests an ambiguity and relativism about divorce, and the novel ends with no definitive moral stance. As Warren Hedges asserts, “Howells pushes the realist investigations of error to the point that it spawns an indeterminacy which undermines realism’s own claims. . . . As such, *A Modern Instance* is an indispensable text, straddling the transition between realism and modernism.”⁴⁶

Further, the ending of this novel is as open-ended as other of Howells’ works, such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, in which the moral, though not reductive or adamant, seems clearer. Perhaps Howells’ subject, divorce, prompted the abrupt shifts in the narrative that makes the novel seem to fail as a realist text. Divorce prefigures the characteristics of modernism in its fragmentation, estrangement, and transience as well as its transvaluation of the ideals upon which marriage, the novel, and the romance are based. Howells ends his novel with a debate between Atherton the realist and Halleck the romantic intellectual. By questioning how divorce affects traditional values, both men anticipate the moral uncertainties implicit in modernism.

I am not arguing that Howells consciously foreshadowed modernist narrative. In fact, the self-consciousness in narrative that characterizes so many modernist texts is definitely lacking in *A Modern Instance*. Nevertheless, Howells was very self-conscious about form in his criticism and he was consciously experimenting with form in his fiction. The very title *A Modern Instance* suggests his concern with modernity. Unlike his critics, moreover, Howells did not consider *A Modern Instance* a failure. As George Bennett writes, “Even in 1893, after *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he could say he had always ‘taken the most satisfaction in *A Modern Instance*’ because there he came closest to American life as he knew it. In 1912 he chose *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as his best book ‘for breadth and depth,’ but he continued to point out that his divorce story was his most intense.”⁴⁷ Perhaps it was also his most modern and his most “American.”

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Notes

1. W. D. Howells to James R. Osgood, 18 February 1881, appendix to *A Modern Instance*, ed. George Bennett (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. xxix.
2. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1959), p. 15.

3. Howells to Osgood, p. xxix.
4. Howells is responding to Arnold's essay "Civilization in the United States," originally published in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. Arnold claims that for all its equality and material wealth which makes for a lack of distinction among classes, the United States also lacks the distinction and beauty that make a society civilized and "interesting" (Arnold's emphasis).
5. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 67.
6. For elaboration on Howells' theories see William Alexander, *William Dean Howells: The Realist as Humanist* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1981); Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980); George Bennett, *The Realism of William Dean Howells, 1889–1920* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1973); Edwin Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years of William Dean Howells 1885–1920* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1958); Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954); and Olov Fryckstedt, *In Quest of America: A Study of Howells' Early Development as a Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958).
7. James Barnett in *Divorce and the American Divorce Novel 1858–1937: A Study in Literary Reflections of Social Influences* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1939) lists only two novels of divorce published prior to *A Modern Instance*. T. S. Arthur's *The Hand But Not the Heart* (1858) and *Out in the World* (1865). Both are highly sentimental novels, warning against the dangers of marriage without love. Deborah Ann MacComb writes in *Tales of Liberation, Strategies of Containment: Divorce and the Representation of Womanhood in American Fiction, 1880–1910* (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 21, that perhaps the first American literary treatment of divorce is Emma Embury's "The Mistaken Choice; or Three Years of Married Life" (1841).
8. In addition to Bell, see Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989); Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988); Rodney Olsen, *Dancing in Chains: The Youth of William Dean Howells* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1991); Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *American Realism: New Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992); and Howells' own "The Man of Letters as Man of Business," collected in *Criticism and Fiction*, pp. 298–309.
9. Borus, *Writing Realism*, p. 106. Borus traces numerous causes and reflections of increasing literacy after the Civil War, including increased production of literary commodities, state support for free public libraries, and increased enrollment in schools. The expansion of the reading audience increased the sense of distance between author and audience. According to Borus, "the deepest root of the late nineteenth-century reading explosion was a transformation from community relations to ones in which strangers figured prominently. New information, new curiosities, and new needs to control all contributed their part."
10. Borus, p. 106.
11. Borus, pp. 108, 110–12.
12. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 47.
13. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 46.
14. See Bell; Borus; and Elise Miller, "The Feminization of American Realist Theory," *American Literary Realism*, 23 (Fall 1990), 20–41.
15. Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 125.
16. Kaplan, p. 26.
17. Howells, *A Modern Instance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881; rpt. 1957), p. 6. All further references to the novel are cited parenthetically.
18. Boone, p. 125.
19. For a historical account of the effects of popular literature and culture on the ris-

ing divorce rate, see Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).

20. Howells explicitly links Atherton's profession and literature. When Halleck comes to Atherton for advice about his relationship with the Hubbards, he comes upon Atherton at "the hour of the night . . . when a lawyer permits himself a novel" (225). While Howells suggests that novel reading provided a leisurely and habitual break for lawyers, he also suggests that Atherton reads novels as carefully as he does law.

21. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 15.

22. Bell, p. 22.

23. Alfred Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), p. 204.

24. Habegger, p. 97.

25. Habegger, p. 91.

26. Many critics have noted the mirroring of Ben Halleck and Bartley Hubbard. Not only do they share the same initials, they went to the same school and both failed law school. For elaboration, see Cady and Kaplan, as well as John C. Pryor, *A Violation of the Sanctities: The Interrogation of the Popular Press in the Novels of Howells, James, Wharton, and Dreiser* (Diss., Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1994); and Kermit Vanderbilt, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells: A Reinterpretation* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968).

27. E.g., Kaplan, p. 38.

28. Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (1940; rpt. New York: Pantheon Press, 1956), pp. 1–2.

29. Joel Porte, "Manners, Morals, and Mince Pie: Howells' America Revisited," *Prospects*, 10 (1985), 443–60.

30. Some of the Emersonian ideals Porte discusses are those of a classless democracy and a self-reliance that partakes in and reinforces community. Porte reads Bartley's indigestion as solitary eating, not the communal ideal (455).

31. Habegger, p. 92.

32. Kaplan, p. 27.

33. Howells, too, began his life as a journalist; and as an editor of the *Atlantic* he was painfully aware of the changes occurring due to the mass circulation of the press—both good changes, in that the press reached a wider, more democratic audience, and bad ones, in the homogenizing of that audience due to advertising. As Cady and Kaplan have argued, in many ways the creation and destruction of Bartley Hubbard can be seen as an exorcism of these tensions for Howells.

34. Kaplan, p. 37.

35. Samuel D. Warren and Lewis D. Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review*, 15 December 1890, p. 195.

36. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 179.

37. It is for this series that Bartley Hubbard interviews Silas Lapham at the beginning of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

38. For a history of divorce law and the West, see Barnett; MacComb; William L. O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967); and Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).

39. Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, p. 95.

40. Howells' ambivalence towards the West was rooted in his childhood memories of Ohio, which had changed irrevocably when he returned to the region as an adult.

41. Fryckstedt, p. 125.

42. There are numerous other instances in which characters discuss unsuccessful marriages and the breaking up of marriages, but they do not yet use the word "divorce."

43. George C. Carrington, Jr., *The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1966), p. 163.

44. This is a curious observation on Howells' part. In postbellum America, divorce laws were growing more and more conservative, especially in New England. In contrast, the number of divorces was increasing rapidly. The law seemed to try to curb this number by making it harder and harder to get a divorce but to no avail.

45. Boone, p. 127. I disagree with Boone, who argues that both Atherton's and Clara's "perspectives uphold the status-quo: Atherton opts for the morally edifying tragedy of self-sacrifice; Clara, for the morally redemptive comedy of a 'happy ending.' Whatever Atherton finally chooses to advise Halleck, the pattern of Howells' novel remains closed, the disturbances of the 'modern instance' of unhappy marriage safely brought to rest within the tragic framework of its structure." Boone's argument assumes that the reader is left in the end only Clara's and Atherton's perspectives, but both have been undermined or at least qualified. Neither of them presumes to offer the final word.

46. Warren Hedges, "Howells's 'Wretched Fetishes': Character, Realism, and Other Modern Instances," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 38 (1996), p. 46.

47. Bennett, p. 113.