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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE NEW SCIENCE:
DARWINIAN EVOLUTION AND THE RISE OF REALISM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Stephen H. Wells

December 2008

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Stephen H. Wells

2008

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE NEW SCIENCE:
DARWINIAN EVOLUTION AND THE RISE OF REALISM

By

Stephen H. Wells

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ABSTRACT

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE NEW SCIENCE: DARWINIAN EVOLUTION AND THE RISE OF REALISM

By

Stephen H. Wells

December 2008

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. Frederick Newberry, Ph. D.

Broad acceptance of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* emboldened a young William Dean Howells to explore the possibility of a scientific foundation for a new literature combining close observations of the immediate environment with a method of interpreting these observations based on evolutionary science as Howells understood it. Charles Sprague's "The Darwinian Theory," published in the *Atlantic* in 1866, the year Howells became assistant editor, provided the foundation for this new method, and Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) prompted Howells to take what he called "a new direction" in fiction based on evolutionary theory and natural selection. He began to explore this new approach in sketches written for the *Atlantic* (later published as *Suburban Sketches*) and further developed it in his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*. Of special interest is the sketch "Jubilee Days" in which he examines

the biological premises upon which Darwin and Wallace base their conclusions about natural selection.

Howells continued to explore evolutionary theory in *A Modern Instance* in which he examines the locus of human morality and the educational process that shapes the human moral sense. Individual progress, analogous to social progress, requires inheritance of an innate altruistic tendency, which stands in tenuous opposition to the selfish impulses that had directed human behavior for millennia. If unsupported, altruism can revert to savage animalism; therefore, education must shape it. Additionally, a terminus of influence delimits the boundary beyond which the adult moral sense solidifies. Later in his career, however, Howells's attitude toward evolution exhibits a slow but steady shift from measured optimism concerning the future of human society to one of doubt and pessimism. In *The Minister's Charge* (1886), Howells concludes that adaptation is possible for the individual and that the variation introduced to the existing, relatively closed social structure will strengthen society as a whole. *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897) presents an interpretation close in accord with an integrated evolutionary theory of Mendelian genetics with Darwinian natural selection. Howells eventually concludes that the best one can hope for is survival in the perpetual struggle and adaptation within a shifting social environment.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, immediate and extended, without whose immeasurable support in so many ways I would never have been able to complete this study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing this dissertation has stretched over eight years and involved many people who have provided support for my project in many ways. I begin with a general declaration of my gratitude to all of those who have helped me in any way to succeed in the completion of this dissertation.

More specifically, I would like to start by thanking my committee, especially my committee chair, Frederick Newberry. Dr. Newberry has watched and in many ways guided my scholarly progress for the past sixteen years, and for the past eight years has offered encouragement, patience, prodding, and incisive criticism, all at the appropriate times. Thanks also to my readers, Connie Ramirez, who provided shaping advice from an early stage in the project, and especially to Tom Kinnahan who agreed to step into the project to replace another reader, Jennifer Leader, whose career took a new direction, which took her away from Duquesne University.

In addition to my committee, others read and offered comment on portions of this dissertation during various stages of its development. My father, Willard Wells, helped significantly during composition of the original proposal for this project and contributed helpful comments on the first two chapters. Diane Maldonado read chapter one in an early state and noted several points that needed clarification. My colleague at the Community College of Allegheny County, Bonnie Ordonez, deserves special thanks for reading the first two chapters, but more importantly for prodding me to talk things out when I was having difficulty and then having the patience to listen once she got me going.

Fellow graduate students at Duquesne University through the 1990s made classes, office hours, and social time engaging and enjoyable. I am especially thankful for the friendship of my fellow graduate student, Julie Kloo, with whom I shared countless lunches and wonderful conversations. Her encouragement and energy influenced significantly my approach to research and writing. Also at Duquesne University, Dorothy Frayer, Laurel Willingham-McLain, and Karen Krzywicki all worked in the Center for Teaching Excellence during my fellowship in that office as Instructional Consultant for TAs. They encouraged me when the task seemed too great and regularly evicted me from the office, sending me off to the library to work on this project.

My aunt Martelle Wells has provided for me through my entire life a model of someone who pushes boundaries and assumes no personal limits. I must specifically acknowledge the grant she provided that allowed me a summer without teaching to devote to scholarship. My aunt and uncle, Becky and Daryl Warner encouraged me to bring my family to Boston and housed and fed us all while I spent a week reading at the Houghton Library during the day and playing badminton in their back yard in the evening. It was as relaxing, enjoyable, and productive a vacation as I have ever had. The knowledgeable and helpful staff at Harvard's Houghton Library Reading Room contributed to a pleasant and enlightening time of study. Permission to quote from the "What Is It?" playbill was generously granted by the Harvard Theatre Collection housed at the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

My mother-in-law, Donna Coon, knew how to solve any problem; the magic cure always involved a good meal. Although she passed away before she could see this project completed, she lives on in my children, all of whom love a good meal as much as

she did, and, unfortunately, in the twenty pounds I've gained since I began working on this project. Her devotion to her family provided an example for me as I tried to balance family life with my teaching and scholarship.

My mother and father, Willard and Margaret Wells, both English majors, instilled in me from an early age a love of reading and literature by sharing with me the exploits of Tom Sawyer and the adventures of the Swiss Family Robinson among many others. They also provided for me an example of a work ethic that helped to carry me through the process of writing this dissertation.

My kids—Alexandra, Meghan, Stephen, and Maria—showed genuine interest in my work, gave me quiet when I asked for it (most of the time) and gave me fun when I needed it (all of the time), and I thank them for their patience and understanding.

Finally, I owe great thanks for the understanding and support of my wife, Jennifer, who has encouraged my devotion to this project, heartened me when I had almost surrendered its completion to the duties of work and family, and who picked up the slack when I needed hours to write. Her commitment and sacrifice surpass my own.

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Introduction

Science, Society, and the Fiction of William Dean Howells

“So many scientists have denied so many things that it is hard to understand that Science herself denies nothing, to begin with, but seeks only and always to know the truth.”
—William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Study” April 1886 (808)

William Dean Howells figures in scholarship and literary history as a gracious editor, an insightful critic, and a conservative influence on American literary realism. He is the subject of two multi-volume biographies, and the bibliography of Howells scholarship continues its plodding expansion. In his role as “dean” of American letters, Howells met and commented on literary figures from Emerson to Frost, and John Updike notes that he stood almost alone as the arbiter of literary taste beginning with his editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* following the Civil War and continuing through the opening decade of the twentieth century: “As a critic and editor he cannot be extricated from the high annals of the literature of the long period between the end of the Civil War and America’s entry into the First World War” (78). Updike also notes, however, that though “few writers filled the American literary sky as amply as Howells in his prime; few have fallen so relatively far into disesteem” (78). Howells’s reputation remains overshadowed by the charge that he was overly prudish and fastidious in his own writing and in his editing of others, an attitude most strongly illustrated in Sinclair Lewis’s characterization of Howells in his 1930 Nobel Prize speech as a man who “had the code

of a pious old maid [and] whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage.”

According to Lewis, Howells had only one notable accomplishment, a dubious one: he “was actually able to tame Mark Twain . . . and to put that fiery old savage into an intellectual frock coat and top hat” (Lewis). Howells has never risen to the first tier as a subject of literary scholarship, nor has he completely faded, and numerous critics predict Howells revivals. Robert E. Clark, for example, describes the “effort to break the canon barrier against resoundingly decent men” and characterizes Howells as “an unfashionable genial master of the nineteenth-century novel” (11). Despite these scholarly productions and prognostications, Howells appears on few college syllabi.

As a focus of scholarship, however, Howells seems almost ideal. He produced a prodigious amount of correspondence, both personal and professional, and much of this material has survived. This, along with his extensive autobiographical writings, leads to one avenue of scholarship, mainly biographical and psychological. The first extensive Howells biography, Edwin Cady’s two-volume treatment (1956, 1958), attempts to provide a “biographical context,” for in the “interplay between an author’s other life and his literature lies his true biography” (*Road to Realism* vii). Cady’s effort to provide this context leads to his introducing psychological material more fully developed by later critics. Kermit Vanderbilt’s 1968 critical biography, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells*, marks a shift in Howells criticism toward a more expressly psychological approach. Vanderbilt characterizes Howells of the 1870s and 1880s as a man “pulled in one direction by the latitudinarian spirit of post-Darwinian Christianity . . . yet urged in another by a yearning for the security of a formulated creed” (55). Vanderbilt argues that Howells’s novels exhibit the tension engendered by the breakdown of religious

orthodoxy and the rise of moral relativism. This tension results in a precarious psychological balance that Howells cannot always maintain.

John Crowley's three-volume literary biography of Howells (1985, 1989, 1999) carries this approach even further. When Howells scholars approach their subject armed with psychoanalytic theory, they perceive (especially in the autobiographical work so pregnant with neurotic possibilities) a child full of neurotic insecurities, a young man unable to part with his mother without experiencing debilitating depression, an editor seemingly uncomfortable with printing any profanity or sexual content, and a mature writer apparently committed to an ostensibly rather tame brand of realism. Crowley describes his approach to Howells in the introduction to the first volume as "the attempt to break through the mask of fictive impersonality, to reverse a writer's conversion of memory into symbolic fable, and to apprehend the animating emotions of the individual artist" (*Black Heart's Truth* x).

In the last volume of his trilogy, Crowley expands his focus to examine Howells as a product of the literary marketplace and his position within it, offering perhaps one explanation for the eclipse of Howells's reputation that occurred in the early twentieth century. Early in his career as a novelist, Howells drew criticism from many who considered his subject matter to be beyond the bounds of propriety. By the turn of the century, however, he had lost his edge as the novels of the naturalist writers, many of whom Howells had supported, pushed the boundaries even farther. Howells, according to Crowley, had so thoroughly established himself as the literary standard that it was not economically feasible for him to push the limits of his fiction: "The monumentalized Dean was . . . an early manifestation of the commodification of the literary marketplace

that has governed American letters throughout the twentieth century” (*The Dean* 3).

Cady’s and Crowley’s analyses establish Howells’s sensitivity to the cultural context in which he lived and worked and begin to examine the influence that this context has on his fiction.

Although Cady and Crowley focus mainly on Howells’s life as it shaped his fiction, they also address Howells’s influence on the younger writers with whom he had contact. Such study, developed in numerous journal articles, provides another possible approach to Howells and reason to pursue him as a subject of scholarship. As assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1866 to 1871 under James T. Fields, and as editor from 1871 to 1881, Howells probably did more than any other individual to shape American literary tastes in the last third of the nineteenth century. This influence continued through his “Editor’s Study” columns in *Harper’s* published between 1886 and 1892. In Howells, some scholars see a literary innovator guiding a younger generation toward the frontier of realism. In an early example of this view, Henry Steele Commager presents a literary leader who, “more than any other literary figure of his time . . . set the standards, drew the patterns, marked out the lines of advance of the literature and the culture in the United States” (vii). Howells sought not only to maintain the reputation of the *Atlantic* through continued publication of the older generation of writers and poets who had shaped it from its inception but also to establish the periodical as a venue for literature on the leading edge of American fiction. Anne E. Boyd points out that Howells, especially, among editors of the *Atlantic*, “was . . . keenly interested in promoting realism and the new writers who were producing it” (20).

Howells's influence on so many of his contemporaries and on those who follow him offers another scholarly approach. And it is this influence that makes the development of Howellsian realism worth further scholarly attention. Perhaps the most striking case of Howells's influence is the career of Mark Twain. Howells immediately recognized Twain's genius for capturing the American frontier, and his favorable review of Twain's *Innocents Abroad* led to their meeting; their similar aims in literature cemented the friendship. Even after Twain stopped writing for the *Atlantic* because Howells could not match the fees offered by other periodicals, Twain continued to send manuscripts to Howells for both editorial and friendly advice, and the two remained lifelong friends. Despite the attacks of Lewis and other modernist writers, Howells's influence on novelists continues today. In *Facing Facts* (1995), David Shi charts the rise of realism in the United States, and, in his closing paragraph, he contends that Howells's influence extends beyond the pages of the *Atlantic*:

In reflecting upon the redemptive ardor of the realistic enterprise, novelist John Updike recently declared that "Howells's agenda remains our agenda: for the American writer to live in America and to mirror it in writing, with 'everything brought out.'" Updike then quoted a letter in which an elderly Howells told Charles Eliot Norton that he was "not sorry for having wrought in common, crude material so much; that is the right American stuff. . . . I was always, as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand." Updike's conclusion shimmers with conviction: "It is hard to see, more than eight decades later, what else can be done." (Shi 307)

To a large extent, Howells's scholarly obscurity relative to some of his contemporaries can be traced to a misunderstanding of his literary project due in large part to a related misunderstanding of the sociohistorical context in which he worked. Scholars have focused for the last fifty years on psychological analysis of Howells, a profitable line of inquiry to be sure, but one that internalizes Howells's conflict and marginalizes the tensions created by the social upheavals surrounding him. It is in this context that Sinclair Lewis's image of Howells imposing the confining trappings of Victorian society upon the vital, primal Twain provides insight, because Lewis addresses, however inadvertently, one of the essential tensions that shapes Howells's fiction, the tension between the highly structured institutions of American middle-class Victorian culture and the world of struggle and chance represented by the then recently popularized theories of evolution and natural selection. According to Paul Thompson, Charles Darwin's "landmark work in biological research and theorizing provided an entirely new framework within which to consider human origins, human behavior, and social policy" (474).

American writers recognized this monumental shift brought on by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection; they strove quietly to incorporate it into their fiction, into their interpretation and expression of reality, and Howells positioned himself at the forefront of this endeavor. Interpretations and misinterpretations of Darwinian evolutionary theory inform Howells's fiction; therefore, recognition of the tensions created by the introduction of such controversial matter is indispensable to an understanding of Howells's literary project. Upon the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth and the sesquicentennial of publication of *Origin of Species*, it seems time that

Howells's fiction be reexamined in light of his pivotal role in translating the essential tenets of Darwinian thought as he understood them into the mainstream of realist writing that has shaped in one way or another much of the American fiction that has followed.

Much critical ink has been spilled in examining realism and naturalism in American fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Typically, Realism appears in literary histories as a reaction to Romanticism and as a precursor to turn-of-the-century Naturalism. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, for example, characterize realism as such a stepping stone: "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (Harmon 428). The relationship between realism and naturalism proves to be complex and much more fluid than many definitions acknowledge, and clear delineation of the two fades away upon close examination.

Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1984) remains one of the standards in this field, and Pizer's explanation offers a solid foundation upon which to build a definition of Howellsian Realism. Pizer bases his definition, in turn, on the work of George J. Becker who addresses the subject in "Realism: An Essay in Definition" (1949). Becker poses a definition based on European and American fiction from 1870, and resting on three basic criteria. The first is verisimilitude of detail based on close observation of the extratextual world. Pizer accepts this criterion of verisimilitude as do most later critics, and it is clear that the realists themselves saw this as essential to their project. As David Shi characterizes them

in *Facing Facts*, realists and naturalists recognize “the existence of a physical realm independent of the mind, a coherent and accessible world of objective facts capable of being known through observation, understood with the use of reason, and accurately represented in thought, literature, and the arts” (4-5). Becker’s second criterion involves an effort to portray normal experience rather than the exceptional. This category of representativeness, Pizer contends, breaks down under scrutiny, revealing a diversity of subject matter far surpassing the basis in normal experience which Becker posits (Pizer 2). Becker’s final criterion depends on narrative objectivity rather than subjective or idealistic commentary. Upon this point, Pizer deviates again from Becker in his assertion that, rather than objectivity, the realist novel presents an “essentially subjective and idealistic . . . view of human nature and experience—that is, it is ethically idealistic” (2). He supports this assertion by noting that many protagonists of realistic literature eventually move to a morally superior position within their social milieu through their own self-sacrificing actions, indicating “the ideal possibilities of action within particular social contexts, rather than the way most men act within these contexts” (7). The individuals in these novels achieve the goals to which mankind as a whole still aspires.

Pizer then differentiates naturalism from realism, agreeing with earlier critics that the naturalists were like the realists in their attention to the details of everyday life but that they stressed the role of causal forces, such as heredity and environment, in the determination of behavior and belief. The difference between the realists and later naturalists rests in large part on differences in subject matter: “In the name of ‘realism,’ fiction concerned itself largely with decorous conversations and parlor intrigues; the domestic problem novel became the self-proclaimed ‘modern’ mode” (Lears 17). Pizer

modifies this definition, suggesting two tensions or contradictions as constituting theme and form in the naturalistic novel. The first tension is between the subject matter of the novel and the idea of humankind that emerges from the subject matter. Naturalism as a mode deals with the local and contemporary, as does realism, but naturalism “discovers in this material the extraordinary and the excessive in human nature” (11). The second tension involves theme in the novel. The naturalist often describes characters as controlled by the aforementioned causal factors. At the same time, the writer suggests a “compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life” (11). The character may not control his environment or his path in life, but he continues to search for indications of his own dignity and importance. The naturalistic novel asserts the worth of all life. In many cases, sex is the single factor that leads to both chaos and marriage. This points to the conclusion that “tragedy is inherent in the human situation given man’s animal past and the possibility that he will be dominated by that past in particular circumstances” (17). The naturalists were not, according to Pizer, attempting to show the overwhelming power of deterministic forces; they instead worked to show the interaction of such forces with individual worth. Pizer concludes that “the late nineteenth-century naturalistic novel anticipates both the startling, convention-destroying concreteness and the profound solipsism of much modern art” (40).

Perhaps it is more accurate to consider both realism and naturalism, to the extent that they can be separated, as overlapping constituents on the same continuum of American literature beginning with the rise of modern scientific inquiry in the early to middle nineteenth century and carrying on through World War I and the rise of

modernism. Distinctions between the two modes offer no clear differentiation aside from judgments about subject matter and philosophical approach. Upon careful consideration, the two modes represent the reflection in literature of developments in science, most especially in Darwinian notions of evolution and natural selection, as further scientific inquiry modified understanding of the mechanisms that drive evolution and natural selection.

Howells defined his realism through the 1880s and early 1890s in his monthly “Editor’s Study” columns in *Harper’s*. In 1892, he compiled and modified these essays to present in *Criticism and Fiction* a complete definition of realism as he saw it at the time. At its most essential level, realism as defined by Howells concerns itself with authenticity in character, plot, and language. In his July 1890 “Editor’s Study” column, he draws from British critic Grant Allen’s article in the March 1890 volume of the British periodical *The Speaker* to define the core of realism:

“The modern American novel,” as Mr. Allen truly says, “is built upon principles all its own, which entirely preclude the possibility of introducing those abrupt changes, sensational episodes, improbable coincidences, which to our contemporary English romance are indispensable ingredients. It . . . depends for its effects upon the faithful, almost photographic delineation of actual life, with its motives, its impulses, its springs of action laid bare to the eye, but with no unnatural straining after the intenser and coarser emotions of blood and fire, no intentional effort to drag in murder, crime, or fierce interludes of passion, without adequate reason.” (317-18)

Howells then modifies Allen's description with additional comment concerning "the American novelist's inherent, if not instinctive perception of equality" (318). Equality, according to Howells, must be found "running through motive, passion, principle, incident, character, and commanding with the same force . . . interest in the meanest and the noblest, through the mere virtue of their humanity. . . . Without this we have here in America our imitators of that [British] romance and . . . criticism: poor provincials who actually object to meeting certain people in literature because they do not meet such people in society!" (318). Character, plot, and language must align with the reader's experience and knowledge of the world, must strike a chord simultaneously strange and familiar. In its simplest form, according to Howells, "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material . . ." (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 229).

Characters in a realistic novel should be drawn from life, and their actions should derive from their natures. Howells commends Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* for its carefully drawn setting but criticizes its failures of characterization: "After that exquisitely careful and truthful setting of his story in the shabby boarding-house, he fills the scene with figures jerked about by the exaggerated passions and motives of the stage" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 205). Too many critics and general readers, according to Howells, read to be comforted, to escape, to imagine that "An English novel, full of titles and rank, is apparently essential to the happiness of such [dull] people; their weak and childish imagination is at home in its familiar environment; they know what they are reading; the fact that it is hash many times warmed over reassures them; whereas a story of our own

life, honestly studied and faithfully represented, troubles them with varied misgiving” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 232).

The novel’s plot should reflect the actions of these accurately drawn characters. Plot twists and turns for their own sake detract from a work rather than showcasing the author’s ability: “There are many persons who suppose that the highest proof an artist can give of his fantasy is the invention of a complicated plot, spiced with perils, surprises, and suspenses; and that anything else is the sign of a poor and tepid imagination. . . . They own it is all false; but they admire the imagination, what they call the “power” of the author” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 225). And both the narrator and the characters should communicate using authentic language, which for Howells stands as essential to expressing authentic life. Howells responds to critics who decry the looming decay of the English language, its inability to capture modern life, by observing, “We may comfort ourselves, however, unless we prefer a luxury of grief, by remembering that no language is ever old on the lips of those who speak it, no matter how decrepit it drops from the pen. We have only to leave our studies, editorial and other, and go into the shops and fields to find the ‘spacious times’ again; and from the beginning Realism, before she had put on her capital letter, had divined this near-at-hand truth along with the rest” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 256).

The importance of realism, according to Howells, is in its attempt to bring weight back to literature, to make it do work in the world:

It is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a message or a meaning for them; and it is the notion that a novel may be false in its

portrayal of causes and effects that makes literary art contemptible even to those whom it amuses, that forbids them to regard the novelist as a serious or right-minded person. If they do not in some moment of indignation cry out against all novels . . . they remain besotted in the fume of the delusions purveyed to them, with no higher feeling for the author than such maudlin affection as the frequenter of an opium-joint perhaps knows for the attendant who fills his pipe with the drug” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 242).

In order to escape this narcotic function, fiction must connect with reality, and Howells calls for fiction to “portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 244). Fiction should “leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on the fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 244).

Probably the most frequent criticism leveled against Howells and his formulation of realism involves his contention that American authors should “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252). Extrapolating from this decontextualized comment, later critics contend that Howells refused from Victorian squeamishness to address any coarse or rude elements of society. In its broader context, however, this comment leads to a more

nuanced assessment of Howells's project. Howells opens the passage by agreeing with Hawthorne who "more or less whimsically lamented, that there were so few shadows and inequalities in our broad level of prosperity" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252). In reflecting specifically on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Howells contends "that whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252). Although the social situation in the United States certainly did not represent the ideal in the last half of the nineteenth century, it represented nowhere near the extreme of social inequality and overcast of imminent danger that existed in Czarist Russia: "Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth; and in a land where journeymen carpenters and plumbers strike for four dollars a day the sum of hunger and cold is comparatively small, and the wrong from class to class has been almost inappreciable, though all this is changing for the worse" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252). Related to this, Howells contends, "Our novelists . . . concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252). The social environment in America allows for relative abundance, and this, according to Howells, must be reflected in any literature that can be considered real: "It is worth while, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities; the very passions themselves seem to be softened and modified by conditions which formerly at least could not be said to wrong any one, to cramp endeavor, or to cross lawful desire" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252).

This does not mean that unhappiness is extinct in America, but suffering is not institutionalized as it is in other places: “Sin and suffering and shame there must always be in the world, I suppose, but I believe that in this new world of ours it is still mainly from one to another one, and oftener still from one to one’s self. We have death, too, in America, and a great deal of disagreeable and painful disease, which the multiplicity of our patent medicines does not seem to cure; but this is tragedy that comes in the very nature of things, and is not peculiarly American, as the large, cheerful average of health and success and happy life is” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252-53). Howells concludes that “It will not do to boast, but it is well to be true to the facts, and to see that, apart from these purely mortal troubles, the race here has enjoyed conditions in which most of the ills that have darkened its annals might be averted by honest work and unselfish behavior” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 252-53). In sum, one must consider Howells’s comment as does Edwin Cady. Far from being “a counsel of namby-pamby optimism to novelists, it [Howells’s comment] had a direct and limited meaning designed to warn American writers away from a false and artificial injection of Russian effects into their work” (Cady, “Note on Howells” 161). Although Howells saw in America a place of comparative safety and security, he also saw rapid and continuous change all around.

Howells lived in an age of transition during which all previously stable points of reference began to shift, leaving people in all social strata and in all realms of endeavor to straddle precariously the inexorably expanding rift between the traditional and the modern. Science and industry increasingly replaced religion and agriculture as the paradigmatic foundations of thought. Most histories of the latter half of the nineteenth century open with enumeration of the varied and extensive changes that shaped the age.

Such profound change could easily have resulted in overwhelming fear and doubt as emblematic of the age. The years from 1859 to 1914, however, saw great hope and optimism in most of the western world. In the United States especially, many intellectuals expected to see the fruition of Winthrop's vision of a "city upon a hill," shining as a beacon of hope to the rest of the world. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Alfred Russel Wallace could declare without any sense of hyperbole that in order to grasp the "full importance and grandeur" of progress in the nineteenth century, one "must compare it, not with any preceding century, or even with the last millennium, but with the whole historical period—perhaps even with the whole period that has elapsed since the stone age" (*The Wonderful Century 2*). As generally inventoried, changes in transportation, communication, and production dominated in an age defined by change, and all of them depended upon advances in science. In fact, according to E. J. Hobsbawm, "Educated men of this period [1850-1875] were not merely proud of their sciences, but prepared to subordinate all other forms of intellectual activity to them" (277). And in this age of scientific ascendancy, Charles Darwin's name stood above the rest: "If any single scientific theory is to represent the advances of natural science in our period [1850-1875] . . . it was the theory of evolution, and if any one figure dominated the public image of science it was the craggy and somewhat apelike one of Charles Darwin" (Hobsbawm 279-80).

There were, in fact, many alternatives to Darwin's theory of natural selection, and even Darwin himself acknowledged that other forces could be at work in the evolution of species. For scientists and non-scientists alike, however, *Origin of Species* embodied a set of ideas at once disconcerting and fascinating that engaged a broad swath of the

American population in a conversation about the very essence of humanity. The public interest surrounding evolution and natural selection that reigned through the latter half of the nineteenth century was without precedent. During this period, it proved almost impossible to avoid some contact with the new ideas sweeping through the sciences. By 1874, W. D. Whitney could write in the prestigious *North American Review* that “The doctrine of evolution, of the connected and progressive development of organic life on the earth, of the transmutation of animal and vegetable species, is, as every one knows, a leading subject of inquiry and controversy in this latter half of our nineteenth century. Hardly any one reads and thinks so little that he has not felt called upon to make up his mind, or at least to ask himself, on which side of the controversy he will take his stand” (Whitney 61).¹ A virtually perfect alignment of events led to the astonishingly broad popular dissemination of Darwinian ideas. The state of scientific inquiry and communication, broad public education, rapid and reliable communication, modern mass media and entertainment all combined to carry Darwinian ideas to a broad and eager public. These factors contributed to the nearly instant ubiquity of Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

Perhaps most importantly, Darwin’s explanation of his own theories and the controversy surrounding them appear in language and media readily accessible to the generally educated reader. By the early twentieth century, scientific vocabulary, specialized jargon, separated scientific from popular discourse, but no such separation existed in the latter half of the nineteenth century; high-stakes, heated scientific debate occurred in plain language within the pages of popular periodicals, and the average educated person felt free to participate in the glories accorded to the great scientists of the

age. As only one example of this engagement, Charles Darwin maintained voluminous correspondence with hundreds of avid amateurs. Janet Browne estimates that “In the decade that followed *The Descent of Man* [1871-81], Darwin probably wrote around fifteen hundred letters each year and received much the same number in reply” (388). Some of these letters contained requests for autographs and photographs, proposals for various projects, and pleas for financial support. Many of them, however, related to scientific communication: “Rafts of amateur naturalists supplied snippets of information on topics that must have stopped even Darwin in his tracks—a frog inside a lump of coal, a hen that laid eggs with clock faces on them, a hybrid cat-rabbit, beans that grew on the wrong side of the pod in leap years, an avowal that the human soul was really only magnetism” (Browne 388). These anecdotes and comments on natural history supply evidence that laypeople had read, understood to varying degrees, and associated on a personal level with Darwin’s scientific works; average people could connect with science: “It was clear that Darwin’s correspondents had read his books and found in them people just like themselves who had supplied information. They wished to join in, to participate in the build-up of evidence by reporting their own case histories; and perhaps to make a contribution, however small, to knowledge” (Browne 388).

Added to this general availability and accessibility of scientific discourse, Darwin’s theory of natural selection is, in essence, relatively easy to grasp, and it presents ideas with which a reading public can interact. Darwinian evolution provided the perfect content for public consumption. In some of her recent work, Sherry Turkle addresses the issue of the popular appropriation of scientific ideas, evoking Emerson: “Writing in his diary in 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson reflected that ‘Dreams and beasts are two keys by

which we are to find out the secrets of our nature . . . they are our test objects.’ Emerson was prescient. Freud and his heirs would measure human rationality against the dream. Darwin and his heirs would insist that we measure human nature against nature itself—the world of the beasts seen as our forbears and kin” (Turkle, *Life* 22). Turkle goes on to examine the mechanism by which these ideas work their way into the popular consciousness: “Appropriable theories, ideas that capture the imagination of the culture at large, tend to be those with which people can become actively involved. They tend to be theories that can be ‘played’ with. So one way to think about the social appropriability of a given theory is to ask whether it is accompanied by its own objects-to-think-with that can help it move out beyond intellectual circles” (Turkle, “Whither” 422-23). Turkle provides examples from Freud—slips of the tongue, dreams. Darwinian theory has such test objects in the ideas of the missing link, the scale of civilization, the struggle for survival, and the resulting survival of the fittest, ideas with which people can engage on many levels. These ideas are comprehensible and appropriable, but they would have fallen on sterile ground had not the broader population had leisure during which to consider them and education to facilitate their appropriation. The rise of labor unions and corresponding regulation of the workday, a national movement toward leisure, the results of the common school movement, and a near mania for self-improvement all contributed to the mass appropriation of evolution and natural selection.

The Puritan work ethic that had dominated since initial settlement of New England in the 1600s began to decline under multifaceted pressures in the middle of the nineteenth century: “From the 1850s on . . . one can trace a steadily mounting attack on the excesses of work and a growing praise of play and recreation as antidotes to the

violent, all-consuming busyness of the Americans” (Daniel Rodgers 102). The call for increased leisure came in part from American pulpits as “with growing frequency ministers raised their voices against the all-consuming ‘run, push, drive’ of American life” (Rodgers 102). They worried primarily that overwork would lead to obsessive accumulation of wealth to the detriment of Christian ideals. To combat “the ascendance of an aggressive, commercially absorbed bourgeoisie” and the “invasion of the Sabbath by newspapers and railroads . . . clergymen . . . were willing, often eager, to preach the pleasures of art and recreation, leisure and play” (Rodgers 103). Warnings also emanated from the medical community: “Coined in the 1860s, the term neurasthenia covered a bewildering variety of neurological complaints—headaches, melancholy, dyspepsia, insomnia, and spinal pains—and joined them all as symptoms of a general exhaustion of the nervous energies” caused by overexertion especially in work (Rodgers 103-4).² These admonitions against overwork targeted mainly the middle class.

The working classes also began to enjoy increased leisure time, but the causes for this increase differed markedly from those prompting this increase in the middle class. Organization of labor and the resulting pressure for political reform began to show benefits for hourly workers in the middle of the nineteenth century: “The ten-hour day organizations of the 1840s and 1850s sought to decrease the workday through political reform. . . . A number of legislatures yielded to the pressure. New Hampshire passed a ten-hour law in 1847, as did Pennsylvania and Maine in 1848 and six more states over the course of the 1850s” (Murolo 64-65). Numerous loopholes made these laws nearly unenforceable, but they provided a pattern for later legislation reducing the workweek “from 69.7 hours per week in 1850” (Zarnowski 271) to 60 hours per week by 1890 (U.S.

Bureau of the Census 168). Labor organizations continued to make progress through the remainder of the century: “By the 1850s the ten hour day was common and in 1878, the Knights of Labor included the demand for an eight-hour day in its first constitution” (Zarnowski 271).

Although this trend seems to indicate a reduction in productivity, Rodgers argues that workers simply packed more production into a reduced time, thus freeing hours for leisure that would otherwise have been consumed by work: “Because shortened hours of labor were frequently accomplished by squeezing periods of relaxation and amusement out of working hours, by trading long hours of casual work for shorter, more concentrated workdays, decrease in the nominal hours of labor was no sign of a diminution of work itself” (Rodgers 108). One effect of such concentration was the separation of work time from leisure: “What did occur was an increasing segregation of work and play into distinct categories in place of the older interfusion of free and work time” (Rodgers 108). Such separation led to a need for leisure activities distinct from work.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a widespread movement, especially in the middle and upper classes, toward personal development both physical and intellectual. Much of this rested on a foundation of evolutionary thought. Taking a Lamarckian perspective, people thought that any improvement in the self would be passed on to the next generation. This is much the same as the idea predominant during the age of capital in which men worked to amass capital to pass on to the next generation. They also strove to pass along physical and intellectual inheritance to their offspring. The physical element in this drive to self-improvement focused on physical fitness: “Through the influence of the colleges, YMCAs, and athletic clubs, an unprecedented

number of middle-class Northerners took time from work only to pour it into still more strenuous regimes of gymnastics, muscle-building exercises, and athletics” (Rodgers 108-9). The focus on physical vigor also appears in popular books dealing with marriage and childrearing. Etiquette books that also cover early married life stress the importance of physical health in both mother and father at the time of conception and through the birth of the child. As one example, George W. Hudson’s *The Marriage Guide for Young Men* contains the conclusion that “We can scarcely doubt that the physical and mental condition of parents at the time they initiate the new life, has much to do with the condition in which their child is born” (160). Hudson instructs young men to “give your children wonderful endowment, by cultivating physical strength, or mental powers and tastes, and engaging in manly study and exercise about the time you beget them” (162). Physically fit parents, runs the argument, beget fit children.

In addition, these theories also stress the emotional and psychological well being of both parents from conception through birth. Among many other anecdotes, Hudson relates the story of a man who conceived a child after working for a year to design a new steamboat. His daughter “grew to be a woman with twenty-three inch brain, superior temperament, and all organic conditions of the highest order of talents, especially the philosophical and artistic” (161-62). Such stories, as well as the obvious benefits to the self, led people to explore educational opportunities as never before. People flocked to lyceums where they “heard lectures and concerts, watched scientific demonstrations and dramatic performances, and participated in debates and discussion groups” (Foner 684). In his novels, Howells mentions such opportunities. For example, toward the end of *A Modern Instance*, Clara Kingsbury reflects on the lectures and other intellectual activities

in which she engaged before her marriage to Atherton. In fact, she specifically mentions John Fiske's lectures on his Cosmic Philosophy, which would later become important in Howells's development of realism.

Well-known institutions including the Lowell Institute and Cooper Union began as lyceums (Foner 684). Science stood as one of the most popular subjects of these lectures, and many prominent scientists actively sought to popularize their work. For example, "The lectures of . . . John Tyndall and Thomas Henry Huxley . . . were particularly popular" (Rhees). Tyndall's lectures on physics during late 1872 and early 1873 "were given with illustrative demonstrations, drew great crowds, and aroused intense interest. Newspapers, as well as such periodicals as the *Scientific American*, reported them fully. The *Chicago Advance* noted that 'the *New York Tribune* sold over fifty thousand copies of its special sheet containing full reports of Professor Tyndall's lectures, and this besides an enormous extra sale of the regular issues in which the lectures were first reported'" (Mott 3:106). Huxley's lectures on evolution during 1876 also proved to be highly popular and successful (Rhees). The focus on education and thought led in large part to reformation of the American public school system.

Publication of *Origin of Species* came just as the newly revamped system of public education reformation in the United States began producing its first generation of graduates. Post-secondary education for the upper and upper-middle classes was already a hallmark of American education: "As early as 1870, there were more American colleges, medical schools, and law schools than in all of Europe" (Schlereth 249). A generation of eager, educated, leisured consumers waited. The primary and secondary schools, however, had only recently undergone the transformation that eventually led to

broader educational opportunities for American children. In the late eighteenth century, the U.S. public school system was little different from what it had been a hundred years earlier. Most people saw education as a choice rather than as a necessity and assumed that primary education should remain “a religious or private matter” (Rippa 57). Even those parents who did value education had very little choice about where to send their children: “During the early decades of the nineteenth century, education was often viewed as a luxury. However, even parents who could afford such a luxury had limited choices. . . . The United States was a patchwork quilt of schools, tied together by the reality that money was needed to attain a decent education” (Sadker 310). For a variety of reasons, this situation began to change about a quarter of the way through the nineteenth century. S. Alexander Rippa succinctly summarizes some of these causes, citing “the desire of the ruling elite to guard their own social and economic status; the eagerness of factory owners to have a properly trained and disciplined work force; the wishes of the working groups to use the common school to climb up the socioeconomic ladder in the United States; and . . . the driving force of . . . reform leaders to improve American society through public schooling” as the predominant factors in the rapid growth of public education (90). These forces combined to initiate a sea change in attitudes toward education, establishing a public school system in the United States which rests on three basic principles: state responsibility for education, the state’s right to levy taxes to support schools, and “the important principle of a nonsectarian, publicly supported school system open to all youth, regardless of creed or financial status” (Rippa 106). The results of this new attitude appeared by the middle of the century, and by the end of the Civil War, “Most of the states had established public-school systems, and a large number

of children were obtaining an elementary education. In addition, some youth in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and a few other states were receiving a free secondary education” (Rippa 106). In order to standardize public school policies and curricula, “28 of 35 states had established state boards of education” (Kauchak 159). The public school system continued to grow, and within two decades of the Civil War, “tax-supported public elementary schools were firmly established as a cornerstone of the U.S. educational system. New Jersey eliminated the need for parents to pay for an elementary education in 1871; it was the last state to do so” (Kauchak 159). A generation of eager, educated, leisured consumers stood prepared to receive Darwin’s ideas.

This population experienced Darwin’s ideas through a variety of media. Science books became increasingly popular beginning in 1844 with the anonymous publication of Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in which he argued that the history of life showed a gradual progression in which each new form could have evolved by a small change from the one immediately below. Chambers continued to assume divine creation, but he questioned the method by which God created life and the incidence of continued divine intervention through the continuing development of life: “We have seen powerful evidence that the construction of this globe and its associates, and inferentially that of all the other globes of space, was the result, not of any immediate or personal exertion of the part of the Deity, but of natural laws, which are expressions of his will. What is to hinder our supposing that the organic creation is also a result of natural laws, which are in like manner an expression of his will?” (Chambers 120). Embedded in Chambers’s evolution, progress and the hope for future improvement of humankind maintained a prominent position: “The present race, rude and impulsive as it

is, is perhaps the best adapted to the present state of things in the world; but the external world goes through slow and gradual changes, which may leave it in time a much serener field of existence. There may then be occasion for a nobler type of humanity, which shall complete the zoological circle on this planet, and realize some of the dreams of the purest spirits of the present race” (Chambers 206).

Vestiges drew immediate and vociferous denunciation from the scientific community for its lack of empirical rigor, but its popularity prepared the reading public for the ascendancy of the sciences in the decades that followed.

In addition to books, both popular and more exclusive periodicals turned to evolution as a topic of interest. In his definitive history of American periodicals, Frank Luther Mott characterizes the postbellum period through the middle of the 1880s as an age of “extraordinary growth of American interest in scientific matters” (Mott 3:105). Science, Mott notes, “ranked . . . before fiction, travel, and history-biography in number of pages in the *Galaxy* file,” and this quantitative evidence from the *Galaxy*, a New York competitor to the *Atlantic*, supports his generalization that this distribution “may be taken as typical of the general magazines for this period” (Mott 3:105). Part of the interest in science derived from a general fascination with technological advance, but pure science also received significant attention due in large part to “the acrimonious and universal discussion of a single theory in the field of biology” (Mott 3:106). He notes that most periodicals, especially those devoted to religion and science, but also general magazines, allotted significant space to evolution, and “At least one periodical was published largely to exploit the theory—*Evolution*, issued from Boston from 1877 to 1880” (Mott 3:107). This periodical coverage spanned a broad continuum of detail and accuracy. Much of it

was imperfect and even blatantly inaccurate, but it clearly established the idea in the popular consciousness with a breadth unapproachable by scientific books.

P. T. Barnum exemplified yet another path toward general popular appropriation of evolution. Many scholars and biographers have clearly established Barnum's penchant for marketing the sensational, and he did not fail to capitalize on what Sherry Turkle calls the "objects-to-think-with" that accompany theory. In early 1860, only three months after publication of *Origin of Species*, Barnum announced the display of one of his more famous and long-running exhibits—"What Is It?"— which presented an African American performer as representative of the "missing link" connecting humans with apes ("What Is It' Archive"). A playbill advertising Dion Boicicault's *The Octoroon* at Barnum's American Museum in New York also includes on its reverse a picture of an upright, human-like ape along with titillating copy drawing attention to the creature's purported status as half man, half ape: "Is it a lower order of Man? or is it a higher development of the Monkey? or is it both in combination? Nothing of the kind HAS EVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE! IT IS ALIVE! and it is certainly the MOST MARVELLOUS [sic] CREATURE LIVING!" The playbill goes on to detail the juxtaposition of human and simian attributes: "He possesses the skull, limbs, and GENERAL ANATOMY OF THE ORANG-OUTANG, with the actual COUNTENANCE OF A HUMAN BEING!" Moreover, the playbill includes newspaper reviews of the display, stressing its purported scientific value: "The New York Sunday Times says:—'It is an animal which would seem to supply the link supposed by philosophers to exist between the human race and brutes'" (Playbill). This advertising copy assumes the reader's familiarity with the idea of evolution, indicating the theory's

ubiquity in the popular mind. While this might seem to be merely one display among hundreds in Barnum's five-story collection of oddities and aberrations, "What Is It" gained much broader popular attention through Matthew Brady photographs and a Currier and Ives print.³

Matthew Brady set up his studio and gallery across the street from P. T. Barnum's American Museum on Broadway in 1844. Brady enjoys his current reputation due largely to his Civil War photographs, but in the middle and late nineteenth century, his popularity depended on a wide range of subject matter, including portraits of Barnum's performers, which he then displayed in his gallery, and many people would have seen daguerreotypes of the "What Is It" in this context. Currier and Ives carried images of "What Is It" to the middle class in their lithograph picturing the "What Is It" with a small group of solidly middle-class observers: "By highlighting the 'scientific' as well as the 'pleasing, interesting and amusing' nature of the human exhibit, Barnum sought to attract middle-class families looking for education and entertainment to the American Museum" ("What Is It" Archive"). The Currier and Ives print "stresses the respectability of the exhibit even as it highlights the 'otherness' of the 'man monkey'" ("What Is It" Archive"). Thus the idea of the "missing link" and by extension the theory of evolution swirled on many levels of the popular consciousness, and Howells clearly recognizes this influence. He situates Bartley and Marcia Hubbard in this context in *A Modern Instance* as he has them attend a play at Kimball's Museum in Boston on their first night in the city. Kimball's Museum was the counterpart to Barnum's New York Museum, and Kimball and Barnum frequently traded curiosities to display. The Hubbards are, perhaps not coincidentally, attending another of Boicicault's plays, the *Colleen Bawn*.

The breadth and subtlety of these ideas in swaying the popular mind, however, remains open to some dispute. Of those who support Darwinism as a significant influence in shaping the ideas of the average American, some agree with Robert Young that, unlike the relatively measured response of the intelligentsia, the popular reception of Darwinism tended to the extremes: “If I am asked about the impact of science and evolutionism on the general public, I find that the reaction was one of unanalytic, total rejection. Darwin was a name to be invoked as a *cliché*, to be rejected by the faithful, or embraced by the secularists” (Young 28; italics in original). Other scholars agree that Darwinism did indeed influence almost every strata of society but contend that the reaction was much more subtle than Young supposes. Gillian Beer observes that *Origin of Species* influenced all reading people. Even if they had not read Darwin themselves, people knew about the ideas it contained; the ideas were in circulation and could not be avoided (4). Beer’s assessment seems closer to the reality of the situation. Young is right in his appraisal that popular reaction was underinformed, but he overstates the dichotomy of response. The fiction and periodical literature of late nineteenth-century America indicate willingness on the part of educated readers to treat Darwin’s theories with reserved skepticism combined with willingness, indeed desire, to attempt a reconciliation of new science and traditional religion. Rather than blanket rejection or total acceptance, most thinking people felt ambivalence.

All of these factors aligned to allow Darwinian evolution to permeate the culture of the day. It is thus safe to conclude that Howells in formulating his literary project would consider this. In his realism, Howells attempted to concentrate on the minutiae of life, on the mundane, on the small details that he thought so often overlooked in the

romances of the early nineteenth century, including the works of Hawthorne and Melville. Literature, he believed, should address the human condition in general, and to address the human condition, one must address the condition of the majority of the population without ignoring the elements so often marginalized in earlier romance. This included evolutionary theory as it existed on all layers of the popular consciousness from the lowbrow to the more intellectually demanding. Howells's evolution, however, was very different than evolution as it is understood in the twenty-first century.

Current conceptions of Darwinian evolution bear little resemblance to the ideas of evolution in wide circulation during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The debate in the United States as it appears now between the scientific community and religious conservatives arose only in the late 1920s with the attempt to institutionalize evolution as a component of the public school science curriculum (Bowler, *Darwinism* 5-6). In fact, many people, including many literary scholars, view the Scopes trial as the defining moment of the conflict, mistakenly casting the famous trial as the culmination of a battle between evolutionists and creationists with its origins in the mid-nineteenth century. Some sixty years before the courts convicted Scopes of violating state law by teaching Darwinian evolution, however, Darwin's ideas had gained relatively rapid and broad acceptance in the United States in both popular and scientific circles, not because people understood evolution as scientists understand it today, but, as Peter Bowler points out, "because his theory was interpreted as the scientific foundation for a more general view of progress in which divine purpose was expressed not in a supernatural act of creation, but in the creative activity of the laws of nature instituted by God" (*Darwinism* 6). Strictly speaking, Darwin developed in his "one long argument" a case for the mutability

of species with natural selection as the primary mechanism (Darwin, *Origin* 435). The term Darwinism as used in 1860 and as it is still generally interpreted, however, refers to a much larger collection of ideas and theories, all broadly related to evolution: the concept that species, through successive generations, can change, slowly or more rapidly, into new species.

Howells could hardly have avoided the influence of the new science. He began his career as an editor at the *Atlantic* in 1861, two years after the British publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Some Howells scholars have approached his fiction with this in mind, but the ideas presented as Darwinian in the mid- to late nineteenth century assumed a very different form from the ideas today commonly associated with the name. This discrepancy leads to problems of misinterpretation. It is thus essential to define the term in its nineteenth-century context rather than relying on the twenty-first century understanding of it, especially considering the case with the emphasis now placed on natural selection as central to Darwin's importance. As Peter Bowler points out, Darwin's reception in the scientific community relies neither on his ideas about evolution, which had been in circulation since the time of Aristotle, nor on his assertion that natural selection provides the mechanism for evolution, but instead on the power of his methodology and on the evidence that he offered in support of his theory (*Evolution* 20). Supporters of evolutionary theory saw in *Origin of Species* the work of a reputable scientist backed by decades of research, and they seized upon it as a point around which to rally support for a scientific approach to evolutionary biology. In fact, Bowler notes that in recent years "it has become increasingly obvious that Darwin succeeded in converting the world to evolutionism not *because* he had the theory of natural selection,

but *despite* the fact that most of his fellow biologists had major reservations about it” (*Darwinism* 3; emphasis in original). Ernst Mayr offers convincing evidence to support this contention that many prominent scientists in Darwin’s day and in the following decades accepted evolution while at the same time denying natural selection as its mechanism (37).

There remains no consensus interpretation of Darwin’s theories of evolution. The more deeply a reader delves into the seemingly rather simple world of *Origin of Species*, the more he discovers that Darwin left open, probably by design, many of the conclusions suggested by his work. These conclusions do appear to some extent in his letters and notebooks, but these sources have only recently become available and were certainly not open for public consumption in the last half of the nineteenth century. The reading public had to work with only Darwin’s published writings and the works of interpretation even then competing for popular acceptance. One must also remember that Darwin was not the first to propose evolution, nor was he originator of the idea that new species can arise by means other than acts of divine creation. The key to Darwin’s influence is not the theory of natural selection. That is why Alfred Russel Wallace generally gets a footnote rather than equal billing. Although natural selection eventually won out as the mechanism by which evolution takes place, Darwin’s initial importance derives from the quantity and quality of data he amassed in support of his theory and his reputation as a well respected and thorough naturalist. He provided a focus for his ideas by presenting a plausible means by which this process of evolution can take place and by allowing advocates of evolution to use him as a rallying point. He brought to the issue a solid reputation as a man of science and twenty years worth of data gathered from a variety of

sources around the world to support his assertion that natural selection was the means by which evolution took place.

Up to the point that *Origin of Species* reached publication, the population, and to a large extent the scientific community, had been able to resist this revolution in thought. Stephen J. Gould argues that, based on Freud's criteria for scientific revolution, such a basic shift has still not taken place ("Spin"). It is certain, however, that Darwin's book and the controversy that followed brought to the fore the question of divine creation and of the role that humankind plays in the cosmos. The importance of Darwin's formulation of natural selection marks him, according to Gould, as "one of the half dozen or so most revolutionary thinkers in western history" (*Structure* 96). This distinction alone certainly marks Darwin as a subject for scholarly examination. Of greater importance is Darwin's continued influence, as Gould puts it, "his continuing relevance, indeed his benevolent hovering over almost all our current proceedings" (*Structure* 96).

Scientific discourse thus surrounded the young Howells. His interest in evolution began before the Civil War, and he would have been aware of this debate as it played itself out in the pages of the *Atlantic*, which he received in Venice, because of a personal relationship with a young American who took a very different path from that taken by Howells. Before he went to Venice to spend the years of the American Civil War as consul, Howells met Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. at a party, and later initiated correspondence with him. Although the younger Holmes appears to have been uncomfortable with the attentions of Howells, and the correspondence ceased when the two young men chose different paths during the Civil War, Holmes Jr. introduced Howells to the intellectual debate over the new science and its connection to theology.

Holmes “entered Harvard in 1857 and by his junior year had joined the rebels who were stealthily reading Darwin and Spencer, much to the chagrin of the faculty and administration” (Shi 73). So powerful was the new thought in shaping Holmes’s own world view and that of those around him, that he wondered “if any writer of English except Darwin has done so much [as Spencer] to affect our whole way of thinking about the universe” (qtd. in Shi 73).⁴ This new direction in thought, Holmes surmised, accounted for the large gap he saw between his own generation and that of his father: “Even though the elder Holmes had himself been ‘brought up scientifically,’ his son emphasized, ‘there was with him, as with the rest of his generation, a certain softness of attitude’ toward areas challenged by modern science. There were questions that his father ‘didn’t like to have asked . . . so that when I wanted to be disagreeable I told him that he straddled’” (Shi 73-74).

When he returned to the United States after the war, Howells moved directly into the battleground on which the evolutionists and catastrophists fought their war of ideas. Howells notes that during his days in Cambridge, “the variety of talents and of achievements was indeed so great that Mr. Bret Harte, when fresh from his Pacific slope, justly said, after listening to a partial rehearsal of them, ‘Why, you couldn’t fire a revolver from your front porch anywhere without bringing down a two-volumer!’” (Howells, *Literary Friends* 181). Many of these “two-volumers” were involved with the debate over the new scientific ideas recently introduced into the American academy. Howells had already absorbed some of his Darwinian ideas through publication in the *Atlantic* of the debate between Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray. Before Howells began as

editor of the *Atlantic*, the debate about Darwinism began to heat up in the United States in the intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge.

Many of the older generation of scientists in the U.S. rejected evolution, and by extension the mechanism of natural selection, as unworthy of serious consideration. Foremost in this school was Louis Agassiz, a professor at Harvard who stood at the forefront of American biology at the time of publication of *Origin of Species*. He was a uniformitarian like Lyell, and he supported the steady state hypothesis, believing that God had created the Earth and everything on it in its present state. On the other side of the argument in the United States stood botanist and fellow Harvard professor Asa Gray who presented evolution as a mechanism through which a benevolent creator allowed his creatures to thrive despite continual changes in their environment. This argument played out in the pages of the *Atlantic*.

While many readers are certainly aware of the disagreement between supporters of Darwin and the adherents to Agassiz's interpretation of biology, few recognize the importance of alternative theories of biological change that were widely circulating during the middle to late nineteenth century. The United States, especially, contained a large number of adherents to the neo-Lamarckian position that the inheritance of acquired characteristics played a key role in the process of evolution. Louis Agassiz was knowledgeable, charismatic, idealistic, and groundbreaking in his own time. His theory of glaciation, published in the pages of the *Atlantic*, "gave credence to theories of catastrophism and fixity of species" and ensured his reputation as a world-class scientist (Croce 46). Agassiz's formal education in Switzerland and Germany stressed the importance of close observation of minute detail to achieve true understanding of nature

(Lurie 93). He also assimilated the dictum that “every physical fact possessed a particular significance and also revealed a higher purpose” (Lurie 93). Agassiz believed, as did many other naturalists of his generation, that change in the natural world did occur constantly, but this change was not directional; it vacillated around a stable mean, and it did not affect the stable adult form of God’s creations. The increasing complexity of life recorded in the fossil record could be explained by successive acts of creation: “The Creator had produced successively higher forms of life as the earth’s physical environment had improved in the course of geological time” (Bowler, *Evolution* 111). These progressive acts of creation reflected the implementation of a single divine plan in which “progress was related to the unfolding of a rationally ordered pattern aimed at eventual production of nature’s highest type: man” (Bowler, *Evolution* 111). Agassiz saw the natural world as formed of distinct divisions of the animal kingdom, divisions that could be established through close observation and classification of representative types. Existing species bore no genetic or hereditary relationship to one another; similarities of form resulted from their common origin in the mind of the divine Creator. Likewise, extinct species were not connected at all to existing species. They represented past acts of divine creation wiped out by massive catastrophes instigated by the Deity to clean the slate, to create a fresh start for new acts of creation.

Agassiz’s refusal to recognize relationships between species, carried ad absurdum by a scientist intent on protecting an idea rather than exploring it, eventually led him to deny “the possibility of variation within species; when others identified varieties or subspecies of recognized species, Agassiz, keeping firm to his outlook, regarded their findings as evidence for wholly separate species” (Croce 46). As scientific knowledge

grew and the variety of species became clearer, Agassiz found himself clinging to an increasingly untenable position: “In the end, Agassiz rendered his whole position ridiculous. In his efforts to minimize the amount of natural variation, he insisted that every form with the slightest distinct characteristic must be a separately created species, even those considered to be merely local varieties by most naturalists” (Bowler, *Evolution* 198).

For Agassiz, the position of man within the hierarchy of creation was just as unequivocally clear. Humankind represented the epitome of physical perfection. Evolution, as Agassiz understood it, entailed constant movement toward ever more complex and improved forms. Man could, therefore, not be subject to evolution. Only moral and intellectual progress could logically take place. Agassiz did not reach this conclusion lightly. He was the master of an astonishing array of scientific disciplines, and he found evidence in each of them to support his own interpretation of natural form. This uncompromising position on the subject led to Agassiz’s increasing alienation from his colleagues, and even from his own students: “If this was the only way that creationism could be defended, younger naturalists would have none of it, and in his later years, Agassiz was disappointed to see many of his own students turning to some form of evolutionism” (Bowler, *Evolution* 198).

Examination of Agassiz is especially important in studying Howells for precisely the same reason that Agassiz is essentially unimportant in the scientific debate of his day. Agassiz could not adapt his own theoretical foundation to support the Darwinian evolutionary structure. He “represented, in microcosm, the full sweep of scientific conviction and philosophical certitude that affirmed the timeless permanence of the

universe, a stability that shone through every observed fact of nature, such immutability being derived from the immaterial intelligent plan of creation designed by the deity” (Lurie 89). As a result, according to Edward Lurie, “Agassiz effectively isolated himself from the main lines of research and generalization . . . and he made only rare efforts to defend his position within the framework of intellectual debate” (Lurie 101). Instead, he chose to present “his refutation in the forum of public opinion” (Lurie 101). To reach his public, he utilized three venues. The Lowell Institute lectures of 1862-63, 1864, and 1866 allowed him to address “the comfortable society of worshipful lecture-hall audiences, cultivated laymen, and scientists not engaged in the study of natural history” (Lurie 103). These lectures he then published as articles in the *Atlantic* from 1862-64 and in 1866, and subsequently republished in a book a few years later. This collection of evidence and interpretation represents one pole in the debate over evolution.

According to Paul Croce, Asa Gray stood, “in a middle ground between Agassiz’s position and secular enthusiasts for Darwinism” (Croce 51). Gray was able to maintain a separation between his religious belief and his practice of science, believing that “the divine [was] distant enough from the created world that the practice of science could remain neutral on religious issues (Croce 51).⁵ Darwin confided in Gray as early as 1857, enlisting him as a representative in America who could gather data in support of the theory of natural selection as Darwin was formulating it.

Into this roil of ideas stepped a young William Dean Howells, desperate to impress the Brahmin elite of Boston and to make a name for himself as one at the forefront of the generation poised to succeed them. As Hannah Graham Belcher observes: “When Howells returned from his Venetian consulate in the late summer of

1865, he came just in time to join the other minds struggling in the welter of thought on matters of religion. The remainder of his life coincided with the period of greatest spiritual turmoil and conflict in the history of the country. Science in its theological implications and in its naturalistic deterministic philosophy had become a distressing force for the adherents of traditional religion, as well as for those not active in any religion, but faithful to the romantic belief in man's power to control his destiny and shape his life" (Belcher 264).

Agassiz and Gray are important in that they represent the dichotomy of views to which Howells was exposed, but by his own estimation, Howells's contact with the scientists of his Cambridge was, for the most part, tangential rather than direct, and he found that he "could touch science at Cambridge only on its literary and social side" (Howells, *Literary Friends* 272). Howells's closest connection with Darwinism in a personal context was embodied in John Fiske. Following Howells's move into Cambridge, John Fiske became his personal guide through the landscape of Darwinism. According to Bert Loewenberg, "What Huxley was to Darwin in England, Fiske was to Darwin and Spencer in America" ("Darwinism" 356). While it is accurate to assert that Fiske translated the scientific discourse into terms readily understood by the educated class, he was of much different temperament than Huxley, and worked to reconcile Darwinism with progress and divine forethought rather than instigating confrontation for the sake of advocating a point of view.

Howells and Fiske spent many hours walking together in Cambridge. In fact, Howells suggested that Fiske collect some of their conversations, and, acting on this advice, Fiske produced one of his most enduring studies, *Myths and Mythmakers*, which

he dedicated “To my dear friend, William Dean Howells” (Fiske, *Myths and Mythmakers* iii). It was during these walks that Howells became thoroughly versed in Fiske’s theories regarding evolution in general and human evolution in particular. Throughout his time at the *Atlantic*, Howells published a number of essays dealing with Darwinian ideas, and Fiske authored many of these. Later, Howells hired Fiske to write a monthly science column for the magazine.⁶

Chapter one of this study examines Howells’s early exposure to the foundation upon which the theory of evolution by natural selection rests. Howells was certainly familiar with Darwinian evolution at least beginning with the publication of *Origin of Species*, and he had been actively contemplating application of the theory to his own writing following soon after. The publication of Charles Sprague’s article, “The Darwinian Theory,” in the October 1866 issue of the *Atlantic* introduced Howells to the scientific rather than the popular side of the evolution argument. From this article, Howells learned of the geological innovation of Hutton and Lyell that drove the age of the Earth back into the millions of years. Howells also read of the biological premises that led to the conclusion that natural selection is the mechanism that drives evolution. Concepts taken for granted today were just starting to gain traction in Howells’s time. Biologists were only beginning to recognize the vast variation within species. Hereditary transmission of characteristics from one generation to the next was obvious in anecdotal terms, but its significance to biology had not as yet been thoroughly explored. Thomas Malthus had proposed that the geometric expansion of populations must necessarily be limited by some outside force and offered competition for resources as this force, but his argument had been considered as an economic rather than a biological proposal. Charles

Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace combined these observations to propose natural selection, and Howells appropriated these elements from Sprague to begin development of literary realism.

Early use of Howells's new understanding appears as the subject of chapter two. Howells's early fiction, sketches of Boston life, and his early novel/travel narrative, *Their Wedding Journey*, illustrate an initial application of these fundamental geological and biological insights to realistic fiction. At the same time that he explores the basic geology that in part spurred nineteenth-century interest in evolution, Howells begins to address more explicitly biological issues, thus confronting another core tenet of Darwinian evolution: vast variability within species, including man. These variations provide the raw material with which natural selection works. The city sketches and the novel describe variation and adaptation of the individual variants to their environment. Beyond variation, there must be a mechanism by which characteristics of individual organisms pass on to their offspring. Howells dwells on the theme of heredity in both the sketches and the novel, and he regularly revisits the concept throughout his career. His examination of these issues in his early fiction sets the stage for later and deeper involvement with more complex Darwinian themes. Prior to these works, and prior to Howells's exposure to the tenets of Darwinian evolution and natural selection, Howells's work exhibited little of the complex analysis that would develop in his later work.

Following his departure from the *Atlantic*, Howells began to apply the lessons he had learned from his early fiction in a rigorous examination of the influence that evolutionary forces had on individuals and on society as a whole. Chapter three of this study explores the influence of Darwinian evolution in Howells's conception of morality

as demonstrated in one of his most respected novels, *A Modern Instance* (1882). In it, he tracks the development of altruism and the innate sense of morality he assumes to be present in all people, and he establishes the importance of social institutions in shaping the moral instinct. In the end, Howells cannot reconcile the tension between individual desire and social expectation. Those who succeed in society are not necessarily those who are the most morally pure, the most altruistic, and this conclusion causes great difficulty for Howells.

In two later novels, *The Minister's Charge* (1887) and *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897), Howells continues to grapple with the issue of competition in modern society and attempts to apply the tenets of Darwinian evolution to this social struggle. The earlier novel presents an optimistic vision of the possibility for progress in the individual and by extension in society as a whole. By the time he wrote the later novel, Howells's personal experiences had guided him toward a more pessimistic outlook. Chapter four addresses these two novels that represent Howells's most explicit consideration of what would later be termed "social Darwinism."

Of course other novels could be substituted for those that are the subjects of this study. The early courtship novels contain indications of what will come in *A Modern Instance*. Howells's two novels that remain the most studied and most popular, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, clearly illustrate the application of evolution and natural selection to the world of business.⁷ His utopian fiction, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), give life to Howells's imagined future in which social evolution has resulted in a perfect and balanced social structure peopled by just as perfect and balanced individuals. The later novels, for

example *The Kentons* (1902) and *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* (1920) present social structures, morality, and struggle as they affect the American family. Even Howells's extensive autobiographical work and his later poetry—the earlier *Poems of Two Friends* predates his introduction to Darwin—are also shaped by his understanding of the new science.⁸ The novels that serve as the focus of this study illustrate a clear chronological progression of ideas in Howells's fiction, beginning with assimilation of the basic premises of the theory of evolution and culminating in a painful move toward a more materialistic view of evolution as it applies to human social structures. In addition, my own aesthetic preferences came into play in my choice of subject texts. Simply put, I chose to work with novels that captured my imagination as well as my scholarly interest.⁹

Howells's novels always maintain the possibility for redemption, for a move back to altruism for those who have strayed away from the habit of moral action. In some cases, this move depends on those social institutions in which Howells places great hope. He addresses the issue of the breakdown of marriage in *A Modern Instance*, but his recurring characters, Basil and Isabella March, who originally appear in *Their Wedding Journey*, enjoy a lasting and stable marriage, thereby demonstrating the continued viability of the institution. Although Howells questions the possibility that organized religion can maintain itself as a practical frame of reference, many of his most engaging and perceptive characters, the Reverend Sewell for example, are ministers. Even though the man of business rarely appears as the model for future society, Howells still sees possible redemption in the likes of Silas Lapham, and he leaves the hope open at the end of the novel that Silas can recoup his losses. These possibilities, however, never seem to be as powerful as the forces that threaten them in Howells's novels, and the conclusions

of many of his novels, therefore, have attracted criticism for this reason. Howells's inability to offer attractive resolutions to the threats he presents in no way sets him apart from others of his time. He shares many of these difficulties, for instance, with the writers of British social problem novels; and later in his career, Howells experiments with many of the same Utopian solutions used by these writers beginning in 1894 with his novella *A Traveler from Altruria*.

It is Howells's weakness in many critical estimations, however, that proves to be of most interest in this Darwinian interpretation of his work. The fall of Lamarckian evolution after the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics and the resulting modern synthesis led to the rise of a more mechanistic approach to selection that removes individual volition from the evolutionary equation, and literary criticism followed along. Howells's social fiction in which hope, faint though it might be, is always present was of little interest to many critics whose worldview maintained the deterministic nature of environment and ignored or discounted individual influence on the environment. This increasingly mechanistic interpretation of Darwinian natural selection denies the existence of free will and presents individual actions as wholly dependent on environment. This is one important point of demarcation between the Realist writers who present their protagonists as both influencing and being influenced by their environments and the Naturalists who see influence flowing in only one direction, from the environment to the individual. Critics who held these beliefs tended, of course, to focus on the Naturalists as those who succeeded in capturing accurately the Darwinian paradigm.

Such strict application of Darwinian evolution to morality has recently been called into question, and perhaps it is also time for such mechanistic interpretations to be questioned in literary criticism. In commenting on the evolutionary synthesis, as he calls it, Peter Bowler asserts that the model of “evolution work[ing] blindly by the differential success of the genes, producing mind as a kind of accident as the process strives to increase the sophistication of behavior” presents many difficulties if it is applied to morality: “If the process of evolution shows no obvious sign of purpose, we should not use it as a guide to moral conduct, as long as we are prepared to allow that in any sense we possess free will. . . . If there is an ethical message in the theory, it tells us simply that we cannot look outside ourselves for guidance” (Bowler, *Evolution* 332). Many factors limited Howells’s understanding of evolution theory, and his comprehension of it was certainly flawed even by the scientific standards of his own day, but he addressed in many of his novels the concerns that are still with us today. His subtlety in addressing the relationship between biological evolution and morality provides a much more fertile field for the examination of Darwinian paradigms in literature than do the relatively limited representations of the issues in the later Naturalism.

Chapter 1

The First Steps toward Realism: Charles B. Sprague and “The Darwinian Theory” in Howells’s *Atlantic*

He [the realist] cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives.

—William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (201)

Although Howells certainly began to consider elements of biological science and perhaps began to contemplate their application in the practice of fiction in the early 1860s, it was not until he became assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1866 that his more formal education began. As Anne Boyd observes, the *Atlantic* represented “the apex of the literary world in the nineteenth century,” and, at least through the 1870s, provided “a new and distinctive venue for authors seeking serious recognition amid the sea of popular magazines” (Boyd 5, 6). In addition to its standing as the focus of literary development, the *Atlantic* also contained discussion and debate on a number of topics, including the new science. One must remember that Howells began work at the magazine before the age of specialization that characterized the turn of the century. The educated individual in the years immediately following the Civil War could reasonably expect to keep abreast of new developments in a wide range of professions, from law and

science to the arts, and the *Atlantic* became for many the means to achieve this wide range of knowledge. As assistant editor, Howells not only honed the skills that would later allow him to take over for James Fields as editor of the periodical, but the editor's desk also served as his college lecture hall in which he studied closely and carefully the views and arguments of the leading thinkers of the day, assimilating elements and approaches that would later shape his own fiction.¹⁰

One of the most important and contentious debates of the time involved the newly popularized theories of evolution, and the *Atlantic* quickly moved to offer representatives of both camps the opportunity to present their views in its pages. Among essays by Agassiz and reviews of Darwin, Wallace, and Tyndall, the most influential primer in these matters appears in Charles J. Sprague's overview of "The Darwinian Theory" in the October 1866 *Atlantic*. In his essay, Sprague sets out the fundamental components of evolution and the mechanism of natural selection apart from the normally attendant sensationalism, and Howells no doubt absorbed the essay in minute detail, thus facilitating his own later reading of Wallace and Darwin among others. Although he was prepared to appreciate Sprague's essay for its scientific content and its possible application to fiction, it also demanded Howells's scrutiny for more pragmatic reasons. Howells began work as assistant editor for the *Atlantic* in March 1866, and Sprague's essay appears in the first several issues for which Howells's responsibilities included "reading proof, checking facts . . . and often revamping articles" among other duties (Goodman 120). The young Howells, intent on demonstrating his worthiness to succeed his new employers as part of the next generation of Boston intellectuals, no doubt read and checked this essay with especial vigor, absorbing its contents for later use; therefore,

close examination of Sprague's piece offers a concise overview of evolution and natural selection as they stood less than ten years after publication of the *Origin of Species* and provides a specific indication of Howells's exposure to these ideas.

Howells's description of the editorial process at the *Atlantic* makes clear his intimate connection with everything published in the magazine, his pride in his own careful attention to detail, and his insistence on personally verifying every item of information that appeared between the covers of the publication. As Howells describes the details of the editorial process, "the proof-reading of the 'Atlantic Monthly' was something almost fearfully scrupulous and perfect. The proofs were first read by the under proof-reader in the printing-office; then the head reader passed them to me perfectly clean as to typography . . . and then I read them, making what changes I chose, and verifying every quotation, every date, every geographical and biographical name, every foreign word to the last accent, every technical and scientific term" (*Literary Friends* 138-39). After Howells finished his own verification, correction, and emendation, the proof went back to the author. When it returned with the author's comments, Howells "revised it, accepting or rejecting the author's judgment according as he was entitled by his ability and knowledge or not to have them. The proof now went to the printers for correction; they sent it again to the head reader, who carefully revised it and returned it again to me. I read it a second time, and it was again corrected" (Howells, *Literary Friends* 139). Howells, it is clear, was extraordinarily familiar with everything that appeared in the *Atlantic*. This would have been especially true as he was settling into his new job, working to establish his credentials as editor of the magazine considered by

many to be the arbiter of literary taste in nineteenth-century America. Sprague's lengthy essay could hardly have failed to make a significant impression on the young editor.

Sprague opens his essay by acknowledging the obvious, the heated controversy attending evolutionary theory, while at the same time lamenting the general public misunderstanding of it: "Notwithstanding the interest which Mr. Darwin's writings and the replies of his opponents have created, and the constant allusion to them in publications of all kinds; in spite of the active warfare they have incited; in spite of the sneers and sarcasms which have been launched by writers, lecturers, and preachers,—sure means of advertisement among the people,—few really and thoroughly comprehend Mr. Darwin's idea" (Sprague 415). Sprague's approach to the topic is exceptional in his choice to focus on the scientific groundwork for evaluation and explication of Darwin's ideas rather than on extensive arguments either for or against them. Such unbiased accounts are difficult to locate in nineteenth-century periodical literature, and the appearance of this article at the outset of Howells's tenure as editor forms an interesting contrast to the conflict that had earlier arisen in the pages of the *Atlantic* "between Asa Gray's defense and Louis Agassiz's rebuttal of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution" (Goodman 121). Sprague logically and lucidly presents Howells with a scientific underpinning for his realism; most essentially, Sprague summarizes the fundamentals of scientific enquiry and the foundations of natural selection.

The theory of evolution rests on a foundation established by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century geology. Geologists began to collect and catalog samples from various geological strata and eventually came to realize the immense antiquity of the earth and concomitantly began to doubt the infallible literalism of the biblical creation

narrative. The powerful forces surrounding us every day, they concluded, worked over countless millennia to shape the Earth as it is today, with change at a pace generally unobservable to human perception. Upon this base, naturalists built the biological structure of evolution. Thomas Malthus used the new science of statistical analysis to support his contention that population growth follows a geometric progression while the increase in subsistence materials can never surpass arithmetic growth. This overproduction of offspring—superfecundity in vocabulary Darwin appropriated from Paley—leads to competition for resources. Variation between members of a species and hereditary transmission of these variable characteristics to offspring allow individuals to adapt more or less successfully to their environment in successive generations. This pattern of variation and adaptation leads over time to a shift in the aggregate constitution of species, a process that in summary describes evolution by natural selection.

As reasonable and common as most of this seems to the early twenty-first century reader, the controversy, both scientific and popular, surrounding Darwinian evolution proved contentious and heated. The eighteenth-century paradigm of a static, divinely created world carried great momentum into the nineteenth century. Many natural philosophers were men of the cloth who saw the cataloging and naming of God's creations, presumed to be as immutable as the planet upon which they live, as a means to praise the power of the creator. Creation, they assumed, followed the process described in Genesis and took place relatively recently, thus leaving very little time for modification by any mechanism. Without vast expanses of time, Darwin's mechanism could not have effected extensive change through the painfully slow process he proposed, a process that could take thousands of generations to introduce significant change in a

population. Many early nineteenth-century scientists held to the notion established in the seventeenth century that the world was roughly five and a half millennia old. Although many theologians have calculated the Earth's age based on biblical genealogy, Archbishop James Ussher most famously worked "back through the biblical patriarchs to Adam and fixed the year [of creation] as 4004 B. C.," and John Lightfoot further specified nine o'clock AM on Sunday, October 23, 4004 B. C., as the moment God created man (Bowler, *Evolution* 4). Both of these calculations rely on the assumption that the Bible contains literal and scientifically accurate information. Such close ties between religious belief and scientific practice remained common through the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Geology was the first of the sciences to begin the breakdown of the young Earth notion, vastly increasing estimates of the age of the Earth and setting the stage for Darwin. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, geologists began to examine and map the various geological strata that comprise the Earth's crust. Although they had long known about fossilized organisms, geologists discounted or incorrectly interpreted the small differences between organisms preserved in various strata. For identification of strata, geologists depended primarily on the mineral characteristics within each layer (Eiseley 75-6). William Smith, an English canal builder, generally receives credit for being the first to map the various strata in 1815 using differences in fossilized organisms to differentiate between strata (Bowler, *Evolution* 121).¹¹ Based on this combination of mineral and geological evidence, geologists had essentially established the sequence of geographical layers by the 1830s. This work leads to various conclusions. The first is that the organization of strata corresponds to age, with the

lowest layers being the oldest and the upper layers the youngest. Smith's evidence that the organisms preserved within each layer differ by strata leads to the conclusion that during these ages, sets of creatures, different from one another and no longer in existence, inhabited the Earth.¹² This information leads to the inference that the Earth has been through a number of geological ages and corresponding ages in biological diversity.

All of this could be explained with relative ease from a theological perspective by asserting a number of divinely caused catastrophes accompanied by acts of creation with each age leading up to the age of perfection in which man was created. Several theories existed to explain these catastrophes. One of the most widely accepted was the cooling earth theory proposed by Elie de Beaumont: as the Earth cools, its crust wrinkles, causing upheavals on a massive scale. In conjunction with the floods assumed from Biblical evidence, this catastrophic theory of the Earth's development offered no serious threat to accepted theology. As Loren Eiseley points out, "the reigning scientific climate of the early nineteenth century . . . is a climate interested in science, increasingly interested in fossils, but firmly intent upon the preservation of religious orthodoxy" (79). This balance proved to be only temporary, however, and science soon reached the limit beyond which a literal reading of the Bible could no longer be rationalized.

Charles Lyell broke with the generally accepted view that the geological history of the Earth records long periods of stasis punctuated by massive geological convulsions with the whole process progressing toward perfection. In building upon and popularizing the earlier work of James Hutton, he argued that "the scientific geologist . . . should do his utmost to explain the structure of the earth through operation of causes *that he can now observe in action* (Bowler, *Evolution* 46; emphasis in original). As Peter Bowler

relates the story, Lyell used Mount Etna to test his hypothesis, influenced by earlier work by George Poulett Scrope, that existing forces acting at their present intensities can explain all changes evidenced in the geological record. In his examination of the volcano, he found that lava flows established a pattern of small eruptions that had worked over vast periods of time to build up Etna's cone. Based on his examination of fossilized mollusks within them, he also found that the whole volcano rested on a layer of relatively recent sedimentary rocks. Since only a few eruptions of Etna had occurred in recorded history, and since the volcano sat upon a younger stratum of the Earth's crust, Lyell concluded that the volcano, as ancient as it seemed, was new in the history of the Earth, and he was thus able to support an expansion of the history of the Earth to an almost unimaginable magnitude. Based on this conclusion, he could discard the view that a series of catastrophic events and corresponding acts of creation formed the Earth as we now see it (Bowler, *Evolution* 135). Lyell recorded his conclusions in *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), which influenced the next generation of naturalists including Darwin and Wallace.

Sprague's discussion of this expansion of geological time would have held special interest for Howells who grew up in a household guided by his father's Swedenborgian philosophy. Although many recognize Swedenborg's name and, quite rightly, associate it with religious concepts, few recognize his breadth of intellectual accomplishment including contributions to geology, which received thorough analysis in early numbers of *The Retina*, published by William Cooper Howells and in all likelihood set in type by his son, a very young William Dean Howells, perhaps even before he had learned to read (Cady, *Road to Realism* 19). This connection between science and religion, and by

extension between science and morality, carried weight with Howells throughout his career. As Howells edited Sprague's piece, however, he was probably even more strongly drawn to discussion of the process by which Lyell opened his discipline to consideration of his uniformitarian theories.

In order to study geology scientifically, without recourse to repeated divine intervention to explain the world, Lyell "quite deliberately set out to reform geology's scientific methodology" (Bowler, *Evolution* 135). Lyell's crowning literary achievement, *Principles of Geology: Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation* (1830-33), as its full title makes clear, offers a detailed case supporting Lyell's contention that observable forces at present day intensities working over enormous spans of time are responsible for the geological structure as it exists in the present, that "all former changes of the organic and inorganic creation are referrible to one uninterrupted succession of physical events, governed by the laws now in operation" (Lyell 144). This shift in his basic approach to geology opens the subject up to more systematic scientific scrutiny.

Essential to this shift in approach is a reconsideration of the position of the observer. "The first and greatest difficulty" in the study of geology, Lyell argues, "consists in our habitual unconsciousness that our position as observers is essentially unfavourable, when we endeavour to estimate the magnitude of the changes now in progress" (Lyell 81). There remains too much in geology that cannot be seen, cannot be measured; thus the cautious scientist cannot assume that current conditions are not dynamic enough to account for the massive changes that appear in the geological record. If geological forces have always functioned at present intensities, the meticulous scrutiny

of the present in minute detail will, Lyell concluded, provide insight into the study of past events in the formation of the Earth. This removes geology from the realm of religion, of faith, and moves it firmly into the purview of the sciences. It also effectively removes God from direct interaction with the geological world. God, in Lyell's formulation, set the geological apparatus of the Earth in motion, and then stepped away to allow it to function based on constant laws and principles.¹³

Howells would have been especially interested in this shift in the position of observer in science as the concept has direct parallels to narrative position in fiction. The objective scientist works only with data that can be directly observed and measured while the realist works to limit narrative intrusion to allow characters to act according to their own needs and desires, to avoid the transgressions of romance novelists such as Trollope who, according to Howells, "was so warped from a wholesome ideal as to wish at times to be like Thackeray, and to stand about in his scene, talking it over with his hands in his pockets, interrupting the action, and spoiling the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 230).

These steps in the development of scientific methodology set the stage for a move away from the generally accepted model of the Earth as a static system created by divine intervention and established a new geological paradigm based on constant change but with an essential balance between constructive and destructive forces. By insisting on this balance, Lyell took away the directional trend assumed by many earlier theorists. The Earth was not progressing toward divine perfection; the changes noted in the geological record were, in fact, "cyclical in character—merely fluctuations about a mean" (Bowler, *Evolution* 136). Lyell's arguments pushed back the age of the Earth into the

millions of years by the time Darwin published the *Origin of Species*, but even by the middle of the nineteenth century, many scientists still assumed a relatively young (measured in millions rather than billions of years) and essentially static universe.

The first element Sprague addresses in his *Atlantic* essay is geological time as established by Hutton, popularized by Lyell, and absorbed by both Darwin and Wallace. Sprague details the slow erosion of the literal interpretation of the Bible that natural philosophers had long considered a precise delineation of the origin of the universe and everything within it. Ignorance of geology and physics permitted the belief that the Bible contained “a perfect, exact, undoubted account of the origin of the world” (Sprague 416). Simply put, “Faith was far stronger than reason; and, during the long ages in which the church ruled supreme, this statement was accepted and implicitly believed by the whole race of Christians” (Sprague 416). Sprague credits the printing press and the accompanying portability of ideas with the eventual ascension of reason as “the multitude of facts . . . became, by and by, so vast, and the conclusions to which they led so indubitable, that the theologians were forced out of simple common-sense, to revise their expoundings of the sacred writings” (416). Sprague’s enumeration of the new discoveries and the accompanying steps in logic leading to these striking conclusions provides Howells in one sentence with an overview of the scientific foundation for geological time:

When it was found that the earth was made up of vast depositions of matter which contained the remains of long-extinct creatures, whose fragments were buried in solid rocks, once soft, oozy mud; when it was found that other rocks, hundreds of feet in thickness, were wholly composed of the imperishable remains of other

extinct animals, which once lived and died and were gathered together in waters which broke over the very spot where these rocks now rise; when it was found that untold millions of years were necessary for the formation of one single group of these rocks, among many equally vast; when it was found that, in the memory of man, during the lapse of at least five thousand years, the earth had undergone no appreciable change; when it was found that the earth was the result of the action of laws existent in matter,—an upheaving, a washing away, a hardening, a disintegrating through a period of time beyond the conception of man,—the theologians were forced to substitute *periods* for *days*. (Sprague 416; emphasis in original)

Once it had become clear that the “days” of the Bible could not be literal days, “the old walls which had circumscribed man’s mind became so crumbled as to allow of egress” (Sprague 416). The destruction of the old paradigms that had previously constrained thought and stifled innovation allowed a shift in perception, making possible the creative leaps based on observation of the natural world rather than on representations of it in books.

This paradigmatic shift led to a new demand for collections of specimens, “and naturalists, no longer restrained by tradition, rushed upon voyages of discovery into the teeming world around them,” and the voyagers themselves began to theorize based on what they saw (Sprague 416). The demand for direct and objective consideration of the thing itself relates directly to later development of Howells’s realist project in that the realists insisted on accurate representations of life based on direct observation. Howells maintained numerous notebooks during his travels, his own voyages of discovery, and he

used the materials from these journals to augment the precision of description in his novels.¹⁴ He also later criticized Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* for deviating from precise description of firsthand experience and coming to rely too heavily on figurative language to make up for the shortfall in authentic detail.¹⁵ The impulse toward authenticity reshaped literature as well as scientific inquiry and led to new breakthroughs in both fields.

As scientific voyages of discovery continued to return increasing evidence of the antiquity of the earth, the immense power of the creative forces at work in shaping the natural environment over vast expanses of time became apparent. Sprague uses Niagara Falls to illustrate the age of the Earth. "How many thousands of ages," Sprague asks, "has it taken the Niagara Falls to cut their way through the solid rock back from Ontario to Erie?" (423). Many of Sprague's readers could relate personally to the power of the falls—Howells himself had seen them before and later used them as an important setting—and their familiarity would provide some level of context to the discussion of geological time. To provide some current context, the modern observer must remember that the harvesting of hydroelectric power has significantly reduced the volume of water that makes it to the lip of the falls. Today, the average flow of water varies by time of day and year, but never exceeds 100,000 cubic feet per second. In 1894, the rate of flow in the Niagara River averaged approximately 270,000 cubic feet per second, a rate that carried 1 billion pounds of water per minute over the falls.¹⁶ Yet, the enormous hydrological force of the falls pushed the lip of the falls back only about nine inches per year between 1842 and 1875, a distance that would be negligible to most observers. Even after an absence of many years, the average traveler would notice no difference in

the geography of the falls. Sprague knew that this context would allow his readers to see themselves as a single individual member of a relatively new and insignificant species inhabiting the earth for only a miniscule portion of its total existence.

After setting up the observation with the Niagara Falls example, Sprague asserts that “it is highly probable that the earth has been approximately the same as it now is for many millions of years” (Sprague 423). He uses this information to counter one of the most frequently cited objections to Darwinian natural selection, the relative stability of the human form throughout recorded history: “Because we see one day succeed another with no change in the organic life around, because the written history of man records no vital change in his structure, men deny the possibility of antecedent variation” (Sprague 424). Recorded history, however, represents only an infinitesimal portion of geological history: “Man’s written history is a thing of to-day. The builders of the Pyramids were our brothers. The five thousand years which have elapsed since the cultivated civilization of Egypt are but a day to the previous ages upon ages of man’s existence before that civilization was dreamed of. The bones of untold myriads of human kind crumbled into dust before Egypt saw the rudest mud-hut that foreshadowed the temples of her prime” (Sprague 424). Although it is difficult if not impossible to appreciate the enormity of the earth’s history, the contextualization of deep time as Sprague illustrates it establishes one element necessary for a defense of natural selection as the mechanism for the development of new species. The other elements are biological.

The next step in the logic of natural selection involves the overproduction of offspring. Thomas Malthus proposed in his now famous *Essay on the Principles of Population* the constant competition between creatures for the limited resources

necessary for survival. Writing in 1798, Malthus formulated an argument to engage in the ongoing conversation concerning the perfectibility of human society. With the French Revolution fresh in his mind, Malthus addresses “the great question . . . now at issue, whether man shall henceforth start forwards with accelerated velocity towards illimitable, and hitherto unconceived improvements, or be condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery, and after every effort remain still at an immeasurable distance from the wished-for goal” (9). Malthus presents his argument simply, proposing two essential premises, and then building to his conclusion. Initially, he proposes “that food is necessary to the existence of man” (12). This assumption he chooses not to defend, as no other writer has proposed that this statement is problematic. Following this, Malthus asserts “that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state” (12). This statement does receive some additional treatment. Despite the obvious change in society over the past four thousand years, he argues, “the great progress that [mankind] has already made from the savage state,” no progress has been made “towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes” (13). He does acknowledge a few exceptions to his general rule, but asserts that these are no more prevalent now than they were in the past. If one accepts these two postulates, that people must eat to survive, and that they also possess an irresistible drive to reproduce, then “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (13). Population left unrestrained increases geometrically, while production of food can increase only arithmetically. “A slight acquaintance with numbers,” Malthus reasons, “will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second” (13). Because a population cannot continue to exist without the means of

subsistence, Malthus concludes the existence of “a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind” (13).

Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that though Malthus did refer to a “struggle for existence” in competition for scarce resources, he did not intend to suggest that this competition would lead to selection of the fittest members of a population, that those who could best compete for resources would survive while those less able would die. She goes on to note that “what Malthus was concerned with was not how the struggle for existence affected the quality of the population but simply how it limited its numbers” (161). In fact, “it was precisely to deny the possibility of an improvement in quality that he had written his essay” (Himmelfarb 162).¹⁷ Loren Eiseley further generalizes to explain that “the struggle for existence was known throughout the century and it is well-nigh futile to attempt to assign this obvious and self-evident fact to a definite individual. It was, however, regarded essentially as a pruning device keeping species in dynamic balance and ensuring the survival of good healthy stock” (52). When read in another context, however, Malthus can lead in a very different direction.

Darwin and Wallace read Malthus after having read Lyell and after having personally observed speciation through observation of geographically isolated populations. Darwin had already opened his first notebooks on species in 1837, and his reading of Malthus in October 1838 provided the creative impetus that led Darwin to connect infinite variation, vast time, and competition for resources to give firm direction to the research that would consume him for the next two decades.¹⁸ Darwin contends in his *Autobiography* that he read Malthus “for amusement,” and that “being well prepared

to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work” (42-43). At this point, however, Darwin so feared the possible negative fallout that might follow the publication of this theory that he delayed, writing first a brief sketch of his theory in June of 1842 and a more extensive outline during the summer of 1844, both of which were for his own use (Darwin, *Autobiography* 43).

Although Sprague’s article does not mention Thomas Malthus by name, Sprague does summarize Malthus’s explanation of geometric increase in animal reproduction, that “animals and plants produce in vast excess of the possibility of life,” by using Darwin’s own specific examples (Sprague 422). Sprague explains, “Darwin reckons that the elephant, the slowest breeder, if allowed to go on unchecked, and to live his allotted term of years, would in five centuries produce fifteen millions of elephants from one pair. If every cod’s egg had developed into a full-grown fish, the whole ocean would, ages ago, have been packed with them, like herrings in a box” (Sprague 422). As the earth fills up neither with elephants nor the sea with cod, the biologist must assume that “a destruction of life is going on to an almost incredible amount” (Sprague 422). The combination of this massive and continuous destruction of life with essentially limitless time, constant environmental change, heredity, and variation leads Darwin and Wallace to postulate the theory of natural selection, “that Natural Law or Persistent Force, acting through all time upon the universe, has evolved from certain primitive organic forms of a very low order

of existence the present diversified races on the earth” (Sprague 424). The leap was a difficult one to make, however, and it required a confluence of reading and observation to overcome the existing belief structure: “The constancy of species—that is, the inability of a species, once created, to change—was the one piece of the old dogma of a created world that remained inviolate after the concepts of the recency and constancy of the physical world had been abandoned” (Mayr 17). Darwin and Wallace both experienced the convergence necessary to initiate a revolution initially in scientific and later in popular thought.

After establishing this geological and biological framework, Sprague moves on to consider Darwin’s unique contribution to discussion of evolution, the proposed mechanism of natural selection. He begins by tracing the history of the idea of evolution through Lamarck and Lyell, eventually arriving at the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* which “rejects utterly the idea of special creation, and maintains that the globe, as it exists to-day with all its myriad inhabitants, is only one phase of that primeval vapor which by the force of that law has reached its present state” (Sprague 419). It is important to note, continues Sprague, that Darwin does not attempt to address the origin of life or of sentience in man; rather he “takes the subject up at the appearance of animal life, and seeks to work out the causes of the present variation among animals, and to detect the *modus operandi* by which the law of evolution has produced the multiform changes now apparent” (Sprague 420). Darwin looks scientifically at the biology that leads to new species and draws his conclusions based on observation of nature rather than on scripture or on previous scientific works.

Sprague continues his explanation of natural selection by examining the underlying biological assumptions: “The three great agencies at work . . . are the tendency of all animals to transmit their peculiarities to their offspring, the tendency of all animals to vary from their ancestors under varying influences around them, and the constant changes taking place in their surroundings” (Sprague 420). These represent the final three elements needed to formulate the theory of natural selection. Hereditary inheritance of traits had been assumed for millennia and had been used to justify everything from slavery to hereditary aristocracy. Variety and adaptation were also generally accepted components of reproduction, important especially in the breeding of animals and plants for domestic use. It was also widely accepted that animals, and in fact, the races of man, showed variation in response to their environment and the constant change at work in the natural world. When combined with the new discoveries in geology and the Malthusian struggle for existence and with careful and close observation of diverse natural systems, these three elements led Darwin and Wallace to propose a radical shift in methods of scientific investigation, and Howells later applied the results of this shift to enact a corresponding shift in the practice of fiction.

As genetic science moves into the 21st century, we increasingly accept that the passage of genetic information, unaltered from one generation to the next, determines in large measure much of our physiological structure and at least some degree of our psychological makeup. We base this acceptance on knowledge of Mendelian genetics bolstered by detailed research into the structure and function of DNA. To the nineteenth-century observer, however, there seemed to be little logic behind the function of heredity, and Victorian notions of the hereditary mechanism varied widely. John Waller notes

that, despite the relative weakness of Victorian understanding of the mechanism at work, these divergent theories of “heredity were the touchstones for many of the age’s most perennial political and scientific debates” including “such diverse topics as illness, class, gender, evolution, religion, colonialism, race, animal breeding, marriage and not least, morality” (Waller 51). In examining nineteenth-century ideas of inheritance, one must make the distinction between modern “hard” heredity and the Victorian model of “soft” heredity.

August Weismann’s work during the last two decades of the nineteenth century established the basic argument that “germ plasm” existed within the chromosomes in living cells. Although the details of his theory later fell out of favor as they stood at odds with Mendel’s observations, his idea of “germ plasm enshrined the principle of ‘hard’ heredity . . . the complete inability of the body to influence the genetic information passed on to the next generation” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 41). Regardless of the effect of the environment on an individual, the reproductive information stored within the germ plasm remains inviolable: “The body, or soma, was only the ‘host’ for its own germ plasm—it carried and nourished the germinal material and had even been derived from it, but it could never affect that material and hence had no control over its own offspring” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 41). This view led to rigidly deterministic interpretations of heredity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, views that carried over into literature, primarily in American naturalism.

In contrast to this stood several varieties of “soft” heredity, frequently associated with Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, all sharing the mechanism of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. As Peter Bowler describes it, Lamarckism involves “characters . . .

acquired *during the life of the organism* and . . . passed on to the offspring” (*Eclipse* 7; emphasis in original). This approach presents “heredity as a labile force, the heritable material as highly plastic, and no inherited ailment as necessarily intractable” (Waller 54). Some versions of this approach allow conscious individual decisions to affect offspring on the genetic level; thus conscious attempts at self improvement can lead to permanent modification of a genetic line. It must be remembered, however, that “the post-Darwinian debates were not straightforward arguments about clear-cut alternatives. They ranged across a series of highly complex issues that gave the individual biologist plenty of room for maneuvering even within what was labeled as a single theory” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 10).

Sprague’s 1866 essay that introduces so many other aspects of Darwinism for Howells is almost mute on this point of heredity. Sprague assumes the point as unproblematic. This confidence is probably well founded. In June of 1870, coincidentally the month and year in which Howells later sets his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, the *Atlantic* contains a review of Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* in which John Fiske refers to heredity in the popular mind: “Uneducated people always expect to see children resemble their parents; and to such an extent is the theory carried, that if a dissipated man dies leaving a son, all the old cronies of the neighborhood will wag their heads and predict of the innocent boy that ‘he is going to be just like his father’” (753). Fiske continues his comment by noting that in this instance scientific evidence supports the conventional wisdom, and Waller observes that “neither laymen nor men of science of the nineteenth century doubted the heritability of physical and

mental characteristics” (51). Heredity becomes interesting when it has some raw material upon which it can work. This comes in the form of variation.

Variation within species observed in a natural setting led both Darwin and Wallace to formulate their theory of natural selection, and later consideration of variation among domestic animals shapes Darwin’s initial approach to an explanation of this mechanism in the *Origin of Species*. As with hereditary inheritance of characteristics, scientists and nonprofessionals alike agreed during the nineteenth century that individual organisms within a single species can vary from one another, sometimes quite radically. Darwin can confidently assert in the *Origin of Species*, “no one supposes that all the individuals of the same species are cast in the very same mould” (102). As type collections of specimens grew in museums and universities throughout Europe and America, it became increasingly apparent that these variations were far more extensive than had previously been believed. In addition, the practice of comparative anatomy and improvements in scientific practice, especially the improved artistic renderings of specimens, made obvious the blurring of the lines that had previously seemed to provide clear demarcation between species. Darwin and Wallace both observed variation in their travels. The traditional view maintained by natural theologians held that variation based on geographic distribution of species was the result of divine creation. Each group of variant individuals in a species was the result of a separate act of the Creator, a population specifically created to fit perfectly within its environmental niche.

The idea that species characteristics adapted the individual to the environment was not a new one. A half century before Darwin and Wallace, William Paley published his *Natural Theology* (1802) in which he famously expounded his argument for divine

creation. Just as the watch by its very existence implies a watchmaker, the obvious contrivance of the natural world implies the existence of “that which can contrive, which can design, must be a person” (Paley 230). Paley presents the perfect design of the animal eye and the adaptation of this design to various environments as perhaps the strongest evidence to support the existence of an omnipotent creator. Paley then fills his volume with an extensive catalog of specific adaptations. He concludes from this catalog that they are “the result of design by an intelligent and benevolent designer,” and, as they result from individual effort, “it was also natural that he [Paley] should regard them as evidence of purpose and of final causes” (Beer 17). Paley carries his line of reasoning even further, concluding that such perfect adaptation must indicate munificence in the creative entity.

Paley’s “proof of the *divine goodness* rests upon two propositions” (Paley 252; emphasis in original). First, “in a vast plurality of instances in which contrivance is perceived, the design of the contrivance is *beneficial*” (Paley 252; emphasis in original). Most if not all adaptations work to further fit the individual to the environment, to make life easier. Second, Paley observes, “the Deity has superadded *pleasure* to the animal sensations, beyond what was necessary for any other purpose, or when the purpose, so far as it was necessary, might have been effected by the operation of pain” (Paley 252; emphasis in original). As evidence, Paley assumes as obvious to his reader that “It is a happy world after all. The air, the earth, the water, teem with delighted existence. In a spring noon, or a summer evening, on whichever side I turn my eyes, myriads of happy beings crowd upon my view. ‘The insect youth are on the wing.’ Swarms of new-born *flies* are trying their pinions in the air. Their sportive motions, their wanton mazes, their

gratuitous activity, their continual change of place without use or purpose, testify their joy, and the exultation which they feel in their lately discovered faculties” (Paley 253; emphasis in original). Paley continues to provide examples of this joy as he observes it in bees among the flowers, aphids sucking on plant stems, and fish jumping because they “are so happy, that they know not what to do with themselves” (Paley 254). Humans, according to Paley, also share in such joy throughout their lives. All is not joy, of course, but joy so predominates that difficulty seems to disappear in comparison: “Pain, no doubt, and privations exist, in numerous instances, and to a degree, which, collectively, would be very great, if they were compared with any other thing than with the mass of animal fruition” (257). In addition to this obvious imbalance, pain and privation provide a foil against which the pleasures of the world stand in positive relief: “Pain also itself is not without its *alleviations*. It may be violent and frequent; but it is seldom both violent and long continued: and its pauses and intermissions become positive pleasures” (Paley 273; emphasis in original). Disease may also seem to be a flaw in this scheme of overall joy and happiness, but Paley points out that “few diseases are fatal,” and those that are fatal serve “to reconcile us to death. The horror of death proves the value of life” (Paley 273, 274). The conclusions Paley draws from this line of reasoning surely provided great comfort to those who could maintain them:

Under this stupendous Being we live. Our happiness, our existence, is in his hands. All we expect must come from him. Nor ought we to feel our situation insecure. In every nature, and in every portion of nature, which we can descry, we find attention bestowed upon even the minutest parts. The hinges in the wings of an *earwig*, and the joints of its antennae, are as highly wrought, as if the

Creator had nothing else to finish. We see no signs of diminution of care by multiplicity of objects, or of distraction of thought by variety. We have no reason to fear, therefore, our being forgotten, or overlooked, or neglected. (Paley 295)

The theory of natural selection threatened the order of Paley's system.

Darwin and Wallace both saw this geographic specialization of species as far more complex, ambiguous, and untidy than had the majority of their predecessors who had assumed the presence of a divine plan. Peter Bowler describes the manner in which Darwin remarks on this phenomenon while in South America during his famous voyage aboard the *Beagle*. While traveling on the pampas of Patagonia, Darwin observes the rhea, a large, flightless bird common to the region. After his party had killed, cooked, and eaten one of the animals, Darwin recognized it as representative of a different species of rhea. He concluded that as he had not observed a line of demarcation between the territories of the two, their territories must overlap. From this, then, it was logical for him to suppose that in this area of overlap, the two species must compete against one another for resources, and "Darwin was forced to abandon the old idea of a carefully balanced ecology and recognize a less optimistic view in which species actually struggle with their rivals for the territory they occupied" (Bowler, *Evolution* 160). This shift from a paradigm of balance and harmony to one of scarcity and competition eventually led Darwin to conclude that such struggle can lead to transmutation of species.

With the last of the elements in place, the conclusion that natural selection allows those individuals best suited to their environment to survive, thrive, and reproduce in greater numbers, thus causing a shift in the basic character of a species, seems almost obvious. Perhaps the most famous response to this epiphany comes from Thomas Henry

Huxley who, upon having the theory explained to him, exclaimed, “How extremely stupid not to have thought of that” (qtd. in Burrow 14). The difficulty with the theory seems not to have been so much with putting together the disparate elements of geology, biology, and population studies that led to natural selection as with overcoming the inertia that had maintained adherence to a more conservative scientific paradigm.

The idea of evolution, that new species are not the result of special creation but arise through the transformation of earlier species, was not new even in Darwin’s time. Darwin clearly recognized his position in the larger conversation on the adaptability and mutability of species. In “An Historical Sketch” included at the beginning of the *Origin of Species*, Darwin situates himself within the larger historical scientific context.¹⁹ It is the case, notes Darwin, that “the great majority of naturalists believed that species were immutable productions, and had been separately created” (53). A few naturalists, however, beginning in Darwin’s estimation with Lamarck, aligned themselves with “the doctrine that species, including man, are descended from other species” (54). Darwin continues to note, paragraph by paragraph, all of those “thirty-four authors . . . who believe in the modification of species, or at least disbelieve in separate acts of creation” (61n). The historical sketch, however, does not offer an acknowledgement of a debt owed to any of the named authors. The foundation for Darwin’s logical structure rests upon elements drawn from widely divergent disciplines. No one prior to Darwin and Wallace assembled all of the pieces necessary to formulate a compelling theory of evolution and transmutation of species based on observable phenomena.

Those scientists who preceded Darwin continued to rely either on divine intervention or on transmutation directed by some type of supernatural power. Lamarck,

for example, viewed evolution as a linear process, “a strictly vertical phenomenon, proceeding in a single dimension, that of time. Evolution for him was a movement from less perfect to more perfect, from the most primitive infusorians up to the mammals and man” (Mayr 17). Lamarck’s theories did not address individual species: “New species originated all the time by spontaneous generation from inanimate matter, but this produced only the simplest infusorians. Each newly established evolutionary line gradually moved up to ever greater perfection, as organisms adapted to their environment and passed along to their offspring these newly acquired traits” (Mayr 17). Lamarck was still bound by the teleological paradigm; he could not escape the assumption that God had initially created the process by which species are created and by which they evolve through a progression of forms to the pinnacle of perfection, humankind.

Howells read in Sprague a single paragraph on Lamarck that focused on the widespread derision Lamarck faced after he proposed his theory that “as any special want was felt by an animal, the body took on that structure which was required to relieve it” (Sprague 418). The most common example provided today for such acquired characteristics involves the giraffe, which, according to Lamarck, acquired its long neck as a result of repeatedly stretching to reach the leaves available in the tops of trees. Howells perused Sprague’s even more outlandish hypothetical example: “If men needed to fly for the support of life, wings would gradually grow out from their shoulders” (418). While this seems absurd today, Sprague uses this example to illustrate the efforts of naturalists a half century before Darwin to consider mechanisms for speciation that did not involve divine intervention: “Ridiculous as this may be, it showed that thinkers were at that time endeavoring to account, on purely natural grounds, for what they considered

natural, and not supernatural phenomena” (418). Neither the scientific community nor the population as a whole embraced Lamarck’s ideas, but only a few decades later, the proposal made inroads into the popular consciousness, providing a foothold for later naturalists, including Wallace and Darwin, to establish a more scientifically accurate explanation of the evolution of species.

Another theory, proposed about thirty years later, receives Sprague’s attention for addressing the evolution of humankind, but it too assumes some degree of progress toward an ideal or perfect state. Anonymously published in 1844, Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* received condemnation from the scientific community for its lack of rigorous adherence to scientific standards and from theologians for its materialism, but the contentious public debate that accompanied it carried the idea of evolution into the popular consciousness. Although it was relatively rapidly dismissed as an example of science, Sprague explains that it raised public awareness of the subject of evolution, and “it aroused widespread public interest in the possibility that alternatives might be sought to the direct miraculous creation of species” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 20). Sprague draws extensive quotations from *Vestiges*, a “learned and lucid” argument as he describes it, to position Chambers as a precursor to Darwin and Wallace. Chambers concludes that there is a progression of species forms, one leading to the next higher form, governed by some undiscovered law. Sprague draws from the language of *Vestiges* to present Chambers’s conclusions: “I suggest [. . .] that the first step was *an advance under favor of peculiar circumstances, from the simplest forms of being to the next more complicated, and this through the medium of the ordinary process of generation*” (qtd. in Sprague 418-19; emphasis in original). Chambers continues, detailing that progress of

species and postulating eventual perfection: “*The simplest and most primitive type [. . .] gave birth to the type next above it [. . .] and so on to the very highest*” (qtd. in Sprague 419; emphasis in original). Sprague acknowledges the weaknesses in Chambers’s argument, its faults in logic and its lapses in scientific evidence, but he maintains that “the thought which pervaded it was intrinsically right” and credits it with foreshadowing later work on natural selection (419). Sprague’s essay illustrates the prevailing public and even scientific assumption that evolution implied linear progression through a hierarchy of forms, with the most recently evolved forms possessing the most complex structures and highest level of perfection.

As Darwin and Wallace made their collections and pondered the process of speciation, scientific and public acceptance of evolution continued to grow. All that was lacking was a rallying point to provide a focus for the scientific community. This eventually took the form of a mechanism to account for speciation presented by a scientist of prominent reputation. Sprague describes Darwin as “a naturalist of the highest rank [who] stands among the foremost men of the day as a clear-minded, trustworthy, accurate, profound thinker,” and his proposed mechanism of speciation as a “theory erected on the primary foundation of a natural law acting through all time,—a persistent force which is applied to all creation, immutable, unceasing, eternal” (Sprague 419). Natural selection takes into account all of the evidence Darwin was able to gather as he “spent twenty years in a patient, laborious study of nature, having special reference to this topic,— the origin of species” (Sprague 419). Darwin’s conclusion, of course, was that all species, plant and animal, must compete for scarce resources, and those best fitted

to compete are the individuals able to survive and pass on their traits to their offspring, eventually leading to a shift in the character of the species as a whole.

As Sprague explains the process, “In this destruction, the weaker animals and plants—those least fitted to thrive under the influences around—become the prey of others better fitted for the struggle, or die of their own lack of assimilative force” (Sprague 422). The results of this struggle lead to change on the species level through heredity and reproduction: “The largest or strongest get the best food or the most attractive females, and then transmit their strength or their peculiarities to their progeny. These peculiarities are the results of the environment, and if this shall go on changing in the direction of these peculiarities, they will increase” (Sprague 420-21). Accumulation of such change over time explains how one species can diverge into related subspecies: “Thus, through untold ages of shifting outward circumstances, the plastic forms of organic life have been remoulded” (Sprague 422). And, with the addition of limitless time, this process can account for the present diversity of life on earth: “When we consider the incalculable, inconceivable lapse of time through which organic life has been swayed by the never-ceasing action of the forces around it, we can imagine what a vast variety of animal forms may have been evolved from some one primal ancestor” (Sprague 420).

The overview of evolution and natural selection offered in Sprague’s essay and in various other reviews and essays in the *Atlantic* at this time gives Howells the general outline of scientific principles he needed to begin thinking about the application of modern scientific principles to fiction. It was not until four years later, however, that Howells was able to combine this science with his own strengths in travel writing to

shape the new variety of fiction that still bears his name. The new outlook contained most of the strengths of the Darwinian revolution in science, but it carried along with it the attendant limitations, misconceptions, and social complications that continue to make Darwinian evolution contentious even today.

Even once the majority of the scientific community agreed to address the issue, the proponents of Darwin and Wallace's proposal had some formidable hurdles to overcome in the realm of public opinion before their theory could gain wide acceptance. The principal stumbling point was that the new theory led to the inevitable conclusion that humankind had derived through the same essential process, as had animals, and humans were thus ruled, at least to some extent, by the same essential motivations. The first steps to supporting the theory proved relatively easy to take. Darwin's first step in his "one long argument," the variability and malleability of domestic animals, caused few problems for most people. The public readily accepted the argument that breeders could choose desirable characteristics and selectively breed their stock to accentuate these characteristics. This process leaves humans in control of the natural world, as the master rather than subjects of selection and modification.

The next step in developing the argument is to carry this selection over to the natural world. Instead of humans making the choices that lead to modification, characteristics of individuals that make them either fit or unfit for their environment make them more or less able to survive and to procreate. Darwin makes his presentation of this argument as palatable as possible for those who maintain belief in a supernatural creative power. If humans, with only a handful of traits for which they consciously select, can bring about significant change in a species, it stands to reason that nature can

exert even more power toward modification: “Man can act only on external and visible characters: nature cares nothing for appearances, except in so far as they may be useful to any being. She can act on every internal organ, on every shade of constitutional difference, on the whole machinery of life” (Darwin, *Origin* 132). In addition to this, human interference subverts the natural process of disparate procreation. The breeder “does not allow the most vigorous males to struggle for the females. He does not rigidly destroy all inferior animals, but protects during each varying season, as far as lies in his power, all his productions” (Darwin, *Origin* 133). The stock the breeder begins with can also undermine the power of selection in nature: “He often begins his selection by some half-monstrous form; or at least by some modification prominent enough to catch his eye, or to be plainly useful to him. Under nature, the slightest difference of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life, and so be preserved” (Darwin, *Origin* 133). As compared to the possibilities for selection within the vast scale allowed by nature, Darwin exclaims, “How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods. Can we wonder, then, that nature’s productions should be far ‘truer’ in character than man’s productions; that they should be infinitely better adapted to the most complex conditions of life, and should plainly bear the stamp of far higher workmanship?” (Darwin, *Origin* 133). In this paragraph, Darwin’s “Nature” is clearly representative of some personified creative force, and the reference at the conclusion of the paragraph to the “workmanship” of nature reinforces this implication, but the argument itself clearly situates species modification through natural selection beyond the realm of supernatural intervention and

within the power of natural process. If this process, working over immense spans of time, can effect change on the species level, humanity would certainly fall under its control.

Although Darwin scrupulously avoids mention of the subject in the *Origin of Species*, making only one direct reference to humans, predicting only that “light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history,” he clearly considers humankind as being under the control of natural selection, a member of the animal kingdom rather than its ruler (458). Stephen J. Gould explains the shift in the self perception of humanity necessitated by acceptance of the Darwinian view of life: “If we are but a tiny twig on the floridly arborescent bush of life, and if our twig branched off just a geological moment ago, then perhaps we are not a predictable result of an inherently progressive process (the vaunted trend to progress in life’s history); perhaps we are, whatever our glories and accomplishments, a momentary cosmic accident that would never arise again if the tree of life could be replanted from seed and regrown under similar conditions” (*Full House* 18). This leap was a difficult one to make, and many people continue to resist the implications inherent in the logical extension of Darwinian theory to humanity.

Sprague examines the tenacity of this conviction that divine intervention provided the only explanation for the existence of humanity. Even after most scientists accepted that animals were not the product of relatively recent divine creation, most still insisted, “man was not an animal” (Sprague 416). Sprague continues, following this comment to point out through sarcasm the contradictions involved in maintaining such a position: “Man was a being apart. Although he was liable to heat and cold, disease and death, although his body was made of the same materials as the brute’s, and was subject to the

same laws of life, he was invested with an individuality which separated him from them” (Sprague 416-17). These contradictions led to a further erosion of a literal interpretation of the Bible as “the old belief, that all men descended from one man, began to be shaken; and good, honest, faithful Christians expressed their doubts of the matter” (Sprague 417). The wall between humans and animals appeared actually to be a permeable barrier. This implication caused much of the derisive response to Darwin’s theory, and it led many who saw merit in his conclusions to contemplate it privately rather than publicly. Once Darwin attached his name to the concept, however, the debate became public, and heated. As noted earlier, reaction to Darwin swept through the popular media, surrounding Howells as he sat at the center of the storm at his *Atlantic* desk. The topic demanded some response from the respected publication, and Howells assumed a position in support of the new science and began to explore it in his own fiction. The lack of solid evidence for evolution and natural selection, however, prompted Howells to offer his readers a balanced view of the subject.

The scientific study and evaluation of evolution presented another stumbling point for Darwinians and for Howells. Laboratory experiments with heredity, as conducted by Mendel, could provide evidence about the mechanism of inheritance, but the transmutation of species over millions of years could not be duplicated because of the obvious chronological constraints. The alternatives include study of the fossil record or of existing forms and their relationships to one another. The presence of fossilized examples of extinct forms in various geological strata provided plentiful fodder for debate. Different schools of thought offered alternate explanations for the extinction of species: “According to Lamarck, no organism ever became extinct; there was such a

drastic transformation that formerly existing types had changed beyond recognition” (Mayr 16). According to another view, that espoused by Agassiz, “each former fauna had become extinct as a whole through some catastrophe and was replaced by a newly created, more progressive fauna. This had happened, according to Agassiz, fifty times since the earth was formed” (Mayr 17). Lyell did not agree with this catastrophic view, and he “produced a third theory consistent with his uniformitarianism. He believed that individual species became extinct one by one as conditions changed and that the gaps thus created in nature were filled by the introduction of new species through some presumably supernatural means. Lyell’s theory was an attempt at a reconciliation between those who recognized a changing world of long duration and those who supported the tenets of creationism” (Mayr 16-17). Although interpretations vary, it is clear that any serious scientific consideration of evolution had to take into account the evidence supplied by the fossil record.

Fossils do present some compelling evidence, but it is limited in its utility by its deficiencies. One of the major arguments against evolution and natural selection, an argument that still stands as one of the primary objections to the theory, is the sparsity of the fossil record. Darwin, Wallace, and the other supporters of evolution argued that the imperfection of the fossil record, the lack of fossil forms of graduated varieties within geological formations, can be attributed to many factors. One, according to Darwin, is the long spans of time involved. A complete fossil record of variant forms in a specific geographic location would demand that sediments be deposited in the same location, without disturbance, for millions of years. As the earth is constantly changing, river courses shifting, deltas forming and eroding, the chance for sediments to build over the

course of time necessary simply cannot occur. In addition to this, even if the deposits had occurred, there would likely not be a record of all of the intermediate forms. Animal populations migrate; the intermediate form might have migrated out of the area, only to return after millennia of additional change and adaptation. Even plants, which would presumably remain within the same location, might not leave a perfect record of their change. As Darwin explains it, plant “varieties are generally at first local; and . . . such local varieties do not spread widely and supplant their parent-forms until they have been modified and perfected in some considerable degree” (*Origin* 306). Thousands, even millions of years of gradual change could precede the widespread redistribution of a radically transformed species.

Sprague addresses this deficiency in the fossil record in even more straightforward fashion, explaining that the lack of forms connecting the widely divergent animal orders or between humans and the lower animals is due simply to the imperfections of scientific knowledge. Much of the earth that was above water is now submerged, for example, and in this, Sprague argues, “the negative evidence is as weighty as the positive” (423). In addition to this, Sprague explains, most animals die and decompose or are consumed without leaving any physical remains: “For one which is accidentally buried so as to resist the destructive forces of air and water, millions are resolved into their primitive elements, and are annihilated as structural forms” (423). The number of fossils that have been recovered attests to the extreme antiquity of the earth, not the antithesis. At most, the controversy results in a draw “while so much of the dim, remote past is attainable only by inference and deduction” (424). The alternative to the study of fossils, which raises many more questions than it answers even today, is the

study of existing forms with scientists sometimes working under the dangerous assumption that the range of existing forms represents a chronological cross section of development.

The common misconception that the current inhabitants of the earth represent a historical overview of evolution resulted from a conflation of Darwinian evolution and earlier but still popular theories of species evolution based on the assumption that species progress through a “chain of being,” moving over time through a predetermined series of changes, culminating in humankind. Darwin insists on a branching model of evolution in which species irregularly give rise to variant forms in response to environmental pressures. The alternative, linear progression directed by forces internal to the organism and independent of external environmental influences, maintained a significant hold on the American scientific community into the twentieth century and was a powerfully influential force during the last half of the nineteenth century. Peter Bowler maintains that “the origins of this characteristic concern for the linearity of evolution are not hard to find: They lie in the idealist philosophy of nature imported into America by Louis Agassiz and disseminated by him from Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology” (*Eclipse* 120). Agassiz, a charismatic individual and engaging public speaker, popularized the notion of linear development, and in the popular mind, misinterpretation of this theory merged with Darwinian evolution to give rise to the belief that modern apes represent a living representative of human history. Lyell’s approach to geology, so influential with Darwin, was also partly to blame. Edward Caudill comments on the influence of Lyell’s scientific approach in initiating this general misconception: “Lyell saw analogy as the only way of gaining knowledge about geology; assuming the

constancy of physical and natural law, a scientist could learn about the past by observing contemporary conditions” (10). This theory applied to living organisms can lead to the conclusion that one can study the range of existing forms to establish a chronology of development. While the study of existing plants and animals can provide insight into the process by which adaptation allowed them to achieve their present form, such study can lead to serious problems. The implications for Victorian society when these assumptions are applied to humankind can lead to striking shifts in perceptions of social responsibility, and these problems can be further intensified and perpetuated when they migrate into popular culture. Howells guided a small part of this migration and attempted to reconcile Darwinian natural selection with traditional morality, and Sprague’s essay prepared Howells to confront some popular misconceptions.

Sprague presents the widespread belief that a gorilla might transform into a man as evidence of the deep misunderstanding faced by Darwinian evolution in the mid nineteenth-century public mind. Sprague describes “a lecturer, alluding to it [Darwin’s theory of the origin of species] lately, says that it will be worthy of consideration when we see an ape turn into a man; and this is about the extent, we imagine, to which the great mass of people understand a theory which has been received as revelation by many of the first scientific men of the age” (Sprague 415). Although Sprague does not endorse such transformation, he does subscribe to the theory that the existing range of species represents an accessible history of evolution. As he describes the process, “Some forms may be less plastic than others [in the process of evolution], and [these forms] give way less readily to the incident forces. These may remain unchanged for a far longer period than subsequent varieties, and be coexistent with them” (Sprague 422-23). He continues

to clarify the assumed relationship between the higher apes and man later in the same paragraph:

Darwin's theory certainly gives to both some vastly remote common ancestor; but it does not maintain the metamorphosis of one into the other. It does not suppose that man was once a gorilla. It supposes that from out of some of the differentiations of some animal form arose the first man-like creature, and that, gradually changing, like other animal forms, some of the varieties eventually evolved into apes and orangoutangs [sic], to stop there and die out like hosts of other forms now extinct. But from some strongly individualized variety sprang, with more rapid and advancing growth, the primitive man, who has, under complex influences, differentiated into the so-called races of mankind. (423)

This view of the differentiation of races of man combined with the aforementioned belief in the persistence of earlier forms leads Sprague to establish a position with which the vast majority of members of the scientific community and most people today would certainly disagree but with which scientists and the laity of the nineteenth century readily aligned.

As he expounds upon the persistence of obsolete forms, he uses humans as an example. As species evolve, "Some varieties may take on cerebral growth as widely different and as strongly individualized as frame structure. Man himself is a striking instance" (Sprague 423). He then continues to enumerate the levels of humanity as representative of change through time: "The Negro, the Malay, the Mongolian, are almost precisely what they were five thousand years ago. The Bushman, the Hottentot, the Patagonian, and the Digger Indian are to-day not much above the animals about them;

while the Caucasian has gone on in a wonderful advancement, leaving the other races in the same state of development in which they were when the Caucasian was no farther advanced than they” (423). With this, Sprague is able to position humans within the realm of animals while at the same time maintaining the vast superiority of white, Western man: “We talk of man as being something infinitely above all animals. There is a vast difference between the highest and lowest species of the genus homo. Were the race confined to those lowest species, we imagine that European and American pride of nature would go before a grievous fall” (Sprague 423). Along with the argument that development and variation provide an almost unbroken continuum from the lowest, least complex to the highest, most complex life form, the belief in progress leads to the widely accepted conclusion that Western man represented the pinnacle of the evolutionary process. The only remaining question involved the possibility of raising other societies to the levels achieved in the West.

Sprague leaves no doubt in his readers’ minds about his own views on progress. His enthusiastic prose mirrors the essential optimism present in America during the middle to late nineteenth century:

It does not stop here. With the eye of prescience it sees the process going on far into the ages yet to come. What may be the result in that distant day, finite speculation may not determine. But the laws which have swayed the world sway it still, and will sway it forevermore. As in the past they have evolved order out of disorder, heterogeneous beauty out of homogeneous crudity, progressive individuality of being and thought out of chaotic vapor, so will they continue their evolving force through all time, till the boasted perfectness of this day of ours,

perfect because it is our day, will be as primitive to the later denizens of this globe as the barbarity of the cave savages is to modern civilization. (424)

Publication of Sprague's essay positioned the *Atlantic* as a voice of measured reason within the broader and more polarized debate over evolution and natural selection.

Howells reinforced this position five months later with publication of Edwin P. Whipple's "Mr. Hardhack on the Derivation of Man from the Monkey." In this satirical rant mocking those who "were affronted by the notion that humankind is simply a highly developed primate," Whipple assumes the persona of Mr. Solomon Hardhack, a "narrow-minded reactionary" already known to *Atlantic* readers from earlier essays (Daugherty). Hardhack opens by clearly establishing the purely emotional nature of his argument: "I can stand it no longer, sir. I have been seething and boiling inwardly for a couple of years at this last and final insult which science has put upon human nature, and now I must speak, or, if you will, explode" (300). Later, he describes his reaction to reasonable attempts to persuade him that evolution could offer a scientific explanation for the many parallels between humans and animals:

"A man of your candid mind, Mr. Hardhack, must admit that no absolutely structural line of demarcation, wider than that between the animals which immediately succeed us in the scale, can be drawn between the animal world and ourselves." And while I don't comprehend a word of this cursed gibberish, I am expected to bow, and look wise, and say, "Certainly," and "Just so," and "It's plain to the meanest capacity," and be soft-sawdered out of my humanity, and infamously acknowledge myself babooned. But they can't try it on me, sir.

When a man talks to me in that fashion, I measure with *my* eyes "the structural

line of demarcation” between *his*, and with my whole force plant there my fist.
(304)

From here, Hardhack turns his attack upon Darwin personally, decrying the lack of a concerted resistance to the new theories: “What if Darwin had been treated as he deserved when he published the original edition of his villainous book? If I had been Chief Justice of England when that high priest of ‘natural selection’ first tried to oust me out of the fee-simple of my species, I would have given him an illustration of ‘the struggle for existence’ he would n’t have relished. I would have hanged him on the highest gallows ever erected on this planet since the good old days of Haman” (304). Hardhack’s obvious ignorance and savagery provide, in the linear scheme of humanity presented in Sprague’s essay, evidence to support the very theory Hardhack so adamantly opposes. In its sarcastic tone, Whipple’s essay invites his reader to join with all *Atlantic* readers in mocking such emotional, unreasonable rejection of Darwinian science.²⁰ The *Atlantic*’s position reflects Howells’s own relative openness to the new science. While he certainly remains skeptical of some elements and misinformed about others, he does not blindly reject them as Mr. Hardhack does. Sprague’s essay and Howells’s reaction in publishing Whipple’s essay only five months later indicate Howells’s position on the new science and prepare him to adopt the basic elements of the theory as he understood them and to adapt them as he began to explore the world from a new point of view that would become the viewpoint of American realism.

Chapter 2

The “errors and caprices of destiny”: Geology, Biology, and the World of Natural Selection in *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*

Howells maintained a precarious balance while at the *Atlantic* as assistant editor from 1866 to 1871 and as editor from 1871 to 1881. He respected the old guard of Boston literary circles, and he needed them as contributors to maintain the circulation of his periodical. At the same time, however, he saw circulation dropping, his readers lured away by the illustrations and sensationalism in other less conservative publications; and he knew that a new direction and fresh, new writers offered the only answer to the question of declining readership and financial solvency.²¹ With this in mind, Howells remained alert for any fresh approach, technique, or topic that would attract new readers and give the *Atlantic* broader popular appeal without alienating the conservative base of readership upon which the *Atlantic* relied. He identified several approaches that he hoped would help. One was to broaden the *Atlantic*'s coverage to include more topical issues on a variety of subjects—foreign literature, physical science, social science, travel—and to engage editors who would write regular columns about their assigned areas.²² He also watched for new literary talent, most famously befriending and helping Mark Twain and, to a lesser extent, Henry James. In this mode of searching, exploring, and extending,

Howells appropriated from the pages of the *Atlantic* methods and material, including the geological and biological components of Darwin's theory of natural selection.

In his early fiction written for *Atlantic* publication, Howells also began edging toward a view of species as representative of slowly shifting averages for entire populations tracked over generations rather than the more common view that ideal individuals could represent the epitome of each species. In addition, he began to address some of the implications associated with Darwin's conclusions; most significantly, he looked during these early years of his career at the scientific recasting of humankind as evolutionary anomaly, rising by chance from a hereditary line that indicates not progress but random adaptation generated in reaction to an ever-shifting environment. In this context, the individual loses significance, subsumed by the natural world. Science transforms the view of nature from the divinely created garden of Genesis to an environment that epitomizes, in George Carrington's words, "the tension between a beautiful, placid surface and erupting, overwhelming horror" (33). Carrington presents this observation as he comments on *Suburban Sketches* (1871), but his words could as easily apply to the world Darwin creates with his theory of natural selection. The seeming balance in the natural world appears only because of struggle and death on a massive scale continuing over millions of years. In his early sketches and his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1871), Howells addresses the geological and biological preconditions that must exist in anticipation of Darwinian evolution by natural selection.

By the late 1860s, Howells was convinced that he would have to strike out in a new direction if he was ever going to achieve the literary success he had sought since childhood.²³ After publishing some poems in prominent periodicals, including the

Atlantic, he thought he might gain fame as a poet, but following the meager success of his collection, *Poems of Two Friends* (1860), he saw that his poetry was not of the quality to gain for him the fame he wanted and financial security he needed. At the same time, he realized that travel writing, though it had introduced him to the reading public with the popular success of *Venetian Life* (1866) and *Italian Journeys* (1867), was not the genre that could afford a writer a lasting place in the American literary pantheon. Upon returning to the United States after the Civil War, Howells sought to establish himself as a player in American literature. His 1860 pilgrimage to visit the literary old guard in Cambridge had introduced him to the founders and current editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and his tenure at the *Atlantic* began in 1866 with an invitation from James T. Fields to serve as assistant editor, responsible mainly for book reviews among more general editorial duties.²⁴ As he began those duties, he kept in mind the necessity of his own literary production. Few famous men of literature had built a reputation on book reviews and criticism, as Howells knew. He carefully negotiated a contract that allowed him, in addition to his duties as editor and reviewer, to publish original works in the *Atlantic*.²⁵

Although it meant a significant increase in workload for the young Howells, his editorial position provided the steady income so important for the head of a growing family. As his responsibilities at the *Atlantic* increased, his family responsibilities also increased with the birth of John Mead Howells, his second child, in August of 1868. About this time, Howells decided upon a literary departure, and he began to write, in addition to voluminous book reviews, a series of sketches to be published in the *Atlantic*. By the late 1860s, he was an experienced reporter who had already written almost eight hundred newspaper and magazine pieces that included poetry, commentary, and travel

(Gibson 158). Because of his experience in recording observations and musings for travel columns and two popular travel books, it makes sense that he would build upon his success to establish the form for his fiction.²⁶ His knowledge of Darwinian evolution and natural selection allowed him to explore his new idea of realism with an eye toward scientific accuracy, and his concern for the interaction of characters and their environment made the form an obvious choice. While indications of this interest in the interaction of individual and environment appear in his first travel books, it was not until the summer of 1869 when he read Alfred Russel Wallace's account of his scientific journeys of exploration and collection in *The Malay Archipelago* that Howells redirected his literary project.

Although Howells did not attempt to theorize realism with any sense of methodical rigor until he began to write his Editor's Study columns for *Harpers* in 1885, the rudiments began to fall into place after he read Wallace. The close observation and detailed description for which Howells's own travel writing had been so popular provided the foundation; Wallace's work presented a scientific paradigm by which Howells could examine individuals' interactions with one another and their environment. Through such exploration, not of exotic locations and peoples but of American settings and society, Howells built a native literature that rested on his early investigation of the geological and biological preconditions that underpin Darwinian evolution through natural selection, and he recorded the results of this investigation in *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*.²⁷

Many critics pass over the sketches and the early novel, and those who do choose to address them either discount them as experiments or recognize some merit in

Howells's intention but conclude that his efforts failed. Edward Wagenknecht, for example, dismisses the early sketches as evidence of Howells's lack of literary direction: "For some time after his return to America [from Venice in 1865] he literally groped for subjects" (59). When he failed to find adequate material for a planned biography of Lucrezia Borgia in the Boston libraries, Howells, according to Wagenknecht, "was left with the exploitation of such local scenes and incidents as made up *Suburban Sketches*" (59). Wagenknecht contends that it is only with *Their Wedding Journey* that "the light began to break," but that even with this text, Howells is unsure of himself (60).

Daniel Aaron sees some depth in the texts, but he concludes that they do not fulfill Howells's hopes for them. Aaron notes Howells's attempt to break with romantic convention, marking especially the brief "Scene," which first appeared in the book publication of *Suburban Sketches* in December 1870. The sketch describes the corpse of a suicide, a "fallen woman," being carted back to town accompanied by a "guard of ragged urchins" (*Suburban Sketches* 193). As the cart moves slowly through town, "the boys could no longer be restrained; they broke out with wild yells, and danced madly about it, while the red shawl hanging from the rigid feet nodded to their frantic mirth; and the sun dropped its light through the maples and shone bright upon the flooded flats" (*Suburban Sketches* 194). As Aaron points out, "Scene," which Howells wrote twenty years before Stephen Crane began work on *Maggie*, clearly "anticipates the subject if not the theme of Crane's Bowery novel" (86). Aaron comments that James Russell Lowell, reviewing *Suburban Sketches* in the *North American Review*, "did not hear the somber passages occasionally sounding through the genial and gossipy commentary . . ." (88). Aaron contends that Howells means to "brush aside the romantic folderol surrounding

tales of abandoned females and to dramatize the ‘*post-mortem* ugliness and grotesqueness’ of the squalid actuality” (89). Howells’s observer elaborately refuses to cast an imaginative glance back to offer a contrived past for the girl, choosing instead to report what is rather than what might have been. Aaron sees in this Howells’s refusal to “‘romanticize’ what was for him a tiresome and unpleasant incident . . .” (89). Later generations, beginning with Crane and Norris, were able, according to Aaron, to carry through with the project Howells had initiated but failed to bring to fruition. Howells was “disqualified by temperament and conditioning from dragging ‘hidden things’ into the sun” even if he did make “it easier for later novelists who could” (90).

John Crowley agrees to an extent, observing that Howells remained “always wary of unconscious depths, including his own” (Crowley, *Mask* 50). Crowley does not contend that Howells’s novels lack “psychological penetration,” but he does conclude that “Howells consistently relied on the dramatic method to reveal his characters’ minds, hearts, and consciences by means of depicting their manners” (Crowley, *Mask* 50). According to Crowley, it is incumbent upon the reader to unearth the threatening darkness that lies behind a façade of comfort and complacency. This common misconception about Howells’s aversion to the coarser aspects of life and his corresponding inability to move forward into “the more relentless realism” of the naturalists leads many to misread Howells, to overlook or to minimize the darkness that the observant eye can discern quite clearly on the surface in Howells’s fiction (Aaron 90).

In conjunction with his composition of the third *Atlantic* sketch, “Jubilee Days,” (August 1869), Howells read Alfred Russel Wallace’s account of his discoveries in *The Malay Archipelago* and of their connection to Darwin’s theories of evolution and natural

selection. “Jubilee Days” immediately precedes in the same volume of the *Atlantic* Howells’s review of Wallace’s record of the voyage that allowed Wallace to conclude, independent of Darwin, that natural selection operates as the primary mechanism of evolution and the formation of new species.²⁸ Howells notes the Darwinian themes in his review, especially in Wallace’s discussion of the geographic history of the islands of the Malay Archipelago and in his examination of the plants, animals, and people that inhabit them. Reading Wallace initiated Howells’s lifelong interest in Wallace and prompted a shift in Howells’s approach to his craft.

Howells opens his review of *The Malay Archipelago* with reference to Sir John Maundeville’s *Voiage and Travayle* of the early 1300s, noting Sir John’s reports of incredible wealth among the great emperors of the Malay Archipelago and the bizarre and curious inhabitants of the islands including “a population of men and women with dog’s heads” and “another island inhabited by a race of serpent-eaters, so strangely affected by their diet that ‘they speak naught, but hiss as serpents do’” (Howells 254-55). With their unveiled references to earlier travel narratives, especially Pliny’s *Naturalis historia*, Maundeville’s tales rely as much on the accounts of earlier explorers as they do on direct observation. One wonders, in fact, if any first-hand observation occurred at all.²⁹ Howells ironically refers to Maundeville’s earlier accounts as he provides perspective for Wallace, the subject of his review: “It is now above five hundred years since Sir John made his run through the Orient, and the Malay Archipelago has changed with the rest of the world. Mr. Wallace, the latest traveler in that region, says nothing of the wonders recounted by his predecessor, and we may fairly suppose that the dog-headed and serpent-eating natives have disappeared” (255). Howells continues to

contrast the content of the nineteenth-century work with that of the thirteenth: “Without absolutely denying that these things may once have been, the modern traveler devotes himself mainly to observation of the present life of the Archipelago, and his own adventures during a sojourn of six years among the Malays” (255).

In his comments on Wallace’s work, Howells notes what he considers the inadequacy of romanticized depictions of reality in the scientific literature of the nineteenth century. In his book *Myths and Mythmakers* (1872), dedicated to Howells, John Fiske describes this transformation from fancy to physical science:

We have come to regard all events as taking place regularly, in strict conformity to law. . . . But our primitive ancestors knew nothing about laws of nature. . . . There was a time in the history of mankind when these things had never been inquired into, and when no generalizations about them had been framed, tested, or established. . . . There was no belief in miracles as infractions of natural laws, but there was a belief in the occurrence of wonderful events too mighty to have been brought about by ordinary means. There was an unlimited capacity for believing and fancying, because fancy and belief had not yet been checked and headed off in various directions by established rules of experience. Physical science is a very late acquisition of the human mind, but we are already sufficiently imbued with it to be almost completely disabled from comprehending the thoughts of our ancestors. (16-17)

Howells recognizes the need for a corresponding transformation in literature and attempts to establish a new direction in fiction, a turn away from romance and toward art based on

observation, on the objective treatment of the finer details of everyday life, as these are the details that, over great expanses of time, shape the world and society as we know it.

Of course, his repeated insistence that a reviewer must carefully read a book before reviewing it does not authorize the assumption that Howells would absorb the minutiae of Wallace's work. He makes clear in the course of his review that Wallace includes an overabundance of detail in some places, asserting his belief that "Mr. Wallace apparently exhausts a very copious diary in the production of his book, and seems almost to have made it a point of conscience not to leave anything out"; and Howells later summarizes his own review by remarking that he has "touched upon some points . . . which interest the mere human being uncontaminated by science" and promising to "cheerfully abandon to the learned or sophisticated man a vast amount of information relative to the animals and vegetation of the Archipelago" (255, 256). Interpretation of such passages must proceed with caution. In his reviews of scientific works, Howells often adopts what Kermit Vanderbilt calls "the persona of the mere reader" (17). Vanderbilt asserts that Howells's stance reflects affectation rather than actuality: "For all his modest protestations, Howells clearly was becoming an informed student of science in this new era" (17-18).³⁰ While Howells indicates that readers can safely scan some of the book, and perhaps that he had skimmed portions of it himself, the basic understanding of Darwinian evolution he had established earlier would lead Howells to recognize the clear references to Darwin's theories that permeate Wallace's book. Howells announces his decision to "cheerfully abandon" the scientific content of the book, limiting himself to the "single remark that the author is a Darwinist, and meets everywhere abundant evidence to sustain the famous Theory" (257). This recognition,

combined with his desire to take a new direction in fiction reflective of the close ties to observation and experience evident in his earlier successes, certainly led Howells to read *The Malay Archipelago* with an eye to the possible uses of detailed observation in his own fiction. It also seems likely that the theories supported by this perspective would register in Howells's mind, especially in those sections of Wallace's work that correspond to the focus of Howells's sketches, the diversity and variation in human society and the influence of this diversity on heredity with the continuing development of the human race and, by extension, social structures.

Howells began his exploration of this realistic approach to literature after two years at the *Atlantic*. The publication of "Jubilee Days" began a creative burst for Howells. On top of his other duties that included composing over thirty book reviews in 1869, he was able to write a sketch for publication in alternate numbers of the *Atlantic* for the next year and a half. In the midst of this period of intense imaginative work, in June of 1870, with Wallace's text fresh in his mind and a plan for a new direction in his fiction, Howells began a diary recording experiences he and wife Elinor had on their travels covering the whole of the territory later described in *Their Wedding Journey* (Reeves xvii). By the time he published "Flitting" (December 1870), the last of the sketches, and began to prepare them for book publication, Howells felt he had established his new direction to the extent that he could expand it to novel length by transforming the detail of the travel diary into fictional travel narrative. The same volume of the *Atlantic* in which "Flitting" appears contains Henry James's review of A. R. Wallace's *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*, thus continuing Howells's exposure to Wallace and evolutionary theory. In that same month, Howells notes in a letter to his

father that he is “fairly launched upon the story of . . . last summer’s travels, which I am giving the form of fiction so far as the characters are concerned. If I succeed in this—and I believe I shall—I see clear before me a path in literature which no one else has tried, and which I believe I can make most distinctly my own” (Mildred Howells, *Life in Letters* 1:162). By March of 1871, he describes to his father his hope for the creation of this new direction in fiction: “The thing is quite a new species of fiction: it isn’t at all dependent on plot, but [merely?] has the interest of character, [seen?] and described, and some notable places. I feel as if I had got over the hardest part, but perhaps I haven’t” (qtd. in Reeves xix). As Howells would discover, the hardest part was indeed to come, but the self-assurance he feels as he writes to his father manifests itself in the confident irony with which he develops scientific evolution in *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*, and he begins where Darwin began, with the study of geology.

* * *

The mammoth power and vast antiquity of the earth, facts of great importance to Darwin in establishing his theories, seem to dawn on most nineteenth-century naturalists in much the same way. A single experience marks the moment when they come to a true understanding of the natural world and their own insignificant place within it. Lyell reached his conclusions at Mount Etna, Darwin in South America during his voyage aboard the *Beagle*.³¹ Darwin was on shore, lying in the woods resting, when he experienced an earthquake which he described as feeling “Something like the movement of a vessel in a cross-ripple, or still more like that felt by a person skating over thin ice, which bends under the weight of his body” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 183). Despite the seemingly gentle motion of the earth that he experiences while in the forest, Darwin

realizes the massive power of the quake as he returns to Concepcion where he sees that “numerous fragments of rock, which, from the marine productions adhering to them, must recently have been lying in deep water, had been cast up high on the beach; one of these was six feet long, three broad and thick” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 184). He concludes after seeing these upheavals and the resulting destruction wrought in the town that “this convulsion has done more to lessen the size of the island of Quiriquina than the ordinary wear-and-tear of the sea and weather during the course of a whole century” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 184).

After this description, Darwin notes the failure of language to describe the scene: “Several of the officers visited it [Concepcion] before me, but their strongest language failed to give a just idea of the scene of desolation” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 190-91). By noting this limitation in language, Darwin qualifies his own description, emphasizing his own inability to convey the precise observational impact of the scene. At the same time, the earthquake affects Darwin more profoundly, threatening the very foundation of his worldview. Recognition of the power present in the natural world “at once destroys our oldest associations: the earth, the very emblem of solidity, has moved beneath our feet like a thin crust over a fluid; one second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity which hours of reflection would not have produced” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 183). The place of the individual as a very small and relatively minor constituent within the larger system of the world becomes apparent, and Darwin notes that “it is a bitter and humiliating thing to see works which have cost man so much time and labor overthrown in one minute” (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 191).

Darwin then attempts to share with readers the tenuous nature of their own position as he offers an extended supposition on the effect an earthquake might have on England:

If beneath England the now inert subterranean forces should exert those powers which most assuredly in former geological ages they have exerted, how completely would the entire condition of the country be changed! What would become of the lofty houses, thickly packed cities, great manufactories, the beautiful public and private edifices? If the new period of disturbance were first to commence by some great earthquake in the dead of the night, how terrific would be the carnage! England would at once become bankrupt; all papers, records, and accounts would from that moment be lost. Government being unable to collect the taxes, and failing to maintain its authority, the hand of violence and rapine would remain uncontrolled. In every large town famine would go forth, pestilence and death following in its train! (Darwin, *What Darwin Saw* 191)

Writing ten years later, and having read Darwin's earlier descriptions, Wallace also attempts to express the power of nature and to address the inability of most Europeans, and by extension Americans, to understand the immense energy available to shape the natural world.

Wallace's moment of recognition occurs while observing a volcano in the small group of islands called Banda: "It is only when actually gazing on an active volcano that one can fully realize its awfulness and grandeur" (Wallace, *Malay* 220). Thus the limited, anthropomorphic view of people who spend their lives in the relative geological

calm of Europe allows them to assume their misapprehended security in the natural world:

The knowledge from childhood, of the fact that volcanoes and earthquakes exist, has taken away somewhat of the strange and exceptional character that really belongs to them. The inhabitant of most parts of northern Europe sees in the earth the emblem of stability and repose. His whole life-experience, and that of all his age and generation, teaches him that the earth is solid and firm, that its massive rocks may contain water in abundance but never fire; and these essential characteristics of the earth are manifest in every mountain his country contains. A volcano is a fact opposed to all this mass of experience, a fact of so awful a character that, if it were the rule instead of the exception, it would make the earth uninhabitable; a fact so strange and unaccountable that we may be sure it would not be believed on any human testimony, if presented to us now for the first time, as a natural phenomenon happening in a distant country. (Wallace, *Malay* 220)

Wallace's observations follow the pattern Lyell and Darwin established earlier; their position as observer shifts, and they are able to think about the earth and its inhabitants from a new and striking perspective, allowing them to approach old conundrums from previously unexplored directions.

Environmental disasters were, of course, nothing new to human knowledge. The Bible contains numerous examples of such events—from the flood of Genesis to the storms, plagues, and earthquakes of Revelation—visited upon the wicked and wayward by a wrathful God who spares the righteous and repentant. Lyell and those who followed him no longer saw the hand of God as the immediate cause of these catastrophes.

Although interpretations varied, the consensus among geologists during the latter half of the nineteenth century was that the natural world functioned according to a set of constant laws that could be observed, studied, and eventually deciphered. Most scientists, Lyell himself for example, maintained their belief in God, merely modifying their faith to acknowledge God's creation of the earth and the laws governing it. This shift to deism eliminated the necessity for miracles and, most importantly, placed humanity within the realm of nature rather than as its master. This shift in the locus of humanity, from "a little lower than the angels" to member of the animal kingdom, led to a concurrent shift in the position of the scientist as observer. The scientist gathers data from within a system of which he or she stands as an integral part, no longer above looking down but from within looking around. This shift also leads to the conclusion that humans, as part of the geological and biological systems of the earth, must also be governed by the same set of natural laws that govern animals. Howells absorbs this shift through reading Wallace.

In *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace offers a concise general explanation of the Earth's shifting surface that would establish for Howells the relationship between geology and biology: "Geology teaches us that the surface of the land, and the distribution of land and water, is everywhere slowly changing. It further teaches us that the forms of life which inhabit that surface have, during every period of which we possess any record, been also slowly changing" (Wallace 8). This change to the forms of life he attributes to their adaptation to the variable environment in which they live: "It is now generally admitted that the present distribution of living things on the surface of the earth is mainly the result of the last series of changes that it has undergone" (8). In the following paragraph, he makes the important point that the mechanism for change may be

problematic, the subject of some debate, but the fact that biological change occurs and is still occurring, and that this change relates directly to geological change, is indisputable: “It is not now necessary to say anything about *how* either of those changes took place; as to that, opinions may differ; but as to the fact that the changes themselves *have* occurred, from the earliest geological ages down to the present day, and are still going on, there is no difference of opinion” (8; emphasis in original). The evidence for such an interpretation lies in the layers of the Earth’s crust: “Every successive stratum of sedimentary rock, sand, or gravel, is a proof that changes of level have taken place; and the different species of animals and plants, whose remains are found in these deposits, prove that corresponding changes did occur in the organic world” (8).

Shortly after reading Wallace, Howells begins to explore his own world in similar fashion, noting many of the same issues established in his mind directly by Wallace and by Lyell and Darwin through Wallace. Howells examines the interrelationship of individual and environment by first recognizing the massive power and continuous change in the geology of the Earth. It is not until he shares with his readers an encounter with Niagara Falls that Howells offers his own moment of recognition, an appreciation of the immediate and massive potential within the natural environment, the antiquity of the Earth, and the relative insignificance of humankind in the overall environment. In *Their Wedding Journey*, his first mature attempt at long fiction, Howells establishes the immense power of nature and gradually builds his case for the individual’s tenuous position within the natural world. The novel eventually leads to perhaps the ultimate natural wonder in the eastern United States, and certainly the geographic feature that

most clearly establishes nature as a force that overwhelms attempts at human intervention and, in many cases, exceeds human understanding, Niagara Falls.

The novel's opening paragraph sets up Howells's aims for the new direction in realistic fiction that he hopes to make his own. His narrator introduces himself with a brief disclaimer in which he explains that Basil and Isabel's changeable courtship represents "quite a long love-story" but presents doubts as to his own "fitness for a sustained or involved narration"; though he contends "that a skilful romancer could turn the courtship of Basil and Isabel March to excellent account" (Howells, *Their Wedding Journey* 3). This feigned self-deprecation is Howells's polite announcement that he is severing himself from the romance genre. Edward Wagenknecht reads this passage literally and encounters great difficulty in trying to reconcile its apparent self-doubt with Howells's concurrent statement of confidence to his father in which he expresses confidence: "I see clear before me a path in literature which no one else has tried" (Mildred Howells, *Life in Letters* 1:162). Wagenknecht can only conclude, "such doubts did not plague him long" (60). A reading more consistent with Howells's letter to his father indicates not Howells's insecurity in his own literary powers but his veiled public statement of the new direction he more openly addressed in the letter. Daniel Aaron notes Howells's earlier move to break with romantic convention in the brief "Scene," but Howells's introduction to *Their Wedding Journey* marks his clearest announcement to this point that his new direction indicates a departure from earlier conventions in fiction.

The narrator then announces his intention to limit himself to objectively relating observations the Marches make on their wedding-journey from Boston to Quebec and back. His purpose, as he describes it, is to "talk of some ordinary traits of American life

as these appeared to them [the Marches], to speak a little of well-known and easily accessible places, to present now a bit of landscape and now a sketch of character” (3). This objective, explicitly stated in the first few pages of the novel, clearly parallels Wallace’s views on the close interrelationship of geology and biology, the physical setting and the creatures living within it. Environment maintains a central role as character within the main tale. Although this may seem similar to the objectives of many others whose travel stories gained a wide audience because of nineteenth-century desire for education, Howells’s narrative establishes a foundation that is set, somewhat infirmly, on an underpinning of evolutionary science.

The clear connection between the environment and human action occupies a central position in the novel from the outset. Howells’s main characters, his wedding journeyers Basil and Isabel March, must contend with continual interruptions to their plans. The novel opens with Basil and Isabel discussing modifications to their trip in reaction to a storm referred to as “that terrible storm of June, 1870” (4). As in the rest of the novel, Howells bases his plot on actual events, permitting his contemporary audience to make a personal and immediate connection to the events and locations on the journey, and thereby allowing readers to share intimately in the discoveries made along the way.³² The storm of June 20, 1870, garnered notice in the New York newspapers as “one of the most violent known in years” (*Brooklyn Eagle* 2). As the *New York Times* reported, “The hail measured from five to ten inches in circumference, and weighed from three to ten ounces” in Massachusetts (“A Terrific Storm”). Of perhaps greater interest to Howells, though the detail goes unreported in his novel, is a story reprinted in many New England newspapers the following day. Lightning struck a mountain along the Hudson River,

throwing a large chunk of rock into the river near a passing steamboat and showering the deck and passengers with bits of rock:

A fire-bolt descended and struck the mountain-top, splitting off an immense piece of rock, weighing over a hundred tons, which was hurled into the air and plunged with a fearful momentum into the river at the base of the mountain. Showers of pieces were scattered in the air, some of them falling upon the decks of passing vessels. The smell of brimstone was for the time almost overpowering, and the hiss of the water as the heated rock plunged into it was plainly heard. (“The Storm in This Vicinity”)

The storm demonstrates the power of present day extremes of natural power to affect both the environment and people, and the reference to events well within the realm of the reader’s own experience gives the reader a personal connection, a foundation upon which Howells can build his argument.

Howells co-opts the storm for his own purposes, using it to exhibit the force of natural phenomena and the relative insignificance of the individual. As Basil and Isabel March conclude their preparations for their wedding trip, nature assaults them, forcing a modification of their plans to accommodate the unforeseen circumstance. “All in a moment,” Howells’s narrator notes, a storm burst “out of the hot sunshine of the day . . . before we quite knew that it threatened, even before we had fairly noticed the clouds, and it went on from passion to passion with an inexhaustible violence” (4). The trees outside the Marches’ dining room windows “whitened in the gusts, and darkened in the driving floods of the rainfall, and in some paroxysms of the tempest bent themselves in desperate submission, and then with a great shudder rent away whole branches and

flung them far off upon the ground” (5). The Marches look out upon the scene with mingled enjoyment and doubt. As Basil and Isabel discuss the mode of transportation to take on the first leg of their journey, they watch as a horse cart passes by and appreciate the theatricality of the “horses that pranced and leaped under the stinging blows of the hail-stones.” From the comfort of their home, the observers think that they are beyond the power of the storm. They imagine the scene as “an effective and very naturalistic bit of pantomime contrived for their admiration” (5). Howells recognizes the desire of his characters, indeed of most people, to believe that they can somehow outwit or prevail over nature, another intimate connection with which the reader can associate.

At the same time, however, the narrator editorializes that Basil and Isabel “were very sensible of a potent reality in the affair,” and they agonize over the decisions they have to make concerning their departure and mode of transport. Howells makes clear in this brief statement that his tale will not allow the characters to elude the natural world, that he intends to demonstrate the necessity of adapting to it. Basil and Isabel reconsider their plans to travel to New York by boat and eventually settle on a journey by train instead. As they travel, the storm reaffirms their decision through the night with “vivid flashes of lightning and quite heavy shocks of thunder, very consoling to our friends, who took them as so many compliments to their prudence in not going by the boat” (8). By the time they reach New York, the tremendous storm has passed, but in the city they must contend with another natural force that routinely affected people, driving them from the cities in the years before the advent of air conditioning: the oppressive heat.

Howells’s vivid descriptions of the intense heat of the city further develop his exploration of natural power. As with the storm the previous day, the heat wave drew

contemporary journalistic attention. *The New York Times* reports, “The heat . . . caused great suffering in this City and vicinity” with temperatures in the low nineties by ten in the morning, and highs in the mid to upper nineties by early afternoon (“The Heat”). The article contains instructions for treating sunstroke, and notes, “the number of sun-strokes during the day was large, and there were a few sudden deaths caused by the heat” (“The Heat”). The heat described in *The New York Times* becomes a most oppressive and even overpowering force when Basil and Isabel are in New York. They plan to visit Isabel’s friend Lucy Leonard, but first they intend to drop in on Lucy’s husband at his office in the city. They disembark at the train station early in the morning, too early to visit Leonard, and walk the streets in relative comfort as the city awakens; but by the time they leave Leonard’s office shortly after 9:00, the temperature has escalated. They travel the fifty miles to Leonard’s house in the country, a commute that amazes Isabel. As they say their farewells to Mrs. Leonard following their visit, the Marches have run out of time and must abandon the notion of continuing on to Albany by boat that afternoon.

They travel back into the city just after noon, and as they sit in the train car, sharing the misery of the other passengers, the narrator describes the day: “All abroad burned the fierce white light of the sun, in which not only the earth seemed to parch and thirst, but the very air withered, and was faint and thin . . .” (27). Howells continues to describe the effect of the intense heat upon those individuals who suffer in it. The scenes, again, reinforce the awe and reverence with which these people, including Basil and Isabel, view the sweltering heat. Many walkers attempt to ignore the weather, trusting to the power of habit to carry them through the discomforts and dangers of the day: “Most of the foot-passengers kept to the shady side [of the street]. . . . Indomitably resolute of

soul, they held their course with the swift pace of custom, and only here and there they showed the effect of the heat” (32). Only upon those who cannot compete well in the struggle against nature does Howells focus his attention: “One man, collarless, with waistcoat unbuttoned, and hat set far back from his forehead, waved a fan before his death-white flabby face, and set down one foot after the other with the heaviness of a somnambulist” (32).

Perhaps one of the more memorable descriptions in the novel involves a man suffering from heat stroke as he sits in a drug store attempting to recover. The situation would be familiar to anyone who had experienced the heat during the summer of 1870 when a daily “run was made . . . not on the banks, but on the soda-water and root-beer fountains, and the lager-beer saloons gained a new interest in the eyes of those who naturally felt thirsty and sought for a means of relief” (“The Heat”). As Isabel and Basil enter the apothecary shop, they see at the center of a small group “a very patient, half-frightened, half-puzzled looking gentleman who sat perfectly still on a stool, and . . . a lady who stood beside him, rubbing all over his head a handkerchief full of pounded ice, and easing one hand with the other when the first became tired” (33). The victim of sunstroke sits at the apothecary’s counter, trying to keep his eyes in focus to avoid swimming off into vertigo and unconsciousness. This image leads Howells to two important observations about the individual, the environment, and art. First is a brief comment on realism in art: “Basil drank his soda and paused to look upon this group, which he felt would commend itself to realistic sculpture as eminently characteristic of the local life, and as ‘The Sunstroke’ would sell enormously in the hot season” (33). The local life to which Basil refers clearly manifests a close connection to the environment of

place, and art appeals to a broad audience if it can depict this environment. Readers will no doubt recognize the importance of their surroundings in shaping who they are, and they appreciate the verisimilitude of art that acknowledges this connection.

Second, Howells begins to explore, if only briefly at this point, the cooperation between individuals in their struggle for survival that will later form the basis for his examination of the evolutionary adaptation that Darwin calls morality in the *Descent of Man*. Darwin sees morality as “fundamentally identical with the social instincts,” and supposes it to be developed from an instinctive drive to protect and promote the “general good of the community” to which the individual belongs (Darwin, *Descent of Man* 1:98). After the Marches’ initial contact with the sunstroke victim, Isabel observes that she would not like to be the victim of any sort of misfortune in the city, because pedestrians seem too willing to pass by without acknowledging the suffering of the man they surely see. Basil adopts Darwin’s view in observing that

place for place, if any accident must happen to me among strangers, I think I should prefer to have it in New York. The biggest place is always the kindest as well as the cruelest place. Amongst the thousands of spectators the good Samaritan as well as the Levite would be sure to be. . . . There is such experience of calamity there that you could hardly fall the first victim to any misfortune. (34)

Basil further explains that the reaction of the inhabitants of a small town would be very different, possibly dangerous: “If a man was overcome in the middle of a village street, the blundering country druggist wouldn’t know what to do, and the tender-hearted people would crowd about so that no breath of air could reach the victim” (35). Willingness to help someone in need without the expectation of immediate reciprocation represents the

initial step toward the development of a moral sense. Isabel responds to her husband by observing that this sense does not seem highly developed in the city: “‘May be so, dear,’ said the wife, pensively; ‘but if anything did happen to you in New York, I should like to have the spectators look as if they saw a human being in trouble. Perhaps I’m a little exacting’” (35). Basil agrees that she might be expecting too much of others, and he notes that “Nothing is so hard as to understand that there are human beings in this world besides one’s self and one’s set” (35). Indeed, Darwin posits the expansion from service to tribe to service to humanity as the dividing line between savagery and civilizations in humans (Darwin, *Descent of Man* 1:97). Howells allows this topic to fade once again into the background, but it will appear again as a central issue in his later fiction. At this point, though, he shifts his attention back to the interaction between the individual and the environment.

The reaction of the people to the heat has great significance for Howells, and he describes the primitive religious awe with which they watch as the mercury rises through the middle of the day. As Basil and Isabel return to the city and disembark from the train near the ferry, the narrator notes, “In a convenient place in the station hung a thermometer, before which every passenger, on going aboard the ferry-boat, paused as at a shrine, and mutely paid his devotions. At the altar of this fetish our friends also paused, and saw that the mercury was above ninety, and exulting with the pride that savages take in the cruel might of their idols, bowed their souls to the great god Heat” (27-28). Again, in the drug store where the Marches attempt to escape the heat, they hear another customer “cry out with a maniacal pride in the affliction laid upon mankind, ‘Ninety-seven degrees!’” (33). The natural phenomena of the storm and the heat set the stage for

Howells's presentation of two waterfalls, the second of which, Niagara Falls, offers the moment of discovery, the moment in which Howells introduces his characters and his readers to the immeasurable age and power of the natural world and the smallness of the individual within it.

The first description of a waterfall in the novel is of Genesee Falls in Rochester, New York. These falls are about a hundred feet high, and various industries line their perimeter. The volume of water flowing over the falls cannot compare to the massive Niagara, but they would certainly impress someone who had never seen a waterfall of any significant volume and drop. When Isabel finds out she and Basil are only a short walk away from the falls when they stop for the evening in Rochester, she insists on a visit. Their moonlit viewing of the falls contains as much romance as realism, and the narrator describes "the broad effulgence and the dense un luminous shadows of the moonshine invested in it. The light touched on the tops of the rapids, that seemed to writhe away from the brink of the cataract, and then desperately breaking and perishing to fall, the white disembodied ghosts of rapids, down to the bottom of the vast and deep ravine through which the river rushed away" (68). The personification of the water represents an attempt to express or explain the natural phenomenon in human terms, to minimize it while at the same time exaggerating human influence. Industrial use of the river's current further provides the illusion of human control of nature. Factories line its shores, "making every drop work its passage to the brink" (67). The Germans, at least, have been able to make "use of the beauty left over and have built a Bierhaus where they may regale both soul and sense in the presence of the cataract" (67). Although the use is different, human exploitation remains.

While the earlier storm could be avoided; the subsequent heat endured and even celebrated; and then Genesee falls minimized, even in the surrounding mystery of the night, by human influence; Howells casts these phenomena into a kind of environmental relief compared to the power of Niagara Falls and the ineffectual influence of humankind in relation to it. Howells introduces the Niagara chapter with commentary on the commercialization of the Falls. Isabel can hear the roar of the falls intermittently, but the trains overpower the sound, and she rides through the town mutely unimpressed while the narrator wonders “whether the lowliness of the shops and private houses makes the hotels look so vast, or the bigness of the hotels dwarfs all other buildings” (74). The features of the small bazaars “where they sell feather fans, and miniature bark canoes, and jars and vases and bracelets and brooches carved out of the local rocks” bring to mind a present day highway rest stop. As they ride closer to the falls themselves, Isabel makes clear that she at once pities and envies Basil for having previously seen the falls, and she talks until “between the trees they saw a white cloud or spray, shot through and through with sunset, rising, rising, and she felt her voice softly and steadily beaten down by the diapason of the cataract” (75). The description of this first encounter with the falls reflects Howells’s reading of Wallace. Just as Wallace describes the manner in which childhood knowledge of volcanoes and earthquakes “has taken away somewhat of the strange and exceptional character that really belongs to them” (Wallace, *Malay* 220), so Howells’s narrator describes the first view of Niagara Falls:

I am not sure but the first emotion on viewing Niagara is that of familiarity. Ever after, its strangeness increases; but in that earliest moment, when you stand by the side of the American fall, and take in so much of the whole as your glance can

compass, an impression of having seen it often before is certainly very vivid.

This may be an effect of that grandeur which puts you at your ease in its presence; but it also undoubtedly results in part from lifelong acquaintance with every variety of futile picture of the scene. (75-76)

Howells's use of the second person in this passage incorporates the reader into the observation and impact of the falls, an attempt to share with the reader, whether he has seen the falls or not, the incapacity of language to convey impressions of so awesome a spectacle. Still, Howells tries to describe the sensations that follow the initial sight. As the vastness of the scene takes hold of every sense, the visitor feels his utter insignificance and powerlessness in relation to the larger environment:

On the whole I do not account this sort of familiarity a misfortune. The surprise is none the less a surprise because it is kept till the last, and the marvel, making itself finally felt in every nerve, and not at once through a single sense, all the more fully possesses you. . . . In all the aspects of Niagara there seems a grave simplicity, which is perhaps a reflection of the spectator's soul for once utterly dismantled of affectation and convention. In the vulgar reaction from this, you are of course as trivial, if you like, at Niagara, as anywhere. (75)

In this case, there remains no doubt that humankind are a part, but a relatively minor part, of the natural world, unable to grasp the scene in its immensity or to establish a firm sensory footing from which to comprehend it.

Basil and Isabel clearly become unnerved in the presence of the Falls, their senses utterly failing to negotiate the myriad impressions of its enormity: "They remembered afterwards how they were able to make use of but one sense at a time, and how when

they strove to take in the forms of the descending flood, they ceased to hear it; but as soon as they released their eyes from this service, every fibre in them vibrated to the sound, and the spectacle dissolved away in it” (78). Even Basil, who had seen the falls before, re-experiences them, and “He knew again the awful delight with which so long ago he had watched the changes in the beauty of the Canadian Fall” (93). In all, Howells’s lengthy descriptions of the falls and of the Marches’ reactions to them repeatedly demonstrate the ease with which “Niagara gradually changes from a thing of beauty to a thing of terror” (96). Although the power and beauty of nature had been the subject of many earlier novels, both as the main subject and as a backdrop to narrative, Howells takes the next step following the study he undertook in *Suburban Sketches* and attempts to convey both the action of natural forces on the geography of the environment and the more immediate effect of environment on the individual. He carefully sets the natural world not only as a backdrop to the action of the novel, but also as an active and vital force at least commensurate with character and thus inseparable from theme or subject.

This force intensifies as Basil and Isabel explore the area surrounding the falls, eventually crossing to Goat Island, a small and rugged fragment of land about a half mile long and half as wide that separates the American falls from Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side. When the Marches arrive, the island has only recently been connected to the mainland, but the wildness of the landscape contributes to the illusion that the two travelers are completely disconnected from civilization. This feeling intensifies as they cross a series of suspension bridges onto the Three Sisters:

In the cavernous precipices of the shores, dark with evergreens, a mystery as of primeval night seemed to linger. There was a wild fluttering of their nerves, a rapture with an under-consciousness of pain, the exaltation of peril and escape, when they came to the three little isles that extend from Goat Island, one beyond another, far out into the furious channel. Three pretty suspension-bridges connect them now with the larger island, and under each of these flounders a huge rapid, and hurls itself away to mingle with the ruin of the fall. The Three Sisters are mere fragments of wilderness, clumps of vine-tangled woods, planted upon masses of rock; but they are part of the fascination of Niagara which no one resists. (90-91)

Basil and Isabel do not resist the lure of adventure and exploration, but the feeling of vulnerability when faced with the full force of natural power in such close proximity soon overwhelms Isabel:

She crossed from bridge to bridge with quaking heart, and at last stood upon the outermost isle, whence, through the screen of vines and boughs, she gave fearful glances at the heaving and tossing flood beyond, from every wave of which at every instant she rescued herself with a desperate struggle. The exertion told heavily upon her strength unawares, and she suddenly made Basil another revelation of character. Without the slightest warning she sank down at the root of a tree, and said, with serious composure, that she could never go back on those bridges; they were not safe. He stared at her cowering form in blank amaze, and put his hands in his pockets. (91)

Basil's reaction demonstrates his absolute helplessness in this situation. He fears action as much as he fears inaction: "The absurd horror of the situation overwhelmed him. He dared not attempt to carry her ashore, for she might spring from his grasp into the flood. He could not leave her to call for help; and what if nobody came till she lost her mind from terror? Or, what if somebody should come and find them in that ridiculous affliction?" (92). Fear of discovery in such a predicament might seem upon first consideration to be an odd reaction to a rather serious plight, but anyone who has quickly looked around after tripping to see if others have noticed the slip can certainly relate to Basil's concerns about the opinions of others, and it is these sentiments that provide a brief introduction to the importance of social conventions and institutions that Howells's later fiction addresses in greater detail.

Social conventions and the concern of an individual that he or she fit in as a part of larger society can partially mitigate the primal urges and fears that threaten routinely to surface if not held tightly in check. This desire to maintain at least a façade of civility and self-control eventually convinces Isabel to leave the primeval world of the islands, returning across the bridges to the city. Basil's fear of discovery comes to fruition, and a small party of tourists that Basil and Isabel had met the day before moves toward them. Basil shouts above the roar of the rapids to tell Isabel of their approach. Upon hearing this, "Isabel dashed her veil over her face, clutched Basil's with her icy hand, rose, drew her arm convulsively through his, and walked ashore without a word" (93). In addition to the geological components, the power of nature, the power of environment to shape the landscape and the plants and animals that live in tension with it, Howells also addresses

the biological issues that eventually lead to the conclusion that natural selection is the mechanism that enables evolution.

* * *

Earlier *Atlantic* pieces on the biological components of evolution and natural selection that Howells edited provide him with an introduction to the subject, but Wallace's work illustrates the application of these theories to the natural world. Overproduction, variation, and heredity—essential precursors of evolution by natural selection—all appear in *The Malay Archipelago* and carry over into Howells's early fiction. Malthusian overproduction appears in *The Malay Archipelago*, but unlike Sprague, Wallace attaches the concept to the name of Malthus. This information appears in a section of the book devoted to family structure among the Dyaks in Borneo, a topic upon which Howells focuses in his review. Howells's review notes specifically Wallace's description of the people of Mendao, an island in the Celebes group, as "the most industrious and peaceable in the Archipelago, living in pretty villages, surrounded by flourishing fields and gardens" (Howells 255). Population growth, however, does not reflect this prosperity: "Here, however, population fails to afford due evidence of material prosperity, and Mr. Wallace ascribes the fact to the women's habit of working in the fields. In Borneo, where there are rarely more than three or four children in a family he attributes the same effect to the same causes,— the crushing toils of agriculture, and the neglect of young children carried afield by their mothers" (Howells 255). In this chapter, Wallace specifically lists several of the limiters Malthus establishes, noting that "Of all the checks to population among savage nations mentioned by Malthus—starvation, disease, war, infanticide, immorality, and infertility of the women—the last is that which

he seems to think least important, and of doubtful efficacy” (Wallace, *Malay* 69).

Wallace continues to describe population growth in Borneo as compared to that in Great Britain which “increases so as to double itself in about fifty years,” estimating that such growth, taking into account “those who die in infancy, those who never marry, or those who marry late in life,” depends upon an average family size that includes four or five children (69).

In addition to his reading about overproduction in Wallace, Howells had a few months earlier edited a series of articles authored by Edward Jarvis entitled “The Increase of Human Life.” Over the course of three articles from October to December of 1869, Jarvis supports his initial assertion that “The sanitary history of the world shows . . . that life has been increasing both in power and in duration, and that it is now increasing more than ever before” (1:495). The remainder of the series offers evidence drawn from all records of longevity Jarvis had available to him, including life insurance and annuity company actuarial tables, to illustrate the increase in life span from Roman times to the latter half of the nineteenth century.³³ Of special interest to Howells would have been the figures relating to the town in which he lived: “In Boston, from 1728 to 1752, the deaths were one in 21.65 of the living. In the twenty years, 1846 to 1865, they were only one in 42.08,—about half as numerous as a hundred years before” (1:498). Jarvis concludes that around the world and in all socioeconomic classes, a significant decline in infant mortality and a concurrent increase in the maximum average age at death led to a dramatic increase in total population.

The idea that species reproduce at a rate far in excess of the environment’s ability to sustain the population occupies significant space in Howells’s early fiction. “Jubilee

Days,” his first sketch following the Wallace review, records Howells’s impressions of the mass of humanity attending the National Peace Jubilee in Boston in June 1869. The event, truly of mammoth proportions even by twenty-first century standards, brought together tens of thousands of spectators in a single enormous building to witness a concert performed by tens of thousands of musicians and singers. P. S. Gilmore organized the event to celebrate the unity of the nation following the Civil War. He arranged for construction of a temporary wooden structure, designed to seat fifty thousand and to accommodate a “performing cast . . . of 20,000 singing schoolchildren . . . a chorus of 10,000 members . . . six bands (with a specially constructed 25-foot bass drum), a 1,000-member orchestra, and a battery of cannon” (Humphreys 26). In addition to the tens of thousands of performers, the crowd attending the performances was no less impressive. From the rear of the enclosed hall, “by far the largest structure of its kind built in Boston up to that time,” packed with tens of thousands of spectators, Howells’s narrator views humankind as a whole, as a homogeneous mass, “the immensity [of which] was quite as striking to the mind as to the eye, and an absolute democracy was appreciable in it. Not only did all artificial distinctions cease, but those of nature were practically obliterated, and you felt for once the full meaning of unanimity” (Cipolla 287; Howells, “Jubilee Days” 246). The size of the crowd removes any sense of self, relegating the individual to such insignificance that it is inconceivable even to be aware of a unique sense of inferiority: “For the time, one would have been preposterously conceited to have felt his littleness in that crowd; you never thought of yourself in an individual capacity at all. It was as if you were a private in an army, or a very ordinary billow of the sea, feeling the battle or the storm, in a collective sort of way,

but unable to distinguish your sensations from those of the mass” (247). Eventually, the mass becomes a phenomenon of nature, described in terms used to detail the natural world: “All the main thoroughfares of the city roared with a tide of feet that swept through the side streets, and swelled aimlessly up the places, and eddied there, and poured out again over the pavements” (249). Even on the second day of the Jubilee, Howells’s observer notes: “Though the novelty had passed away, the cause for wonder was even greater. If on the first day the crowd was immense, it was now something which the imperfect state of the language will not permit me to describe; perhaps *awful* will serve the purpose as well as any other word now in use” (“Jubilee Days” 248; emphasis in original).³⁴ Just as language fails the observer in attempts to describe the massive power of geological phenomena, words again fall shy of adequately expressing the essential, emotional power of such an experience. Again, the awesome experience overwhelms the senses and reduces Howells’s observer to ineffectual grasping for some means to absorb the spectacle laid out before him. The observer attempts to assimilate this phenomenon by transforming the multitude into a single entity he can manage as a unit.

Such attempts to reduce the complexity of the natural world into clearly defined discrete categories parallel the essentialist ideology that predominated before Darwin, which held that “all the variable phenomena of nature . . . are a reflection of a limited number of constant and sharply delimited *eide* or essences” (Mayr 40; italics in original). As Earnst Mayr observes, “all of Darwin’s teachers and friends were, more or less, essentialists,” and this philosophy limited their ability to postulate a mechanism for gradual evolution: “For an essentialist there can be no evolution: there can only be a

sudden origin of a new essence by a major mutation or saltation” (41). The essentialist believed that “the species was the true reality, with a deeper level of meaning than the imperfect manifestations of its type in the physical world, and . . . thus stood opposed to any form of evolution that would tend to break down rigid distinctions between specific types” (Bowler, *Evolution* 106). Such thinking, of course, has a long history in Western philosophy.

Plato’s allegory of the cave is perhaps one of the most famous and still the most read tracts of Greek philosophy. In it, Plato contends that earthly corporeal objects, including plant and animal life, are imperfect reflections of unchanging essences: “The species was thought to exist at a deeper level of reality than the individuals that composed it. The essence of the species was the idealized form or structure defining it, not the superficial characteristics of individuals in any one generation” (Bowler, *Evolution* 13). The observable differences between individuals within a species, then, represent not a normal and natural constituent within a balanced system, but a “manifestation of imperfect reflections of the underlying constant essences” (Mayr 41). The idea of an unchanging ideal form of each species “fitted well the belief that each species was designed by the Creator, who guaranteed its permanence by ensuring that individual organisms could not vary except within rigid limits” (Bowler, *Evolution* 13). Such systems of belief carry on into the present in the creationist’s belief in a static, divinely created universe in which humans are central. Darwin’s work began the process of breaking down the millennia-old assumptions about the boundaries of species.

Darwin’s major contribution to his field originated in his ability to see beyond the prevailing scientific and philosophical paradigms in order to appreciate the power of

individual variation: “The discovery of the importance of the individual became the cornerstone of Darwin’s theory of natural selection” (Mayr 42). This shift in thinking transforms variation from superfluous anomaly to critical component in the explanation of the development of life as it exists on Earth: “Variation, which had been irrelevant and accidental for the essentialist, now became one of the crucial phenomena of living nature” (Mayr 42).

Recognition of the utility of variation presented new avenues of thought in both science and fiction. Sprague had introduced the importance of variation to Howells, and reading Wallace provided him with specific examples of the application of variation to the evolution of human populations. Wallace frequently notes the variation in the plants, animals, and people of the Malay Archipelago. Early in his book, Wallace generalizes about variation and its role in natural selection in his discussion of a species of tree frog that had adapted the ability to glide much like the American flying squirrel. A Chinese worker brought the frog to Wallace’s attention, insisting that the frog had descended from a nearby tree in a sloping glide, as if it had flown to the ground. Upon examination, Wallace “found the toes very long and fully webbed to their very extremity, so that when expanded they offered a surface much larger than that of the body” (29). He explains the role of variation in the adaptation of the frog to best compete for resources within its environment: “It is very interesting to Darwinians as showing, that the variability of the toes which have been already modified for purposes of swimming and adhesive climbing, have been taken advantage of to enable an allied species to pass through the air like the flying lizard” (29). This example offers a clear illustration of the mode by which

relatively minor variation between individuals can lead to modification on the level of species.

Such variation and modification can take place in the human population as well, according to Wallace, and he comments regularly on the contrast between the two main races in the Archipelago, the Malays and Papuans. In his consideration of the people, he tends to focus on the differences between the various tribes he encounters in the Malay Archipelago, a focus that leads to generalizations about the various groups of inhabitants. He also notes that intermediate forms exist, and he comments that “it is sometimes a nice point to determine whether they [the people of the Archipelago] belong to one or the other race, or have been formed by a mixture of the two” (446). This observation takes on additional importance in Howells’s later examination of race, but at this point in the development of his realism, he is still contending with the rudiments of scientific theory.

The importance of variety, introduced to Howells in Sprague’s essay and reinforced by his reading of Wallace, begins to provide the foundation for a new worldview in Howells’s early sketches. At the same time that Howells’s speaker in “Jubilee Days” records the crushing enormity of the crowd, he notes the variety around him, and just as there is variety within the seeming homogeneity of the hive, so variation, the raw material with which natural selection works, asserts itself within even the largest human gathering. Once Howells’s observer begins to pick out some of the specific details of the scene around him, he is able to sense again the variation and individuality within the mass: “These minor particulars, in fact, served greatly to assist you in identifying yourself, when the vast hive swarmed with humanity, and you became a mere sentient atom of the mass” (246). And it is the strength of a single human voice, that of

the opera diva, Parepa-Rosa, which moves Howells's observer more than even the spectacle of the anvil chorus performed by thousands: "When Parepa had sung, the revived consciousness of an individual life rose in rebellion against the oppression of all that dominant vastness. In fact, human nature can stand only so much of any one thing" (247). Even within the press of humanity, individual variation exists; it simply sometimes goes unrecognized.

In *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells initiates a deliberate and systematic study of variation and heredity as they exist in the United States. Because of its formation as a nation of immigrants, America is the ideal location in which to study variation and the result of hereditary transmission of this variation. Howells begins by establishing his main characters as observers of a biological system. Their job is to scientifically record and classify their experiences. He casts his main character as a man of science who remains grounded in the arts. Basil March has abandoned his initial desire to be a writer; he abandons the shabby muse of whom he repeatedly speaks to pursue what he, and by extension Howells, sees as the future of the arts: the accurate representation of the objective reality that surrounds him. When Isabel wonders aloud if Basil regrets his choice of a profession, he assures her that he is comfortable with his decision to break with his muse. As he explains it in a mock conversation with his muse:

"You see the insurance business is very absorbing; and besides, it has a bad appearance, your coming about so in office hours, and in those clothes." "O," she moaned out, "you used to welcome me at all times, out in the country, and thought me prettily dressed." "Yes, yes; but this is Boston; and Boston makes a great difference in one's ideas." (Howells 16)

March acknowledges the many good times he and his muse have enjoyed together, and assures her: "I've no objections to your being present at Christmas and Thanksgiving and birthdays, but really I must draw the line there" (16). Following this break and in anticipation of his marriage to Isabel, March becomes an insurance man, depending upon the variation within populations to make a profit. Insurance companies rely on scientific data tabulation and analysis to profit from differential survival rates among clients. The insurance industry depends on the biological component of Darwinian natural selection and upon average values distributed over a large cross section of a population. If Basil March possesses the technical knowledge necessary for scientific study, Isabel contributes patience and attention to detail. As Basil endeavors to stretch out the process of checking their bags in the depot, and even stops to purchase accident insurance, Isabel sits on a bench, content to watch the people around her: "'Isn't it charming,' she said gaily, 'having to wait so long?'" (6). She then reminisces on previous journeys and waits, noting specific details from the scenes, especially the individuals who stand out from the rest.

In this context, Howells offers a brief narrative intrusion to comment on the limits of objective observation. He notes that "Our temporary state, whatever it is, is often mirrored in all that come near us, and our friends [Basil and Isabel] were fated to meet frequent parodies of their happiness from first to last on this journey" (7). This statement succinctly encapsulates an argument that historians of science currently recognize. As summarized by Stephen J. Gould, "Science, since people must do it, is a socially imbedded activity. . . . Much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alteration of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly"

(Gould, *Mismeasure* 21-22). Marion Cumpiano relates this issue to Howells's commentary in pointing out that "If the reader does not allow himself to see things only through their [the Marches] usual optimistic view, as so many readers have done in the past, and notices as well the details already enumerated [the darker elements], he discovers in *Their Wedding Journey* a far more somber world than has hitherto been suspected" (Cumpiano 480). Howells thus addresses both the action of observation and the specific observers within the world of his novel.

After establishing the combined proficiency of his two observers, Howells introduces their objective, the study of human variety. The Marches choose their mode of transportation as the storm rages. Basil decides that there can be "nothing more peculiarly American than a voyage to New York by a Fall River boat," in part because of the wide "variety of company" they would encounter in taking this mode of transportation (4). Yet the Marches eventually abandon the idea of beginning their journey by boat because of the terrible storm that persists through the night. Nevertheless, they encounter equal variety on board the train they take as a safer alternative. The initial scene in Worcester Depot establishes the couple's awareness of humanity and substantiates their fascination with, and by extension Howells's interest in, the relationships between the sexes that lead to the transmission of inherited characteristics, especially the courtship and marriage conventions as they relate to young couples. The Marches have two hours to wait before the departure of their train, and they spend much of it observing those around them.

The importance of the scene as representing Basil and Isabel's observations becomes apparent in studying the selected manuscript leaves that John Reeves presents

along with commentary in his edition of *Their Wedding Journey*. Reeves observes that Howells repeatedly expanded his original draft of the novel with personal histories of selected passengers who travel along with the Marches on the various legs of their wedding journey. Reeves proposes these insertions as “a means of creating interest in the commonplace” (220). What is more interesting than the initial insertion of these details, however, is Howells’s later deletion of them in the manuscript prior to publication. By removing the background details, Howells shifts the focus away from the ancillary characters and back onto the observers, allowing the reader to know only what the subjects of their observation do and say while indicating nothing of what they think.

Basil and Isabel are on their wedding journey, a precursor in Howells’s day to the almost inevitable years of raising children, and Howells opens the journey by stressing the practice of courtship and marriage. The first people to follow Basil and Isabel into the train station’s waiting room are a young couple embarking upon “a pleasure tour, which . . . was evidently one of the first tours of any kind that they had made” (7). Howells contrasts this young couple with the next group to enter, a “young man who is called by the females of his class a fellow, and two young women of that kind known to him as girls” (7-8).³⁵ The young man sits between the girls and soon begins a “robust flirtation” with one of them (8). The courted girl becomes “selfishly unconscious of everything but her own joy” (8). The other girl, ignored, tries to “divert a little of the flirtation to herself,” but she eventually gives up after repeated failures. Such competition for a mate and the associated opportunity to transmit characteristics to the next generation forms one of the cornerstones of natural selection. Following the departure of the three younger people, a stylish couple from New York takes their place.

Thus the first episode of the trip itself opens with courtship, newlyweds, and established couples.

Howells continues to cast Basil and Isabel as observers and recorders after they board the train. In taking in those around them, they note that “It was in all respects an ordinary carful of human beings, and it was perhaps the more worthy to be studied on that account” (55). Howells’s narrative voice then offers commentary on the value of the average and everyday:

As in literature the true artist will shun the use even of real events if they are of an improbable character, so the sincere observer of man will not desire to look upon his heroic or occasional phases, but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness. To me, at any rate, he is at such times very precious; and I never perceive him to be so much a man and a brother as when I feel the pressure of his vast, natural, unaffected dullness. Then I am able to enter confidently into his life and inhabit there, to think his shallow and feeble thoughts, to be moved by his dumb, stupid desires, [usually used to describe animals] to be dimly illumined by his stunted inspirations, to share his foolish prejudices, to practice his obtuse selfishness. Yes, it is a very amusing world, if you do not refuse to be amused; and our friends were very willing to be entertained. (55)

With the geological and biological essentials in place and with his observers and their position within their environment clearly established, Howells moves on to the final step in his consideration of the foundational components of evolution and natural selection. Deep time allowed the chronological span necessary for evolution by natural

selection to be a reasonable theory to explain the modification and transformation of species. Superfecundity, variation, and heredity provided the biological foundation necessary to carry natural selection into the realm of workable theory. Essential to the application of these components, however, is the willingness to abandon Platonic essences as the foundation of speciation and to embrace the shifting nature of species and the importance of the average makeup of a population as representative of a species rather than assuming some ideal and static form as archetypical of a species. Darwin made this leap, from a belief in slight variation around a stable, God-created center to a paradigm of speciation involving massive variation and a shifting average composition of species aligned with the environment in which it exists, and Howells followed a decade later. Darwin's new interpretation of species assaulted thousands of years of scientific and social assumptions about the fixity of species and the position of humans within that order.

* * *

By introducing a new paradigm of constant change, "Darwin forced naturalists to reconsider the traditional definition of biological species" (Bowler, *Evolution* 13). Earlier generations had assumed that a finite number of species inhabited the Earth, that enough time and energy invested could result in a virtual Noah's Ark collection containing representative examples of each species. Building such a collection was the aim of many nineteenth-century natural history museums. As collections grew and diversified, conservators and taxonomists came to realize that, no matter how extensive, they could not achieve completeness. Specimens within species could exhibit marked variation, and individuals drawn from separate species, most famously Darwin's

Galapagos finches, could be strikingly similar. Darwin needed a new and more flexible definition of species, and he found it in his view of species as populations rather than as collections of individuals.

Lambert Quetelet's anthropological work led to the integration of a population approach with Darwin's own thinking, further leading him to a mathematical principle, the distribution of characteristics throughout a population, which would become integral to his formulation of natural selection. Quetelet's application of statistical analysis to human populations allowed him to show that "for any characteristic . . . there was a range of variation between two extremes, with most individuals clustered around the center of the range" (Bowler, *Evolution* 173). Such distributions represent the now familiar bell curve with the left and right tails indicating the extremes of variation. Quetelet offered to Darwin "an excellent illustration of variability and population thinking, treating a species (man himself) as a group of diverse individuals rather than a single unified type" (Bowler, *Evolution* 173). Based on this work, "Darwin . . . pioneered a new approach to scientific explanation that would become characteristic of the later nineteenth century" (Bowler, *Evolution* 172). The conclusions of the scientist should not be seen as applicable to every individual within a system, but should be viewed as average values for diverse and vast systems. This allowed for shifts in the average constitution of a species and thus shifts in the species itself.

As a result of Darwin's theory, the image of species lost sharp focus. Species became groups of individuals, whole populations constantly adapting to a dynamic environment. The Darwinian "population approach treats the species as a group of interbreeding individuals, which may have significant differences among themselves.

There is no ideal or permanent structure—if the average constitution of individuals making up the population changes, then by definition the species itself has changed” (Bowler, *Evolution* 13). The natural variation within a species represents, then, not abnormalities that will soon revert to type but possibilities for future shifts in the average based on their suitability for the environment in which they exist.

Howells first addresses the concept of adaptation on the population level in “Jubilee Days.” The enormity of the crowds, both spectators and performers, allows Howells to shift his perceptions away from exclusive consideration of the individual, as had been his previous direction, and toward an examination of the aggregate mass of humankind that more accurately represents the current state of the species. In his earlier sketches in the *Atlantic*, Howells focuses primarily on the individual. “Mrs. Johnson” (January 1868) is most clearly indicative of this approach in its careful record of the narrator’s observations of a single individual and her story. The sketch does give some indication of Howells’s interest in heredity and variation in its discussion of race. Mrs. Johnson, an African American woman who has gone into service following the death of her husband, “was a matron of mature age and portly figure with a complexion like coffee soothed with the richest cream; and her manners were so full of a certain tranquility and grace, that she charmed away all our will to ask for references” (Howells, “Mrs. Johnson” 101). At the same time, however, her upbringing provides a thin veneer that can but partially obscure the hereditary characteristics Howells assumes to be associated with her race: “It was only her barbaric laughter and her lawless eye that betrayed how slightly her New England birth and breeding covered her ancestral traits, and bridged the gulf of a thousand years of civilization that lay between her race and

ours” (101). While these details, among others, certainly indicate Howells’s interest in the subject and allude to future directions in his scientific interests, it is not until “Jubilee Days” that he begins to explore the broader ramifications of these biological components of Darwinian evolution.

While “Doorstep Acquaintance” (April 1869) seems to begin a move away from the individual with its consideration of a whole social class (the mendicants who visit Howells’s house in search of handouts) the focus remains on the development of specific details of individual characters. Not until after he reads Wallace does he begin to consider the population as a whole rather than as a collection of discrete individuals. As Howells’s observer marvels at the size of the crowd at the Peace Jubilee and observes the individuality that still remains within it, he begins to see how a shift in the average constitution of a group can create a new and different character for the group as a whole. If this character shifts far enough, Darwin recognized, a new species can arise. Within the multitude, the mass of seemingly identical people, differences between individuals do appear, and they remind the narrator in Howells’s sketch of the possibility for constant modification for a shifting of the average and thus a shifting in species. The narrator in “Jubilee Days” observes the ease with which the observer can become so accustomed to the faces around him that the differences between them become lost within the overall homogeneity of the human race: “You get so used to the Boston face and the Boston dress, that a coat from New York or a visage from Chicago is at once conspicuous to you; and in these people there was not only this strangeness, but the different oddities that lurk in out-of-way corners of society everywhere had started suddenly into notice” (245). Careful, close observation of the people of the city leads to a clearer understanding of

subtle variation within a seemingly homogeneous population and the manner in which this variation might later shape the population as a whole.

To accompany this observation of more subtle variation, Howells supersedes examination of normal variation within the boundaries of species to scrutinize the genetic monstrosities that exist on the margins of species. The extremes of variation constituted an important argument in the support of the theory of natural selection as the mechanism for evolution. Arguments against natural selection often centered on the assumption that variation had limits. Although variation certainly exists, it cannot exceed the boundaries established by the species barrier. Howells notes with mock surprise that even “the society of monsters was . . . generally shunned, and a cow with five legs gave milk from the top of her back to an audience of not more than six persons” (250). There seems no outer boundary to variation, but the extremes often get ignored. Howells does not focus for long on the animals, however. Major shifts in a short time do not commonly occur in species. Steady, small change over long periods of time make the real difference, and Howells shifts his attention to comment on the variety of humanity in Boston for the Jubilee much as Wallace does on the variety of inhabitants in the Malay Archipelago. In *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells shifts his focus from biological issues to the mechanism by which variation can affect populations.

The notion that differential survival leads to shifts in a population and eventually in a species drew perhaps the greatest amount of criticism from all directions. The seemingly arbitrary and capricious nature of the evolutionary process offered a much larger impediment to broad acceptance than had any of the other elements discussed thus far. John Herschel characterized Darwin’s formulation of speciation as the law of

higgledy-piggledy, indicating that there is no logic to the process, no set plan or directionality. William Irvine argues that “Herschel was shocked not so much at the atheism which natural selection implied as at the niggling slovenliness it imputed to nature” (Irvine 131). While it is the case that there is no constant direction to the changes that occur, it is not accurate to describe evolution by natural selection as senseless. Yet if one attempts to examine the process on the level of the individual instead of at the population level, it soon becomes difficult to reconcile the fortunes of the individual with some larger species-level trend. Happenstance seems to play too large a role.

The random nature of variation is perhaps the most criticized component of natural selection in popular rather than scientific argument. The seeming balance and perfection seen in the natural world, the subtle and apparently ingenious adaptations of organisms to their environment and to coexistence with other organisms gives the impression that some force, either divine or natural, drives the development of species progressively toward some ideal of perfection. Earlier natural philosophers interpreted this flawlessness as the result of divine creation. A single unimaginably powerful consciousness designed each minute detail of the natural world to function as part of a massive, unified system. The example often referred to, beginning with Paley, was the complexity and perfection of the structure and function of the eye. The fish eye has a lens expressly adapted for vision under water; while the eye of land animals has a less spherical lens, adapting it for vision on the land (de Beer 8). The voyages of discovery in the nineteenth century and the study of the resulting collections led scientists to modify their conclusions.

The scientific community responded by postulating a new mechanism to account for the assumed progressive nature of evolutionary modification. In the American academy, this shift had special appeal because it allowed at least a partial accommodation for the work of Agassiz and for the strong religious sentiments that prevailed in nineteenth-century America. As vast variability and modification became apparent through collections of living specimens and examinations of biological history preserved in the fossil record, the locus of control for this seeming progressive drive shifted from an external to an internal mechanism with the assumption that some force within the organism, perhaps instilled therein by the actions of a divine creator, drives the organism's development toward a state of perfection. Development driven by internal forces beyond the organism's control, orthogenesis, can "unfold without reference to the demands of the environment and may even lead to extinction" (Bowler, *Eclipse* 7). Despite the risk of extinction, each species experiences this inexorable development through a predetermined sequence of steps or stages: "All the vertebrate species were linked into a hierarchy with man at the top, a pattern that Agassiz interpreted as a divine plan unfolded through a series of supernatural creations. Its progressive, goal-directed nature was indicated by the parallel that could be seen between the history of life on the earth and the embryological growth of the highest form" (Bowler, *Eclipse* 120).

In 1868, Edward Drinker Cope, the American vertebrate paleontologist, asserted his law of acceleration, which built upon Agassiz's foundational argument from design to propose parallel development of a genus through orthogenesis: "The similarity between the species in a genus is not a sign of common descent; instead, every species represents a distinct line of evolution passing in parallel through the same hierarchy of generic

forms” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 122). At a predetermined point identified by forces internal to the affected organisms within a genus, each genus succeeds to the next stage of development within the hierarchy. Through this process, “the hierarchy of modern genera in a group represents part of the historic plan of development through which all member species must pass. . . . Evolution from one genus to the next in line is a sudden process whereby all the individuals begin to exhibit the extra stage of growth at the same time” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 123). Cope largely abandoned this approach within two years of his first publication, realizing that an appeal to design was no longer scientifically tenable, but his theory retained some influence into the early twentieth century, especially in the United States. The decades following publication of the *Origin of Species* saw a move in scientific thought away from stasis and directed development toward increasing acceptance of environment and random variation as driving forces.

The argument as it took shape in the popular imagination appeared as a dichotomy: “The issue presented itself as a choice between chance and design—more specifically, between the method and the achievement of natural selection. If the achievement is emphasized, then the universe . . . seems too wonderful and coherent not to be the work of an intelligence similar to our own. If chance variations and the struggle for existence are emphasized, then it seems a rather unhappy accident” (Irvine 133-34). The urge toward progress and direction are too great for most individuals to resist. People must assign some agency, must establish some metanarrative into which the occurrences in their lives can fit. While the religious narrative had given way to the scientific, a secular teleology remained. The idea of chance, of random occurrence in addition to environmental fitness determining which individuals live and die, thus

carrying on the species, contradicts too many generations of scientific, philosophical, and religious thought. The process is simply too messy; it contains too much waste to seem reasonable.

Howells examines chance and human attempts to account for it throughout the sketches following “Jubilee Days” and later in more explicit detail in *Their Wedding Journey*. As George Carrington notes, constant tension exists in the sketches between humans and their environment: “Man pushes at nature, and nature, like a compressed spring, pushes back . . .” (62). Chance events constantly threaten to subvert human intention. In the three-part sketch “A Day’s Pleasure,” for example, “the characters, a suburban family, ask only that nature co-operate passably with them in their effort to have an enjoyable holiday at the seaside near Boston. When the characters act on that expectation, their reasonable demands meet with both passive and active resistance” (Carrington 62). A series of chance events thwarts their intentions at every turn: the City Council has chartered the boat upon which they initially plan to travel; they miss boarding their second choice by a matter of minutes; in a sudden reversal, “the blue heaven had turned a chilly gray, and the water looked harsh and cold, and toward evening, the falling tide grounds their boat” (Howells, “Day’s Pleasure” 227). They eventually return home without ever achieving their relaxing afternoon at the seaside. The culmination of the day’s events appears in the form of a small, lost boy to whom they must attend before they can themselves put the day behind them. Despite all of the negative happenings, Howells concludes the sketch on an optimistic note with his main character, Frank, concluding that, “although every hope of the day had been disappointed, and nothing I had meant to do had been done, yet the man who had ended at midnight by

restoring a lost child to the arms of its father, must own that, in spite of adverse fortune, he had enjoyed A Day's Pleasure" (346). Although chance events intrude to disrupt the day's agenda, the conclusion is essentially positive.

Their Wedding Journey offers a darker view of the pervasiveness of chance.

Marion Cumpiano notes that despite its seeming description of an idyllic honeymoon, the novel contains persistent reminders of omnipresent darkness and danger:

On the journey, deaths and catastrophes of all sorts occur frequently or are recounted. Danger lurks unexpected at all times or looms ominous. War, savagery, and evil are shown to be the heritage of the modern American. . . . Stupidity and cruelty and ignorance beset man; and the most terrifying fact of all is that the best man and the best woman, at times, partake of the general depravity. (Cumpiano 474)

Although Carrington and Cumpiano both recognize the darker layers beneath the surface in the novel, neither of them attributes the presence of this darkness to Howells's exploration of Darwinian natural selection.³⁶ Upon careful examination, however, the connections become clear.

Early in the novel, when Basil and Isabel begin their journey by train, they sit in the waiting room at the station, observing the anxious passengers around them. Howells remarks on the reasons for such emotional response and specifically refers to the vagaries and uncertainties of life in creating such apprehension: "It was not a particularly sane spectacle, that impatience to be off to some place that lay not only in the distance, but also in the future—to which no line of road carries you with absolute certainty across an interval of time full of every imaginable chance and influence" (11).³⁷ Howells continues

to describe the waiting room, introducing Darwinian struggle and individual fitness for survival. An old woman enters the waiting room, so weak that she must be propped in place with shawls and pillows. Isabel speaks to her briefly before returning to Basil. The old woman is an object of pity but is not equipped to compete in the struggle that follows: “They lost sight of the invalid in the hurry of getting places on the cars, and they never saw her again. The man at the wicket-gate leading to the train had thrown it up, and the people were pressing furiously through as if their lives hung upon the chance of instant passage” (12). Chance, struggle, survival, and fitness all figure into this short passage along with the unreasonable and nearly irresistible urge to join an ongoing competition, even if it is futile or pointless. At the same time, Basil and Isabel maintain their position as observers, able to remain outside the struggle by virtue of Basil’s pre-purchase of tickets for the sleeping car.

Their complacent confidence in their own security, however, fades in the reader’s eyes as the narrator examines human reaction to danger and uncertainty, in this instance related to train travel:

It is a phenomenon whose commonness alone prevents it from being most impressive, that departure of the night-express. The two hundred miles it is to travel stretch before it, traced by those slender clews, to lose which is ruin, and about which hang so many dangers. The drawbridges that gape upon the way, the trains that stand smoking and steaming on the track, the rail that has borne the wear so long that it must soon snap under it, the deep-cut where the overhanging mass of rock trembles to its fall, the obstruction that a pitiless malice may have placed in your path—you think of these after the journey is done, but they seldom

haunt your fancy while it lasts. The knowledge of your helplessness in any circumstances is so perfect that it begets a sense of irresponsibility, almost of security; and as you drowse upon the pallet of the sleeping-car, and feel yourself hurled forward through the obscurity, you are almost thankful that you can do nothing, for it is upon this condition only that you can endure it. (13)

The security experienced by the Marches, the narrator, and by extension Howells himself exists only when the individual surrenders him or herself to the caprices of chance.

On the next leg of their journey, the Marches once again face chance danger, and this time it is closer at hand and potentially more deadly. In the middle of the night, the night boat on which Basil and Isabel travel up the Hudson River runs down a smaller craft, and the world of chance intrudes itself upon the staid and structured Victorian world of the Marches. The passengers awake to “the sharp sound of the pilot’s bell signaling the engineer to slow the boat,” followed by the sound of the collision (45). Basil hurries to check on the status of their own boat, and Isabel, unable to wait for her husband in their room, walks out into the pandemonium on deck: “Isabel had emerged into a world of dishabille, a world wildly unbuttoned and unlaced, where it was the fashion for ladies to wear their hair down their backs, and to walk about in their stockings, and to speak to each other without introduction. The place with which she had felt so familiar a little while before was now utterly estranged” (46). Many passengers return to their cabins, choosing to regard the incident as part of a dream, more easily ignored than addressed. Some of the men remain awake, sitting on the promenade deck, rehashing the events of the evening: “They turned the disaster over and over in their talk, and rolled it under their tongues. Then they reverted to former accidents in which they

had been concerned” (48). There seems a general need to make sense of disasters, to assign some responsibility for them or to find some direction in them, to explain the seeming randomness of events.

The reality of chance in the occurrence of death and individual suffering returns within an hour as the boats dispatched from the steamer to search for survivors come alongside. As he joins the remaining passengers who crowd the railing to learn the results of the search, “Basil heard a hollow, moaning, gurgling sound, regular as that of the machinery, for some note of which he mistook it. ‘Clear the gangway there!’ shouted a gruff voice; ‘man scalded here!’ And a burden was carried by from which fluttered, with its terrible regularity, that utterance of mortal anguish” (49). Basil moves quickly away, returning to the promenade to await the dawn, “thinking with a certain luxurious compassion of the scalded man” (49-50). Basil March, like Howells himself at this point in his career, must exert constant effort to appreciate the tenuous edge upon which human life exists. Basil, and Howells along with him, tries to remind himself of human vulnerability: “He bade his soul remember that, in the security of sleep, Death had passed them both so close that his presence might well have chilled their dreams, as the iceberg that grazes the ship in the night freezes all the air about it,” but he soon reverts to thoughts of his present happiness, and the final sentence of the chapter records that soon “his revery [sic] reflected with delicious caprice the looks, the tones, the movements that he loved, and bore him far away from the sad images that he had invited to mirror themselves in it” (50). Again, security comes from the ability to disregard chance danger, not from any hope of overcoming, predicting, or controlling it.

Howells's sketches and *Their Wedding Journey* examine the geological arguments that lead to the conclusion that the Earth's history extends back much farther than had been previously contemplated. In combination with Malthusian overpopulation, deep time provides a basic foundation for Darwin and for Howells. After establishing these precursors, Howells explores what Stephen J. Gould calls the "'syllogistic core' of natural selection . . . the standard pedagogical presentation of the abstract mechanism of the theory as a set of three undeniable factual statements followed by the inference of natural selection . . . as a logical entailment of the three facts" (Gould, *Structure* 125n). Superfecundity, variation, and heredity together lead to the conclusion that only a relatively small selection of offspring can survive in any one generation, and those best adapted to survival in their environment have the best chance of survival. The traits that aid them in this survival then transmit to the next generation through a hereditary mechanism, creating a minute shift in the average constitution of a species. Such small changes occurring over vast expanses of time can eventually result in the creation of a new species. At this early stage in his career, Howells absorbs into his realism only the preconditions necessary for evolution by natural selection, the premises of Gould's syllogism.

Howells used these new ideas to formulate his idea of realism, and, according to George Carrington, he was able to look somewhat dispassionately, somewhat ironically, at these ideas as they relate to humankind. He is still a young man and has not been disappointed by life experience. He has the luxury of being amused at the animal nature of our species and our own grand illusions about our place in the world and in the cosmos. It is easy for him to look with some humor on the smallness, the insignificance

of humankind in the larger evolutionary scheme and to see some hope for the possibilities that future species modification might bring. While he does recognize the more negative aspects of nature and society, Howells, like his protagonists, cannot help but focus on the positive. Basil's explanation of the allure of Broadway and his own pride in the American scene and its power as compared to the European milieu could just as well describe Howells's own reaction to the world: "Perhaps the street has some positive grandeur of its own, though it needs a multitude of people in it to bring out its best effects. I'll allow its disheartening shabbiness and meanness in many ways; but to stand in front of Grace Church, on a clear day . . . and look down the swarming length of Broadway, on the movement and the numbers, while the Niagara roar swelled and swelled from those human rapids, was always like strong new wine to me" (19). This attitude shifts in his more mature fiction as Howells further develops his exploration of the new science as it relates to morality and human progress. The core syllogism, as Stephen J. Gould observes, "works well, but does not permit a teacher to go beyond the simplest elucidation of selection as a genuine force that can produce adaptive change in a population" (Gould, *Structure* 126n). This logical core can only lead to the conclusion that natural selection does exist; "the core says nothing about the locus, the agency, the efficacy, or the range of selection in a domain—the sciences of natural history—where all assessments of meaning rest upon such claims about mode, strength, and relative frequency, once the prior judgment of mere existence has been validated" (Gould, *Structure* 126n). As Howells explores the details of selection in human culture, and as he experiences the darker side of human existence in his personal life, his fiction of the

1880s and early 1890s begins to explore the darker corollaries that accompany “the more smiling aspects of life.”

Chapter 3

“A curious sense of moral decay”: Sympathy, Morality, Education, and Reversion in *A Modern Instance*

Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things.

—William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (233)

After looking at the precursors to and the basic components of evolutionary theory, Howells moved on to explore the potential for human social progress and to examine the locus of morality in the individual and in society. This represents for Howells the first step beyond study of evolution and natural selection in a relatively rudimentary form and toward application of these forces as elements influencing human behavior and social structure. In *A Modern Instance* (1882), the issues of environment, overproduction, variation, heredity, and selection continue to occupy a prominent place, but Howells chooses to focus his attention on the individual's ability to establish and maintain a moral basis amid the struggle for resources. He concludes that individual progress, analogous to social progress, requires inheritance of an innate moral sense, an altruistic tendency that arose only recently in the human evolutionary process, within the past few thousand years. Because this adaptation is so modern from an evolutionary perspective, it stands in tenuous opposition to the selfish impulses that had directed human behavior for millennia before. This fledgling impulse toward altruism does not yet have the strength of inheritance over many generations, and it can easily give way when unsupported, caving in to savage animalism. This necessary support takes the form

of education to shape the innate sense. Such education requires the intervention of social institutions—marriage, family, organized religion, school. Without these institutions, the individual cannot avoid reversion to an earlier evolutionary state, relying on more primitive instincts and emotions rather than on trained hereditary morality and reason. In addition, Howells decides that this institutional intervention must occur before the adult moral sense solidifies; there exists a terminus of influence beyond which the moral sense cannot be reshaped. Howells’s examination of morality arose amid the public discussion of the topic instigated by the growing influence of Darwinian evolution.

Darwin’s publication of the *Origin of Species* did not, as is now generally believed, instigate a great rift between science and religion. In fact, earlier battles surrounding discoveries in paleontology and geology along with the “higher criticism” had already “convinced almost everyone that the text of Genesis must be understood in a less rigorous way that would allow the earth and its inhabitants to change over a vast period of time” (Bowler, *Evolution* 218). Association of Darwinian ideas with concepts of human morality and values, however, did lead to contentious debate between radical materialists, who discounted all religious substance in their explanation of human interaction, and a few extreme conservatives, who rejected natural selection without any attempt at compromise (Bowler, *Evolution* 219-20). As in the histories of most intellectual debates, extreme dichotomy survives in scholarship on the topic while the far more populous middle ground garners little more than a footnote, especially in popular histories. Stringent materialism has come to be associated with Darwin, and selfish individualism with materialism. While Darwin certainly believed natural selection could account for all human characteristics, including human intellect and the moral sense,

Darwin's explication of the higher human cerebral faculties offers an approach exposed to scientific scrutiny and is perhaps the more optimistic view when compared with some alternatives.

Nineteenth-century approaches to determining the origin of morality can be divided into those depending on divine agency and those opposed to transcendental explanation. Those assuming the presence of an omnipotent creator can be subdivided based on their notion of the creator's role in the process. Theists ran the gamut of belief from Louis Agassiz, who maintained that every species in all its complexity resulted from an individual act of divine creation, to Alfred Russel Wallace, who supported natural selection but invoked divine power to explain significant leaps in the evolutionary process. Wallace applied this approach to human morality, arguing that natural selection could not account for some human adaptations: "Wallace's early views on human evolution fitted the Darwinian picture, but in the course of the 1860s, he came to doubt that natural selection alone could account for the production of certain characteristics," including human reason and the moral sense (Bowler, *Evolution* 229-30). Wallace's break with Darwin occurred "just as he [Wallace] began to develop an interest in spiritualism, which would have suggested to him that we do indeed possess a soul capable of existing independent of the body" (Bowler, *Evolution* 229-30). Many scientists of this period, however, relied on evolution alone to account for human intellect and morality. This approach also breaks down into subcategories, in this case dependent on conclusions about whether or not evolution as a process is inherently progressive.

Peter Bowler asserts that most Victorian explanations of the genesis of human morality rest on a common assumption that evolution as a system implies progress: "Few

Victorian thinkers of any persuasion could tolerate the idea of evolution as anything but an essentially progressive system: evolution *had* to have a purpose in which the emergence of man played a key role, whether or not one traced that purpose back to a supernatural Creator” (Bowler, *Evolution* 221; emphasis in original). The various approaches within this group differ only in their conclusions about the means to achieve such progress. Herbert Spencer “denied any transcendental source of moral values but insisted that it was worthwhile to follow nature’s own rules” so as not to impede the natural progress of these values in the human species (Bowler, *Evolution* 221). In Spencer’s estimation, such a laissez-faire approach “would ensure not only individual happiness but also the progress of the race; and progress was guaranteed by the fact that natural evolution is itself progressive” (Bowler, *Evolution* 221). Essentially, Spencer advocates a social structure in which the individual must experience the consequences of his own actions. Intervention on behalf of those suffering the consequences of their own negative actions, “the undeserving poor,” for example, would only retard the progress of evolution, thus delaying the eventual equilibrium that Spencer saw as the end product of evolution. Howells believes in this eventual perfection of human society, and he describes it in his utopian fiction, first in *A Traveler from Altruria*. He does not, however, share Spencer’s absolute laissez faire attitude.

Another approach, that espoused by Thomas Henry Huxley, argued that “in a truly Darwinian universe there was no guarantee of progress and hence no point in following nature’s harsh methods” (Bowler, *Evolution* 221). According to Huxley, Spencer’s advocacy of “a laissez-faire system in which each individual had to look after his own interests . . . [gave] full rein to the worst aspects of Victorian capitalism”

(Bowler, *Evolution* 221). Human moral values, according to Huxley, derived not from nature but through the action of human conscience. Huxley's approach, later scholars point out, contradicts Darwinian natural selection in that it removes an essential component of human development from the purview of natural selection. Frans de Waal argues that Huxley represents one school of thought in the debate about the origin of morality. Huxley, de Waal argues, "does not see moral tendencies as part and parcel of human nature. Our ancestors [Huxley argues] . . . became moral by choice" (de Waal 6). This position presents humans as essentially amoral: "It views morality as a cultural overlay, a thin veneer hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature" (de Waal 6). De Waal traces this position to Thomas Henry Huxley in its modern relationship with evolutionary biology and argues that this point of view marks Huxley's only true break with Darwin in that Huxley's position "deliberately curbed the explanatory power of evolution" (de Waal 7). In effect, Huxley argued that morality exists only because humans are capable of opposing the natural impulse toward competition and selfishness: "We are part nature, part culture, rather than a well-integrated whole. Human morality is . . . a thin crust underneath of which boil antisocial, amoral, and egoistic passions" (de Waal 10).

On the other side of the argument stands "Charles Darwin's quite different standpoint of an evolved morality . . . [which] was inspired by the Scottish Enlightenment" (de Waal 7). Darwin realized, according to de Waal, that "It is fine to describe animals (and humans) as the product of evolutionary forces that promote self-interest so long as one realizes that this by no means precludes the evolution of altruistic and sympathetic tendencies" (de Waal 14). In the end, "evolution favors animals that

assist each other if by doing so they achieve long-term benefits of greater value than the benefits derived from going it alone and competing with others. Unlike cooperation resting on simultaneous benefits to all parties involved (known as mutualism), reciprocity involves exchanged acts that, while beneficial to the recipient, are costly to the performer” (de Waal 13). This approach explains the genesis of human morality while at the same time maintaining the universal applicability of natural selection in human development. In de Waal’s estimation, Darwin’s world is preferable to the world Huxley envisions: “Since Darwin saw morality as an evolutionary product, he envisioned an eminently more livable world than the one proposed by Huxley and his followers, who believe in a culturally imposed, artificial morality that receives no helping hand from human nature. Huxley’s world is by far the colder, more terrifying place” (de Waal 17).

The American scientist and philosopher John Fiske combined these two antecedents, progress and altruism, in his *Outline of Cosmic Philosophy* (1874), which like Spencer’s *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1862-93) promotes evolution as synonymous with universal progress, but Fiske, according to Bowler, “introduced a significant twist into the theme by presenting altruism as the guiding feature of human evolution. For him, altruism, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, represented the most successful evolutionary policy for the species and had become the essential stimulus for the growth of human civilization” (Bowler, *Evolution* 228). Fiske’s optimistic outlook maintains the progress toward perfection expressed in Spencer’s formulation of evolution and adds to it an innate human altruism, which he attributes to natural selection, and it is Fiske whose ideas formed the groundwork for Howells’s notions of human morality.

Howells began writing *A Modern Instance* in mid May 1881, and his reading at the time of its composition indicates his continued interest in evolutionary science. Howells's discussion of morality and progress rests on the work of his good friend John Fiske as well as on Darwin and William James. Among his other friends and acquaintances in Cambridge, "Howells found a particular favorite in the historian John Fiske, his neighbor and soon his friend, with whom he dined and talked philosophy and history. They determined that, when the first of them died, the survivor might attend to the other's affairs" (Goodman 114). Howells no doubt found himself drawn to Fiske's thoroughgoing belief in progress and his enduring optimism. Kenneth Lynn observes that "although Fiske was a Darwinian, he denied that there was any incompatibility between evolutionary theory and supernatural beliefs, and it was his ability to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable ideas that made Howells welcome his visits. . . . In later years, Howells hailed his friend for having rescued the human soul" (243). And in Howells's view, the human soul needed rescue.

Among the intellectuals in Cambridge, few save Agassiz maintained an unqualified faith in the doctrine of divine creation. Most, like William and Henry James, "grew impatient with their father's unquestioning belief in God and his blithe dismissal of 'the facts' of contemporary life" (Shi 74). As Susan Goodman points out, Howells's interaction with the younger Cantabrigian generation exerted significant influence on his realism, and, as did his friends, "Howells distrusted received ideas or absolute standards and accepted the role of chance forces at work in human lives" (Goodman 134). This break with the settled beliefs of the past, however, created anxiety for Howells that he shared in letters to his father:

In the fall of 1871, Howells remarked to his father, “Underneath all my literary activity there is a strong current of spiritual thought—or trouble, and I shall yet end a violent believer or disbeliever. I don’t see how I can keep this middle course.” The “literary activity” in which Howells discerned his spiritual concern was not *Suburban Sketches* or *Their Wedding Journey*, but, rather, his book reviews for the *Atlantic*, wherein he had repeatedly expressed the fear that science, especially Darwinian biology, was destroying man’s hopes for immortality. (Lynn 241-42)³⁸

Howells was clearly searching for a resolution to this tension between the scientific and the spiritual, and Fiske no doubt shared his ideas with Howells as the two walked and talked during summer evenings in Cambridge.

In his interpretation of evolution, Fiske maintains that human intellect and morality remain the province of natural selection and agrees with Wallace’s early declaration that the small step between simian and human intellectual capacity occurred “when the intelligence of the progenitors of mankind had reached the point where a slight increase in representative capacity came to be of greater utility to the species than any practicable variation in bodily structure” (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:156). Social evolution takes root as natural selection begins to produce mental rather than physical modifications at the point when “variations in intelligence became so much more important than variations in physical structure that they began to be seized upon by natural selection to the relative exclusion of the latter” (*Outlines* 4:128).³⁹ The human mind, Fiske asserts, arose solely through the process of natural selection. As a result, all aspects of humanity arose as well through the actions of natural selection.

At the point when the human mind and adaptation of the mind in the struggle for existence took precedence over physical adaptation, according to Fiske, natural selection began to work upon psychological rather than physical functioning. As this happened, cooperation rose as a beneficial adaptation. The sense of duty to family or tribe then became ingrained in the human mind as an innate sense of morality. People do not “consciously and deliberately reason out, in each particular case” the benefits to humankind of each individual action (*Outlines* 4:126). Such determinations, according to Fiske, are often next to impossible even for the most advanced science, and in most cases “we do not stop to apply science to the matter at all” (*Outlines* 4:126). The determination, unconscious and unconsidered, rests on instinct:

We shrink from stealing or lying as we shrink from burning our fingers; and we no more stop to frame the theorem that stealing and lying, if universally practiced, must entail social dissolution and a reversion to primeval barbarism, than we stop to frame the theorem that frequent burning of the fingers must entail an incapacity for efficient manual operations. In short, there is in our psychical structure a moral sense which is as quickly and directly hurt by wrong-doing or the idea of wrong-doing as our tactile sense is hurt by stinging. (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:126)

Thus far, Fiske’s explanation parallels Spencer’s approach, positing a hardwiring of morality into the human mind.

Fiske then takes another step to reconcile the two basic approaches, Huxley’s veneer theory and Darwin’s evolved morality, by arguing that education, human culture, provides an essential ingredient in the development of a moral sense in the individual: “In asserting that we possess an instinctive and inherited moral sense, it is not meant that we

possess, anterior to education and experience, an organic preference for certain particular good actions, and an organic repugnance to certain particular bad actions. . . . We simply inherit a feeling which leads us, when we are told that stealing is wrong, to shun it, without needing to be taught that it is detrimental to society” (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:156). Education, therefore, leaves open the opportunity for humans to influence the relationship between morality and action, opening the door to intentional social progress. Fiske also realizes that human intervention through moral education can lead to moral atavisms, reversions to savage states of morality, but, ever the optimist, he argues that the innate moral sense, developed through natural selection, will keep such aberrations in check and reinforce those actions most beneficial to society:

Hence there is a chance for pathological disturbances in the relations between the moral sense and the actions with which it is concerned. Imperfectly adjusted moral codes arise, and false principles of action gain temporary currency. These, nevertheless, come ultimately to outrage our sympathies, and are consequently overthrown; while the principles of action which really tend to heighten the life of society are sustained by our sympathies ever more and more forcibly, and at last become invested with a sacredness which is denied to others. (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:152-53)

Thus Fiske reconciles de Waal’s conundrum concerning the locus of morality by asserting that the essential tendencies toward morality are innate, established through natural selection. Shaping this innate sense, however, requires education, training of the innate sense of right and wrong based on social expectations.

Fiske takes a final step in his account of human morality to stipulate a hierarchy of social morality with European and American society, perhaps unsurprisingly, placed at the pinnacle. In such societies, intelligence reaches a level sufficient to allow “deliberate pursuit of moral excellence, attended by a distinct knowledge of the elements in which such excellence consists” (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:153). The highest level of such moral attainment appears in an individual’s reflexive consideration of his or her own actions in light of social needs:

Such conscious devotion to ends conducive to the happiness of society is the latest and highest product of social evolution, and becomes possible only when the moral sense is extremely developed. At this stage, ethical conceptions begin to be reflected back upon the conduct of the individual where it concerns solely or chiefly himself; and the self-regarding virtues, as Mr. Darwin calls them, which are quite unknown save in a high state of civilization, come into existence. The injury of one’s self, by evil thoughts, intemperate behaviour, or indulgence of appetite, comes to be regarded not only as physically injurious, but morally wrong; and there arises the opinion that it is selfish and wicked for one to neglect one’s own health or culture. (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:153)

These central components of Fiske’s morality direct Howells’s own exploration of human morality in *A Modern Instance*, and the listed examples of “injury to one’s self” form the outline for Bartley Hubbard’s moral demise.

In light of Howells’s struggle to reconcile science and religion, his November 1880 review of *What Mr. Darwin Saw* commands particular attention. The review appears in an *Atlantic* piece suggesting gift books for the holidays. The reviewed text is

an edition of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, abridged for younger readers, but substantially the same as Darwin's more readily recognized record of his famous visit to South America and the Pacific Islands. Howells notes that "accounts of wild animals fitly come first; those of wild men follow" (131). He also voices his approbation of both text and author and notes that he can "commend the book heartily for the wisdom of its conception, and its thorough acceptability. One could hardly choose a book for an intelligent boy which would more successfully appeal to his love of nature, or more pleasingly acquaint him with the great master in the literature of science" (131). The material in Darwin's book influences Howells's novels, but at this point it is important to note the acceptance of Darwin and, by extension, his theory of the evolution of species through natural selection. Howells no longer feels the need for subtlety and concealment. By the last two decades in the nineteenth century, he can address openly this new scientific paradigm as he begins "banging the babes of Romance about."

In addition to this Darwinian background, Howells also had fresh in his mind William James's "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," published in the October 1880 *Atlantic*. In his review, James lauds Darwin's separation of natural and sexual selection from the causes of variation and argues by analogy that the causes of genius, of so much interest to Spencer, are irrelevant, that study should focus on the effects of environment upon genius and conversely of genius on the environment. Howells uses this idea that changes in the environment, in social structure, can lead to changes in the system of moral education to explore his characters in *A Modern Instance*.

March 1, 1881, marked a personal, professional, and artistic turning point for Howells. He quietly resigned his position at the *Atlantic* and signed a contract with

James R. Osgood for a salary of \$7,500 in exchange for the royalties from the first 10,000 copies of each of his books.⁴⁰ In addition, Osgood had the rights to serialize one book per year (Goodman 212-13). This financial stability and freedom from editorial duties allowed Howells a flexibility he had not known before and permitted him to shift his focus from editorial work and reviewing to the development of his fiction. Driven as always to produce at a prodigious rate, he took little time for leisure, but pushed ahead with his fiction.

Five months later, in August of 1881, Howells, “unable to concentrate on anything else . . . plugged away at his six-hundred-page manuscript of *A Modern Instance*” (Goodman 215). At this point, he thought himself to be about half done with the book. By September, he had written 900 pages (Bennett xv); and Kenneth Lynn records that “by mid-September [of 1881] he had stepped up the pace of his writing to the point where he sometimes hit three thousand words a day—more than twice his usual rate” (253). The rapid pace of composition indicates Howells’s solid direction and confidence in his material and his abilities. By the middle of November, however, his health failed him once again, and he remained bedridden for seven weeks during which “he lost twenty-six pounds, his heart beat arrhythmically, and he felt so weak that he dreaded climbing the hill to Redtop,” the house that he and Elinor had recently built looking out over Cambridge and Boston (Goodman 215). Researchers cannot establish a specific diagnosis of Howells’s condition, but “Howells himself and others after him have described this episode as a ‘breakdown,’ for which his old terms *hypochondria* or *neurasthenia* serve equally well. He also suffered from cystitis, a painful bladder infection, but that and sundry other ailments may have been symptoms of a more general

condition. He was a man worn down from the strain of his wife's and daughter's misery and from his writing" (Goodman 215; italics in original). As much as exhaustion and worry, however, the central issues in his current novel could very well have triggered the failure in his health.

The novel revolves around the relationship between two young lovers, Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord, who live in the small town of Equity, Ohio, where Bartley runs the local newspaper. Despite her parents' protestations, Marcia elopes with Bartley to Boston where their relationship slowly disintegrates due to a variety of internal and external pressures. Soon after the birth of their daughter, Bartley abandons Marcia, fleeing west to Indiana where divorce laws would allow him to dissolve the marriage with relative ease. A parallel subplot involves a schoolmate of Bartley's, Ben Halleck, who falls in love with Marcia. Halleck struggles with the dilemma posed by this love and the competing demands of morality and social duty. Bartley files for divorce in Indiana, and Marcia travels with her daughter, her father, and Halleck to contest the divorce. During the ensuing trial, Squire Gaylord delivers a rousing closing statement, and then suffers a stroke. Bartley flees amid the resulting chaos. Years later, an angry subject of one of his sensational newspaper stories murders him. Marcia moves back to Equity to care for her daughter and her incapacitated father, and Halleck, whose love for Marcia never abates, turns to the ministry to provide him with some comfort.

According to John Crowley, "the eruption of his inner conflicts" resulted from Howells's identification with his protagonist, Bartley Hubbard, and the scene in which Hubbard abandons his wife and young daughter. The parallel is indeed quite striking. Howells's own wife, Elinor, suffered for years from a variety of physical and

psychological complaints that formed a regular topic of conversation for Howells and Twain, whose own wife, Olivia, suffered from health issues of her own. In addition, as Crowley points out, Howells's oldest child, his daughter Winifred, suffered from severe depression and possibly anorexia nervosa, the treatment for which, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure," put quite as much stress on the parents of the young patient as it did on the patient herself (Crowley 119).⁴¹ Watching the progress of the disease and the treatments, Howells repeatedly questioned his choices in medical care for his daughter.⁴² It would not be surprising for a man under such stress to contemplate the release that abandoning his family would afford. At the same time, however, Howells would certainly have recoiled from such thoughts. Some critical assessments of *A Modern Instance* assume that this tension appears in Howells's treatment of Bartley Hubbard. Howells's difficulty in dealing specifically with Bartley's character becomes obvious in the final section of the novel. As Kenneth Lynn points out, Bartley does not reappear after deserting his wife, and after Howells's own recovery, "until close to the end [of the novel], while he [Howells] concentrated instead on a moral dialogue dominated by a lawyer named Atherton" (254). Howells, according to Lynn, avoids Bartley until he absolutely must face him again to provide the novel with some sort of resolution.

Writing the end of the novel and revising the sections he had already written seemed especially difficult for Howells during his recovery, but as serial publication had already begun in the December 1881 issue of the *Century*, he had no choice but to carry on to the end. In January of 1882, he says in an oft-quoted letter to Twain that he is "working away all the time at the story now running in the *Century*. I had written 1466 MS. pages before I fell sick, and I have had to revise nearly all that since I got up; and I

have still 300 or 400 pages to write before the story is finished” (Mildred Howells, *Life in Letters* 1:307). Howells goes on to lament his difficulty in completing his novel: “I find that every mental effort costs about twice as much as it used, and the result seems to lack texture. I ought to have had a clean rest of three months when I began to get well” (Mildred Howells, *Life in Letters* 1:307). Clearly, Howells addresses difficult issues and in his own estimation fails in his attempt to resolve these issues in the pages of the novel. Specifically this ambiguity and Howells’s ambivalence and doubt provide the novel’s texture for the modern reader.

In Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord, Howells begins his application of Fiske’s comments on morality. He begins by establishing two characters who rely almost exclusively on the untrained, innate moral sense. He then removes all institutional supports in order to observe as primitive impulses reassert themselves. Both characters come from childhoods that provided little in the way of moral education. Bartley spent his childhood as an orphan who “had been not only well housed and fed, and very well dressed, but pitied as an orphan, and petted for his beauty and talent, while he was always taught to think of himself as a poor boy, who was winning his own way through the world” (*A Modern Instance* 27). Bartley is a creature of short memory, of sensation, a man who relies on his innate intelligence, instinct, and mimicry; he represents, in short, a primitive type positioned in the modern world.

In Marcia Gaylord, Howells offers another study of an intelligent yet undisciplined individual. Marcia grows up with her mother and father, but her moral education falls victim to her mother’s disinclination and her father’s indulgence: “Marcia was the youngest, and her mother left her training almost wholly to her father. . . . she

held aloof from them both in their mutual relations, with mildly critical reserves. They spoiled each other, as father and daughter are apt to do, when left to themselves” (89). This lack of direction has no immediate effect, but Howells notes that it will certainly manifest itself in her prospects for future happiness: “What was good in the child certainly received no harm from his [her father’s] indulgence; and what was naughty was after all not so very naughty. She was passionate, but she was generous; and if she showed a jealous temperament that must hereafter make her unhappy, for the time being it charmed and flattered her father to have her so fond of him that she could not endure any rivalry in his affection” (89). Marcia is selfish, self-indulgent, and overly jealous. The combination of these two natures, Bartley’s and Marcia’s, both lacking early moral direction, sets up Howells’s study of environment and social support.

In addition to Bartley and Marcia, Howells includes a third character who offers a profound contrast in his moral education. Ben Halleck, a friend of Bartley’s from his college days, first contrasts with Bartley in his physical appearance. Ben has a physical infirmity, a limp, the result of being bullied as a boy.⁴³ When Halleck, recently returned from an extended trip to Europe, first meets Marcia, her beauty “quite abashed Halleck, who limped helplessly about, after his cane had been taken from him, before he sat down” (215). At the same time, Marcia observes that Halleck is “plain and awkward, with close-cut drab hair and a dull complexion” (215). Halleck has neither the beauty nor the strength of Bartley, but he does have a moral education that, in Howells’s estimation, far surpasses Bartley’s.

In a conversation with his lawyer friend, Eustace Atherton, Halleck observes that in college Bartley was “a poor, cheap sort of creature. Deplorably smart, and regrettably

handsome. A fellow that assimilated everything to a certain extent, and nothing thoroughly. A fellow with no more moral nature than a base-ball” (213). Halleck, by contrast, grew up in relative wealth and comfort in a family set firmly in the second tier of Boston society. In addition, he had the example while growing up of his parents, whose marriage comes as close to success as does any other union in the novel. Ellen Wright observes that “the Hallecks are clearly deeply attuned to each other; their generosity, hospitality, and simplicity of manner give outward evidence of a union intensely satisfying to both parties” (215). They are also able to cope with changes in their physical and cultural environment while maintaining the stability of their marriage, for they had successfully made the move as a young married couple from the country to the city (Wright 215). In short, Ben Halleck is everything Bartley is not. The affinity in their names, however, invites the reader to hold the two together, to view them as two specimens immersed in the experiment of modern society.⁴⁴

After introducing his characters and their physical and psychological characteristics, Howells proceeds through Fiske’s delineation of human morality, allowing his characters to struggle against one another, their environment, and themselves. He undertakes this examination with the assumption that the range of existing types of any species can represent the evolutionary history of that species. Based on this commonly held though erroneous assumption, Victorian scholars concluded that existing human types correspond to the evolutionary development of the species. In addition, many in the late nineteenth century mistakenly assumed that one could determine those most likely to succeed in the struggle and to pass on their characteristics. It was then possible, based on this line of reasoning, to track the historical progress of

humans and to extrapolate the future progress of humanity as represented by the progress of an individual. To Howells's mind, his characters represent in microcosm the development of all humanity.

Modern evolutionary scientists do not look at the structure of evolution the same way the Victorian scientists did. Although they do share some similarities, their approaches are very different. The modern view presents humans as a relatively obscure anomaly in the overall structure of evolution. Stephen J. Gould offers perhaps the strongest statement of this position in his book *Full House*, which argues that humans fill a position far out on the tail of the bell curve representing the totality of life on Earth. From the beginning of life, Gould asserts, bacteria have comprised the majority of life in all measures (169-73).⁴⁵ This interpretation, however, represents a step in the Darwinian revolution that Victorian scientists had yet to take.

The Victorians, as do many modern popular thinkers, placed humans at the top rung of an evolutionary ladder, a linear ascent based on complexity of structure. The first and perhaps most famous use of this structure for creating evolutionary lines of descent was by Othniel C. Marsh in his iconic depiction of the evolution of the horse, a depiction still on display in many museums and textbooks. Marsh presented a simplified, linear ascent from a small quadrupedal creature about the size of a modern fox through several intermediate forms culminating in the modern horse. Such a series offered the perfect illustration for a Victorian society heavily dependent on the horse as a beast of burden. The horse provided transportation, worked as an engine of production on the farm, and served as an object of pride and a statement of prosperity much as the modern car and truck fill this function now. The perfection of the horse for its function would have been

obvious to a nineteenth-century audience, and the presumption of its linear development to perfection lasted well into the twentieth century. This assumption carried over to human development as well, and Howells presents in *A Modern Instance* the stages of development in human morality.

Bartley and Marcia possess the innate moral sense that, according to Fiske, represents the most basic level of morality achieved relatively recently through natural selection. They are not products of moral training, and thus in their primitive appearances and actions, Howells treats them as reversions, living specimens of an earlier moral state. Ben Halleck represents the result of modern moral education, a morality shaped and guided by social expectations. He works at the highest level of Fiske's structure, reflexively examining his own morality in an attempt to improve himself in relation to a set of moral standards.

In this light, the seeming structural anomalies in the novel that bother so many critics become reconciled. Halleck does not appear for the first two hundred pages of the novel as Howells first explores the more primal morality that Bartley and Marcia represent. One of the central issues in scholarship involving *A Modern Instance* is Bartley's corresponding disappearance for the final one hundred pages of the novel with only a brief courtroom appearance in the penultimate chapter. Once Bartley abandons his family, reaching the lowest level of depravity Howells can imagine, "nothing remained to him [Bartley] but the ruin he had chosen," and nothing remained for Howells's study of his character but the ignominious actions he takes in filing for divorce, accusing Marcia of abandonment, and fleeing the courtroom when Marcia and her supporters arrive to

contest the divorce (*A Modern Instance* 348). The end of the novel treats Ben Halleck who struggles at what Howells sees as the higher levels of morality.

Howells establishes his characters in their environment, an isolated small town in Ohio, and then removes them to Boston to determine whether they can adapt and survive. He concludes that, when pressed, men and women without the benefit of adequate moral education or of social institutions for support eventually show their savage natures. The innate moral sense must have some supports, or it cannot suppress the primal savagery that always lies hidden just below the surface. As the lawyer Mr. Atherton says of Bartley and Marcia at the end of the novel, “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 dare say, 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 had dropped it. The flower of this implanted goodness is what we call civilization” (416-17). As soon as Bartley and Marcia lose their connection with the influence of supportive social structures, they revert to bestial form. Bartley eventually meets with violent death, and Marcia ends bitter and isolated with scant hope for restoration.

Howells opens *A Modern Instance* with reference to the importance of nature and natural cycles, setting environment as a central character in the novel. The first sentence stresses the isolation of the small town, Equity: “The village stood on a wide plain, and round it rose the mountains” (3). The town, Howells’s initial setting, stands in marked isolation from the broader world. This isolation allows Howells to control his experiment

in morality, so he can later examine the effect of environment on the individual as he moves two of his characters out of Equity and into Boston. The remainder of the opening paragraph and the two following paragraphs address the foundations of biological evolution Howells initially explored in *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*. The power of natural forces appears in the novel's second sentence. The mountains surrounding Equity "were green to their tops in summer, and in the winter white through their serried pines and drifting mists, but at every season serious and beautiful, furrowed with hollow shadows, and taking the light on masses and stretches of iron-gray crag" (3). References to summer and winter draw attention to the repeated cycles of birth, life, and death that shape the hereditary structure of life, the mechanism itself obscured figuratively by the evergreens of summer and mountain mists of winter. No matter the season, however, the natural world surrounding Equity, as do all natural wonders in Howells, exudes a sense of mystery, of threatening darkness beneath the superficial beauty. The attractive surface, "furrowed with hollow shadows," offers not clarity and openness but impenetrable obfuscation, and the "stretches of iron-gray crag" illustrate the precarious hold that life maintains in a difficult environment.

The plain upon which Equity sits offers an apparent contrast to this initial description of natural power: "The river swam through the plain in long curves, and slipped away at last through an unseen pass to the southward, tracing a score of miles in its course over a space that measured but three or four" (3). The river's gentle motion indicates the relative safety of the plain and a pace of life that seems to defy the threat looming from the mountains above. The description of fecundity and life takes on a Darwinian cast in the sentence that follows: "The plain was very fertile, and its features,

if few and of purely utilitarian beauty, had a rich luxuriance, and there was a tropical riot of vegetation when the sun of July beat on those northern fields” (3). This sentence brings to mind Darwin’s final paragraph in the *Origin of Species*, which opens with his observation that “It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us” (459). Darwin’s description of fertility and interwoven function leads him to the various precursors to natural selection—reproduction, heredity, variation—and to his ultimate conclusion that differential survival results in “a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms” (459).

Darwin’s struggle for life depends on limited resources to sustain a population, and Howells initially implies abundance in his description of Equity’s fields: “They [the summer fields] waved with corn and oats to the feet of the mountains, and the potatoes covered a vast acreage with the lines of their intense, coarse green,” all irrigated by “the river, that doubling and returning upon itself still marked its way with a dense fringe of alders and white birches” (3). Fields of corn and potatoes imply human agency, and the conclusion of this paragraph does offer some indication of human influence upon the landscape. As in the descriptions of the cataracts lined with industry in *Their Wedding Journey*, human defiance of nature’s power can be carried only so far before being

overwhelmed within a much broader and infinitely complex system. Natural selection demands limitation, and Howells's second paragraph addresses this.

The short opening sentence of the second paragraph begins with a conjunction that abruptly qualifies the seeming pastoral placidity of the preceding paragraph: "But winter was full half the year" (3). The narrator delimits the season by placing it between two New England holidays: "The snow began at Thanksgiving, and fell snow upon snow till Fast Day, thawing between the storms, and packing harder and harder against the break-up in the spring, when it covered the ground in solid levels three feet high, and lay heaped in drifts that defied the sun far into May" (3).⁴⁶ The paragraph continues with repeated images of winter's barren desolation. The first mention of people within this scene occurs in Howells's description of "the farmers and lumbermen [who] came in to the village stores, and made a stiff and feeble stir about their doorways" (4). The only audible indication of human habitation in the scene emanates from the sawmill, but even the sounding of the whistle to mark the termination of a shift cannot penetrate the silence as the whistle blasts "seemed to shatter themselves against the thin air" (4). Howells inverts the cliché of a loud noise shattering silence, allowing the frigid winter air to block transmission of human communication. Aside from this, "an Arctic quiet prevailed" (4). Human society cannot hope to influence significantly the environment at its harshest.

Surrounded by such natural forces, the houses of the town have adapted to their surroundings following the Darwinian paradigm and, in keeping with the destructive forces associated in the popular mind with natural selection, are in constant danger: "Behind the black boles of the elms that swept the vista of the street with the fine gray tracery of their boughs, stood the houses deep-sunken in the accumulating drifts" (4).⁴⁷

Although the inhabitants try to maintain their homes, nature continually reasserts the slow but steady forces always at work in shaping and reshaping the environment: “They [the houses] were all kept in scrupulous repair, though here and there the frost and thaw of many winters had heaved a fence out of plumb, and threatened the poise of the monumental urns of painted pine on the gate-posts” (4). Those houses that have existed within this environment for a long time have seemingly adapted themselves to it: “They had dark-green blinds of a color harmonious with that of the funereal evergreens in their door yards; and they themselves had taken the tone of the snowy landscape as if by the operation of some such law as blanches the fur-bearing animals of the north” (4). The newer houses have not yet taken on the tone of their environment: “Some [houses] of the more modern taste, painted to a warmer tone, looked, with their mansard roofs and jigsawed piazzas and balconies, intrusive and alien” (4).

Against this backdrop of natural law and the adaptive power of the environment, Howells introduces the house that will provide the setting for Bartley and Marcia. Squire Gaylord’s house stands at one end of the main street, “advanced from the rank of the rest, at the top of a deep-plunging valley, defining itself against the mountain beyond, so sharply that it seemed as if cut out of its dark wooded side” (4-5). The house becomes almost one with the natural world, establishing the parallel between nature, the foundation of Darwinian evolution, and human existence. Into this environment, Howells situates the characters who serve as subjects for his experiment in the relative powers of heredity and environment and in the possibility of progress both in the individual and by extension in the population as a whole.

Howells opens with a scene that establishes the animal natures of Bartley and Marcia and concurrently with the lack of social constraints available to counteract their primitive impulses. The two enter the Squire's house after returning from a church social. Bartley covers his horse and returns to the front door of the darkened house. Marcia opens the door, and the following scene reveals the sexual tension between the two.⁴⁸ As Marcia holds the door open for Bartley, the light from a lamp inside silhouettes her figure "and revealed the outline of her bust and shoulders, while the lamp flooded with light the face she turned to him" (6).⁴⁹ Howells's choice to present first Marcia's figure and then her face emphasizes the sexual nature of Bartley's attraction to her. As Bartley enters the door, she holds open for him, "he gave her beauty a deliberate look . . . as he lightly stamped the snow from his feet, and pulled the seal-skin gloves from his long hands" (6). In response to these actions—the gaze, the stamp of an impatient animal, the undressing—Marcia whispers, "'Come in!' . . . coloring with pleasure under his gaze" (6). She leads the way into the room; he continues to undress: "he slipped off his overcoat and swung it over the end of the sofa" (6-7). Following this increase in sexual tension, "they drew up chairs to the stove, in which the smouldering fire, revived by the opened draft, roared and snapped" (7). The image of the smoldering fire crackling to life demands almost no comment save to note its importance as a motif that continues through the novel.

The physical description of Bartley and Marcia underscores the image of their essential carnality and undisciplined emotion. As the lamplight reveals Marcia's face, she looks at Bartley, then "again averted for a moment as if startled at some noise behind her" (6). This animal movement mirrors Bartley's stamping impatience as he stands in

the doorway. Howells continues by noting the girl's "smooth low forehead, lips and cheeks deeply red, a softly rounded chin touched with a faint dimple, and in turn a nose short and aquiline" (6). Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau notes Marcia's low forehead and its connection to savagery in humans (56).⁵⁰ Yet the description goes beyond this initial observation. The short, aquiline nose is birdlike in appearance, evoking the beak of a raptor. In addition to the shape of her nose, Howells's description of Marcia's mouth also suggests a distinctly birdlike shape: "Her upper lip . . . was exquisitely arched, and at the corners it projected a little over the lower lip, so that when she smiled it gave a piquant sweetness to her mouth" (6).

Marcia's hair, however, is most important in establishing her savage nature. Her "dusky hair [as it] flowed crinkling above her fine black brows," conveys unavoidable connotations in late nineteenth-century America, and the texture of Marcia's hair would have resonated powerfully with Howells's nineteenth-century audience. Hair texture had long been used to differentiate the races, and Howells's characterization of Marcia as "southern" in type emphasizes this component in the description. In his history of the idea of race in America, Thomas F. Gossett notes that in the 1840s, Peter A. Browne classified varieties of hair and wool from lower mammals in order to establish the commercial value of the various types. Eventually, he initiated a study of human hair and established three different types, "some oval, some cylindrical, and some 'eccentrically elliptical'" (Gossett 80). The three types, he concluded, "corresponded . . . to the white race, the Indian race, and the Negro race" (Gossett 80). In his evaluation of mammalian hair and wool for commercial use, Browne "found that Negro hair was more like wool than like the hair of the white man. Thus he noted that 'the hair of the white man *will not*

felt, but the wool of the Negro *will felt*” (Gossett 80; emphasis in original). Accordingly, Browne concludes that the “pile” of hair, the range of hair from fine, soft, straight European hair to the coarser and tightly curled hair of African Americans, illustrates a linear continuum with straight hair representing increased development and the coarser hair indicating a closer affinity with the lower mammals.⁵¹ Marcia’s animal movements; raptorial nose and mouth; low, sloping forehead; and, most tellingly, “crinkling” hair clearly establish her as a creature of instinct, a primitive type with which Howells can experiment.

Bartley, too, appears primitive, almost savage. In his initial description of Bartley, Howells refers specifically to the young man’s “yellow mustache, shadowing either side of his lip with a broad sweep like a bird’s wing” (6). This correspondence to the earlier mention of Marcia’s birdlike characteristics connects the two in their reliance on their emotions, their animal natures. The mustache accentuates Bartley’s “chin, deep cut below his mouth, which failed to come strenuously forward” (6). The lack of prominence in his chin marks Bartley as primitive. As Daniel Brinton observes in *Races and Peoples* (1890), “None of the lower animals possesses a true chin, while man is never without one” (24). The weakness of Bartley’s jaw reflects a weakness in character, a weakness of will that later results in his inability to control the savage side of his nature and eventually leads to his ruin and death.

Further highlighting Marcia and Bartley’s animal nature, Howells records their conversation concerning Bartley’s horse, a sorrel colt. Bartley proposes to wrap Marcia in his overcoat to help warm her by the fire. Marcia notes that this is akin to covering a horse, and then she digresses: “Some day, father says, that sorrel will be the death of us.

He says it's a bad color for a horse. They're always ugly, and when they get heated, they're crazy" (7). Bartley denies the connection between color and disposition: "I don't believe in this notion about a horse being vicious because he's of a certain color" (7). The young couple's physical characteristics, their animal actions, and their reliance on their senses clearly indicate their essential inclinations. The conclusion of this opening scene cements the importance of their sensuous natures. Bartley kisses Marcia and leaves: "'Good night,' she panted, and after the door had closed upon him, she stooped and kissed the knob on which his hand had rested" (14). The obvious sexual overtones, particularly the phallic image of the doorknob, are difficult to miss and leave little question about the nature of the two young lovers or about Howells's interest in their primitive natures.

The source of Marcia's character becomes apparent with the appearance of Squire Gaylord, her father. He startles her as she stands and turns after kissing the doorknob; he pauses on the steps looking down upon her, "and as they stood confronted, their consanguinity came out in vivid resemblances and contrasts" (14). The birdlike features of Marcia's face derive from her father's "high, hawklike profile" (14). She also takes after her father in her hair: "The harsh rings of black hair, now grizzled with age, which clustered tightly over his head, except where they had retreated from his deeply seamed and wrinkled forehead, were the crinkled flow above her smooth, white brow" (14). The only feature attributed to her mother is her complexion, smooth and white rather than the Squire's "dusky yellow," which obviously refers to some mixture with dark-skinned Africans considered in the late nineteenth century to be inferior, savage (15). As the

natural environment of Equity harbors darkness beneath its bright surface, so Marcia Gaylord harbors the darkness of her father's skin beneath the bright whiteness of hers.

Howells does not establish Bartley's pedigree as clearly as he does Marcia's connection to her father, and intentionally so. Bartley is an orphan, and he recalls nothing of his parents. This distinction is important to Howells, who cancelled in the manuscript a paragraph that would have afforded Bartley some memory of his mother: "He could just remember his mother making pies in the kitchen at home; she must have been a very pretty woman, for now her vague image was one of lightness and grace as she moved about her work; it always seemed to him that he could recall her thick golden hair, and her complexion like a peach. He had some dim association that reminded him of his mother when he heard a woman singing at her work" (qtd. in Bennett xviii).

George Bennett attributes this excision to Howells's sense that the paragraph is overly sentimental or because the "passage . . . would have particularized Bartley's upbringing in such a way as to make his lack of 'discipline' less understandable and more reprehensible" (xviii). While either of these suppositions could indeed be true, it seems more likely, in light of Howells's interest in Marcia's connection to her father, that he chose to obscure Bartley's origins as a part of his experiment. Howells clearly did not want to develop Bartley's parents as fully as Marcia's, and vague hints offer confusion rather than clarity.

After establishing Bartley and Marcia as physically primitive types, Howells presents them as exhibits in accord with Fiske's theories: without adequate training and social support, the more recently evolved innate moral sense struggles to maintain dominance over the more deeply engrained savage impulses. In need of attention a day

after their previous meeting, Bartley enters the Gaylord house to visit Marcia. He meets unexpected resistance as Marcia struggles to sublimate her primitive impulses. She initially yields to him, “and then as if the recollection of some new resolution forced itself through her pleasure at sight of him, she freed her hand, and retreating a step or two, confronted him” (38). Surprised at this, Bartley responds by pledging his love for Marcia. This breaks Marcia’s resolve: “She caught him tighter, and hid her face in his neck, and cried and laughed for joy and shame, while he suffered her caresses with a certain bewilderment” (39).

He cannot comprehend the significance of her reaction, but he takes pleasure in the physical sensation of Marcia’s embrace: “Whether Bartley perfectly divined or not all the feeling at which her words hinted, it was delicious to be clung about by such a pretty girl as Marcia Gaylord, to have her now darting her face into his neck-scarf with intolerable consciousness and now boldly confronting him with all-defying fondness, while she lightly pushed him and pulled him here and there in the vehemence of her appeal” (40). Bartley functions on an instinctive level, and Howells here offers a narrative intrusion to solidify this characterization: “Perhaps such a man, in those fastnesses of his nature which psychology has not yet explored, never loses, even in the tenderest transports, the sense of prey as to the girl whose love he has won” (40). Bartley acts and reacts in the moment, considering neither the future nor the past in his animal pursuit of immediate, pleasurable sensation. At the same time, however, Howells asserts in this narrative comment the innate moral sense Fiske postulates in his *Outline of Cosmic Philosophy*. Although Bartley lacked proper direction in the training of this instinct, it nevertheless exists: even as he feels the primitive pleasure of predation in

winning Marcia, “it is also certain that he [the instinctive man] has transports which are tender, and Bartley now felt his soul melted with affection that was very novel and sweet” (40).

This innate moral sense appears again, this time associated with physical violence rather than with love. Bartley’s flirtations with the young women of Equity eventually catch up with him, and he punches his young printing assistant, Henry Bird, in an altercation over the honor of one of the office girls, Hannah Morrison.⁵² Bird falls under Bartley’s attack and hits his head on the floor. Bartley, fearing that Bird is dead and instinctively thinking of his own welfare rather than that of the unconscious boy, “turned to the door and locked it, and the lie by which he should escape sprang to his tongue” (70). The boy’s body shows no mark, and Bartley plans to claim that he died in a fit. Even as he formulates this lie, however, “he felt the lie choke him” (70). Again, Howells offers an editorial comment explaining Bartley’s reluctance: “Few men love the truth for its own sake, and Bartley was not one of these; but he practiced it because his experience had been that lies were difficult to manage, and that they were a burden on the mind” (71). It was not on principle but “in self pity that he revolted from it” (71). The sense that lying causes problems offers a possible means by which natural selection could have arisen, and Howells’s narrative voice offers one more observation: “When our deeds and motives come to be balanced at the last day, let us hope that mercy and not justice may prevail” (71). Although individuals may strive for moral progress, it is generally more selfish motives that lead to morally laudable behavior. Again, this places Bartley at the lowest level of moral behavior in Fiske’s hierarchy, the level of instinctive, innate moral sense without the benefit of education. At the same time, even in the individual driven

almost exclusively by sensation, the innate moral sense does exist, and there remains hope that with adequate guidance this moral instinct can be developed. It only remains to explore the extent to which it can be developed in an adult who has had little or no guidance in youth.

Marcia also possesses a moral sense that remains untrained, and her innate sympathy, like Bartley's, remains undirected. Marcia's parents recognize and discuss her lack of emotional discipline and lament the lost opportunity to shape their daughter's moral sense. Together, Squire and Mrs. Gaylord place responsibility on Marcia herself for this shortcoming rather than placing it partly on themselves or on the society in which they live where at least some of the blame surely belongs. Squire Gaylord "pulled his hat far down over his cavernous eyes, and worked his thin, rusty old jaws" as he contemplates his daughter and listens as his wife voices her wish: "I hope't she'll be able to school herself so's't not show out her feelings so much" (51). The Squire takes the comment one step further, and one step up in Fiske's hierarchy of morality, the point at which Fiske predicts that "ethical conceptions begin to be reflected back upon the conduct of the individual" (Fiske, *Outlines* 4:153). The Squire initially expresses hope: "I wish she could school herself so as not to have 'em so much"; then he abandons himself to reality and observes, "but I guess she'll have 'em, and I guess she'll show 'em out" (51). The Squire has given up hope for Marcia's further development, illustrating the terminus of influence on outside forces in shaping individual reactions to innate sensation.

Howells establishes the initial components of moral development as Fiske outlines them—innate morality, the need for guidance and moral direction, the eventual

terminus of influence—while Bartley and Marcia remain in Equity. He then follows them to Boston, away from the stabilizing influences of the small town, to observe their attempt to adapt to the social milieu of the city. Three or four months after their elopement to Boston, however, they have not demonstrably adapted: “Their life went ignorantly on in the obscure channels where their isolation from society kept it longer than was natural” (178). Bartley makes a start for himself in business. He has the “newspaper instinct,” and the community of newspapermen accepts him. To earn a steady income, however, Bartley accepts a position with a less-than-reputable periodical, *The Events*, whose editor, Witherby, sees the primary function of his periodical as economic. Marcia revels in Bartley’s new position because of the steady income, not recognizing the moral compromise he has made to secure the position: “He gave her a full history of the affair, and they rejoiced together over it, and were as happy as if Bartley had been celebrating a high and honorable good fortune. She was too ignorant to feel the disgrace, if there were any, in the compact which Bartley had closed, and he had *no principles, no traditions by which to perceive it*. To them it meant unlimited prosperity; it meant provision for the future, which was to bring a new responsibility and a new care” (199-200; emphasis added). This event marks a clear turning point for Bartley and Marcia in their moral degeneration as their lack of moral training contributes to poor decision making. At this moment, Howells introduces Ben Halleck into the story, opposing him to Bartley in his breeding and moral education, but as akin to Bartley in his moral struggles.

Howells locates the Halleck family outside the small inner circle of elite Boston society, but they are still comfortably middle class. Of the four Halleck children, only the

younger two, Ben and Olive, sometimes feel the weight of their exclusion from fashionable society. Ben notes sarcastically that if he had gone to Harvard he would have been able to gain a social foothold. Olive insists that she could have achieved the same result if she had done more to ingratiate herself with the other girls while she attended school. Regardless of the reason, however, Ben observes of his family: "We're outside of everything, and it makes me mad, because we've got money enough to be inside, and there's nothing to prevent it" (206). The younger Halleck siblings thus have the training, the moral instruction afforded to the educated class and the product of solid, respectable parents. At the same time, however, they remain uncorrupted by the moral compromises required at the highest social levels.

While he places the Hallecks within the social structure, Howells at the same time sets up Ben's moral conflict, his attraction to Marcia. Olive comments that if she had brought home more of the fashionable girls from school, Ben might have married into the social sphere to which he aspired. She then notes that such actions probably would not have made a difference as Ben's "heart's set on that unknown charmer of yours" (206). This comment then receives brief elaboration with enough information to raise the reader's suspicions concerning the identity of this unnamed girl: "Ben had once seen his charmer in the street of a little Down-East town, where he met her walking with some other boarding-school girls; in a freak, with his fellow-students, he had bribed the village photographer to let him have the picture of this young lady, which he had sent home to Olive, marked, 'My Lost Love'" (206). Howells only later confirms these suspicions in another conversation between Ben and Olive. Olive comments on the resemblance between Marcia and the girl in the photograph and asks Ben what has become of it. He

replies that he “burnt it the first evening after I had met Mrs. Hubbard. It seemed to me that it wasn’t right to keep it” (301). Upon further questioning, he confirms that he does indeed believe that his “Lost Love” is Marcia Hubbard.

Howells thus establishes the three subjects for his experiment—Bartley, Marcia, and Ben—as well as the means by which they will be tested. Bartley steadily falls into utter moral dissolution as his own base urges and the temptations of life in the city undermine his innate moral sense that remains untrained and without the support of social structures. Marcia struggles against similar failure with marginally greater success. She must confront her own selfish, jealous nature, allowed to develop unchecked by any interference from her family. She ultimately concludes that she is beyond hope, but her instinctive desire to care for her child saves her from Bartley’s end. This instinct cannot, however, prevent her eventual misery as an outcast from a society into which she cannot hope to assimilate. Ben Halleck, prepared with moral and formal education, must struggle against a radical threat to his fundamental moral sense as he faces his growing love for a married woman. In the end, he finds solace only in dogmatic conformity to traditional religious belief. Howells can find no clear solution.

Howells traces Bartley’s moral decay by following precisely Fiske’s criteria of indulgence of appetite, intemperate behavior, and evil thoughts, the “injury of one’s self” that marks a primitive state as compared to the altruism that marks the “latest and highest product of social evolution . . . when the moral sense is extremely developed” (4:153). Bartley possesses the innate moral sense in its most rudimentary form, but it remains untrained and unsupported. His decline begins as Howells walks his character through the three steps Fiske delineates, terminating in his precipitous fall in plagiarism and

abandonment of his family. The physical manifestation of Bartley's "indulgence of appetite" appears only after his removal to Boston where he begins to evince a "visible tendency to stoutness" (231). This inclination, however, quickly extends beyond the stoutness indicative of prosperity and becomes an indication of what Fiske terms "injury to one's self": "He was unquestionably growing stout, and even Mrs. Halleck noticed that his blonde face was unpleasantly red that day" (255). Although he does drink a fair amount of beer with both lunch and dinner, he had not yet, the narrator indicates, inclined to intemperance. Bartley of course recognizes that he is putting on weight, and "he joked about the three fingers of fat on his ribs, and frankly guessed it was the beer that did it" (255). When he thinks of it this way, he concludes that "perhaps he should have to cut down on his Tivoli," but this resolution does not last long. By the close of the novel, Bartley's total moral dissolution appears physically in corpulence: "It was not the fat on Bartley's ribs only that had increased: his broad cheeks stood out and hung down with it, and his chin descended by the three successive steps to his breast. His complexion was of a tender pink, on which his blond moustache showed white" (438). Howells's final description of Bartley has him sitting at the plaintiff's table, his head "bent forward where he sat, and showed only a fold of fat red neck above his coat-collar" (441). In addition to adding fat to his body through over-indulgence of base desires, Bartley also eventually succumbs to intemperance, another of Fiske's indicators of incomplete moral development.

Bartley's intemperate behavior follows a fight with Marcia. The episode also allows Howells to explore the active struggle between the moral sense and baser instinctive urges toward selfishness. Bartley walks out after the fight and initially enjoys

the suspension of his internal struggle: "Once outside, he experienced the sense of release that comes to a man from the violation of his better impulses; but he did not know what to do or where to go" (259). Soon, the ever-present innate moral sense prods him to return, but he works actively to suppress it: "He walked rapidly away; but Marcia's eyes and voice seemed to follow him, and plead with him for his forbearance. He answered his conscience, as if it had been some such presence, that he had forborne too much already, and that now he should not humble himself: that he was right and should stand upon his right. There was not much comfort in it, and he had to brace himself again and again with vindictive resolution" (259).

After dinner out with his editor friend Ricker, Bartley stops off for a nightcap, ostensibly to help him sleep, and decides on hot-scotch rather than on his usual beer. The spirits quickly overcome him, and he wanders into the night. Soon Bartley "dimly perceived that he was . . . sitting on a doorstep, and that his head was hanging far down between his knees, as if he had been sleeping in that posture" (271). The doorstep is Halleck's, and Ben wakes to the sound of Bartley mumbling to himself, rehashing all of the perceived injustices he had recently suffered. Ben saves Bartley from the hands of a policeman, and, with the patrolman's help, returns Bartley to his home where Marcia awaits his return. Never having seen him in such a state before, Marcia assumes that he is sick. Bartley explains his state to her the next day, and Marcia, failing to recognize the severity of Bartley's lapse, absolves him of all responsibility for his intemperance thus demonstrating the significant weakness in her own moral education.

The final example of moral degradation Fiske characterizes as "evil thoughts," and Howells places in Bartley's mind the most wicked thoughts he can comfortably

include in a novel: thoughts of abandonment as a means to free himself from pressure toward virtue. After reading a long letter from Marcia, who is in Equity with her parents, Bartley resents “what he considered Marcia’s endeavor to clap the domestic harness on him again” (332). She asks about housekeeping and household expenses, items that Bartley chooses not to address while Marcia is away. From this,

His thoughts wandered to conditions, to contingencies of which a man does not permit himself even to think without a degree of moral disintegration. In these ill-advised reveries he mused upon his life as it might have been if he had never met her. . . . In fact, he was still very fond of her; when he thought of little ways of hers, it filled him with tenderness. He did justice to her fine qualities, too. . . . He had his doubts whether there was sufficient compensation in them. He sometimes questioned whether he had not made a great mistake to get married; he expected now to stick it through; but this doubt occurred to him. (332-33)

His thoughts drift to the more recent past, to the night Halleck brought him home drunk: “A moment came in which he asked himself, What if he had never come back to Marcia that night when she locked him out of her room? Might it not have been better for both of them?” (333). Then his thoughts turn to the future, and he attempts to rationalize abandoning his family for Marcia’s sake as well as his own. He even magnanimously imagines for her a happy second marriage: “She would soon have reconciled herself to the irreparable; he even thought of her happy in a second marriage; and the thought did not enrage him; he generously wished Marcia well. He wished—he hardly knew what he wished” (333). At this point, Bartley recovers himself from what Howells certainly sees as a perilous precipice, but not to a perfectly safe distance: “He wished nothing at all but

to have his wife and child back again as soon as possible; and he put aside with a laugh the fancies which really found no such distinct formulation as I have given them; which were mere vague impulses, arrested mental tendencies, scraps of undirected reverie. Their recurrence had nothing to do with what he felt to be his sane and waking state. But they recurred, and he even amused himself in turning them over” (333). Although the narrative “I” explains that these thoughts receive no clear articulation in Bartley’s mind, it is at the same time clear that these thoughts exist on a level beneath consciousness, at a primal level where they compete directly with Bartley’s innate moral sense.

Bartley does at times struggle with the sense that his behavior somehow conflicts with what Fiske calls the “highest product of social evolution,” and he consciously contemplates improvement. At one point, with Marcia in Equity and life humming along well for Bartley, he considers making some changes in his life: “There were not many things in his life which he really cared to have very different; but there were two or three shady little corners which he had always intended to clean up.” He thinks it would be good for him to cultivate some sort of religious belief; though “he did not much care what.” He also resolves to be more kind to and honest with Marcia. In addition, “he thought he might be overdoing the beer . . . he was getting ridiculously fat” (329). Finally, he considers repairing the relationships damaged by his theft of material for one of his articles. These resolutions quickly dissipate as his remaining journalistic friends, “young men and not very wise elders,” laugh at Bartley’s description of Ricker’s indignation upon his discovery of the theft, and “once, after a confidence of this kind at the club, where Ricker had refused to speak to him, he came away with a curious sense of moral decay. It did not pain him a great deal, but it certainly surprised him that now with

all these prosperous conditions, so favorable for cleaning up, he had so little disposition to clean up” (330). The impulse to selflessness cannot take hold in Bartley because he has never adequately learned how to direct this impulse. To stress this point, Howells gives Bartley a final chance. Bartley loses a significant amount of borrowed money on a bet that Samuel Tilden will win the 1876 presidential election. Bartley is able to recover all of his money from the referees who are holding it by claiming that he had bet on the popular vote and not the electoral vote, but the close call shocks him into reflection: “He saw how hideous it was in the retrospect, and he shuddered; his good instincts awoke, and put forth their strength, such as it was” (343). The final phrase provides a clear indication of the impending resolution, and the resolution is not long in coming.

The final string of events leading Bartley to abandon his family allows some critics to mark this episode as a point of failure in Howells’s realistic agenda. As she returns home the day after the election, Marcia happens to bump, literally, into Hannah Morrison, one of the girls with whom Bartley used to flirt in Equity. Hannah is drunk and staggering down the street. As Marcia later passionately relates to Bartley: “She reeled against me; and when I—such a fool as I was—pitied her . . . and asked her how she came to that, she *struck* me, and told me to—to—ask my—husband!” (345; emphasis in original). Marcia’s suspicion of Bartley’s infidelity leads Bartley to renounce his earlier determination to reform: “Bartley had hardened his heart now past all entreaty,” and he mercilessly attacks Marcia at her most vulnerable point, her jealous nature. He refuses to deny an affair with Hannah, in fact falsely admitting to it: “I mean it. I *don’t* deny it. What then? What are you going to do about it? . . . Come! I mean what I say. What will you do?” (345; emphasis in original). As Marcia begins dressing the baby to

leave the house, Bartley still refuses to deny the affair or to make any gesture of reconciliation. Anger and impulse overwhelm sympathy, and, as the narrator observes, “Each had most need of the other’s mercy, but neither would have mercy” (346). Marcia leaves; Bartley packs, eats, puts his papers in order, and waits for an extra fifteen minutes for her return, not knowing “whether he was afraid that she would or would not come” (347). He eventually leaves, taking a train as far as Cleveland where “all the mute, obscure forces of habit, which are doubtless the strongest forces in human nature, were dragging him back to her” (347). When he attempts to purchase a return ticket, however, he realizes he has been robbed of all his money: “Now he could not return; nothing remained for him but the ruin he had chosen” (348). This episode ends the chapter and essentially ends Bartley’s role in the novel.

Bartley represents for Howells the lowest moral level of humanity that can reasonably exist in modern western culture in that he has not demonstrably developed any of the “self-regarding virtues” to which Fiske refers. He has not reached the point at which Darwin posits the transition between the primacy of primitive, selfish urges and more modern but weaker altruistic impulses. He still has what Darwin calls “weak power of self-command; for this power has not been strengthened through long-continued, perhaps inherited, habit, instruction and religion” (*Descent* 1:97). The nascent innate moral sense exists within him, but without adequate training and support, it cannot assert itself as a force equal to the stronger primitive urges that rule Bartley’s behavior.

Howells leaves Bartley to his inevitable end and continues in the final quarter of his novel to examine his other two characters, Marcia and Ben, exploring in them the same struggle between selfishness and altruism.

Edwin Cady contends that the final quarter of the novel, written following Howells's extended illness, wanders, refusing "to come up to the point" (Cady, *Road to Realism* 210). One of the major problems Howells faces, according to Cady, is in marking the passage of time between the abandonment and the divorce notice. Howells needed to kill some time, in Cady's estimation, and so shifted his attention to the Hallecks and their social set to do so. Cady also surmises that Howells subconsciously had difficulty addressing divorce and "was probably also tempted to maneuver around in an effort to ease his way toward the painful fact with which he was determined to end his novel" (Cady, *Road to Realism* 210). The result of the two issues is that Howells, again according to Cady, largely wastes "four chapters in exploring the lives of his Proper Bostonians, sending poor crippled Ben Halleck off to South America in penance for his silent love of Marcia, letting a stuffy lawyer named Atherton debate the moral problems of the book in fruitless Swedenborgian meanders, and briefly summarizing the romance and marriage of Atherton with Clara Kingsbury, a fluttery Junior League type" (210-11). More recent critics are eager to follow Cady's lead in discarding the final quarter of *A Modern Instance* as the product of a hurried and harried author's attempt to catch up on the end of a novel already in serial publication.

Although not entirely without merit, this approach removes from critical consideration a significant portion of the novel and in effect abandons possibly the most interesting part of Howells's struggle with his characters and themes. Marcia's dissolution extends through the final chapters and provides repeated reminders of the dangers inherent in reliance on untrained innate morality to restrain the more primitive and more deeply engrained selfish impulses. Perhaps more important is the developing

and finally deteriorating relationship between Ben Halleck and Eustace Atherton. While Bartley catches only fleeting glimpses of his own inevitable dissolution, Halleck clearly sees and articulates his own dilemma. Despite this insight, he remains powerless to resist the forces at work against him. Atherton does at times seem stodgy and unenlightened, but his conservatism represents one side in the argument about how a society should address such individuals as Bartley and Marcia, and his final vacillation undermines any strictly Spencerian interpretation of the novel as events lead him to question the value of a laissez faire social policy. Howells's inclusion of him signals another viewpoint in examining the relationship between environment and moral development and offers an essential counterpoint to Halleck's devolution toward the savage.

Marcia Hubbard continues through the end of the novel to demonstrate the permanent harm that can result from a lack of early training of the innate moral sense. She, unlike Bartley, attempts to remedy the neglect of her moral training, but her education is so far retarded as to be irrecoverable. At one point, shortly after her baby's birth, Marcia considers religion and the possibility of joining a church to have the baby christened, just in case: "I don't feel so anxious about myself, just at present, as I do about Flavia. . . . I want her to be christened—I want her to be baptized into some church. . . . I think sometimes, what if she should die, and I hadn't done that for her, when may be it was one of the most important things" (251-52). Mrs. Halleck tries to help, to explain the importance of a religious life, but she falls short. Mrs. Halleck later describes the conversation to Olive, likening Marcia to a member of a primitive tribe: "I couldn't have believed . . . that there was any person in a Christian land, except among the very lowest, that seemed to understand so little about the Christian religion, or any

scheme of salvation. Really, she talked to me like a pagan. She sat there much better dressed and better educated than I was; but I felt like a missionary talking to a South Sea Islander” (254).

Marcia’s concern for moral education arises with the birth of her daughter. This concern aligns her development once again with Fiske’s theory of moral evolution. Fiske proposes that the innate moral sense arose as a corollary of human intellectual development. In brief, the increase in human intelligence demands an increase in the period of infancy as intellectual growth takes far longer than can be accommodated by human gestation. This increase in the length of infancy must necessarily be accompanied by a corresponding increase in parental devotion to the child, which manifests itself most strongly, according to Fiske, in the mother. Because the infant takes longer to develop to maturity, he or she must be protected and nurtured for a much longer time. This instinct toward extended protection developed slowly over vast expanses of time in humans, and it eventually led to an expansion of this maternal affection to encompass, over many generations, similar devotion to the rest of the immediate family, then to the clan, and finally to all of society. The innate moral sense also appears, according to Fiske, in the male of species that mate. The important point is that the innate moral sense arose first in the female and first concerning the relationship between a mother and her offspring. This sense should, therefore, assert the most influence in mothers as it is in them most deeply engrained (Fiske 130-39).

These domestic instincts initially surface in Marcia following her engagement to Bartley and provide some hope for her moral development through her focus on others beyond herself, but their influence begins to fade after Bartley abandons her. As she

faithfully, or perhaps desperately, awaits Bartley's return, Marcia "seldom left the house. . . . She ceased to care for her dress or the child's; the time came when it seemed as if she could scarcely move in the mystery that beset her life, and she yielded to a deadly lethargy which paralyzed all her faculties but the instinct of concealment" (373). Even this most basic instinct, the desire to protect oneself from public ridicule, to maintain the support of the group to which one belongs, eventually breaks down under the weight of her hopeless situation. Threatened by legal action as bill collectors begin to realize that she has no money, Marcia cannot hold up her pretenses, and she goes to see Atherton: "Her one blind device had been concealment, and this poor refuge was possible no longer" (374).

Olive Halleck again acts as Howells's observer, noting that a lack of discipline, of moral education, led Marcia to the decisions that shape her life. Two years after Bartley's abandonment, Olive describes Marcia to Ben: "She's grown commoner and narrower, but it's hardly her fault, poor thing, and it seems terribly unjust that she should be made so by what she has suffered. But that's just the way it has happened. She's so undisciplined, that she couldn't get any good out of her misfortunes; she's only got harm: they've made her selfish, and there seems to be nothing left of what she was two years ago but her devotion to that miserable wretch" (401). Olive pleads with Ben not to abandon Marcia because of what she has become, reminding him, "You mustn't let it turn you against her, Ben; you mustn't forget what she might have been. She had a rich nature; but how it's been wasted, and turned back upon itself! Poor, untrained, impulsive, innocent creature,—my heart aches for her! It's been hard to bear with her at times, terribly hard, and you'll find it so, Ben. But you must bear with her" (401). Marcia

continues to function without a moral compass, experiencing flashes of sympathy, but reverting rapidly to selfishness.

Following the Indiana divorce trial, when she realizes that Bartley is gone for good, she moves back to Equity with her daughter and her father, now crippled following a stroke he had suffered in the courtroom. In Equity, “they opened the dim old house at the end of the village street, and resumed their broken lives” (449). Marcia “kept herself closely housed, and saw no one whom she was not forced to see” (449). Those few in the village who do see her on a regular basis, “the meat-man and the fish-man could speak authoritatively concerning her appearance and behavior. . . . They reported the latter as dry, cold, and uncommunicative” (449). She like Bartley ends in exile, with very little hope for any significant redemption. Her story, along with Bartley’s, essentially ends on the night of her abandonment. Marcia remains a prominent character in the novel as a demonstration of the maternal instinct, as a reminder of the result of failed moral training, as a foil to Halleck, and simultaneously as his greatest challenge.

The one real chance for redemption in the novel lies with Halleck. His moral sense has received adequate training in youth, yet he faces constant struggle between the demands of this moral sense and his more basic, more primal love of Marcia. After two years in South America where he fled to escape the temptation presented by his love for Marcia, he returns unannounced and appears in Atherton’s office. His primitive impulses have won out, as Howells’s description of him indicates: “The full beard that he had grown scarcely hid the savage gauntness of his face; but the change was not so much in lines and contours as in that expression of qualities which we call looks” (395). Atherton immediately rejects Halleck’s return. He clearly recognizes Halleck’s moral reversion,

and he imagines it as a threat not only to Halleck's own wellbeing but to his family's reputation and by extension to the very institution of marriage: "I'm not glad to see you, Halleck. . . . For your own sake I wish you were at the other end of the world" (395). Halleck has obviously rejected his moral education, and he responds in a mocking tone, "I'm surprised at you, Atherton, with your knowledge of human nature. I've come to stay; you must know that. You must know that I had gone through everything before I gave up, and that I haven't the strength to begin the struggle over again. I tell you I'm beaten, and I'm glad of it; for there is rest in it. You would waste your breath if you talked to me in the old way; there's nothing in me to appeal to, any more. If I was wrong—But I don't admit, any more, that I was wrong: by heaven, I was *right!*" (396; emphasis in original). Halleck plans to prove that Bartley is dead so he can marry Marcia and satisfy the primal urge that has overwhelmed his moral sense. Atherton still tries to convince Ben through logical argument that the destruction of a single marriage threatens the institution as a whole, and all of society by extension.⁵³

Atherton concedes that if Marcia is indeed a widow, marriage to Ben would not be out of the question, but he presses his argument forward with another alternative: "How will you ask her, if she's still a wife, to get a divorce and then marry you? How will you suggest that to a woman whose constancy to her mistake has made her sacred to you?" (397). Halleck considers a response, but he is beyond reason and logic, and so "he only panted dry-lipped and open-mouthed," exhibiting a brutish response to Atherton's logic (397). Atherton continues, attempting, despite Ben's earlier admonition, to speak to him in the old way, to appeal to his moral sense, his responsibility to others even in the face of his own destruction: "You would have to corrupt her soul first. I don't know what

change you've made in yourself during these two years; you look like a desperate and defeated man, but you don't look like *that*. You don't *look* like one of those scoundrels who lure women from their duty, ruin homes, and destroy society—not in the old libertine fashion in which the seducer had at least the grace to risk his life, but safely, smoothly, under the shelter of our infamous laws” (397; emphasis in original). Atherton finally broadens his argument, making one last effort to appeal to Halleck's moral education, including the shaping institutions from Halleck's early formation, his family, and society as a whole:

Have you really come back here to give your father's honest name, and the example of a man of your own blameless life, in support of conditions that tempt people to marry with a mental reservation, and that weaken every marriage bond with the guilty hope of escape whenever a fickle mind, or secret lust, or wicked will may dictate? Have you come to join yourself to those miserable specters who go shrinking through the world, afraid of their own past, and anxious to hide it from those they hold dear; or do you propose to defy the world, to help form within it the community of outcasts with whom shame is not shame, nor dishonor dishonor? How will you like the society of those uncertain men, those certain women? (397-98)

Halleck responds by refusing to consider his intended actions in light of their effect on society. He focuses instead on his immediate concern for satisfying his own desire: “You are very eloquent . . . but I ask you to observe that these little abstractions don't interest me. I've a concrete purpose, and I can't contemplate the effect of other people's actions upon American civilization” (398). In addition, he extends his concern

to his view of Marcia's wellbeing and refuses to accept that the legal structure has any true authority over what is right and good: "When you ask me to believe that I oughtn't to try to rescue a woman from the misery to which a villain has left her, simply because some justice of the peace consecrated his power over her, I decline to be such a fool. I use my reason, and I see who it was that defiled and destroyed that marriage, and I know that she is as free in the sight of God as if he had never lived" (398). As far as society's opinion of his actions is concerned, Halleck considers them more right, more just than others widely accepted:

If the world doesn't like my open shame, let it look to its own secret shame—the marriages made and maintained from interest and ambition and vanity and folly. I will take my chance with the men and women who have been honest enough to own their mistake, and to try to repair it, and I will preach by my life that marriage has no sanctity but what love gives it, and that, when love ceases, marriage ceases, before heaven. If the laws have come to recognize that, by whatever fiction, so much the better for the laws! (398)

Halleck seems resolved to deny his moral formation, to defy the familial, theological, and social bonds that constrain and confine his actions. Howells cannot allow such dissolution of character for someone of Halleck's training and heredity, and he explains through an editorial intrusion that Halleck has not emerged from his struggle through rejection of morality; he has merely "mistaken for peace that exhaustion of spirit which comes to a man in battling with his conscience; he had fancied his struggle over, and he was to learn now that its anguish had just begun" (399).

When faced with the choice, Halleck cannot maintain this subversion of his moral sense. When he again sees Marcia, she celebrates his return and shatters any hope he might have of escaping from his moral and social obligations. Marcia welcomes him enthusiastically and begins to plan her future not with him but again with Bartley: “‘Oh, I am so glad you have come back!’ she said. ‘Now I know that we can find him. You were such friends with him, and you understood him so well, that you will know just what to do. Yes, we shall find him now, and we should have found him long ago, if you had been here’” (401). It is not in response to Atherton’s logic but in response to Marcia’s faith in him that Halleck recognizes his responsibility to a tradition and obligation beyond himself. He supports Marcia as she searches for Bartley and as she subsequently defends herself at the divorce trial.

Halleck faces temptation a last time on the night before his departure, the same night that Bartley abandons Marcia. He finds Marcia, holding her baby, sitting in a small reception room by the front door of the Halleck home. He asks for no explanation, and she offers none until he has escorted her back to her house. She then explains that she walked out with the baby following a quarrel with Bartley and that she is afraid to enter her own home alone. Halleck insists that she must face her fears alone: “‘You must go in alone! No man can be your refuge from your husband! Here!’” (370). He extracts himself from her grasp, presses the baby, whom he had been carrying, back into her arms, and watches as “‘She stood a moment looking at the closed door; then she flung it open, and, pausing as if to gather her strength, vanished into the brightness within’” (370). Following what Ben certainly sees as his final chance to be with Marcia, Howells demonstrates Ben’s moral failure, one that parallels Bartley’s drunkenness: “‘He turned,

and ran crookedly down the street, wavering from side to side in his lameness, and flinging up his arms to save himself from falling as he ran, with a gesture that was like a wild and hopeless appeal” (370). Halleck’s staggering retreat and subsequent departure mark his final moral dissolution, but Howells does not end his novel here; he needs to extend his discussion of morality and altruism beyond simply a demonstration of moral dissolution. He needs to explore the chances for redemption in each of these characters, to decide if there can be hope for some rehabilitation.

As demonstrated in the courtroom scene, Howells finds little hope for Bartley. He remains too inveterately centered upon himself. After fleeing the courtroom under cover of the pandemonium surrounding the Squire’s collapse, Bartley appears one more time in a face-to-face meeting with Ben Halleck. During this brief interview, Bartley recognizes Halleck’s emotional attachment to Marcia, “and in his benighted way he honored it” (447). He tries to explain to Halleck the reasons for his divorce, and then offers Marcia to Halleck, along with his blessing: “In a burst of generosity, which marked his fall into the abyss as nothing else could have done,” he explains, “Look here, Halleck, *I* can’t marry again for two years. But, as I understand the law, Marcia isn’t bound in any way. I know that she always had a very high opinion of you, and that you are the best man in the world: why don’t *you* fix it up with Marcia?” (448). With this, Bartley fades into exile farther west. The last news of him appears as a newspaper article announcing his death at the hands of “one of Whited Sepulchre’s leading citizens” following publication of comment on the man’s “domestic relations” in Bartley’s newspaper (450-51). In the end, Howells concludes that inadequate training of the moral

sense in a man of Bartley's temperament leads necessarily to dissolution and destruction with little or no chance for redemption.

Halleck takes a different direction, which, on first examination, seems to offer him some measure of success in balancing his innate morality with his primitive desire for Marcia. When Ben visits Marcia and Squire Gaylord after the divorce trial and their return to Equity, Halleck has gone into ministry, but he cannot rationally justify his conversion. At this point, Howells seems to indicate that unquestioning faith remains an option for those who have lost their moral compass:

In entering the ministry, he had returned to the faith that had been taught him almost before he could speak. He did not defend or justify this course on the part of a man who had once thrown off all allegiance to creeds; he said simply that for him there was no other course. He freely granted that he had not reasoned back to his old faith; he had fled to it as to a city of refuge. His unbelief had been helped, and he no longer suffered himself to doubt; he did not ask if the truth was here or there, any more; he only knew that he could not find it for himself, and he rested in his inherited belief. (450)

Religious belief such as this, however, cannot stand up to scrutiny. Halleck understands and accepts this in exchange for the peace provided by unquestioning faith: "He accepted everything; if he took one jot or tittle away from the Book, the curse of doubt was on him. He had known the terrors of the law, and he preached them to his people; he had known the Divine mercy, and he also preached that" (450). Ben Halleck ends much as Bartley and Marcia, not in literal isolation but in isolation from ideas and influences that

might threaten the precarious balance he has achieved between his moral sense and his primitive love for Marcia.

Howells cannot accept the apparent conclusion that nothing remains for individuals who do not conform to established middle-class social conventions. Following the news of Bartley's death, Halleck begins to entertain once more the thought that he might marry Marcia, to save her from the life of loneliness and exile in which she must now live. Howells closes the novel with a conversation between Atherton and his wife. The two have just received a letter from Halleck questioning his freedom to marry Marcia. She is free from Bartley following his death, but as Halleck has loved her while she was still married, and as Bartley himself has sanctioned their union, Halleck is still torn as he describes in his letter: "There are times when . . . I feel a sanction for my love of her, an assurance from somewhere that it is right and good to love her; but then I sink again, for, if I ask whence this assurance comes—I beseech you to tell me what you think. Has my offence been so great that nothing can atone for it? Must I sacrifice to this fear all my hopes of what I could be to her, and for her?" (452). In conversation with his wife, Atherton responds to Halleck's plea, arguing that "his being in love with her when she was another man's wife is what he feels it to be,—an indelible stain" (453). Clara replies that they must judge Halleck by his actions, not by his thoughts, and that his actions certainly offer nothing upon which to base a condemnation of him. She insists that as Marcia is a widow, she is free to marry. Atherton maintains his argument as best he can, but he finds himself losing faith in his clearly delineated judgment, applying his rule now to Halleck as an individual rather than to all men: "Any man but the one who loved her during her husband's life. That is, if he is such a man as Halleck. Of course it

isn't a question of gross black and white, mere right and wrong; there are degrees, there are shades. There might be redemption for another sort of man in such a marriage; but for Halleck there could only be loss,—deterioration,—lapse from the ideal” (453). Clara continues to push him: "Oh, how hard you are! I wish Ben hadn't asked your advice. Why, you are worse than he is! You're *not* going to write that to him?" (453; emphasis in original). In response, Atherton utters the final words of the novel—appropriately enough, words of indecision: “Atherton flung the letter upon the table, and drew a troubled sigh. ‘Ah, I don't know! I don't know!’” (453).

Atherton's final exclamation clearly mirrors Howells's own difficulty in accepting social consensus as the final arbiter of moral rectitude. He recognizes his failure to establish clearly the locus of morality within either the individual or within some social construct; the only resolution seems to be that morality exists within the tension created by social convention and individual desire, and this resolution Howells can only offer with the greatest of doubt, as if he himself, upon completion of the novel “drew a troubled sigh” and intoned Atherton's words, “Ah, I don't know! I don't know!”

Chapter 4

Social Evolution and Howells's Diminishing Hope for Progress in *The Minister's Charge* and *The Landlord at Lion's Head*

I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with "civilization" and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury money can buy.

—William Dean Howells (qtd. in Abeln 33)

Howells's reflection on evolution and natural selection, along with all they entail, continued through the 1880s and 1890s. The natural environment and its power to shape individual and group behavior continued as central to the development of Howellsian realism; additionally, Howells began to focus his attention on closer consideration of human relationships and the social struggle so influential in shaping the world as he knew it. Evidence of this sharper focus appears in the "Editor's Study" columns he wrote for *Harper's* through the 1880s to champion literary realism and its practitioners. Importantly, Howells's columns demonstrate his continued faith in progress.⁵⁴ For Howells in the 1880s, evolution, in life and in literature, appeared as a progressively ascending scale of development with each generation representing a step up the evolutionary ladder. During the 1880s and 1890s, Howells analyzed the results of his earlier observations about geological, biological, and moral evolution, all the while

maintaining a relatively optimistic outlook on the prospect for social progress in the United States.⁵⁵ This attitude took shape largely because of his friendship and intellectual exchange with John Fiske.⁵⁶ *The Minister's Charge*, published serially in the *Century* throughout most of 1886, epitomizes this outlook.

The decade following publication of this novel, however, would lead to a noteworthy shift in his position and a corresponding shift in his use of Darwinian concepts in his fiction. In the ten years between 1886 and 1896, Howells became increasingly dissatisfied with Fiske's optimistic interpretation of human social evolution that had been his guide to that point. A series of personal experiences and social observations during these years led Howells away from his earlier assumptions about the inevitability of human progress and toward a more skeptical and perhaps more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Darwinian natural selection shapes species to their environment, in particular the ways that selection and adaptation can determine human success within existing social structures, and how humans shape the social environments in which they live. From this viewpoint, human development will not someday end in the perfection of humanity as in the theories of Fiske and Spencer. Instead, evolution and natural selection of humans will continue as long as the species exists, not in any single direction, but in constant response to shifts in environment. *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897) illustrates this new view of the possible social applications of biological principles. *The Minister's Charge* and *The Landlord at Lion's Head* demonstrate Howells's continued interest in natural selection and adaptation; in addition, they mark his most direct consideration of what has come to be known as social Darwinism,

illustrating the development of Howells's relatively sophisticated understanding of Darwin's biological principles and their application to social structures.

In his book *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*, Mike Hawkins accurately summarizes the experience of trying to pin down social Darwinism for study in his observation that "Anyone consulting the vast literature on Social Darwinism . . . is likely to experience confusion rather than enlightenment" (Hawkins 3). The vastness of the literature on social Darwinism and the vehemence and occasional vitriol expressed in the various debates prompted by its study can dishearten all but the most dedicated (or perhaps masochistic) scholars. Even the most fundamental point of entry into the academic fray, a definition of the term, poses significant problems. Difficulty with definition leads to disagreements about the breadth of membership in the club of social Darwinists, with scholars offering a range of arguments from almost universal inclusiveness to exclusivity that eliminates almost everyone from consideration to denial that social Darwinism even exists. Source studies prove equally contentious, especially those attempting to establish Darwin himself as the charter member of the social Darwinist club. As the situation now stands, scholars from a broad cross section of disciplines remain unable to reach consensus on a clear definition of the term, on the significance and breadth of its historical application, or on a clear source of social Darwinian thought in either Darwin's writings or those of his contemporaries.

Modern examination of social Darwinism usually begins with Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), which presents social Darwinism as the stable and prevailing conservative sentiment that held sway in United States social and political thought in the years following the American Civil War. In

Hofstadter's view, the conservatives who adopted this perspective co-opted "the force of a natural law to the idea of competitive struggle" in human society (6). The evolutionary pace of development—slow, plodding, uniform, meticulous—aligned with conservative ideology. Although thinkers applied these ideas to the human condition with varying degrees of optimism, they shared the belief "that all attempts to reform social processes were efforts to remedy the irremediable, that they interfered with the wisdom of nature, that they could lead only to degeneration" (Hofstadter 7). Conservative politicians, according to Hofstadter, leaned heavily upon Darwinian thought and metaphors "when they wished to reconcile their fellows to some of the hardships of life and to prevail upon them not to support hasty and ill-considered reforms" (5). Late nineteenth-century conventional wisdom held that economic reward would come to those who worked hard and maintained a spotless personal character, while those who were dishonest, lazy, or inefficient would not survive in the competition for capital. Struggle on the individual level resulted in competition for jobs and money in capitalist Western economies. It also provided a ready rationale for successful men of business to proclaim that their ascendancy resulted from natural law rather than from chance or luck. They were better prepared through heredity for the contest of life, and their eventual prosperity was inevitable; things could not have ended otherwise.

Andrew Carnegie has become especially associated with this brand of social Darwinism, since he forthrightly used Darwin to explain capitalist competition and to justify the individual accumulation of vast fortunes. The increasing stratification of wealth in the latter half of the nineteenth century could be attributed, according to Carnegie, to the action of natural law. The advantage of the natural law of competition

lies not in the ease it brings to the life of the average person; to the contrary “the law may be sometimes hard for the individual” (Carnegie 655). Despite the difficulty, however, competition “is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department. We accept and welcome, therefore, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment, the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few, and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential for the future progress of the race” (655). While upon close examination the logic of Carnegie’s argument strains credulity, his appropriation of evolution and natural selection combined with the assumption of progress remained widely accepted in the popular mind through the end of the nineteenth century. Howells no doubt took some comfort in Carnegie’s logic as his own fortune continued to grow, but unlike Carnegie, Howells pushes conservative social Darwinism to its breaking point.

Hofstadter presents social Darwinism broadly, as any application of natural selection or any other evolutionary theory to human social development. From this broad beginning, scholars of the last sixty years have consistently worked to focus the definition and explore its social application, and examination of and response to Hofstadter’s thesis have resulted in a variety of useful perspectives. In “Darwinism and Social Darwinism” (1972), James Allen Rogers defines social Darwinism quite simply as “the application of Darwin’s theory of natural selection to the evolution of human society” (265n). Michael Ruse presents a “generic term for theories of human social development and maintenance which are in some way inspired by biological evolutionary theories” (23). Mike Hawkins offers perhaps the most useful definition of social Darwinism, specific enough to offer a

solid foundation for analysis while at the same time flexible enough to encompass a broad range of ideologies. Hawkins sees social Darwinism “as a *network* of interlinked ideas, subject to change over time—particularly with regard to the relationships among these ideas—but retaining its overall identity notwithstanding these modifications” (Hawkins 6; emphasis in original). He proposes that social Darwinism requires acceptance of five essential elements, including the four foundational premises of biological natural selection, which he presents as

a configuration of assumptions concerning nature, time and human nature which gave natural selection its relevance and meaning. It consisted of the following elements: (i) biological laws governed the whole of organic nature, including humans; (ii) the pressure of population growth on resources generated a struggle for existence among organisms; (iii) physical and mental traits conferring an advantage on their possessors in this struggle (or in sexual competition), could, through inheritance, spread through the population; (iv) the cumulative effects of selection and inheritance over time accounted for the emergence of new species and the elimination of others. (Hawkins 30-31)

Upon this foundation, the social Darwinist builds “a crucial fifth assumption, namely that this determinism extends to not just the physical properties of humans but also to their social existence and to those psychological attributes that play a fundamental role in social life, e.g. reason, religion and morality” (Hawkins 31). Many scientists who accepted the biological underpinning did not accept Hawkins’s fifth element, “either on the grounds that such features are unique to mankind, which stands apart from the rest of nature as a divine creation; or, as was increasingly argued by social scientists, because

humans are cultural creatures and culture cannot be reduced to biological principles” (Hawkins 31). The social Darwinist did accept the fifth element and broadly applied Darwin’s biological paradigm to a range of disciplines: “Social Darwinists . . . are of the view that many (if not all) aspects of culture—religion, ethics, political institutions, the rise and fall of empires and civilizations, in addition to many psychological and behavioural features—can be explained by the application of the first four elements to these domains” (Hawkins 31). Hawkins concludes that “Social Darwinists . . . endorse two fundamental facts about human nature: that it is continuous with animal psychology, and that it has evolved through natural selection” (Hawkins 31).

Social Darwinism experienced a relatively easy transition from the biological to the social. As a broad idea, social Darwinism seems to be a logical extension of the foundational principles of biological natural selection to human society. This selection occurs, in theory, at all levels of human endeavor from the most esoteric fields of study to business to the struggle for food and shelter. It appears obvious, even from individual experience, that in almost all fields—science, geography, medicine, technology, the arts—each generation builds upon what has come before, adding to the vast store of human knowledge. Within the social structure, individuals or groups advance new ideas. These ideas, once the larger group adopts them, face tests within society, and the best and most worthy of these ideas survive to provide a foundation for the next generation of ideas. This apparent progression of ideas would have been especially apparent to Howells who lived during one of the great ages of discovery, exploration, and invention. At the end of the nineteenth century, Alfred Russel Wallace could state without a hint of irony “that not only is our century superior to any that have gone before it, but that it may

be best compared with the whole preceding historical period. It must therefore be held to constitute the beginning of a new era of human progress” (*Wonderful Century* vii).

Although there does not exist consensus about the power and homogeneity of a formal group of social Darwinists who attempted to influence public policy, there remains no doubt that the ideas surrounding Darwinian natural selection did maintain broad and significant influence in the United States.

As for membership in this club, it is far too imprecise to label anyone as a “social Darwinist.” As Peter Bowler argues, “The emergence of evolution theory in biology, and the widespread use of evolutionary metaphors in social thought, reflect complex developments within a culture that was just as fragmented as our own. The search for simple unifying factors, for symbols that will somehow capture the essence of a historical period, is illusory” (*Darwinism* 13). There is significant danger in any attempt to use scientific theory as a rationale for social values: “History tells us that scientists and their followers have been able to use all sorts of different theories to uphold the same social policy—and that different policies can be justified on the basis of the same theory” (*Darwinism* 61). The attempt to come to grips with social Darwinism as a clearly defined movement or school of thought leads to grappling with shadows. The misinterpretation of natural selection as solely dependent on competition, struggle, and the “survival of the fittest” arose, according to Michael Ruse, as a result of the misreading of Darwin’s metaphorical description of natural selection and through conflation of his ideas with those of Malthus and Spencer. The term “survival of the fittest” itself was in many ways detrimental to a clear understanding of natural selection.

Robert Bannister embraces a much narrower definition of social Darwinism. In *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (1979), Bannister argues that there was “no school (or schools) of social Darwinists” and concludes that “the term was a label one pinned on anyone with whom one especially disagreed” (xi). In other words, “the so-called conservative social Darwinists of the 1880s (laissez faire liberals, utilitarians, and the like) were, *as social Darwinists*, the invention of their opponents to the left,” Hofstadter in particular (xi; emphasis in original). One cannot approach social Darwinism as a unified movement in social theory. There never existed a single, coherent group rallying around a clearly articulated framework establishing a methodology for application of Darwinian natural selection to human social development. It is apparent to most scholars today that application of a biological theory of speciation to human social interaction poses significant problems.

Howells’s career as a novelist spans a half century of development in scientific and popular attitudes toward Darwin, evolution, and natural selection, as well as the varied application of these attitudes toward evolution of social structures. The initial defense of the *Origin of Species*, led by T. H. Huxley as “Darwin’s bulldog,” was abrasive and uncompromising, and this moment suited Howells as he worked to establish a clear form and concrete boundaries to shape and limit his realistic agenda. The young Howells found it relatively easy to acknowledge the broad outlines of Darwinian science and to shrug off with sanguinity and irony the complexities of the theory. Howells was thus able to accept and explore the first four assumptions detailed by Hawkins as the essential components of a foundation for realism. For this theory to provide the scientific underpinning of a new variety of literature, however, it must address complex human

social interaction, and this effort caused Howells great difficulty. His struggle with the locus of human morality caused him significant stress and almost certainly contributed to his nervous breakdown of 1881 as he wrestled with Bartley Hubbard's final dissolution in *A Modern Instance*. As Howells further developed his realism, he also had to develop application of Darwinian science to human society, leading him to accept Hawkins's "crucial fifth assumption" that the principles governing biological evolution of species also apply to human "social existence" and "psychological attributes" (Hawkins 31). As he began to delve more deeply into such applications of Darwin, Howells tried to maintain the optimism of his early work. Fiske's influence perpetuated this attitude through the middle of the 1880s, but the years between 1885 and 1895 brought with them experiences that led Howells to a reevaluation of his world view and a concomitant reconsideration of the promise for progress that he had previously assumed to be present in evolutionary development.⁵⁷

By 1885, Howells could count himself a literary success. Leaving the *Atlantic* in 1881 after serving five years as assistant editor and ten years as its editor, Howells was well known in literary circles as the American arbiter of literary taste and as a champion of the new, young realist and local color writers. The reading public knew him for his role at the *Atlantic* as well, but his popular reputation rested on the success of his serialized novels and, to a lesser extent, his travel writing. Frank Luther Mott notes that "most literary Americans of the time would have ranked Howells at the top of writing men this side of the Atlantic" (4:130). Mott goes on to record the opinion of the "editor of the *Bookman* [who] in 1896 asserted that Howells was 'universally admitted to hold the primacy among living American men of letters'" (4:130). A poll conducted by the

New York *Critic* confirms this editor's opinion. The *Critic* asked its readers to identify the greatest living American authors. Howells ranked fifth on the list behind Holmes, Lowell, Whittier, and the historian George Bancroft (Mott 3: 238).⁵⁸ He had achieved some financial security as well. Although Osgood's publishing house failed in 1885, and Howells lost this source of income, he dealt from a powerful position in negotiations with other publishers, and he was able to strike favorable terms with Harper and Brothers, bringing in a steady income of about \$200,000 per year in 2006 inflation-adjusted dollars (Cady, *Realist at War 2*; Sahr).

This success in both letters and business led Howells to feel keenly the disparities between social classes in nineteenth-century America, and this realization shaped his fiction through the end of his life. Even though, according to John Crowley, Howells was "no more capable of joining the proletarian struggle than he had been of enlisting in the Union army," he could join the struggle indirectly through his fiction (*Mask 29*).

Crowley asserts that Howells's view of himself as "a theoretical socialist and a practical aristocrat" led to guilt that manifested itself in his novels, especially in characters like Silas Lapham who are obliged to care for the family of another man who had chosen to join in some struggle (*Mask 29*). Added to this guilt, Howells began to feel a sense of responsibility to those less socially and financially secure than he was.

In his immediate circle, Howells contributed financially to his family. Goodman and Dawson describe the difficulty of Howells's struggle "with the endless puzzle of family responsibility and the unfairness of life" (269). Beginning in 1885, he sent his father and sister a monthly allowance to free them from financial worries. Taking stock of his finances in January of 1892, he concluded that he had sent them a total of \$2,400

(Goodman 312). This would be equivalent to approximately \$50,000 in 2006 inflation-adjusted dollars (Sahr). In addition to his father and sister, Howells also felt obliged to help his brother Sam who repeatedly accepted money from Howells and just as repeatedly squandered it. For example, in 1886, Howell bought for Sam a newspaper in Madison, Ohio, with the expectation that it would provide him with an income of about \$1,000 per year (Goodman 269). Sam soon “gave up the *Index* but dishonestly collected rent on the building” (Goodman 313). Nevertheless, Howells retained a sense of obligation to his family throughout his life.

Newly conscious of these social and financial disparities, and perhaps, as Crowley argues, feeling the guilt that accompanied his own success, Howells began work on a new novel for serial publication, *The Minister's Charge*, at the same time he began work on the Editor's Study essays for *Harper's*. Although he was beginning to sense the weight of social responsibility, he maintained an essential optimism about the power of evolution and natural selection to improve society. This brand of social Darwinism as Howells would have understood it derives in large part, once again, from his friend John Fiske.⁵⁹ Howells's editorial work provides an indication of his reading at the time he was writing *The Minister's Charge*. This novel he published serially in the *Century* from February through December of 1886. His “Editor's Study” column in the April 1886 edition of *Harper's* addresses two of Fiske's publications, *The Destiny of Man Viewed in Light of His Origins* (1884) and *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge* (1885).

Fiske's two volumes record the content of two speeches delivered about a year apart at the Concord School of Philosophy. In them, Fiske develops the argument that humans represent the culmination of physiological selection and that future evolution will

work to achieve the perfection of humanity. Much of the support for this argument appears in his *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* published a decade earlier, but in *The Destiny of Man* and *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge*, he states his conclusions with an intensity lacking in *Outlines*. In addition, Fiske in the first volume affirms his Lamarckian leanings and his belief in the teleological nature of evolution and in the second volume reasserts his theistic interpretation of evolution.

As a result of Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Lyell, and Darwin, Fiske argues, the human self-image has been radically altered. No longer can we see ourselves as the center of the universe, nor can we assume ourselves to be the static result of a single act of divine creation: “Not only has Lyell enlarged our mental horizon in time as much as Newton enlarged it in space, but it appears that throughout these vast stretches of time and space with which we have been made acquainted there are sundry well-marked changes going on” (*Destiny* 18-19). Rejecting the random changes so often charged to Darwinian natural selection, Fiske posits “Certain *definite paths of development* . . . being pursued; and around us we behold worlds, organisms, and societies in diverse stages of progress or decline (*Destiny* 19; emphasis added). Fiske clearly establishes the directional nature of change and at the same time opens the idea of evolution to application in a variety of disciplines from biology and geology to sociology and political science. And though humans can no longer be classified separately from other members of the animal kingdom, evolutionary theory, Fiske asserts, clarifies the hierarchy of the animal kingdom by placing humans securely at the top: “So far from degrading Humanity, or putting it on a level with the animal world in general, the Darwinian theory shows us distinctly for the first time how the creation and the perfecting of Man is the

goal toward which Nature's work has all the while been tending. It enlarges tenfold the significance of human life, places it upon even a loftier eminence than poets or prophets have imagined, and makes it seem more than ever the chief object of that creative activity which is manifested in the physical universe" (*Destiny* 25).⁶⁰ Humans may look very much like their closest relatives, the apes, but there is an enormous intellectual divergence that separates them; and in humans, natural selection no longer works on physical modifications but on mental and social aspects of humanity. No other creature will ever supplant humans atop the hierarchy of animals. According to Fiske's interpretation of Darwin, human physical form already represents perfection: "According to Darwinism, the creation of Man is still the goal toward which Nature tended from the beginning. Not the production of any higher creature but the perfecting of Humanity, is to be the glorious consummation of Nature's long and tedious work" (*Destiny* 31). This perfection will be achieved, according to Fiske, in substantial part through Lamarckian use inheritance.

Darwin himself increasingly agreed with his critics that natural selection would need help to achieve the enormous changes he attributed to it.⁶¹ As the *Origin of Species* moved through successive editions, Darwin increasingly accepted Lamarckian use inheritance as an essential mechanism driving the evolution of species. By 1871, the year in which he published *The Descent of Man*, Darwin accepted Lamarckian processes for both physical and mental adaptation. In a discussion of bipedalism in humans, for example, he refers to physiological differences between humans and apes that make possible human upright posture. As a mechanism for such change, Darwin posits a combination of use inheritance and natural selection: "It is very difficult to decide how

far all these correlated modifications [that led to upright posture] are the result of natural selection, and how far of the inherited effects of the increased use of certain parts, or of the action of one part on another. No doubt these means of change act and react on each other” (Darwin, *Descent* 1:143). In other words, use inheritance could result in hereditary modifications upon which natural selection would act. The two mechanisms, to Darwin’s mind, remained inextricably commingled.

Perhaps to a degree even greater, Darwin accepted use inheritance as essential to human emotional and intellectual modification. He notes that there currently exists a struggle between “social instincts, with their derived virtues, and . . . lower, though at the moment, stronger impulses or desires” (*Descent* 1:104).⁶² The social instincts, Darwin assures his readers, will eventually prevail as “the ever-present social instincts, or . . . habits gained in early youth and strengthened during our whole lives, perhaps inherited . . . are at last rendered almost as strong as instincts” (*Descent* 1:104). He concludes that “Virtue will be triumphant” (*Descent* 1:104).

The belief in Lamarckian use inheritance was especially influential in the United States where many scientists and philosophers maintained “that the purposeful response of life to its environment was the driving force of evolution” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 85). This mechanism was particularly important to Herbert Spencer who saw it as a relatively “rapid way of bringing individuals into equilibrium with the changing social situation” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 71). Individuals who could adapt rapidly to their environment could pass along these adaptations to their children who would then be better prepared to contribute to society. Some later American Lamarckians held that humans could use this mechanism to control the direction of evolution.⁶³ Spencer, however, argued that the

forces at work in human evolution were far too complex to allow human comprehension, let alone intervention. As summarized by Peter Bowler, Spencer maintained that “A policy of laissez faire was essential because it was only the constant threat of misery that would keep people up to the mark in an ever-developing society. Free enterprise did not eliminate the unfit—it forced everyone to acquire fitness” (*Eclipse* 71).

Lamarckian use inheritance appears in Fiske’s essays, reflecting his intellectual debt to Spencer. Fiske refers to this mechanism as “direct adaptation” in *The Destiny of Man* and provides as examples “the gloved hand of the dandy [that] becomes white and soft while the hand of the labouring man grows brown and tough” (98). This process, he holds, “is the main principle at work in the improvement of Humanity” (98). Use inheritance is not limited, of course, to physical modification: “Our intellectual faculties, our passions and prejudices, our tastes and habits, become strengthened by use and weakened by disuse. . . . This law of use and disuse has been of immense importance throughout the whole evolution of organic life. With Man it has come to be paramount” (98). The eventual result of generations of use inheritance, according to Fiske, will be the inevitable perfection of humankind. Yet humans remain sometimes uncomfortably close to their savage ancestors, especially in kindness and sympathy: “The selfish and ugly passions which are primordial—which have the incalculable strength of inheritance from the time when animal consciousness began—have had but little opportunity to grow weak from disuse” (*Destiny* 101). Actions deriving from these primordial instincts continue to shape too much of human action. Humans still have a long way to go if they are to achieve the perfection Fiske forecasts for them, but he predicts a day when “The ape and the tiger in human nature will become extinct” (*Destiny* 103). It will be an agonizingly

slow struggle to achieve this end, but use inheritance as Spencer advocates will speed the process significantly.⁶⁴

The modern reader will by now have recognized the essential flaw in the reasoning of Darwin, Spencer, and Fiske. All three assume cultural development as an extension of biological evolution. Benjamin Farrington states the issue succinctly when he observes that “Darwin had failed to make a clear distinction between the brain and the mind, and the failure had a disastrous effect on his mental life and happiness” (86). Beyond the personal effect on Darwin, this lapse in reasoning also affected Spencer, and by extension Fiske, leading to a foundational error in their approaches to social questions and the value of social interventions. As an interpreter of Fiske, Howells also made the assumption that the laws explaining biological development apply as well to social development. This assumption plays itself out through the years leading into the later period of Howells’s fiction.

In *The Minister’s Charge*, Howells introduces a protagonist, Lemuel Barker, raised on a farm in rural Maine. Howells then initiates his experiment by removing Barker to the city with nothing but the clothes on his back and his innate abilities. The resulting novel tracks Barker’s slow adaptation to his new physical and social environment. Howells concludes that not only is such adaptation possible, but that the variation Barker represents will benefit the upper classes of Boston. In other words, the breakdown of social stratification in the United States will allow for selection of fittest individuals from among the entire population, which will serve to strengthen the American genetic stock, leading eventually to the perfection of the individual and of society.

The novel's plot is not complex. Barker, a young aspiring poet, travels to Boston following the false flattery of David Sewell, the minister of the novel's title. Sewell, summering with his wife in the country town of Willoughby Pastures, agrees to listen to and critique the poetry of nineteen-year-old Lemuel Barker, purported to be a local prodigy. Sewell recognizes the verse for the doggerel that it is, but he praises it nonetheless, assuming that he had "merely cheered a lonely hour for the boy" who would "be back to hoeing potatoes to-morrow" (3-4). This seemingly simple deception has far-reaching consequences as it leads Barker to believe that sale of his verse to a publishing house can augment his family's meager farming income. He travels to Boston and seeks out Sewell for an introduction to a Boston publisher. Sewell must eventually tell Barker the truth, that the poetry is not worthy of publication and that the best place for a young man of his talents is on the farm from whence he came, but Barker's pride will not allow an immediate return to the farm, and the remainder of the novel follows his social evolution as Barker rises through the various strata of the Boston social hierarchy.

Howells's description of Barker upon his unannounced arrival at Sewell's home emphasizes the young man's physical power while at the same time demonstrating his awkwardness, both physical and social, when removed from the environment of the farm to which he is perfectly adapted. Howells's description of the young man's clothes marks him as an outsider:

Barker had given his Sunday boots a coat of blacking, which he had eked out with stove-polish, and he had put on his best pantaloons, which he had outgrown, and which, having been made very tight a season after tight pantaloons had gone out of fashion in Boston, caught on the tops of his boots and stuck there in spite of his

efforts to kick them loose. . . . He wore a single-breasted coat of cheap broadcloth, fastened across his chest with a carnelian clasp-button of his father's, such as country youth wore thirty years ago, and a belated summer scarf of gingham, tied in a breadth of knot long since abandoned by polite society. (10)

A complete lack of social skills accompanies his unfashionable clothing and physical awkwardness. Removed from the farm and uncomfortably ensconced in the Sewells' reception room, Barker "seemed so much more stupid than he had at home; his faculties were apparently sealed up, and he had lost all the personal picturesqueness which he had when he came in out of the barn, at his mother's call, to receive Sewell" (14-15). Barker obviously belongs on the farm, in the environment to which he is well adapted.

Howells takes this opportunity to reiterate his interest in the debate surrounding evolution and aligns Sewell with creationist belief. In attempting to dissolve the social barrier between Barker and himself, Sewell offers to show Barker a photograph of Louis Agassiz that he keeps in his upstairs study.⁶⁵ As they ascend the stairs, the difference between the two men, one adapted to city life and the other to the country, again becomes apparent. Sewell "led the way out of the reception-room, and tripped lightly in his slippered feet up the steps against which Barker knocked the toes of his clumsy boots. He was not large, nor naturally loutish, but the heaviness of the country was in every touch and movement" (16). When they reach the study and Sewell hands Barker the picture, Barker "dropped the photograph twice in his endeavor to hold it between his stiff thumb and finger" (16). Barker's adaptation to the farm and the ineffectiveness of these adaptations in town mark Howells's focus on Darwinian evolution.

Finally, Howells emphasizes Barker's primitive nature with an outright comparison. In his discomfort, the minister becomes increasingly desperate as his guest repeatedly fails to reciprocate Sewell's invitations to conversation. Sewell points out various items in his study as conversation pieces, and Barker "did what Sewell bade him do in admiring this thing or that; but if he had been an Indian he could not have regarded them with a greater reticence" (17). For the reader of the late nineteenth century, the comparison of Barker with a Native American would clearly have marked Barker as savage and primitive.⁶⁶ Following an awkward and uncomfortable dinner with the Sewells, Barker leaves, and upon his departure, Howells emphasizes once more through Sewell's commentary the vast evolutionary divide between the man of the city and the man of the country: "I couldn't find any common ground where we could stand together," Sewell laments. "We were as unlike as if we were of two different species" (27).

To complete arrangements for the experiment, Howells removes from Barker any chance of returning to Sewell or to his own home in the country and reduces him to the most brutally savage existence possible in Boston. As Barker sits in Boston Common, a swindler approaches him and dupes him out of ten dollars. With only some change in his pocket, Barker must sleep in the Common instead of in a hotel. As he sleeps, his bag and the rest of his money disappear. Now isolated by his poverty and his shame at having been victimized so easily, Barker faces the added humiliation of being arrested in a case of mistaken identity. By the time he arrives in court the next morning, Barker has become an animal, penned up with a group of other prisoners awaiting an audience with the judge: "The door was opened, and they were driven [like animals] up a flight of stairs

into a railed inclosure at the corner of a large room, where they remained huddled together . . .” (53-54). Upon hearing the facts of the case and listening as the only witness recants her identification, the judge releases Barker, dismissing all charges against him. Barker walks into the street a free man, yet with nothing but the clothes he is wearing. Barker’s experiences through the remainder of the novel assure Howells that evolution will work to strengthen and solidify the American character.

After setting up his experiment, Howells sends Barker alone and penniless into the city to determine whether he is capable of adapting to his new environment. At this point, Howells presents Barker at the mercy of his environment, a creature having no power to affect his surroundings in any meaningful way. A police officer directs Barker to follow an inebriated tramp to a house for vagrants, so he can secure himself a bed for the night. As Barker mindlessly does as he is told, he marvels at his situation and his lack of control: “He had hardly ever seen a drunken man at Willoughby Pastures, where the prohibition law was strictly enforced; there was no such person as a thief in the whole community, and the tramps were gone long ago. Yet here was he, famed at home for the rectitude of his life and the loftiness of his aims, consorting with drunkards and thieves and tramps, and warned against what he was doing by policemen, as if he was doing it of his own will. It was very strange business” (62-63). Barker’s intentions amount to nothing as he faces the city without the requisite adaptations.

To observe the lowest level of Boston society, Howells settles Barker in the “Wayfarers Hotel,” a shelter for indigent men. A young tramp there notes for Barker the various types who frequent the house and apologizes for the relative dearth of inhabitants: “Well, you do see all kinds of folks here, that’s a fact. Sorry there ain’t more

in to-night, so's to give you a specimen" (68). Based on the sample he does have at hand, Barker observes that despite their outward appearance, even those who look "wistfully, like cowed animals," once they are scrubbed and dressed in linen nightgowns, they share common membership in the family of humankind: "In the nakedness in which Lemuel had first seen them, the worst of them had the inalienable comeliness of nature, and their faces, softened by their relation to their bodies, were not so bad; they were not so bad, looking from their white night-gowns" (71). In this brief moment, Howells reasserts the essential connection between all members of the human race. The physical reminders of established social divisions reassert themselves the next morning, however, as the wayfarers emerge to cut wood as payment for their room and board: "Clad in their filthy rags, and caricatured out of all native dignity by their motley and misshapen attire, they were a hideous gang, and all the more hideous for the grin that overspread their stubbly muzzles . . ." (71). This description offers a reminder of the importance of context in shaping a person.

The repeated references to the men and women of the police court, the Common, and the charity houses in bestial terms—their herd behavior, bovine stares, and brutish facial features—establish Howells's belief in one of the "fundamental facts about human nature" that Mike Hawkins attributes to social Darwinists: human nature is of a kind with animal nature; "it is continuous with animal psychology" (Hawkins 31). The lowest humans are only a small step above the highest animals on an evolutionary scale.⁶⁷ Barker rises quickly above the lowest stratum of society represented by these frequenters of the police court and the Common.

Much like Bartley Hubbard, Lemuel Barker initially advances in society through mimicry of those around him. After finding work as a hotel clerk, Barker begins to imitate the landlady and the other boarders. Howells makes clear, however, that life at the St. Albans represents only a small step up in the social hierarchy. The boarders “nearly all snuffled and whined as they spoke; some had a soft, lazy nasal; others broke abruptly from silence to silence in voices of nervous sharpness, like the cry or the bleat of an animal; one young girl, who was quite pretty, had a high, hoarse voice, like a gander” (130). Once again, Howells presents his characters as akin to animals. But Barker perceives them as representatives of Boston society, and he attempts to replicate their behavior: “Lemuel did not mind all this; he talked through his nose too; and he accepted Mrs. Harmon’s smooth characterization of her guests” (130). The results of Barker’s effort soon appear: “Among these people, such as they were, and far as they might be from a final civilization, Lemuel began to feel an ambition to move more lightly and quickly than he had yet known how to do, to speak promptly, and to appear well” (140). To this end, he changes his rustic garb for a new suit of clothes, taking great satisfaction in a ready-made suit purchased on installment from “a place on a degenerate street, in a neighborhood of Chinese laundries, with the polite name of Misfit Parlors, where they professed to sell the failures of the leading tailors of Boston, New York, and Chicago” (140).

Barker’s time at the St. Albans leads to intellectual development as well: “He grew constantly nimbler of hand and foot . . . and he grew quicker witted; he ceased to hulk in mind and body” (153). As he works, he always keeps a book with him, not a popular novel, but one of a variety of books loaned to him by Mr. Evans, the editor of the

Events who lives in the building. Evans first comments on Barker's choice of reading material when he sees him working his way through "a tough little epitome of the philosophies in all times, the crabbed English version of a dry German original" (154). In addition to his reading, Barker also listens to "the coteries of homeless sojourners in the St. Albans" from whom he absorbs a wide variety of viewpoints, the effect of which "was a ferment in his mind in which there was nothing clear. It seemed to him that he had to change his opinions every day. He was whirled round and round; he never saw the same object twice the same. He did not know whether he learned or unlearned most. With the pride that comes to youth from the mere novelty of its experience was mixed a shame for his former ignorance, and exasperation at his inability to grasp their whole meaning" (170). Adaptation to his new environment demands that he acquire knowledge that has no value on the farm but that is essential to socioeconomic mobility in the city.

The distance between Barker and his former self increases even more after he begins to read aloud for Bromfield Corey, the aging patriarch of an old Boston family. This employment marks the next step in Barker's development. After spending time with Corey, Barker realizes "how far from really fine or fashionable anything at the St. Albans had been. . . . He oriented himself anew, and got another view of the world which he had dropped into" (259). In this new environment, "the deeply underlying mass of his rustic crudity and raw youth took on a far higher polish than it had yet worn. . . . He began insensibly to ape the manners of those about him" (260). And Bromfield Corey realizes that "It isn't our manners alone that he emulates. I can't find that any of us ever dropped an idea or suggestion of value that Barker didn't pick it up, and turn it to much more account than the owner. He's as true as a Tuscan peasant, as proud as an Indian, and as

quick as a Yankee” (261). By the end of the novel, Barker’s development is complete. He avoids marriage to a factory girl, and Howells hints at the prospect for a marriage that will bring “happiness for those it joined” and which holds the promise of “whatever is worthier and better in life than happiness” (312). Barker, it appears, will marry at a social level that will solidify his personal and social gains, and he will pass these gains along to succeeding generations.

Of course, this development could be simply a record of a young man’s reaction to the opportunities of the city, an adaptation of the traditional bildungsroman. Edwin Cady notes that “On the surface the hero’s story is as close to Horatio Alger as Howells ever came” (*Realist at War* 4). Throughout the novel, however, Howells carefully interweaves commentary on Barker’s social evolution, linking it convincingly to Darwinian evolution by noting the close connection between Barker’s development and social Darwinism. Howells first establishes Barker’s mother as representative of an earlier evolutionary phase. Sewell describes her to Evans as “worth seeing as a survival of the superficial fermentation of the period of our social history when it was believed that women could be like men if they chose” (166). Her bloomer dress marks her, to Sewell’s mind, as a social relic. As the offspring of such a survival, Barker is, through the laws of heredity, born into this same level of social development.

As Barker becomes increasingly familiar with Boston’s social structure, he begins to realize and to be dissatisfied with his position in service. Evans explains the situation to Sewell: “I’m afraid his view of our social inequalities is widening and deepening, and that he experiences the dissatisfaction of people who don’t command that prospect from the summit” (187). Evans and Sewell discuss possible solutions to this problem of

Barker's humiliation. Half in jest, Evans proposes that Sewell "prove to Barker that his ignominy is in accordance with the Development Theory, and is a necessary Survival, or something of that sort" (189). This joking reference contains an element of truth and links Barker to his mother—she a survival from an earlier stage of social development and he a victim of a tradition held over from that earlier stage.⁶⁸

Bromfield Corey later proposes Barker himself as a social survival, as a living relic of an earlier stage of social development. Sewell approaches Corey and his friend Charles Bellingham in an attempt to find an occupation for Barker, "anything that isn't menial" (250). Corey responds by noting that he's fascinated by Barker: "The boy's an Ancestor!" (250). Barker, according to Corey, does not need help; he merely needs time for further development: "'All you have to do,' pursued Corey, 'is to give him time, and he'll found a fortune and a family, and his children's children will be cutting ours in society. Half of our great people have come up in that way. Look at the Blue-book, where our nobility is enrolled; it's the apotheosis of farm-boys, mechanics, inside-men, and I don't know what!'" (250).⁶⁹ Barker represents the past for Corey, an artifact of Boston society as it existed four generations earlier. Corey recognizes Barker's individual development, and he assumes that Barker's individual gains will be transmitted to the next generation. By extension, the continuation of this type of individual development through large segments of the population leads to social progress, improvement of the entire social structure. Progress is inevitable in Corey's and by extension in Howells's worldview.

Bromfield Corey elaborates further upon this initial observation after he spends more time with Barker. Corey notes once again that Barker is "ancestral, and he makes

me feel like degenerate posterity” (262). Corey goes on to observe that he has experienced the same feeling with his own son, Tom, “but Barker seems to go a little farther back” (262).⁷⁰ At this, Corey pauses to qualify this observation: “I suppose there’s such a thing as getting too far back in these Origin of Species days; but he isn’t excessive in that or in anything” (262). Barker represents just enough of a survival for his interest to be historical rather than anthropological. As Corey observes, “it’s the youth of my sires that I find so strange in Barker” (262). Such observations leave little doubt that Barker’s story represents for Howells a case study in social development based on survival of the fittest.⁷¹

Howells chooses to address the issue of social Darwinism and struggle through Barker’s own words during a conversation with Sewell about the relative merits of country life and city life. Social progress, for Barker as well as for Howells, relies on urbanization.⁷² In comparing country and city, Barker notes the country is not the haven of mutual aid that city dwellers envision: “There isn’t half the sympathy in the country that there is in the city. Folks pry into each other’s business more, but they don’t really care so much” (204). Barker elaborates, explaining that in the country “you could live cheaper, and the fight isn’t so hard. You might have to use your hands more, but you wouldn’t have to use your head hardly at all. There isn’t so much opposition—competition” (204). Sewell, trying as much to convince Barker to return to Willoughby Pastures as to pursue the intellectual discussion, addresses the concept of “survival of the fittest” in society: “But this competition—this struggle—in which one or the other must go to the wall, isn’t that painful?” (204). In this question, Sewell reveals a lack of understanding, an inability to apply Darwinian struggle to social structures. As

Howells's narrator explains, Sewell "was frequently at the disadvantage men of cloistered lives must be, in having his theories in advance of his facts" (204). Barker has the worldly experience to deny Sewell's assumption that pain and death are inevitable results of this Darwinian struggle: "'I don't know as it is [painful],' answered Lemuel, 'as long as you're young and strong. And it don't always follow that one must go to the wall. I've seen some things where both got on better'" (204). Through Lemuel Barker's words, Howells expresses his own understanding of some of the complexities inherent in social Darwinism. He sees through Darwin's metaphor, which has caused so many misunderstandings over the last century and a half, to the underlying concept that adaptation does not necessarily demand that there be a winner and a loser, victor and vanquished.⁷³ He also understands that without competition for resources there can be no improvement. The country represents social stasis while the city represents progress.

In the last pages of the novel, Howells sums up his hopeful philosophy of social evolution through the reverend Sewell's sermon on the topic of "Complicity." This is a philosophy Howells initially voiced, however indirectly, in *A Modern Instance* in Atherton's argument that the moral failure of a single man, in this case Ben Halleck, affects the moral structure of all society. This doctrine appears explicitly in *The Minister's Charge* as Sewell argues that "you can have a righteous public only by the slow process of having righteous men and women . . . no one for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy, for sickness or health, stood apart from his fellows, but each was bound to the highest and the lowest by ties that centered in the hand of God. No man . . . sinned or suffered to himself alone; his error and his pain darkened and afflicted men who never heard of his name" (308-9). Howells's narrator notes that Sewell's "evolution from the

text, 'Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them,' of a complete philosophy of life, was humorously treated by some of his critics as a phase of Darwinism," but as Jane Marston observes, this reference to Darwin at a key point "indicates that Howells had not forgotten about evolution when he wrote the novel" (77). Marston also observes that the irony with which Howells treats Sewell's critics "in that they miss the point of the sermon" weakens their argument "that the brotherhood of man consists in merely material interrelationships" (77). In fact, Arnold Fox explains complicity as founded upon Howells's rejection of materialism as the sole driving force in social development, explaining that, though Howells greatly admired the naturalism of Zola and Hardy,

He was too much a humanist to tolerate what he considered the brutalization of man which would result from the acceptance of determinism, and there can be no question that in his own work Howells starts with the concept of a free man who must accept the responsibility for his action. However, this was merely a necessary moral premise; from the social viewpoint Howells recognized that there was more to the problem. He came to an increasing awareness of the effects of environmental forces in shaping human behavior, and out of this grew his doctrine of complicity. (Fox 196)

The social environment shapes the individual, and the individual in turn affects the future of the species as a whole, thus altering the social environment. The individual who exhibits a "conscious devotion to ends conducive to the happiness of society" through self reflexive examination of the "self-regarding virtues" within himself has a responsibility to live a life of moral rectitude as an example to others, as opposition to social evil, and as sire to the next generation which, to Howells's mind at this point, will

offer an improvement: “As we grew in grace, in humanity, in civilization,” Sewell sermonizes, “our recognition of this truth would be transfigured from a duty to a privilege, a joy, a heavenly rapture” (309). Each generation improves upon its predecessor with the end result being a perfectly balanced society as Howells describes in *A Traveler from Altruria*. Complicity articulates Fiske’s optimistic interpretation of Darwinian evolution. The decade that followed this articulation of Howells’s belief in inevitable progress would severely test its viability.

* * *

As elaborated upon earlier, Howells’s view of social evolution more closely paralleled Fiske’s optimistic brand of thinking in the late 1870s and early 1880s. And though he never succumbed completely to Spencer’s laissez faire attitudes, events of the decade following 1885, both social and personal, profoundly altered Howells’s outlook, tempering his optimism and reducing his faith in the social institutions upon which he had hitherto rested his hopes for the future development of American society. Howells’s approach to his brand of social evolution developed significantly in the ten years between 1886 when he published *The Minister’s Charge* and 1897 when *The Landlord of Lion’s Head* came out in book form. In the earlier novel, Howells presents a very nineteenth-century view of evolution and natural selection. Ten years later, his view is much more closely aligned with the interpretations of evolution that arose following the Modern Synthesis, which integrated Mendelian genetics with Darwinian natural selection.

The most powerful influence on Howells during this decade was the slow deterioration and eventual death of his daughter Winifred on March 2, 1889. Her illness had lasted nearly a decade, and she insisted until the end that her ailment was

physiological and not purely psychological. Whatever the case, her death affected her father profoundly. Worse than losing his daughter was Howells's lingering suspicion that he had somehow been responsible for her death. Elinor had maintained reservations about S. Weir Mitchell and his rest cure to which Howells had insisted they resort, and epistolary evidence convinces Edwin Cady that "upon autopsy Mitchell apparently discovered a real and organic disease that had caused her pain and at last her death" ("Introduction" xiv). Cady suggests that Howells's poem "Change," part of "Stops of Various Quills" published in the December 1894 *Harper's*, most frankly expresses the effect of Winny's loss on Howells and his outlook on life:

Sometimes, when after spirited debate
Of letters or affairs, in thought I go
Smiling unto myself, and all aglow
With some immediate purpose, and elate
As if my little, trivial scheme were great,
And what I would so were already so:
Suddenly I think of her that died, and know,
Whatever friendly or unfriendly fate
Befall me in my hope or in my pride,
It is all nothing but a mockery,
And nothing can be what it used to be,
When I could bid my happy life abide,
And build on earth for perpetuity,
Then, in the deathless days before she died. (38)

It had before been possible for Howells to view the struggle for survival with some detachment and even humor. But Winny's death altered Howells's angle of vision, placing him in close proximity to the death that can visit with seeming randomness even those with natural gifts, those who seem to represent the best future of humanity.

Looking beyond his immediate family, Howells saw an extension of his personal grief working itself out on the national stage. In 1886, a year that saw the culmination of twenty years of unprecedented labor unrest in the United States, a bomb exploded in the midst of a peaceful labor rights demonstration in Haymarket Square in Chicago (Parrish 23). The Chicago police arrested eight men for the crime; judge and jury sentenced six of these men to death, and in November of 1887, the state executed four of them, even though it was quite clear at the time that none of the men had thrown the bomb. The state had executed the Anarchists for their ideas rather than for their actions, for advocating violence rather than for committing it. These events prompted Howells to write public letters advocating reconsideration of the convictions and sentences. In the face of almost universal support for the convictions, Howells spoke up eloquently in support of free thought and expression.

Everett Carter contends that the Haymarket affair was central to Howells's development as a writer: "The exact occasion for the transformation of Howells from conservative to radical, the exact moment of his sudden anguish, cannot be determined. He said it came 'through reading their trial' and this reading necessarily was at some time between the summer of 1886 and the summer of 1887. In this year he came to the realization that an America which could present only smiling aspects to the realist was no longer; that if a writer were to portray truthfully he would have to portray a society which

could create a submerged social class and then had ‘civically murdered’ four men who were calling attention to the plight of that class” (Carter 183). Although Carter overstates the rapidity with which Howells’s transformation occurs, he is right in asserting its centrality. The trial and subsequent execution of the Haymarket Anarchists contributed to what can more aptly be called Howells’s evolution as a realist.

Finally, the death of his father in August of 1894 reinforced the personal nature of loss and pain. Following his father’s death, Howells wrote to Charles Norton about the “strange summer” of 1894: “I got home in time to have a good fortnight with my dear old father, a month before he died; but he died, and so the first chapter of being is closed for me. I can go back with him to my childhood no more. It has aged me as nothing else could have done” (qtd. in Goodman 328). No longer could he hope to maintain optimism for human social progress as he had presented it in *The Minister’s Charge*. The growth of society had lost, for Howells, the teleology so important to Fiske and Spencer. This does not mean, however, that Howells abandoned the Darwinian framework that he had developed over the previous two and a half decades; he merely adopted a modified interpretation of the social phenomena he observed and recorded.

Social Darwinism does not necessarily assume progress. As Mike Hawkins points out, “the Darwinian world view did not entail a commitment to a particular direction for evolutionary change, and theories of degeneration were as prolific as theories of progress. Certainly many Social Darwinists did believe that evolution entailed progress, a view endorsed by Darwin himself. . . . But belief in progress forms part of the ideological aspect of a theory, and the Darwinian world view was equally compatible with a quite antithetical perspective” (Hawkins 34). Following the personal

losses of the decade between 1885 and 1895, Howells moved away from his earlier belief in teleology, shifting toward a vision of balance and constant adaptation to a changing environment that does not offer the clear prospect of some inevitable perfect state.

As Goodman and Dawson observe, “Sorrow had changed Howells’ understanding of life and its truths, as well as the limits of his internal censor” (333). One result of this new approach was his novel *The Landlord at Lion’s Head*, which “proved to be one of Howells’ most naturalistic and troubling novels” (333). As with *The Minister’s Charge* a decade earlier, the plot follows a young protagonist, this time Thomas Jefferson Durgin, from rural New England to the social milieu of Boston in order to track his adaptation and development following his change in environment. Jeff Durgin is a formidable physical specimen, undisciplined as a child and only a little more so as an adult, who leaves the farm on which he had grown up to attend Harvard. His mother hopes that he will graduate, study law, and make a good match for himself with a girl from Boston society. Jeff has other plans, envisioning himself as the landlord of a high-priced, high-class summer resort hotel.

Following the death of her husband, Mrs. Durgin transformed the family farm near Lion’s Head mountain into a small summer hotel. She does so at the suggestion of a young painter, Jere Westover, who boards with the family while painting a landscape featuring the nearby mountain. Mrs. Durgin and her two sons still living on the farm work with a neighbor family, the Whitwells, to make the hotel a success. They earn enough money in the next several years to allow Jeff to attend Harvard. This opening section, through the beginning of the ninth chapter, establishes themes that will play out through the remainder of the novel.

The rugged landscape described in the opening pages indicates Howells's intention once again to include environment as a central component. Lion's Head appears starkly above the dense, primeval forest below: "Seen from the east, the mass of granite showing above the dense forests of the lower slopes had the form of a sleeping lion" (3). The Durgin farm itself maintains only a tenuous grasp on existence, threatened by the encroaching forest: "A stony mountain road followed the bed of the torrent that brawled through the valley at its base, and at a certain point a still rougher lane climbed from the road along the side of the opposite height to a lonely farm-house pushed back on a narrow shelf of land, with a meager acreage of field and pasture broken out of the woods that clothed all the neighboring steeps" (3-4). The entire region around Lion's Head remains "almost primitively solitary and savage" despite the development of the surrounding country (3). From this near-wilderness issues Howells's protagonist, Jeff Durgin.

Howells establishes a clear link with his earlier examination of similar issues in *The Minister's Charge* and between Jeff Durgin and Lemuel Barker. The reader must recall that Lemuel Barker worked for a time at a hotel called the St. Albans. It was here that Barker had his first introduction to people of a social class above the lowest levels. In *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, Jeff Durgin's mother mentions that her "father kept the tavern on the old road to St. Albans on the other side of Lion's Head. That's where I always lived till I married here" (26). Only a few pages later, the name appears again as Whitwell tells Westover about the Durgin family. Whitwell explains that Mrs. Durgin's father, Mason, "Kept the old tavern stand on the west side of Lion's Head, on the St. Albans road" (32). The importance of this reference and an indication of Howells's

intention to develop further the examination of social Darwinism initiated in *The Minister's Charge* appear in the fact that the second mention of the St. Albans comes during a conversation about heredity and inheritance within the Durgin family.

Heredity plays an important role in the opening sections of the novel. The first few pages contain a description of Jeff's father, who "stooped at his work, with a thin, inward-curving chest" (6). Jeff's mother, on the other hand, "stood straight" at her work and "had a massive beauty of figure and a heavily moulded regularity of feature" (6). She prematurely shows her age, Howells's narrator informs his reader, because "since her marriage at eighteen she had lived long in the deaths of the children she had lost" (6). Nearly all of her children had inherited their father's hereditary characteristics and thus are not strong enough to survive life's struggle: "They were born with the taint of their father's family, and they withered from their cradles" (6). As they grew older, they "began to cough, as she had heard her husband's brothers and sisters cough, and then she waited in hapless patience the fulfillment of their doom" (6). This extended discussion of fitness and heredity sets the tone for the novel. Strength and survival depend upon fitness, which is, in turn, dependant upon heredity. Those who do not inherit strength are doomed almost inevitably to death. Those of weaker constitution who do manage to survive have little chance to pass along their characteristics to successive generations.

Among all the Durgin children, only Jeff, the youngest, "seemed to have inherited her health and strength" (6). According to Whitwell, during his initial conversation with Westover, the youngest Durgin inherited more than physical traits from his mother's family. Earlier in the week, Westover had prevented Jeff from threatening to have his dog attack Whitwell's children, Cynthia and Franky. Whitwell thanks Westover for his

intervention and observes, “I don’t suppose a fellow’s so much to blame, if he’s got the devil in him, as what the devil is” (32). Westover responds by questioning the presence of the devil in the equation, noting that “It may be original sin with the fellow himself” (32). Whitwell concedes the point with the qualification that “it ain’t *original* sin in the boy. Got it from his gran’father pooty straight . . . and maybe the old *man* had it second-hand. Ha’d to say just where so much cussedness gits statted” (32; emphasis in original). The old man in question is, of course, Jeff Durgin’s maternal grandfather, the proprietor of the tavern on the St. Albans road.

In addition to the St. Albans reference, Howells links Jeff Durgin to young Lemuel Barker through his attitude toward menial labor. Like Barker, Durgin engages in work that would be considered beneath any man in Boston; he “built the kitchen fire, and got the wood for it; he picked the belated pease and the early beans in the garden, and shelled them . . . he did a share of the family wash . . . and Westover saw him hanging out the clothes” (29). And like Barker, Durgin “suffered no apparent loss of self-respect in these employments” (29). At the same time, Durgin can comfortably spend time with Westover “with an effect of unimpaired equality” (29). Lemuel Barker’s adaptation depends on his realization that a life of service will not allow an individual to advance in society. Durgin’s adaptation follows a very different path.

Jeff’s mother hopes that a change in environment will change Jeff’s essential nature. She sees in herself a lack of social training that puts her at a disadvantage in her dealings with the “summer folks” from Boston who stay at her hotel in the summer: “She often found herself unable to cope with them, even when she felt that she had twice their sense; she perceived that they had something from their training that with all her

undisciplined force she could never hope to win from her own environment” (165). She sees Harvard as Jeff’s chance to absorb these advantages: “She believed that her son would have the advantages which baffled her in them, for he would have their environment” (165-66). Even more specifically, “She had vaguely fancied that with the acquaintance his career at Harvard would open to him Jeff would make a splendid marriage” (165). Such a match would, in his mother’s eyes, allow him “to rivet his hold upon those advantages” (166). He could follow Lemuel Barker in his climb up Boston’s social ladder “by taking a wife from among them, and . . . living the life of their world” (166).

Jeff Durgin does adopt many of the outward trappings of Boston society, but his bestial nature continues to assert itself, and he eventually realizes that self-serving strength allows him to succeed, measured against his own criteria, over the social constraints, which up to this point had served for Howells as the moderating forces assuring social progress. Eventually, Jeff lives not in accord with the dictates of social convention but with the materialistic social Darwinian standards of struggle, strength, and tenacity both in competition for material wealth and for a mate.

Howells first considers Durgin’s adaptation to the farm. Five years after his first visit to the Durgin farm, Westover returns to find that Jeff has grown into a young man almost perfectly suited to his rustic environment. His “stalwart frame was notable for strength rather than height . . . he was massive without being bulky. His chest was deep, his square shoulders broad, his powerful legs bore him with a backward bulge of the calves that showed through his shapely trousers” (45-46). Durgin’s compact power and latent sexuality mirror the landscape in which he lives. As is typical of Howells, the

hands of his characters tell more about them than any other feature.⁷⁴ Westover notes Jeff's hands as Durgin "caught up the trunks and threw them into the baggage-wagon with a swelling of the muscles on his short, thick arms which pulled his coat-sleeves from his heavy wrists and broad, short hands" (46). The female guests also notice Jeff's primitive power and, out of his hearing, "the ladies murmured a hymn of praise to his type of beauty; they said he looked like a young Hercules" (67).

As Lemuel Barker is suited to only one environment, Durgin also has difficulty upon first arriving in Boston. At his mother's urging, this man of the country moves to Cambridge to attend Harvard, and Howells follows him there to observe the effect of Cambridge society and Jeff's adaptation, or lack thereof, to his new environment. Initially Westover observes that Jeff "seemed painfully out of his element, and unamiably aware of it" (75). Westover finds him living with "some other rustic Freshman," and when Jeff asserts that within a year he will have a room in Harvard Yard, "Westover thought him still more at odds with his environment than he had before" (75, 76). Like Lemuel Barker, Jeff begins to adapt to life in the city, but unlike Barker, Durgin does not seem to be "growing in grace and wisdom" as Barker had (77). Quite the contrary, Durgin enhances his powerful physique with frequent trips to the gym, and increasingly "gave . . . the effect of tremendous strength. . . . He was of middle height, but he was hewn out and squared upward massively. He felt like stone to any accidental contact . . ." (78). Also unlike Barker, Durgin does not read intellectually stimulating books but popular novels (79). Jeff's letters home from Europe after his first year confirm his lack of development in their "mixture of crude sensations in the presence of famous scenes

and objects of interest, hard-headed observation of the facts of life, [and] narrow-minded misconception of conditions . . .” (80).

In his second year at school, Jeff continues to mimic those he sees around him, people well adapted to the urban social environment. He “wore a long frock-coat, with a flower in his button-hole, and in his left hand he carried a silk hat turned over his forearm as he must have noticed people whom he thought stylish carrying their hats” (114). He could not, however, conceal the primitive power of his robust frame:

In the outing dress he wore at home he was always effective, but there was something in Jeff’s figure which did not lend itself to more formal fashion; something of herculean proportion which would have marked him of a classic beauty perhaps if he had not been in clothes at all, or of a yeomanly vigor and force if he had been clad for work, but which seemed to threaten the more worldly conceptions of the tailor with danger. It was as if he were about to burst out of his clothes, not because he wore them tight, but because there was somehow more of the man than the citizen in him; something native, primitive, something that Westover could not find quite a word for, characterized him physically and spiritually. (114)

Even after four years at Harvard, Jeff has acquired no more than a thin veneer of refinement. Beneath this superficial layer, the primitive type remains.

This thin layer of civility is especially apparent to Bessie Lynde. During the summer before his graduation, Jeff begins a flirtation with Bessie, a dissipated society girl whose brother Alan is an alcoholic. Bessie shares her brother’s hereditary inclination toward addictive behavior, but her compulsion is to coquetry. Her fascination with

Durgin rests upon his inability to adapt to the environment of Cambridge. As she explains to her aunt, “His face is so rude and strong, and he has such a primitive effect in his clothes, that you feel as if you were coming down the street with a prehistoric man that the barbers and tailors had put a *fin de siècle* surface on. . . . Whenever I looked round, and found that prehistoric man at my elbow, it gave me the creeps, a little, as if he were really carrying me off to his cave” (207; italics in original). Bessie observes more than any other character Jeff Durgin’s undisguisably bestial nature: “‘*Touché,*’ Mr. Durgin says. He fences, it seems, and he speaks French. It was like an animal speaking French; you always expect them to speak English” (210; italics in original). And in a later conversation with her friend Mary Enderby, Bessie observes that, despite his own belief that he fits in with Boston society, “Mr. Durgin . . . is no more like one of us than a—bear is—and his attitude toward us is that of a bear who’s gone so much with human beings that he thinks he’s a human being. He’s delightful, that way” (285-86).

Westover also sees the potential for primitive behavior hidden just beneath Jeff’s superficial adaptation when he confronts Jeff about an episode at a dance during which Jeff drank champagne with Alan Lynde, perhaps in a conscious effort to contribute to Lynde’s alcoholic overindulgence. Westover realizes as he treats Durgin with some severity, that despite “the growth Jeff had made intellectually,” the brute still lies just beneath the surface: “The revolt latent in him [Durgin] would be violent in proportion to the pressure put upon him, and Westover began to be without the wish to press his fault home to him so strongly” (252). Westover even reaches a point where he can see Jeff’s actions through Jeff’s eyes, and there seems to Westover to be some logic, some reason behind the younger man’s actions.

The discussion revolves around Jeff's actions during a single episode, but the larger implication of their words soon becomes apparent: Jeff Durgin and Jere Westover represent for Howells the two poles of evolutionary possibility. In this exchange, Howells presents two interpretations of social evolution using Jane Marston's dichotomy of "inevitable progress or mere random change," and as the conversation develops, it becomes clear that Howells no longer sees the predominance of progress with the clarity and confidence he maintained when he conceived of Lemuel Barker a decade earlier (Marston 136). Jeff defends his actions at the Enderby dance as being out of his control. "You believe that everything is done from a purpose," he tells Westover, "or that a thing is intended because it's done" (248). Jeff maintains a very different world view: "I see that most things in this world are not thought about, and not intended. They happen, just as much as the other things that we call accidents" (248). Westover's subsequent rejoinder continues the line of reasoning Howells established in *A Modern Instance*: "But the wrong things don't happen from people who are in the habit of meaning the right ones" (248). The properly conditioned moral sense, according to Westover, leads the individual inevitably to right action in any circumstance. Only the undisciplined, untrained individual takes actions apparently based on chance. Jeff rejects this logic, arguing that chance and immediate desire play just as large a role as morality and habit in shaping human behavior: "I believe they do, fully half the time . . . and, as far as the grand result is concerned, you might as well think them and intend them as not. I don't mean that you ought to do it; that's another thing, and if I had tried to get Lynde drunk, and then gone to dance with his sister, I should have been what you say I am. But I saw him getting worse without meaning to make him so; and I went back to her because—I

wanted to” (249). As a result, Jeff argues that he cannot judge himself too harshly based on his actions.

Jeff explains that he judges his own behavior not reflexively, as does Westover, but objectively, evaluating it from the position of outside observer. Under the influence of some punch Jeff mixed for him, Westover begins to appreciate this approach and to realize that the sort of success Durgin seeks, individual rather than social success, might best be achieved through adopting Durgin’s approach: “He perceived that in this earth-bound temperament was the potentiality of all the success it aimed at. The acceptance of the moral fact as it was, without the unconscious effort to better it, or to hold himself strictly to account for it, was the secret of the power in the man which would bring about the material results he desired; and this simplicity of the motive involved had its charm” (251). Westover cannot help admiring such self-interest: “Westover was aware of liking Durgin at that moment much more than he ought, and of liking him helplessly. In the light of his good-natured selfishness, the injury to the Lyndes showed much less sacrilege than it had seemed . . .” (252).⁷⁵ And Jeff Durgin’s self-interest and his subsequent success in achieving his goals form the remainder of Howells’s argument for materialistic social Darwinism.

Jeff’s self-centered approach to life places him in the position of having to make a moral decision. He has proposed to Cynthia Whitwell, the neighbor he has known since childhood, and at the same time he has continued and intensified his flirtation with Bessie Lynde to the point that he kisses her. Again, the image of Jeff’s hands in this scene marks him as physical and primitive: “Jeff took her hands and put them both in the hold of one of his large, strong hands. . . . He put his other large, strong hand upon her waist,

and pulled her to him and kissed her” (300). His response to his own actions reinforces his savagery: “Another sort of man, no matter what he had believed of her, would have felt his act a sacrilege then and there. Jeff only knew that she had not made the faintest struggle against him; she had even trembled toward him, and he brutally exulted in the belief that he had done what she wished, whether it was what she meant or not” (300).⁷⁶ As he tells Westover about the kiss, Durgin again describes it as being out of his control: “I couldn’t have believed it myself, if I hadn’t been through it. . . . I don’t care for the girl; I never did” (304). Following this observation, Jeff proceeds to make a decision based not on social duty or on personal morality, but on his own desire.

Howells demonstrates Jeff’s primitive nature in his description of the decision-making process that revolves around selfish motives. Jeff insists that his own inclination to maintain his relationship with Cynthia and his claim to the family hotel at Lion’s Head dictate that he break with Bessie Lynde. Westover argues that Jeff should break with Cynthia and return to Bessie, for whom, Westover argues, Jeff is clearly suited, and he disgustingly chastises Durgin: “I see . . . that you’ve been reasoning it all out, and I’m not surprised that you’ve kept your own advantage steadily in mind. I don’t suppose you know what a savage you are, and I don’t suppose I could teach you. . . . You can’t do a wrong thing and prosper in it. . . . You’re an unlucky man if life hasn’t taught you that you must pay in suffering of some kind, sooner or later, for every wrong thing you do” (308). Jeff responds “with a sneering laugh.” He asks, “How do you suppose all the big fortunes were made?” making an obvious reference to Carnegie and his kind, and he continues to explain his view of the situation:

You pay, or you don't pay, just as it happens. If you get hit soon after you've done wrong, you think it's retribution, and if it holds off till you've forgotten all about it, you think it's a strange Providence, and you puzzle over it, but you don't reform. You keep right along in the old way. Prosperity and adversity, they've got nothing to do with conduct. *If you're a strong man, you get there, and if you're a weak man, all the righteousness in the universe won't help you.* But I propose to do what's right about Cynthia, and not what's wrong; and according to your own theory of life—which won't hold water a minute—I ought to be blessed to the third and fourth generation. I don't look for that, though. *I shall be blessed if I look out for myself; and if I don't, I shall suffer for my want of foresight.* But I sha'n't suffer for anything else. (309; emphasis added).

Jeff clearly represents a brand of social Darwinism at odds with Fiske's optimism and reflective of Howells's own modified interpretation of social evolution. However, his view is not entirely "red in tooth and claw."

Although Jeff does achieve all that he wishes—ownership of the Lion's Head Inn, a fire that destroys the old building and gives him a chance to build anew with insurance money, and a marriage to a woman of social and economic status with whom he fell in love years before—Howells does not give him the last word in the novel. That honor goes to the idealist Westover. In conversation with Whitwell, Westover contends that Jeff Durgin, even after all his success, has not changed his ways, that he is still the scoundrel he was as a child. Whitwell cannot accept that a morally primitive person can achieve such success as Durgin has achieved: "All that I thought . . . is't there must be a moral government of the universe *somewheres*, and if a bad feller is to get along and

prosper hand over hand, that way, don't it look kind of as if—" (399). He cannot carry the thought through to its conclusion, but Westover is willing: "There wasn't any moral government in the universe? Not the way I see it. . . . A tree brings forth of its kind. As a man sows he reaps. It's dead sure, pitilessly sure. Jeff Durgin sowed success, in a certain way, and he's reaping it. He once said to me, when I tried to waken his conscience, that he should get where he was trying to go if he was strong enough, and being good had nothing to do with it. I believe now he was right" (399).

Westover qualifies this statement in what follows, but the qualification seems much weaker than original sentiment, as if he is trying to convince himself of its truth but finds himself unequal to the task: "He was wrong too, as such a man always is. That kind of tree bears Dead Sea apples, after all. He sowed evil, and he must reap evil. He may never know it, but he will reap what he has sown" (399). The novel's final chapter functions in much the same way as Westover's platitude, insomuch as Howells describes Westover's realization of his love for Cynthia and closes with her acceptance of his proposal of marriage. This small success for the moral center of the novel does little, however, to offset the much more significant lesson illustrated by Jeff Durgin.

Howells's experiences, both in his personal life and in his view of society, had shifted his angle of vision, allowing him to adopt a worldview in significant alignment with twenty-first century positions on biological and social development. His earlier fiction, represented here by *The Minister's Charge*, relied heavily on Fiske's assumption of teleological progress achieved through slow, constant improvement of individuals, which would lead in turn to constant improvement in humanity as a whole. Howells voices this view in his principle of "Complicity" as articulated by Reverend David

Sewell. Such individual and social evolution appears in the person of Lemuel Barker as he adapts to his new environment in Boston and advances through the strata of Boston society, eventually passing along his characteristics to the next generation of Bostonians through his marriage to a woman of some social standing. The novel closes with the implication that improvement will continue through the generations, at some point reaching an equilibrium representative of perfection.

In *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, Howells maintains no such hope. Adaptation to a changing environment and struggle for survival and reproduction remain central to this new view, but there no longer appears to be hope for an eventual age of human perfection. Those who rely on physical strength and sheer tenacity, individuals like Jeff Durgin, have an equally good (perhaps superior) chance to survive and prosper, passing their characteristics and their accumulated wealth to succeeding generations that will, in turn, compete with those like Westover who represent the hope for what Howells sees as social improvement. Westover's own marriage to Cynthia Whitwell, a representative of "the New England Type," marks perhaps a moral improvement, but an improvement that remains overshadowed by Durgin's own match (99). Social Darwinism no longer offers hope for constant improvement, constant progress, and eventual perfection; it now represents only the hope for perpetual struggle for survival in an ever-changing and threatening social environment.

Conclusion

Howellsian Realism and Darwinian Evolution: The Dean from a New Angle of Vision

“In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation. . . . Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.”

—Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (458)

William Dean Howells’s literary career continued for another twenty-three years after publication of *The Landlord at Lion’s Head*, and he continued to explore the themes he had developed in his fiction to that time, including those prompted by his ongoing interest in Darwinian evolution, but his creativity had stagnated by the end of the nineteenth century, a casualty, according to some scholars, of his own popular success. His solid reputation and the steadiness associated with his name meant more to his publishers than innovative production, and his own financial stability had become more important to him than literary innovation. The trajectory of his creative energy had run its course, and Darwinian evolution apparently left him few additional avenues to explore following *The Landlord at Lion’s Head*. He did attempt, late in his career, to reinvent himself as he had in the early 1870s, but critical and popular expectations and his own disillusionment limited the scope of his creative impulse. In addition, he was feeling old and weary, not capable of devoting the energy to his art that he had as a younger man.

This does not mean, however, that his later work is not worthy of attention, nor does it mean that he abandoned altogether the paradigm of evolution and natural selection

that had served him so well for twenty-five years. Although *The Landlord at Lion's Head* marks the point at which he concluded that humankind might never see the balance and perfection of Altruria, the Darwinian viewpoint offers direction for the Howells scholar in examining all of his works from 1870 on. In so doing, the student of Howells must recognize that the Darwinism of Howells is not the hard, materialistic evolution of the later naturalists. Howells approaches the subject with an eye to nuance, and eventually uses his interpretation of Darwinian natural selection to define his perspective in explaining human behavior.

This dissertation recognizes the subtlety with which Howells made use of Darwinian science, in an effort to contribute to the ongoing reclamation of Howells's reputation as a groundbreaking writer and critic, preparing the path that materialistic realists and modernists would later follow. The development of Howellsian realism depended on an alignment of many factors. Wide dissemination of Darwin's ideas about evolution and natural selection provided the foundation. A leisured and educated reading public readily accepted a theory presented to them in accessible and engaging language by a popular and respected scientist. Science had brought great prosperity and progress to American society, and a scientific explanation of the wide variety of life on earth gradually mediated a theological paradigm weakened by decades of doubt. The ready acceptance of evolution as the new basis for biological study emboldened a young William Dean Howells to explore the possibility of a scientific underpinning for a new direction in literature that would combine close observation of the immediate environment, much as he had exercised in his travel writing, and a method of interpreting

these observations that depended on the foundational principles of evolutionary science as Howells understood them.

In a creative burst near the beginning of his literary career, Howells absorbed the components of Darwinian natural selection from the intellectual milieu that surrounded him. To augment this general understanding, he read and reviewed the works of Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin, and John Fiske, and he solicited essays for publication when he was editor of the *Atlantic* that would reinforce the knowledge he needed to establish his new direction in literary expression. Charles J. Sprague's October 1866 *Atlantic* essay detailing the development and dissemination of "The Darwinian Theory" along with some discussion of its implications appeared only months after Howells began working for James Fields as assistant editor of the *Atlantic*. The essay, which Howells no doubt proofread and checked meticulously, provided the basic overview of Darwinian natural selection upon which Howells built the initial scaffolding for his own brand of literary realism.

Sprague first provides a brief history of the movement in geology that would eventually lead Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace to their proposal of natural selection as the mechanism driving the evolution of species. Geologist Charles Lyell most famously rejected the generally accepted catastrophist view that the Earth remained a static system for long periods which were punctuated by moments of divinely directed mass destruction that would set the stage for a remaking of the Earth's surface. Lyell built upon the work of Scottish geologist James Hutton, proposing that steady changes generated by natural forces acting at historically consistent levels could account for the creation of the current geologic structure of the planet, and eventually his *Principles of*

Geology (1830-33) reshaped the field of geological study. The result of his work was the expansion of the Earth's age from the previously accepted value of about four millennia back into the millions of years. It would have been nearly impossible for a nineteenth-century reader to appreciate the enormity of the earth's history, but Sprague explains the concept using the example of Niagara Falls, thus making concrete for Howells the immensity and power of the natural environment in shaping human behavior. Even more importantly for Howells was the exposure of geology to scientific study. In the new view, natural law rather than divine inclination shaped the world. Scientists could conceivably uncover these laws and understand the process. Howells realized that the novelist, working with these same natural laws, could establish the natural laws that shape human behavior and lead humanity to eventual perfection.

Lyell's new approach to geology corresponded with the age of European imperial expansion, and voyages of discovery and exploration began to return massive collections detailing the natural environments of new lands. Naturalists returned to Europe bearing carefully preserved and cataloged specimens representing the vast range of species of flora and fauna from across the globe as well as their almost infinite variability. Although exploitation of natural resources remained the primary objective for these voyages, their byproduct was a new store of specimens for scientific study, evaluation, and classification. Howells understood this new direction in scientific study, and he extrapolated from it the possibility for the artist to document and examine human behavior using the same techniques. In the early sketches he wrote for the *Atlantic*, Howells gathered his specimens for study from the streets of Cambridge and surrounding areas, recording in his journals minute details of the actions and speech of his subjects as

well as the minutia of their surroundings. From these observations, he built the collection of sketches that he would later publish as *Suburban Sketches* in which he began his systematic examination of human behavior and of people's interaction with one another and with the environment.

In addition to examining the geological components in natural selection, Sprague also addresses the biological precursors to the theory of natural selection. The first of these essential elements is biological overproduction, or superfecundity in William Paley's words. The geometric expansion of populations if left unchecked would soon pack the planet with creatures. Thomas Malthus contended that the limited resources necessary for survival, which can only expand arithmetically, would act as this check. Sprague does not name Malthus, but conveys Darwin's examples of vast overproduction. Having recently moved from New York City where the population had almost doubled over the preceding twenty years, Howells would certainly have appreciated the concept of geometric population growth. He also no doubt would have been especially receptive to discussion of the other two elements central to Darwinian natural selection, hereditary transmission of characteristics from one generation to the next and variation within species populations.

Sprague does not see fit to address heredity directly. He likely assumed that its influence would not come into question. Selection under domestication taught that selectively bred animals would reproduce offspring that would breed true to the characteristics exhibited in the parents. This assumption carried over to humans as well. It was and still is the expectation that a child will take after his parents in both appearance and temperament. The final piece in the puzzle that when completed will reveal the

image of natural selection is the concept of broad variability within species. The aforementioned voyages of discovery returned large collections of specimens that illustrated this point to the scientific community. Sprague discusses variation of animals and humans, and Howells certainly appreciated the broad variability of humanity present on the city streets. The combination of these components—deep time, biological overproduction, heredity, and variation—led Darwin and Wallace to conclude that the competition for scarce resources would lead over immense spans of time to shift the basic constitution of a species as those individuals better adapted to win these resources were able to pass on their characteristics to the next generation while less fit individuals died without the opportunity to reproduce. Thus biology, like geology a generation earlier, came under the rule of natural law and therefore became available for scientific scrutiny.

The most significant effect of this shift was to alter the place of humankind within the natural world. Although scientists of the post-Darwinian nineteenth century continued to support a hierarchy with humans firmly ensconced upon the pinnacle, they increasingly began to include humans as a part of the animal kingdom rather than as a creation positioned above the animals. For Howells, the implications of this shift in scientific inquiry were manifold. He began to explore this new approach to the natural world in his early sketches written for publication in the *Atlantic* and further developed in his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*. In these early works, Howells pokes about the edges of a Darwinian world and attempts to refine his method of interpretation based on evolutionary science. Niagara Falls encapsulates Howells's vision of the natural world as ancient, powerful, and constantly changing. His characters in *Their Wedding Journey* react to the power of nature with awe and fear, fully aware of their inability to affect it in

any meaningful way, despite the seemingly indomitable power of human technology. In a Darwinian world, nature overwhelms human endeavor. Throughout his career, Howells periodically reaffirmed this view of nature. In 1888, for example, he added a chapter to *Their Wedding Journey* for its republication. “Niagara Revisited: Twelve Years after Their Wedding Journey” follows Basil and Isabel March, now accompanied by their two children, Tom and Bella, as they retrace the steps of their honeymoon. The Marches experience again “that old, entrancing sense of the mingled awfulness and loveliness of the great spectacle” and observe that “the triviality of man in the surroundings of the Falls had increased with the lapse of time” (*Their Wedding Journey* 188, 189). Such instances reinforce the extensive influence that the study of geology had on Howells’s fiction. This successful exploration of the geological foundations of Darwinian evolution, the power of natural forces and the insignificance of individual effort in the face of such overwhelming power, leads Howells to explore the Darwinian paradigm in greater depth.

In the same period of his artistic development during the opening years of the 1870s, Howells also began to explore the biological components of evolution including competition for limited resources, variation within a species, and heredity transmission of characteristics that can affect the differential survival of varying individuals. As a novelist, Howells was of course interested in the interaction of the individual and the environment. Indications of this interest appear in his early nonfiction works including *Venetian Life* (1866) and *Italian Journeys* (1867), but in the summer of 1869, he read Alfred Russel Wallace’s account of his journeys through Maritime Southeast Asia in *The Malay Archipelago* (1868). This extensive description of the islands between Southeast

Asia and Australia led Howells to redirect his literary focus. Wallace's efforts to combine close observation with detailed analysis of the interaction of people with their environment would surely have attracted Howells's attention. Wallace's support of Darwin's theories would also be of special interest to Howells, especially the detailed accounts of individual and social development of the humanity he encounters.

Suburban Sketches and *Their Wedding Journey* contain Howells's exploration of the biological elements essential to natural selection as well as an initial attempt at analysis of the implications of this paradigm shift. Howells's sketch "Jubilee Days," his first sketch published after reading Wallace, details Howells's observations recorded at the National Peace Jubilee in Boston in June 1869. The massive crowd illustrates exponential reproduction, heredity, and broad variation in humans. The immensity of the crowd represents both superfecundity and variation while the narrative observer's recognition of a Boston "type" that can be differentiated from a New York or Chicago type illustrates hereditary influence through generations in a geographically circumscribed population. In *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells also explores the role that chance plays in the life of the individual and in the development of a population. Throughout the sketches and the novel, chance regularly influences or undermines human intention. Sometimes the results are relatively benign, but in many cases, the result is injury or death. By the time he had published *Suburban Sketches* and *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells was convinced that this new approach to literature could lead him to the recognition and success he wanted so badly.

With publication of *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells established the premises upon which the conclusion of natural selection depends, but he had yet to explore more

extensively the implications of natural selection as they relate to human social structures. The courtship novels Howells wrote during the 1870s following publication of *Their Wedding Journey* represent his continued work with the biological elements of evolution, and study of them could help to chart the development of his attitudes toward Darwinian evolution. I have been unable to locate any evidence that Howells read Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) upon its publication. He did not review it, nor did a review of it appear in the *Atlantic*. It nevertheless seems clear that he was familiar with the arguments it contains, because to read his courtship novels after reading the explication of sexual selection in *Descent of Man* certainly suggests a debt owed to Darwin.

Bert Bender notes this debt in *Descent of Love* (1996), his study of the influence of Darwin's *Descent of Man* from its publication in 1871 to Ernest Hemingway's use of its ideas in *The Sun also Rises*. The most significant limitation to Bender's work is his assumption of Howells's familiarity with *Descent of Man* without any evidence that Howells had ever read the book or anything about it. Bender begins by noting that "It is scarcely credible that Howells . . . would not have been among the very first Americans to read *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. With no less excitement than that with which a later generation of writers would turn to Freud, he would have seen at once that Darwin's new book would become the measure of the new, realistic examination of courtship and marriage that he had just begun" (45). While this may be true, it seems incautious to base a literary study upon this foundation. Further pursuit of such parallel readings with accompanying documentation of Howells's familiarity with source materials could prove helpful in study of Howells's use of Darwinian sexual selection. The conventions of courtship in Howells's courtship novels mimic in some

detail the courtship process Darwin describes, from the ostentatious beards of the men to the plumage on the women's hats. Howells, like Darwin, sees the woman's position as one of great power and of great importance; the choices Howells's women make in selecting their mates will shape the next American generation. At the same time, their power remains almost entirely passive, and the activity involved with accepting or rejecting a suitor often overwhelms them.

Howells's initial exploration of evolution's implications led him to conclude that Darwinian evolution provides a pattern for creation of a literature based on mimetic representation of mundane details observed and recorded in minute detail. The whole of these combined recorded observations demonstrates a theoretical structure informed by Darwinian natural selection and evolution. Based on his work at the *Atlantic*, Howells stood poised to take the next significant step in developing the application of evolution on a broader scale to human morality and its relationship to human social structures. He concluded that a nascent human morality exists in all individuals and that social institutions are required to develop and solidify this innate morality. In other words, the human moral sense must be trained to recognize accepted standards of thought, speech, and action. Howells's close friend John Fiske combined progress and altruism in *Outline of Cosmic Philosophy* (1874) and shared his conclusions with Howells on their walks together about Cambridge. In his formulation of an overarching philosophy of human development, Fiske presents evolution as synonymous with universal progress and posits altruism, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, as the central guiding factor in the evolution of humankind. Fiske's outlook retains Herbert Spencer's progress toward

perfection and adds to it an innate human altruism developed through natural selection. Fiske's ideas provided the groundwork for Howells's exploration of human morality.

Composition of *A Modern Instance*, in which Howells initially develops this notion of human morality, cost him dearly in terms of his own intellectual, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The main characters in *A Modern Instance* facilitate Howells's application of Fiske's explication of human morality. He begins with his two central characters, Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord, who never had the benefit of moral education. Howells removes from them the support provided by social institutions and observes their humanity as it dissolves into near savagery when their unchecked primitive impulses overwhelm them. Howells offers Ben Halleck as a contrast to Bartley and Marcia. Halleck has neither physical beauty nor strength, but his moral education sets him apart. The structure of the novel allows Howells to explore Fiske's description of human morality, working from the assumption that the existing variety of humanity represents the evolutionary history of the species. At the close of the novel, Howells can only conclude that the world of Darwinian evolution is not nearly as tidy as he had initially supposed, and thus he confesses, through the words of Eustace Atherton, that human institutions governing moral behavior do not yet have the requisite stability to shape adequately human moral development. Examination of the novel from this perspective makes sense of the seemingly anomalous structure that bothers many Howells scholars. Following publication of *A Modern Instance*, Howells continued in a decade-long burst of creative energy to explore application of Darwinism to human action and interaction.

Throughout the 1880s, Howells's attitude toward evolution exhibited a slow but steady shift from one of measured optimism concerning the future of human society to one of pessimism and doubt. The first half of the new decade, however, marks the apex of Howells's hopeful vision of evolution. *The Minister's Charge* introduces Lemuel Barker, a farm boy from rural Maine. Howells removes Barker from the environment to which he is perfectly adapted and deposits him in the city with only his clothes and his innate abilities. Howells then traces Barker's adaptation to this new environment. He concludes that adaptation is possible for the individual. He also concludes that the variation introduced to the existing, relatively closed social structure will strengthen society as a whole. In theory, the social de-stratification of the United States will allow a broader pool upon which the process of selection can take place. Over generations, this will strengthen the American genetic stock, perhaps allowing the eventual perfection of the individual and of American society. In *The Minister's Charge*, Howells also first fully articulates his notion of complicity, the idea that individual improvement can become part of the hereditary composition of American society, strengthening and invigorating the solid foundation supplied by the Boston Brahmins for whom Howells maintained great respect. To combine the self-control, reserve, intelligence, and wisdom of Bromfield Corey with the vitality and adaptability of Lemuel Barker would assure the future of American society.

The decade following publication of *The Minister's Charge*, however, led to a significant modification in Howells's thinking, and this shift appears as well in his use of Darwinian concepts in his fiction. Howells never fully adopted Herbert Spencer's laissez faire attitude, but events that took place between the publication of *The Minister's*

Charge in 1886 and *The Landlord of Lion's Head* in 1897 led to a distinct shift in Howells's outlook. His acceptance of Fiske's optimism and his own faith in social institutions that had sustained Howells for so long slowly gave way to a more mature conception of evolution and natural selection. While the earlier novel presents a nineteenth-century view of evolution and natural selection, the later novel presents a more modern interpretation much closer to evolution as it is now accepted following the Modern Synthesis integrating Mendelian genetics with Darwinian natural selection. Between 1886 and 1896, Howell's faith in Fiske's optimistic view of human morality fell victim to a series of personal and social calamities, and a new conception of evolution as a never-ending process took its place. The death of his father and, more importantly, of his eldest daughter; his reaction to the Haymarket affair; and his discovery of Tolstoy's social writings, all led him away from his earlier optimism. The conclusions about human progress that result from this shift illustrate Howells's more subtle understanding of Darwinian natural selection, especially as it affects human success within existing social structures and human efforts to shape social environments. From this perspective, social evolution will never result in perfection. Evolution becomes a perpetual process by which individuals and societies adapt to ever-changing environments. *The Landlord at Lion's Head* illustrates this new view, represents Howells's most direct examination of social Darwinism, and exemplifies his increasingly sophisticated understanding of evolution and natural selection as applied to human social structures.

In *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, adaptation to an ever-shifting environment and the struggle for survival and reproduction remain, but the hope for the eventual perfection of humanity is gone. Individuals like the rough-hewn Jeff Durgin who prosper solely

based on physical strength and tenacity survive and prosper. The painter Jere Westover represents the last bit of hope for what Howells sees as social improvement. Westover appears as physically weak—his final discussion with Durgin occurs while Westover is recovering from a prolonged illness—and Durgin influences him much more frequently than he influences Durgin. Social Darwinism cannot offer for Howells any hope for steady progress toward eventual perfection. The best that can be hoped for is survival in the perpetual struggle within a shifting social environment.

The Landlord at Lion's Head marks the culmination of Howells's understanding of evolution and its application to fiction. He had finally come to grips with application of the new Darwinian paradigm to realist literature, but he was wearing out physically, intellectually, and emotionally. The pace at which he had pushed himself for decades along with the psychological burdens, both personal and more broadly social, that weighed upon him had taken a toll, sapping his creative energy. John Crowley asserts that: "Although his professional fortunes unquestionably improved during the 1890s—by the turn of the century he had become not only a literary idol, but also a rich man (a millionaire in today's dollars)—the arc of his ascendance crossed a downward curve in his imaginative powers. By the time Howells had been installed as 'The Dean of American Letters,' he was largely exhausted as a writer" (Crowley, *The Dean* 46). Howells had worked his way through development of Darwinian evolution, the "new direction" he had taken two decades earlier after reading Wallace's account of his exploration and collection in the Malay Archipelago, and he had finally concluded that existing social structures could not contain the brutal strength of an individual like Jeff Durgin.

If he was to continue writing fiction, Howells was going to have to light out in another “new direction,” and he was finding that he was too old and too tired to try anything new. It could also be inferred that he had been disappointed by the conclusions he had reached about the potential of evolution in human progress, and by 1898, he was complaining that he no longer had the heart to create fiction: “I have written a great deal on the lines I attempted long ago; and I think the present novel will be the last I shall do on them. I am an elderly man, and I ought to deal more with things of spiritual significance. This is what I have felt for some time. Outer life no longer interests me as it once did, and I cannot paint it with spirit, or give it the charm I used to find in it” (qtd. in Crowley, *The Dean* 47). Although Howells seems to have maintained his literary output during the decade of the 1890s, he was, in Edwin Cady’s estimation, merely executing projects conceived years earlier: “Without being able to date many of his fundamental creative impulses to fiction, one suspects that he had begun to live off creative capital—that the ideas for almost all the fiction after about 1892 had come from the previous six or seven years of extraordinary creative richness” (*Realist at War* 223). Crowley agrees with Cady and expounds upon the illusion of Howells’s productivity: “The regular appearance of ‘Life and Letters’ [a column Howells wrote for *Harper’s*] after 1895 and the belated publication of fiction written earlier gave the appearance of undiminished energy and unstinting productivity. But Howells, as he realized, had passed his zenith; after *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* was completed in March 1896, he soon reached the point of diminishing returns with his novels” (Crowley 47). Evolution and natural selection had not supported Howells’s hope that progress had carried human society to the verge of perfection. He had carried the examination of Darwinian

evolution and natural selection to its logical and, for Howells, disheartening conclusion, and he had expended much of his creative energy in doing so.

This does not mean, however, that the approach taken in this dissertation loses all efficacy in relation to Howells's later work. One possibility for further application of this approach is to study the imagined future that Howells projects in his utopian fiction in which he bypasses the process of perfection and imagines a world where the peaceful transformation to the perfect, balanced social structure envisioned by Herbert Spencer, the "evolution" as Howells calls it in *A Traveler from Altruria*, has already taken place. As the traveler in the novella explains, "we first took the name of Altruria in our great, peaceful campaign against the Accumulation" (142). This social conversion seems to happen almost of its own accord: "Our evolution was accomplished without a drop of bloodshed, and the first great political brotherhood, the commonwealth of Altruria, was founded" (145).

Howells's autobiographical writings also offer a possible direction for scholarship. In his detailed record of the development of a single life, to Howells's mind analogous to development of a species, one can trace the development of humankind. In this outlook one can see shades of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Gertrude Stein's "The Making of Americans." The child represents for Howells a primitive state of existence. Tom Towers identified this element in 1969 in his essay "Savagery and Civilization: The Moral Dimensions of Howells's *A Boy's Town*," but he never attributes his obviously Darwinian observations to Darwin himself. The main character in *A Boy's Town* is identified as "My Boy," a superficially disguised surrogate for Howells in his own youth. In Towers's estimation, "'My boy' can scarcely perceive and certainly

cannot understand the more sordid aspects of his experience. He seems surrounded by pleasure—or at least the absence of responsibility—and the lives of others in a very real sense simply do not exist for him. Throughout the book, Howells calls this failure of the moral imagination ‘savagery,’ and he repeatedly refers to the boys as ‘savages.’ The savage boy cannot explain the evil that impinges upon his own life, but from time to time he becomes inarticulately conscious of it” (Towers 171). Towers perceives that this savagery rests on a hereditary foundation; it is not something that is learned: “For Howells there is no outward or environmental explanation for the savagery of the boys. Rather, cruelty and violence seem necessary parts of the primitive life of childhood” (Towers 175). Towers also notes the universality of savagery in humankind: “But if the boys seem to speak for the necessary savagery into which all men are born, there are also other facets to the human character, and there is in the book the possibility of a better existence in which man can hope to become free from both outward harm and inward horror. The state which Howells sets over against savagery he calls civilization, by which he means not a cultural but a moral condition” (Towers 175). Observations such as those Towers made forty years ago could be significantly augmented and developed given the superstructure of Darwinian evolution as provided in this study.

Additionally, one could pursue Howells’s influence on American fiction in the generations that followed him. W. D. Whitney’s comment in the 1874 *North American Review* referring to Darwinian evolution could as easily apply to Howellsian realism in the decades from 1870 to 1940: “Hardly any one reads and thinks so little that he has not felt called upon to make up his mind, or at least to ask himself, on which side of the controversy he will take his stand” (61). Howells’s realism, denigrated though it was by

the next generation of writers, prepared the reading public and literary critics for the more materialistic strains of realism that rose at the end of the nineteenth century. Norris and Dreiser, among others, presented human endeavor as wholly determined by heredity and environment. The failure and despair of their characters derives from their inability to affect in any meaningful way the trajectories of their lives. In the years following the Civil War, Howells's work both in the *Atlantic* and in his many novels prepared the way for the later realists, and study of his work with an eye to this foregrounding opens new avenues of scholarship both for Howells and for all those who came under his influence, whether they recognized it or not.

Such a critical approach would help to redeem Howells's reputation, which has never fully recovered from the attacks leveled against him in the twenty years following his death. At the end of the nineteenth century, criticism of Howells began to shift. As Crowley points out, however, criticism was not new to Howells: "At no time during his long career did Howells ever escape criticism, and the nature of the criticism remained consistent insofar as it was inflected by romantic assumptions and centered on the perceived deficiencies of realism as a literary method" (Crowley, *The Dean* 92). What did change, however, was Howells's ability to defend himself from such attacks:

"Whereas at the height of Howells's success, during the 1880s, his fiction had sometimes been seen as provocative and denounced as excessively analytic or perilously agnostic, the complaint against *The Dean*, soon after the turn of the century, was the banality, placidity, and 'femininity' of his all too common and crude material" (Crowley, *The Dean* 92). Much of this critical vitriol was, according to Crowley, misplaced and undeserved, and this dissertation offers evidence of Howells's understanding of the

Darwinian science that would later provide the foundation for critically commended naturalism.

Late in his career, Howells found it very difficult to address or even to deflect the criticism leveled at him: “If Howells had been inclined to defend himself [from criticism that his fiction was bland and trite], he was now prevented by his own exalted status, with which only regal silence seemed commensurate. Thus as *The Dean* became more and more monumentalized, a paralyzing petrification set in, leaving Howells immured in the prisonhouse of his own celebrity, impotent to conserve his rapidly diminishing power” (Crowley, *The Dean* 95). Within only a few years, Howells saw his popularity fade, and “by his death in 1920, he had not only outlived his beloved wife and most of his friends; he had also long since lost his dominant influence on the national literature” (Crowley, *The Dean* 66-67).

Howells’s literary reputation was not allowed to wane naturally during his lifetime with the possibility for later discovery and resurrection. The modernists in the years following World War I built a Howellsian effigy and took great pleasure in burning it with some regularity: “Not content to cast down *The Dean*’s statues and leave the moonlit grass to blanket them, the moderns dragged the dread icons into broad daylight and smashed them to smithereens” (Crowley, *The Dean* 91). This iconoclasm occurred most famously in Sinclair Lewis’s Nobel Prize speech of 1930. Careful reading and reflection rather than mimicking the academic party line, however, open to the reader new possibilities for serious study of Howells.

This dissertation demonstrates one possible approach to Howells as applied to select novels. Elements of evolution and natural selection appear in all of Howells’s

work after *Suburban Sketches*. In an interesting passage from a later short story, “The Critical Bookstore” (1916), Howells sums up the role of the critic in literary evolution. Howells’s protagonist in the story, Frederick Erlcort, has determined to open a bookstore that sells only the best of literature. He wants to be able to guarantee the quality of the fiction he sells. To this end, he buys a shop and begins to read a massive stack of books in an attempt to select the best of them to share with his clients. He meets with some success, but finally concludes that it should not be he who determines what of literature is to survive: “Literature is the whole world; it is the expression of the gross, the fatuous, and the foolish, and it is the pleasure of the gross, the fatuous, and the foolish, as well as the expression and the pleasure of the wise, the fine, the elect. Let the multitude have their truck, their rubbish, their rot; it may not be the truck, the rubbish, the rot that it would be to us, or may slowly and by natural selection become to certain of them. But let there be no artificial selection, no survival of the fittest by main force—the force of the spectator, who thinks he knows better than the creator of the ugly and the beautiful, the fair and foul, the evil and good” (223). It is clear that a reassessment of Howells should be undertaken in light of new connections between his literary production and the ideas of evolution and natural selection. Scholars have long noted the parallels between Howells and evolution, but to this point, none has combined in-depth source analysis with detailed readings of Howells’s fiction in light of these essential influences.

Notes

1. Whitney's brief definition of evolution will later prove important as he voices the common assumption, maintained by many to this day, that evolution represents overall progress.
2. Howells himself suffered almost all of his life with ailments he described using these terms.
3. The performer who played the "What Is It" for at least the later years of Barnum's display went on to a long career as Zip the Pinhead in both traveling sideshows and later at Coney Island.
4. Darwin's influence continued through Holmes's life. As Stephen J. Gould relates, Holmes's Supreme Court opinion in 1927 upholding Virginia's involuntary sterilization law in *Buck vs. Bell* illustrates his continued faith in the power of hereditary inheritance and the possibility that negative eugenics could ensure human progress: "Carrie Buck, a young mother with a child of allegedly feeble mind, had scored a mental age of nine on the Stanford-Binet [intelligence test]. Carrie Buck's mother, then fifty-two, had tested at mental age seven. Holmes wrote, in one of the most famous and chilling statements of our [the twentieth] century: 'We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the state for these lesser sacrifices. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough'" (*Mismeasure* 335).

5. Stephen J. Gould develops a similar idea in his contention that “no supposed ‘conflict’ between science and religion should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (nor do they encompass all inquiry). But the two magisteria bump right up against each other, interdigitating in wondrously complex ways along their joint border” (“Non-Overlapping” 55).
6. More detailed examination of Fiske’s interpretation of Darwinian evolution appears throughout this dissertation as necessary.
7. It was my reading of *Silas Lapham* in an undergraduate literature class first drew me to study of Howells.
8. Some of the poems make a brief appearance in chapter four of this dissertation.
9. My thanks to Frederick Newberry who assured me that sometimes the simple, honest explanation is the best explanation.
10. Howells had very little formal education save the “bits of grammar and geography” he picked up while attending the Giles Female Academy (an institution more liberal in admission practices than its name might suggest) in Hamilton, Ohio (Goodman 20). In 1882, Howells declined a professorship in literature at Johns Hopkins based in part on his lack of formal education in the subject (Goodman 238). Two years later he turned down an offer from Harvard to succeed Longfellow and Lowell as Smith Professor of Modern Languages, perhaps partially for the same reasons (Lynn 195). Although he had acquired many honorary degrees by the end of his life, including an honorary M. A. from Harvard, he never finished grammar school. Consciousness of this shortcoming prompted him to zealous efforts at self education.

11. William Smith and his map recently enjoyed some popularity as a result of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Map That Changed the World: William Smith and the Birth of Modern Geology* by Simon Winchester (New York: Harper Collins, 2001)
12. Although Smith recognized the importance of fossilized organisms in identifying various geological strata, he did not apply this information to any theory of biological development, focusing instead on the potential financial rewards that would accompany the ability to assess the potential mineral content of a property. It was left to later geologists to synthesize this information with other data to establish a theory of the Earth's antiquity.
13. This is the same shift that Henry Thomas Buckle will later attempt to effect in the study of history, a project Howells had read about during his time in Venice.
14. Twenty-five of these notebooks survive and are housed at Harvard's Houghton library. They offer fascinating insight into the working of Howells's observational impulse.
15. Howells had previously supported Crane, attempting to find a publisher for Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, saying of the novel later in life, "I shall never understand what was found offensive in the little tragedy" (qtd. in Edwards 129). Comments like this undercut Howells's reputation as overly conservative.
16. The modern reader might be able to relate the massive scale involved with the events of 9/11. The image of the colossal World Trade Center towers collapsing in upon themselves, filling the streets of New York with dust and debris cast an indelible image for anyone who saw the video and still images. The mass of the two towers represents the weight of water plunging over Niagara Falls every two minutes.

17. In this argument, Malthus assumes a similar system acting in population as Lyell assumes in geology. Both systems remain balanced and essentially static, all alterations being equally distributed about an unchanging mean. Malthus thus concluded that a social structure stratifying rich and poor would always exist. Darwinian thought introduced the possibility for deviation from this mean over time. Howells's later utopian fiction, along with all utopian fiction of the late nineteenth century, rests on this assumption.
18. Loren Eiseley argues that Darwin most likely did not initially encounter the idea of competition for resources from Malthus, but that a combination of Darwin's own observations and the expression of similar ideas in Lyell and Paley suggested the selective action of competition (*Darwin's Century* 182).
19. Darwin added "An Historical Sketch" to the 3rd British edition of the *Origin of Species* in response to criticism that he had not adequately credited those who had previously addressed the topic of evolution. The sketch appeared in the 3rd American edition which is a reprint of the 5th British edition.
20. In a comment on evolution's effect on hereditary aristocracy, Whipple addresses the physical characteristics of savagery that Howells will later utilize in establishing the primitive natures of selected characters:
- With a monkey in the background, how can even a Hapsburg or a Guelf put on airs of superiority? How must he hide his face in shame to think, that, as his line lengthens into an obscure antiquity, the foreheads of his house slope, and their jaws project; that he has literally been all his life aping aristocracy, instead of being the real thing; and that, when he has reached his true beginning, his only

consolation must be found in the fact that his great skulking, hulking, gibbering baboon of an ancestor rejoices, like himself, in the possession of “the third lobe,” “the posterior cornu of the lateral ventricle,” and “the hippocampus minor.” (302)

Further discussion of this appears in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

21. The summer of 1869 saw a rapid decline in *Atlantic* circulation following publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s article detailing Lord Byron’s affair with Augusta Leigh, his half-sister. The sensational piece cost the magazine “fifteen thousand subscribers and at least part of the moral high ground it had earned and enjoyed since the founding days” (Goodman 133). This reduced the magazine’s circulation to 35,000. Four years later, circulation had dropped to 20,000, and by the time Howells left in 1881, it was down to approximately 12,000 (Goodman 142). Despite this rather precipitous decline in readership, Howells refused to cross certain lines, including that separating the *Atlantic* from the illustrations and sensationalism of the weeklies.
22. Additional information about Howells’s struggles to maintain the *Atlantic*’s circulation appears in Goodman and Dawson’s *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life*.
23. From early childhood, Howells worked in publishing. Goodman describes how “he could remember not knowing how to read; setting type he had known forever” (Goodman 13). John K. Reeves records that Howells “set type for and printed himself his first publication at the age of six or seven” (209). This led Howells to his first attempt at serial fiction when he was just seventeen and began publication of “The Independent Candidate: A Story of To Day,” which he “extemporized . . . at the typecase, setting it up as he thought it out” (Crowley, *Black Heart’s Truth* 34). It was

- a miserable failure in Howells's eyes (and it taught him to draft and edit carefully before publication), but it set him on his way to a career in literature.
24. Howells details his pilgrimage to meet the Brahmins of Boston in the opening chapter of *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*. During dinner with James T. Fields, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Holmes addressed Fields with, "Well, James, this is something like the apostolic succession; this is the laying on of hands" (Howells, *Literary Friends* 37). Howells reports taking Holmes's "sweet and caressing irony as he meant it," but also relates that "the charm of it went to my head long before any drop of wine" (37). He also met Emerson and Hawthorne on this trip.
25. The original position, which he assumed March 1, 1866, paid an annual salary of \$2,500, which would equal approximately \$30,000 in 2006 inflation adjusted dollars (Sahr). His duties included the requirement that he write at least five pages for each issue (Goodman 120).
26. John Bassett contends that Howells also chose travel writing as a framework for his fiction because the travel book "in the nineteenth century had empirical authority, literary prestige, and a more masculine orientation than did popular fiction" (176).
27. In his later fiction, Howells builds upon these preconditions for selection and adaptation in his attempt to negotiate the ever-shifting tensions created by the rapid change of industrial America and the individual's efforts to adapt to this change
28. Wallace wrote a letter to Darwin in 1858 outlining his theory of a mechanism for the origin of species. The fear that twenty years of secret ongoing work might be preempted in a moment prompted Darwin to agree to Charles Lyell's suggestion of a

- simultaneous presentation at a 1 July 1858 meeting of the Linnean Society of Wallace's letter, selections from a 189-page essay Darwin wrote in 1844 detailing his theory about the transmutation of species, and a portion of a letter Darwin wrote in 1857 to American botanist Asa Gray explaining his theory and including an abstract from *Natural Selection*. This "gentlemen's agreement" allowed Darwin to maintain his priority while at the same time recognizing Wallace's contribution (Desmond 316, 457-58, 469-70).
29. Lack of direct observation, as Michael Shermer points out, stood as one of the key stumbling blocks in unraveling the origin of species: "Solving the problem of the origin of species first required accurate representations of plants and animals, which did not come about until the sixteenth century. Before this time medieval scholars made copies of copies of copies, dating back centuries to the ancient texts considered canonical, without checking the original sources" (Shermer fig. 3-5, 95).
30. In this review in particular, the adoption of a persona becomes evident as Howells discusses Wallace's treatment of Malthusian overproduction, exhibiting a scientific knowledge belying his protestations to the contrary. Malthus appears as a topic later in this chapter, and Howells's understanding and use of Malthus will be developed in greater detail.
31. Quotations related to Darwin's time on the Beagle are drawn from *What Darwin Saw* instead of the more well-known *Voyage of the Beagle* as the former is the version of Darwin's experience that Howells read and reviewed in 1879.
32. Such use of actual events in his fiction continued through Howells's career as Edward Wagenknecht observes: "The train wreck in *The Quality of Mercy* was a real wreck of

- 1887, while *A Masterpiece of Diplomacy* makes use of the New York cholera scare of 1893. Silas Lapham builds a house on the water side of Beacon Street at the very time Howells was preparing his residence there, and the streetcar strike in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* took place while the book was being written” (41).
33. Howells would have been particularly interested in the life insurance actuarial tables. Basil March, who would appear as a central character in two Howells novels and as a minor character in several more, and who first appeared within a year of this publication, works in the insurance industry.
34. This description offers a striking parallel to Wallace’s description of the volcano on Banda referenced earlier in this chapter (Wallace, *Malay* 8).
35. “Fellow” in this instance can be read as synonymous with “lover” or “sweetheart” (Bartlett 210).
36. Cumpiano contends that Carrington does not go far enough in fully recognizing the extent to which Howells explores “the same dark and mysterious universe, considered the province of a Hawthorne or a Melville” in *Their Wedding Journey*, but neither Cumpiano nor Carrington notes Howells’s departure from the romantic tradition Hawthorne and Melville represent.
37. As has been noted earlier, the Marches choose to travel by train in an effort to avoid some of the dangers of travel by boat during a severe storm.
38. Upon closer examination, it seems clear that the issues to which Lynn here refers do indeed surface in Howells’s early fiction as well as in his *Atlantic* reviews.
39. Wallace later recants and posits divine intervention as the source of human intellect.

40. \$7,500 in 1881 would have the buying power of approximately \$140,000 in 2006 inflation adjusted dollars (Sahr). As Cady points out, one must also view this deal a “literary bonanza [for Howells], especially in consideration of the purchasing power of the then almost untaxed dollar” (*Realist at War 2*). Howells renegotiated his Harpers contract again in 1886: “For agreeing to offer all his work to the Harpers, Howells received \$10,000 a year. He agreed to write one novel per year. . .” (Cady, *Realist at War 2*). \$10,000 in 1886 would have roughly the purchasing power of \$200,000 in 2006 inflation adjusted dollars (Sahr). As Cady observes, “The history of the arts is replete with sad stories of how immature and necessitous creators were fleeced by rapacious publishers and promoters. That did not happen to Howells” (*Realist at War 2*).
41. S. Weir Mitchell’s “rest cure,” perhaps most famously described in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” demanded that the patient, usually female, lie flat in bed, sitting only to consume eight meals per day. Mitchell substituted massages and daily bathing for the normal exercise lost during the treatment. The administering doctor measured progress by tracking daily weight gain in the patient, assuming that such weight gain equated to increase in strength and constitution.
42. Winny’s condition varied over the years, sometimes giving Howells reason for hope, sometimes driving him to despair. Overall, though, Winny exhibited a slow decline that eventually ended with her death in 1889 while in Mitchell’s care. She was twenty-five years old when she died, one day after her father’s fifty-second birthday.
43. It is interesting to note that Halleck would almost certainly be destroyed in a more savage “struggle for existence.” Only in a society that treasures selflessness could he

- hope to survive and even prosper. This possibility indicates for Darwin and Wallace, and especially for Spencer and Fiske entrance into a new phase of human evolution that values psychological characteristics over the physical.
44. Howells makes frequent use of this device in *A Modern Instance*, using initials, identical and inverse, to mark affinity and contrast between characters. Several critics note this. What goes unnoted in scholarship is that BH could also be William Howells's own initials if Bill, the common nickname for William, were substituted for his first name.
45. Gould presents evidence to support his contention that bacteria surpass all other life on Earth in volume, mass, and in variety of species. He also shows that only bacteria live in all extremes of environment from the ice sheets of Antarctica to the superheated emissions from sub oceanic vents three miles under the Pacific Ocean (175-95).
46. As Howells began writing *A Modern Instance* in the middle of 1881, Fast Day sat at the center of a religious controversy. Originally conceived of as a day of religious contemplation, fasting, and prayer in the mid 1600s, by the late 1800s it had lost most of its religious overtones. In Massachusetts, Fast Day became Patriots' Day in 1894. By this time, there had been calls to dissolve the holiday "for about forty years . . . and Governor Russell in his Fast Day proclamation of the year before . . . so strongly urged the abandonment of the day which had 'ceased to be devoted generally to the purposes of its origin but is appropriated and used as a holiday for purposes at variance with its origin, its name and its solemn character' that the people very properly decided to continue the travesty no longer" (Crawford 483). This early

- reference to Thanksgiving and Fast Day dovetails neatly with Howells's subsequent discussion of institutionalized religion.
47. Again, Howells makes reference to religion in his evocation of the stained glass windows of a church in his description of nature. He places the houses of Equity within the church of nature, thus foreshadowing his later reconstitution of religion in natural law.
48. Critics cite this scene in urging a reevaluation of sexuality in Howells's novels. For additional discussion, see Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau's *The Circle of Eros: Sexuality in the Work of William Dean Howells*.
49. According to George Bennett, Howells substantially toned down this initial description of Marcia's sexuality while the novel was still in the manuscript stage. The unmodified description read, "The action *threw her strong alive young* figure in *perfect* relief, and revealed the outline of her *full* bust and shoulders, while the lamp flooded with light the *smiling* face of *rich* [?] *welcome* she turned to him . . ." (qtd. in Bennet xvii; emphasis added by Bennet). Despite the modification, Marcia's sexuality is hardly disguised, and would have been striking to Howells's audience.
50. Marcia's low forehead recalls the evolutionary sequence as summarized in Edwin P. Whipple's "Mr. Hardhack on the Derivation of Man from the Monkey" as discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation.
51. This belief, though scientifically debunked during the nineteenth century, has remained prevalent in the popular mind. In 1868, John Crawford presented a paper to the Ethnological Society of London in which he continues to assert the existence of a hierarchy of races (with white Europeans at the apex), but which presents hair texture

- as so widely variable as to be useless in establishing racial identity. Despite this, only fifty years ago, “African American caseworkers in New Orleans . . . constructed color charts to assist Negro prospective adoptive parents, who often noted on their applications that they were specifically looking for a child of a given color (usually light-skinned) and with a given hair texture (usually ‘good hair,’ meaning straight or slightly curly but definitely *not* kinky)” (Kennedy 523-24 n.8; emphasis in original).
52. Once more Howells uses the inversion of initials to mark connections between characters: Bartley Hubbard, BH, and Henry Bird, HB. In addition, the bird imagery reappears in Henry Bird’s name.
53. This is an early iteration of the doctrine of Complicity articulated by the Reverend Sewall in Howells’s later novel *The Minister’s Charge* (1887).
54. As Jane Marston notes, these columns reveal that “Howells regarded nineteenth century realistic fiction as an inevitable phase of evolutionary development in the arts” (12). Although Marston does not explicitly acknowledge Howells’s continued assumption of the teleological nature of evolution, her use of the word “inevitable” to describe literary development implies her understanding of this inclination in Howells.
55. Howells’s frequently criticized observation that American novelists “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American” offers some rationale for this optimistic outlook (*Criticism and Fiction* 252). In its proper context, this statement, as Edwin Cady notes, illuminates Howells’s recognition that “as against conditions in Czarist Russia, our well-to-do actualities did not warrant equal gloom” (“Note” 161).

56. Fiske's interpretation of Darwinian evolution and natural selection as applied to human development appears as a central element in chapter 3 of this dissertation.
57. Although definition of social Darwinism as a concept and the later discussion of this concept can provide a useful framework for analysis, one must remain cognizant of the chronology related to the term and realize that Howells's work in the late nineteenth century was entirely uninformed by such articulation. Howells's work exhibits the initial acceptance of a framework based on hard evolution and a broad application of natural selection, but it later develops to illustrate a softening of heredity and an acknowledgement of complexity initially lost in the zealous defenses of Darwinism in the 1860s.
58. This measure probably gives a better indication of Howells's popularity than do sales figures for his novels. Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson note that even *A Modern Instance*, one of Howells's more popular novels, eventually sold only about 10,000 volumes in the United States. This number seems relatively modest by today's standards, but one must "remember that it reached more than one hundred thousand potential readers through serialization in the *Century*, and maybe more assuming that two or more people read each issue" (Goodman 264). It was magazine publication and not book sales that clearly established Howells's popular reputation.
59. Fiske's writings in his *Outline of Cosmic Philosophy* contribute to the foundation upon which the argument in chapter 3 of this dissertation rests.
60. Although Darwin maintains some faith in human progress, he is not as sanguine in his view of human classification: "If man had not been his own classifier, he would never

- have thought of founding a separate order for his own reception” (Darwin, *Descent* 1:191).
61. One must remember that the mechanism for genetic heredity was not known in Howells’s time. Hugo de Vries and Carl Correns rediscovered Gregor Mendel’s work with genetic inheritance in peas only in the early twentieth century, and the concept did not gain wide acceptance until popularized by William Bateson. This work eventually led to what Julian Huxley dubbed the Modern Synthesis in which biologists used Mendelian genetics to support natural selection as the sole mechanism for inheritance of characteristics. Before this time, biologists assumed a variety of such mechanisms of which natural selection was only one.
62. This, of course, is the struggle that works itself out in the actions of Bartley and Marcia Hubbard in *A Modern Instance*.
63. The eugenics movement, which aimed to exert human control over the process of human evolution, began with Robert Galton’s writings in 1865. It was he who coined the term “eugenics” in 1883. Eugenics took hold in the United States through the efforts of Charles Davenport in the early years of the twentieth century. Interventions included positive eugenics, which involved encouraging individuals of “superior” genetic stock to reproduce with one another, and negative eugenics, which attempted to prevent reproduction of individuals of “inferior” genetic stock. Although many people believe that eugenics disappeared with the fall of Hitler’s Germany, the last involuntary sterilizations of “genetically ‘defective’ members of society” in the United States took place as recently as the middle 1970s (Cuddy 12-13)

64. Interestingly, Fiske attempts to reconcile his formulation of progress with theology when he asserts that “original sin is neither more nor less than the brute-inheritance which every man carries with him, and the process of evolution is an advance toward true salvation” (*Destiny* 103).
65. Detail of Agassiz’s position on evolution versus creation appears in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
66. As one example of this attitude, the Columbian exposition of 1893, which Howells attended along with his wife Mildred, “featured living ethnological displays of nonwhite cultures . . . [that] were staged along what one contemporary called ‘a sliding scale of humanity.’ Nearest to the White City were the Teutonic and Celtic races, represented by the two German and two Irish enclaves. The midway’s middle contained the Muhammadan and Asian worlds. Then, continued the observer, ‘we descend to the savage races, the African of Dahomey and the North American Indian, each of which has its place’ at the remotest end of the midway” (Schlereth 172-73). The broad acceptance of such views can be inferred from the fact that “over twenty million people, nearly a quarter of the population of the United States in 1893, paid fifty cents apiece to visit the Columbian Exposition” (Goodman 324).
67. Howells establishes the bestiality and savagery of such primitive types in much the same way that he establishes these qualities in Marcia and Bartley Hubbard in his initial description of them in *A Modern Instance* as described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
68. Howells’s utopian novel, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), presents his view of a society that has moved beyond such survivals, eliminating the serving class and the

- humiliation that comes with it. Although Jane Marston argues that the utopian writings do not sensibly fit with development of Howells's views on evolution, they actually represent the culmination of Darwinian social development as Howells envisions it (Marston 8).
69. This is also, of course, a comment on Howells's own rise from being an unpedigreed boy from small-town Ohio to editor of the *Atlantic*.
70. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Tom Corey himself defies the social institutions that previously bound a young man of his social position to take a wife from his own socioeconomic stratum. Corey marries Penelope Lapham, the daughter of nouveau riche "paint king" Silas Lapham who himself hails from a small farm in Vermont.
71. Although the term "survival of the fittest" as a description of natural selection first appeared in Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864), Darwin adopted it in the fifth edition of *Origin of Species* (1869) and by the 1870s, the term had become associated with Darwinian evolution in the popular mind.
72. Howells himself, it should be remembered, left the Ohio countryside to expand his literary horizons, initially living in Venice during the Civil War and spending the remainder of his life mainly in Boston and New York.
73. The Naturalist writers who followed Howells, and for whom he maintained great respect, did not appreciate this subtlety in their interpretation of social Darwinism.
74. Any reader of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* remembers Lapham's discomfort as he stands at the door of the Corey house wondering whether to remove his gloves or to wear them through the door: "When he had them on, and let his large fists hang down on either side, they looked, in the saffron which the shop-girl said his gloves should

- be of, like canvassed hams” (1034). The rustic Howells man cannot hide his adaptation to farm life.
75. Westover’s seemingly unreasonable liking for Durgin reflects Howells’s own attitudes toward his protagonist. In the introduction to the 1911 Library Edition of the novel, Howells wrote, “I myself liked the hero of the tale more than I have liked worthier men . . .” (viii).
76. In contrast, Lemuel Barker’s reaction after kissing Statira Dudley in *The Minister’s Charge* is to fall “back from her aghast” and to run from the room and out of the boarding house (112).

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