

Annie Howells

and the

Realist-Romantic Conflict

From December 1876 to April 1877, a novel entitled Reuben Dale was serialized in the Galaxy magazine of New York. The author of this work, Annie T. Howells, is not commemorated in any but the most exhaustive literary histories and bibliographies; but her writing career which spanned more than fifty years and encompassed both the United States and Canada presents an interesting reflection of some of the key issues in the late nineteenth-century realist-romantic conflict.

Born in Hamilton, Ohio, in 1844, Annie Howells was the daughter of the eminent journalist William Cooper Howells and the younger sister of the influential American realist William Dean Howells. After the American civil war, inspired by her brother's success in fiction writing and by the steadily increasing opportunities for women in literature, Annie Howells strove to establish herself as a writer by contributing travel

by James Doyle

and literary features to various mid-western newspapers and, for a brief interval in 1872-73, she was the literary editor of the Chicago Inter-Ocean. When this job disappeared in the financial panic of 1873 she decided to follow her brother's example and give up the middle west for New England. In Boston she served as a freelance correspondent to a number of midwestern and New York newspapers. In the spring of 1874 her father was appointed American consul to Quebec City. Annie Howells joined her family there, where she continued her freelance journalism career and in 1875 completed her novel. Two years later she married Canadian civil servant,

journalist, and poet, Achille Fréchet, younger brother of the well-known Canadian poet Louis Fréchet. Annie and Achille Fréchet settled in Ottawa, where they lived for thirty-three years. In 1910 they retired, first to Switzerland and ultimately to California, where Annie Howells Fréchet died in 1938 at the age of ninety-four.

Although throughout her long life she published many short stories and articles in leading American magazines, her novel Reuben Dale is the most noteworthy of her contributions to literature.(2) The story involves an American girl, Agnes Morgan, who marries a widower some twenty years her senior, and who subsequently falls in love with a handsome young army officer named Reuben Dale, precipitating a situation with predictably tragic results. Thus baldly summarized, the plot sounds rather melodramatic, which in many respects it is; but the author, in emulation of her brother's work, carefully builds up a convincing image of social and psychological reality. Her heroine is not the spiritless, simpering ingenue of much nineteenth-century popular fiction but like her creator she is an intelligent and experienced woman in her late twenties. The army officer is no moustache-twirling cad, but a sensitive if somewhat egotistical, young man driven to impetuosity by years of lonely service on the western frontier. The wronged husband is a particularly successful

piece of characterization: vain and rather tiresomely garrulous, he nevertheless reveals a competence within his own limited sphere of experience which his wife gradually comes to recognize and respect. The action, too, is carefully motivated and logically developed. Because social conventionality has become second nature to persons of his background, Reuben Dale imagines himself to be attracted to Agnes's unmarried companion Jenny Bell and it is only with mounting self-revulsion that he gradually realizes he has been unconsciously displacing his affections. Similarly, Agnes begins to recognize her sexual attraction to Dale very slowly and reluctantly, and tries to suppress it by avoiding Dale and devoting herself more conscientiously to her husband. The novel ends, furthermore, with the potentially effective irony of the husband's complete ignorance about his wife's infatuation.

The conclusion of the novel, however, gives way to forced and violent melodrama: gathering all her strength in one final gesture of renunciation, Agnes sends her would-be lover away from her out into a storm; Dale is struck and killed by lightning and Agnes is subsequently driven insane by the shock. In addition to this flamboyant conclusion, the novel suffers from many infelicities of diction and irrelevancies of dialogue and narration. As the story approaches its violent climax, the language becomes stilted, the sentence structure clumsy:

As he went out into the storm which was upon them in its fury, his heart beat quickly with the pain which filled it, and yet through it the certainty that she would love him again when the horror of the present was over was the comfort which sustained him.

"She cannot cease to love me; her heart will still be mine, even as mine will be hers, and until death I will love her."(3)

On the other hand, some elements of the narration are extremely well done, such as the semi-comic characterization of Agnes's husband, whose fantastic notion of courtship conversation is a lugubrious monologue on the death of his first wife:

Many times during the month he had shocked [Agnes] almost beyond forgiveness by his crudeness, his lack of sentiment, and his practical manner of treating subjects which she had always thought of with reverence and utmost delicacy. But she had forgiven him many times, always finding some good to balance the bad. She had even pardoned him in her mind (for he never dreamed he stood in need of mercy) after he had sent a whole afternoon entertaining her with a minute description of the last illness and death of his wife. From the recital he seemed to derive a certain pleasure, which she could not understand, unless

it was that the remembrance of his unceasing kindness to her and the profusion with which he had spent his money upon doctors filled him with self-commendation.

"I should like to have you see the monument I have erected to her memory," he had said in conclusion; and encouraged by her expression of the pleasure which the sight would give her, he described it at length, not, it is true, with the technicalities of an architect or sculptor, but quite vividly enough to give her an idea of its proportions and grandeur, as he did, not omitting to name the sum he had paid for it.(4)

On the whole, the infelicities of style, plot and character in Reuben Dale suggest that the novel was in need of at least one further thorough revision. As a work of late nineteenth-century American realistic fiction it compares quite favourably with many similar efforts published in the magazines or in book form. In one particular respect Reuben Dale is worthy of special note. Departing courageously from contemporary bluestocking moral standards, the author treats the subject of marital infidelity. Adultery had, of course, been used as a literary theme many years earlier in a classic American work of fiction, but Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter had approached its subject through the half-

lights and indirections of the romance, which in the author's famous words, deals with "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet." (5) The post-civil war American realists, who professed to deal mainly with the concrete surface of reality and with the familiar elements of human experience, generally tended at first to avoid such sordid sexual themes. The European realists, of course, particularly Balzac and Flaubert, had dealt with adultery but European explicitness on this subject had almost no influence in the United States until after the appearance of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Annie Howells' audacity is fully evident when it is recalled that Anna Karenina was just being written as Reuben Dale was published, and did not appear in English until 1885. A comparison of a relatively slight magazine piece like Reuben Dale with a masterpiece of Russian realism is easily dismissed as ludicrous but certain parallels of plot and character are worth noting in order to appreciate some of the social and artistic ramifications of Annie Howells' treatment of the adultery theme. The male lovers in both novels are young army officers; the disrupted marriages are between a young woman and an aging husband. Both novels end in exaggerated violence: Reuben Dale's death by lightning bolt is comparable to Anna Karenina's destruction under the wheels of a locomotive. What these parallels indicate,

of course, is that both writers had recourse to standard devices of melodrama: an army officer is a potential roué, errant lovers are punished by a grimly violent nemesis. If Tolstoy rises much further above these conventionalities than Annie Howells does, his recourse to them still indicates that both writers, while dealing with a controversial subject, recognized the moral demands of the nineteenth-century reading public. Only by casting their fictional transgressors in familiar forms and by subjecting them to violent punishment could they hope to get away with treating the subject of adultery at all.

If Reuben Dale is thus seen as a tentative development of some of the insights and ideas subsequently brought to fruition by a master of nineteenth-century European realism, the response of Annie Howells' brother to her novel appears in a particularly suggestive light. In accordance with an arrangement which prevailed for years between them, Annie sent the manuscript to William Dean Howells, who was to offer his criticisms before submitting it to an editor for possible magazine serialization. Later, in 1885, Howells' conception of the comprehensive moral and social relevance of realistic fiction had developed far enough that he could admire Tolstoy's treatment of passion and pronounce Anna Karenina "a wonderful book." (6) But in 1874, his theories still had serious limitations, especially as far as the selec-

tion of subject matter for fiction was concerned. "I could wish," Howells wrote his sister after reading her novel, "that you had chosen some simpler and wholesomer face of human nature, which would also be fresher" (7) This reservation about his sister's choice of subject matter significantly prefigures Howells' famous appeal in 1886 to his fellow novelists in America "to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American." (8) It also recalls the fact that in much of Howells' own fiction the determination to deal only with the "smiling aspects of life" frequently takes the form of an apparent reluctance to deal with sexual problems. In his first novel, Their Wedding Journey (1872), he had deliberately avoided the popular penchant for novels about conflict in love and created a fictional anatomy of a happy marriage and it was not until 1882 that he could bring himself to write the corollary to this early paean to conjugal love, a novel about marital strife and divorce. A Modern Instance reveals, furthermore, weaknesses similar to those he complained about in Reuben Dale. "I should say," he wrote Annie, "that with the ending [of Reuben Dale] the story was a failure. It is violent and feeble at the same time, and I strongly advise you to invent some other denouement. To have Dale struck by lightning and Agnes go mad is a mere coup de théâtre, to which you ought not to resort." (9) Yet in his own A Modern



ANNIE HOWELLS
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Instance Howells resorts to the ploy of having the errant husband killed by an irate reader of his newspaper. The shooting of Bartley Hubbard is not quite so flamboyant and unprepared for as the lightning-bolt death of Reuben Dale but Howells' novel shows that he also could not avoid the obligation to dispense violent punishment to those who flout the sanctity of marriage.

In spite of Howells' objections to the conclusion, he forwarded the manuscript of Reuben Dale to the Galaxy, which to Annie's delight accepted the novel for serialization. The subsequent fortunes of the work, however, were disappointing: its controversial theme elicited no marked response from either readers or critics, suggesting that with its stylistic and other infelicities it was not widely read. Its consignment to virtual oblivion was guaranteed when several publishers declined to bring it out as a book. If Howells' criticism of Reuben Dale stemmed partly from his own rather narrow ideas of novelistic theme and form, he was obviously right in his suggestion that his sister should have toned down the conclusion and worked over some of the prose. But the disappointing reception of Reuben Dale, combined with the disapproval of her brother, apparently had a devastating effect on the author: although she subsequently published many short stories, she never again in her long life attempted a novel.

Her next literary venture after

Reuben Dale may, in fact, have been written as a reaction to her brother's criticisms and the public failure of the novel. Her short story "Le Coureur des Bois," which appeared in Scribner's Monthly for May 1876 seems deliberately to defy every principle of the realist creed as expounded by William Dean Howells. Taking its subject matter and epigraph from the histories of Francis Parkman, a writer for whom Howells had only guarded admiration because of his prominent romantic inclinations, "Le Coureur des Bois" unfolds a tale of love and adventure in seventeenth-century Canada. Instead of taking its material from contemporary life as Howells urged writers of fiction to do, it looks to the past; instead of relying for its action on the probable and ordinary course of human experience, it depends on unusual events and strained coincidence; instead of accepting the logic of events and the frequent ironies of real life, it relies on a contrived and artificial happy ending of the sort common to so-called "domestic sentimental" fiction. It is especially tempting to conclude that Annie Howells wrote "Le Coureur des Bois" as an ironic response to her brother's criticisms of Reuben Dale in view of the fact that Scribner's was in 1876 under the editorship of Josiah Holland, one of the main proponents of the romantic and sentimental school of fiction in nineteenth-century America, and one of the few American literary men for whom the usually congenial and

tolerant William Dean Howells expressed an open dislike. (10)

But if Annie Howells was deliberately offering an indirect rejection of her brother's criticisms of Reuben Dale, she was apparently satisfied by this one brief expression of spleen, for in her next literary venture she attempted to return to orthodoxy. Ironically, however, this attempt to re-establish her devotion to Howellsian realism was unexpectedly thwarted. Early in 1877, she offered a story to Harper's magazine, a slight epistolary narrative entitled "A Visit to a Country House and What Came of It" in which a young girl on vacation imagines herself to be involved in a budding romance with a handsome young man, only to discover to her embarrassment that she has been misinterpreting his conduct and the young man has not had romantic thoughts about her at all. It is not a very good story, but in the ironic ending Annie was obviously trying to implement her brother's repeated warnings against the obvious sentimental conclusion. To her surprise, however, the story was rejected by the Harper's editor Henry Mills Alden, on the grounds that the ending was too inconclusive. Bemused but undaunted, Annie revised the story so that the young couple discover their mutual attraction and in the end are engaged to be married. Alden thoroughly approved of this version, and "A Visit to a Country House" appeared

in the September 1877 issue of Harper's. (11)

Annie Howells' one novel and a few of her subsequent short stories thus provide an interesting illustration of some ramifications of the realist-romantic controversy in American literature and its effect on young ambitious fiction writers--especially women writers. On the one hand, authorities like William Dean Howells were urging their disciples to deal with "real life"--which as his comments on Reuben Dale indicate, actually meant a fairly restricted conception of social and moral problems. On the other hand, many editors like Holland of Scribner's and Alden of Harper's demanded, especially from their female contributors, conformity to the conventions of domestic sentimentalism. As the sister of William Dean Howells, Annie Howells' position in this conflict was especially difficult and she is hardly to be blamed for becoming discouraged with novel writing or for vacillating throughout her career between the two poles of literary theory without ever really finding a distinctive fictional voice of her own. But even with its limitations, Annie Howells' little known fiction is worth resurrecting as a concise and informative illustration of some aspects of a central controversy in nineteenth-century literature.

NOTES

1. This paper is a slightly modified excerpt from a forthcoming joint biography of Annie Howells and her husband Achille Fréchette.
2. I have published a brief survey of Annie Howells' entire literary career as "Howells' Canadian Sister," Canadian Literature, No. 74 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 58-62.
3. Annie T. Howells, "Reuben Dale," The Galaxy, 21 (April, 1876), p. 511.
4. Ibid., 20 (Dec., 1875), p. 733.
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Custom-House: Introductory to The Scarlet Letter," Norton Critical Edition, ed. Scully Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), p. 31.
6. William Dean Howells to Thomas S. Perry, October 30, 1855, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), II, pp. 372-73.
7. William Dean Howells to Annie T. Howells, unpublished letter, October 24, 1874, Houghton Library of Harvard University.
8. William Dean Howells, "The Smiling Aspects of American Life," William Dean Howells: Representative Selections, ed. Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: Hill & Wang, 1961), p. 356.
9. WDH to ATH, Oct. 24, 1874 (Houghton).
10. Howells' differences with Josiah Holland are outlined in Edwin H. Cady, The Road to Realism: The Early Years, 1837-1885, of William Dean Howells (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1956), pp. 122-25.
11. H.M. Alden to Annie T. Howells, unpublished letter, January 24, 1877, Howells-Fréchette Collection, Huntington Library. The ms. early version of the story is in a collection of family papers owned by Annie Howells' grandson, Dr. V.D. Fréchette.