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CHARACTER AND FOCUS IN
THE LANDLORD AT LION'S HEAD

By SUSAN ALLEN TOTH

Ever since its lackluster reception in 1897, *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* has been the most neglected and misrepresented of all William Dean Howells’ major novels. Concentrating on Howells’ critical realism, modern scholars have favored novels with more obvious social data, such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The brief attention given to *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* has largely been devoted to Howells’ masterful characterization of Jeff Durgin, the New England provincial whose independent vigor and lack of conventional morality propel him to success.

Such a perspective on the novel is understandably obvious, since the main narrative does indeed follow Jeff’s life, from his humble beginnings on a poverty-stricken farm, through an abortive career at Harvard, and finally to managerial success at his fashionable hotel on the old farm’s site. Much of the emotional force of the novel, however, reverberates beyond the limits of this “success story.” Howells’ careful delineation of his central observer, the artist Westover, and his almost obsessive scrutiny of Westover’s motives and opinions; his ambiguous and drawn-out portrait of the “pure” heroine, Cynthia Whitwell; and his long, charged account of Jeff’s flirtation with the socialite Bessie Lynde all distort the novel in odd ways. Its final shape strays far from the straight lines of a Horatio Alger story.

In most published studies of *The Landlord at Lion’s Head*, Jeff is regarded as the novel’s likable villain, Westover as Howells’ own moral spokesman. Sister Mary Petrus Sullivan, for example, sees Jeff as “morally and humanly stupid,” contrasted to Westover, whose “extreme sensitivity and perception” are supposed to represent Howells’ own ethics.1 Edwin Cady sees Westover as likewise “the one character who can incarnate values which really call Jeff Durgin’s success into doubt,”2 while George Carrington opposes the “decent characters, who are

trying to build quite normal lives,” to the “demonic” Jeff.  

A few critics have recently voiced doubts about this seemingly simple duality, however. William McMurray, in a brief chapter devoted to the novel in his study, emphasizes that Howells tries not to pass judgment on Jeff. Linking Howells with William James’s pragmatism, McMurray sees Howells using Jeff to demonstrate “that the act of seeing and judging is relative to the person who sees.”  

Eleanor Tilton, in her succinct afterword to the Signet edition, also warns readers not to expect “strong directives” from Howells’ encompassing, tactful, and compassionate point of view. She notes that because Westover “echoes so many notions discoverable in Howells’ letters” it is easy to mistake him “as offering the final word.”  

Most importantly, Kenneth Lynn’s critical biography of Howells contains a perceptive reading of the novel that points out Howells’ dissatisfaction with Westover, whom Lynn sums up as a “devastatingly ironic portrait of the artist as a middle-aged prig.”  

This “middle-aged prig” is more than another minor variety of American character painstakingly observed with Howellian acuteness. Both Lynn and Kermit Vanderbilt, in the latter’s study of four other Howells novels, have illuminated the later Howells’ ambivalent and often critical attitudes towards the Boston cultural elite to whom he had once been introduced with respect, awe, and admiration.  

Since Westover strikingly resembles just this sort of idolator, a youngish man who, like Howells, has emerged from the Middle West into a seeming haven of sensitivity and comfortable aristocracy, his point of view commands special attention. Westover offers a kind of autobiographical double exposure, the artist as a young man juxtaposed against a Boston whose flaws had become visible to the older and more disillusioned, writer.

5 George C. Carrington, Jr., The Immense Complex Drama: The World of the Howells Novel (Columbus, 1966), 45.  
6 William McMurray, The Literary Realism of William Dean Howells (Carbondale, IL, 1967), 98.  
7 Eleanor Tilton, “Afterword,” The Landlord at Lion’s Head (New York, 1964), 313.  
Once Westover's place in *The Landlord at Lion's Head* is given this kind of close scrutiny, the moral center of the novel abruptly shifts. No longer is this only a study of Jeff's modern amorality; it is also a severe and often agonized examination of the kind of society Westover espouses and therefore represents. Tangled further in this perspective is the possibility that Howells sees Westover somewhat critically as a version of himself, although anyone familiar with Howells' subtlety will be wary of facile biographical parallels.

Such a shift of emphasis, while posing new questions, solves many problems about the novel's structure. No longer does the story stray unaccountably at times from the saga of Jeff's steady and ambitious rise. The prolonged "affair" between Jeff and Bessie, whose emotional intensity otherwise seems to throw the narrative out of balance, becomes one of Howells' frankest attempts to deal with the kind of impulse and passion Westover, and, by association, his repressive society, strive so hard to deny. Even Howells' sometimes tedious insistence on detail, such as his attention to spiritualism, as practiced in an amateur way by Jeff's brother and Mr. Whitwell, appears as another aspect of his implicit criticism of the decadence of old New England culture. For the Whitwells and Durgins, poor and backwoods people as they may be, are the Puritan stock from which Boston claimed antecedents and dominance.

As a version of the self-critical author, and as a representative for the closed and self-sufficient Boston society into which Howells had long ago won an entrance, Westover is a complicated character. Far from being the decent, sensitive, if rather dim, esthete that many critics have assumed, he suffers the defects of his sensibilities.

First of all, Westover is tainted with smugness. Self-assured and confident of being socially and morally correct, he has an offensively patronizing air from his first visit to the Durgin farm, when he announces: "I want dinner. Go in and tell your mother, and then show me where I can wash my hands."8

But Westover's self-confidence is shown by Howells to be at

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least partially deceptive. At the end of this first visit to Lion's Head, Westover refuses to sell the painting he has made of Lion's Head Mountain to Mrs. Durgin, for he tells her it will undoubtedly bring up to three hundred dollars at his fall exhibition. Mrs. Durgin is badly embarrassed that she has not recognized its value. The following spring, however, we learn that this picture has sold for a disappointing hundred and sixty dollars. Avoiding explicit comment, Howells effectively uses this detail to undermine Westover's pretensions.

Howells also shows at the beginning of the novel the blind pride upon which Westover builds his moral judgments. On this first visit to Lion's Head, Westover forms his negative opinion of Jeff Durgin when, upon departure, Jeff pelts him with a rain of apples. Always on the moral alert, Westover broods about whether he ought to report the boy to mother or teacher, but he finally decides against it by comparing Jeff's disadvantaged status to his own obviously enviable one: “The more he thought of the incident, the more he was disposed to be lenient with the boy, whom he was aware of having baffled and subdued by his superior wit and virtue in perhaps intolerable measure” (44). Westover's self-accolade here is an early but unmistakable warning about the vanity of his moral pronouncements.

Westover's most significant limitation, however, is his self-inflicted isolation from any emotional contact or communication. Although Howells emphasizes this so strongly and so early in the novel, with a vehemence that recalls Howells' own much-discussed emotional inhibitions, this aspect of Westover's character has been largely overlooked. From his first visit to Lion's Head, Westover refuses to identify himself in any personal way with the Durgins or their world. Although they adopt him into their family almost immediately, he admits before his second visit that “he could not have said he felt very much at home on his first sojourn at the farm, or that he had cared greatly for the Durgins. But now he felt very much at home, and as if he were in the hands of friends” (50). What he omits here is as important as what he confesses; even now he cannot “care greatly” for this family. Throughout the succeeding years, he is never comfortable in the role of family advisor: “Westover liked so little the part of old family friend which he seemed,
whether he liked it or not, to bear with the Durgins, that he would gladly have got away” (106). He resents the trouble he is forced to take for Jeff, and he is finally relieved when he can sever his connection with the family.

Only once, when Jeff first meets him, does Westover (or Howells) mention his given name, “Jere.” Shying from even that intimacy, Westover remains so successfully aloof that in the last lines of the novel, when Cynthia is clearly going to accept his marriage proposal, she notes that “I should always have to call you Mr. Westover.” And he accepts her condition, possibly with gratitude.

Westover’s isolation renders his understanding of human affairs both partial and barren. While Westover disapproves of the increasing esthetic deterioration of Lion’s Head Inn as it burgeons with success, he gives little compensating weight to the Durgins’ escape from poverty. Westover tends to judge people as well as places by esthetic standards. When he sees Jeff grown to young manhood, he “rejoiced in the fellow’s young, manly beauty, which was very regular and sculptur-esque” (47). From his exalted social plane, Westover can regard Jeff mainly here as a fine physical specimen. Even with Cynthia, whom he loves, Westover is unable to escape his supercilious delicacy of taste. When he at last recognizes his feelings towards her, he glances at her with anxiety at the dinner table, fearing for her manners. “He was ashamed of his anxiety, for he had owned that it ought not to have mattered if she had used her knife like her father” (259). She doesn’t, and he is spared.

Westover’s moral self-confidence and determined estheticism not only alienate him from human relationships, but also foster in him an unmistakable basic snobbishness. He is constantly referring to social standards, classes, and mores, offering a kind of running commentary on the rising and falling rhythms of American culture. In these perceptions, Westover’s intonations sound remarkably like Howells’ own, for Howells often seems to share his observer’s views about the nature of American society.

Distinguishing Howells’ voice from Westover’s on the subject of social class and manners is a task further complicated by the problem of distinguishing the specific, miniscule facts of con-
temporary behavior that Howells reports from his attitudes towards those facts. For example, when Westover sees from a window young Jeff sitting with Genevieve Vostrand on a street bench, Howells as authorial observer — not Westover — comments:

It was quite too early yet for the simple lovers who publicly notify their happiness by the embraces and hand-clasps everywhere evident in our parks and gardens; and a Boston pair of social tradition would not have dreamed of sitting on a bench in Commonwealth Avenue at any hour. But two such aliens as Jeff and Miss Vostrand might very well do so; and Westover sympathized with their bohemian impulse (123).

To classify the act of sitting on a bench so solemnly as a "bohemian impulse" indulged by "two aliens" is the kind of pontificating Howells elsewhere condemns in Westover. Is Howells here quietly poking fun at Westover's sensitive scruples, or is he himself displaying a fine distinction of social acceptability?

Howells' ironic overtones are hardest to hear when Westover is upholding or praising the established customs of Boston's upper society. Yet, given what Howells has revealed of Westover's smugness, isolation, and self-delusion, it is likely that Howells assumed his readers could fairly judge Westover's social condescension. When, for instance, Westover is told by Mrs. Durgin that she wishes Jeff to go to Harvard, his instinctive reaction is: "He commanded himself to say, 'I don't see why he shouldn't'" (54). He is clearly shocked at this unseemly aspiration, even though, like Howells himself, Westover did not attend college at all. When he is sufficiently recovered, he warns the Durgins about their temerity: "'I've heard,' Westover continued, and he rose and stood, while he spoke, 'that Harvard's like the world. A man gets on there on the same terms that he gets on in the world. He has to be a man, and he'd better be a gentleman'" (56). Does Howells share Westover's reverence towards this social pinnacle? He makes no overt comment to indicate otherwise; in fact, Westover's speech seems to have the ring of the author's approval. Yet later in the novel, we see that Westover's idealism is badly out of date. Not only are many of the "gentlemen" at Harvard depicted as social inanities, one of them, Alan Lynde, is a drunken and violent maniac. Nor does Jeff's social failure in the world of Harvard have any effect on his eventual stunning success in
the world outside. Westover's illusions seem to be those of a man who desperately wants to believe in a society in which he has struggled long and hard for acceptance; he clings to his faith like a convert. Howells must have sympathized with this fierce allegiance, even while recognizing its futility.

Westover's combination of complacency, snobbery, and conscientious scrupulousness is never better illustrated in the novel than when he meets his old acquaintances, the Vostrands, in Boston, and has to decide how to treat them socially. The Vostrands represent one facet of American society with which Howells and James were both fascinated, the expatriate American mother who chooses exile with her children as an escape from an unhappy marriage. While Mrs. Vostrand and her daughter have lived abroad, they have occupied a social position in Europe that has no counterpart here in Boston. Hence Westover is troubled about their status, a worry complicated by his gratitude for the kindness Mrs. Vostrand has earlier shown to him in Rome. Howells carefully records Westover's scruples:

He felt at once that he could not do things by halves for a woman who had once done them for him by wholes and something over, and he had instantly decided that he must not only be very pleasant to her himself, but he must get his friends to be pleasant, too. His friends were some of the nicest people in Boston; nice in both the personal and social sense; he knew they would not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for him in a good cause, and that made him all the more anxious that the cause should be good beyond question (112).

Westover goes on to agonize at length about the Vostrands' social worthiness and about how far he ought to go to introduce them to "society." His worries are given in such detail, in fact, that it is hard to see Howells' dwelling on them as anything but an ironic comment on Westover's exaggerated regard for such matters.

Yet if Howells is wryly humorous in presenting a man who can seriously say to himself that his friends "were some of the nicest people in Boston," Howells as author is also capable of speaking in exactly that same tone himself. At one early stage of the novel, he is moved to comment at length upon how the clientele of Lion's Head Inn has changed as the hotel itself has expanded. This is the time when Westover returns to the
In fact, the people who can afford to pay ten dollars a week for summer board, and not much more, are often the best of the American people, or at least, of the New England people. They may not know it, and those who are richer may not imagine it. They are apt to be middle-aged maiden ladies from the university towns, living upon carefully guarded investments; young married ladies with a scant child or two, and needing rest and change of air; college professors with nothing but their modest salaries; literary men or women in the beginning of their tempered success; clergymen and their wives away from their churches . . . here and there an agreeable bachelor in middle life, fond of literature and nature; hosts of young pretty girls with distinct tastes in art, and devoted to the clever young painter who leads them to the sources of inspiration in the fields and woods. Such people are refined, humane, appreciative, sympathetic . . . (64).

Much is remarkable about this passage, from its clear-eyed specificity to its delicately phrased modifiers. (Only Howells would have noticed the "scant child or two" attached to the young married ladies of this class; presumably larger numbers of children would have changed their mothers' status.) But in the assumption that one can somehow identify "the best of the American people," charmingly though they are described, the author's voice sounds close in tone to the voice that feels "his friends were some of the nicest people in Boston." Like Westover, Howells is sensitive to social differences of what one is tempted to call the nicest kind; and this passage is one of the most acute records in all his novels of how finely and exclusively his sensitivity could be tuned.

Howells' portrait of Westover, then, seems blurred at the edges, because although Howells seems to condemn Westover's delusive self-confidence and his narrowness, he finds it hard to divorce himself entirely from Westover's social attitudes. Howells clearly senses that Westover's world is restricted and unreal, and yet he is aware that this world offers seductive advantages of accepted codes of behavior and moral certainty.

Howells' ambivalent feelings towards the Boston society of which Westover is such an eager acolyte are nowhere more forcefully illustrated than in his portraits of the two young women who form the chief love interest in the novel. Although Jeff finally marries a third woman, the shadowy and insubstan-
tial Genevieve Vostrand, he spends most of his time torn between the other two, Cynthia Whitwell and Bessie Lynde, who each represent the virtues, possibilities, and drawbacks of their respective societies. Van Wyck Brooks acutely comments in his brief remarks on the novel that “the real story was of Jeff’s relations with three women.”

At first glance, Cynthia would seem to be the familiar and approved Howellsian heroine, the intelligent, virtuous, active and responsible young woman who, with added vivacity, was to become the “typical American girl” for a wide public. With her quick mind and firm convictions, Cynthia is allied to Penn Lapham of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and Kitty Ellison of *A Chance Acquaintance*; her inborn country strength and moral rectitude make her kin to Lydia Blood of *The Lady of the Aroostook*. As such a woman, she stands as a kind of reproach to the flighty, insubstantial Boston society ladies typified by Bessie and her circle.

But although Howells admires Cynthia, as does her repressed lover Westover, he describes her always in terms of purity, wildness and coldness that keep her disturbingly aloof. Her intense shyness is almost a distortion of her personality, her dignified reserve a barrier to any kind of intimacy. “He easily found in her shy, proud manner, and her pure, cold beauty, the temperament of the child he remembered . . . . She made him think of a wild sweetbrier, of a hermit-thrush” (58). Howells repeats this metaphor later, likening Cynthia to “the color of the sweetbrier, its purity and sweetness, and if there was something in Cynthia’s character and temperament that suggested its thorns too, one still could not deny that she was like that flower” (138). The suggestion is definitely one of sharpness, a thorny and not-to-be-touched quality.

When Westover finally paints her, he captures the feeling of “a bird that you’ve come on sudden, and it stoops as if it was goin’ to fly—”, in her father’s words (192). Cynthia can never be caught or caged, never brought from the world of wild nature into a domestic setting, without damage to her spirit. Somehow she lacks the human warmth that usually redeems similar pure and virginal Howellsian heroines. Penelope, Kitty, Lydia and others all give in to moments of impulsive emotion.

or show brief weaknesses that render them touchingly vulnerable. Cynthia does not.

Indeed, Howells strongly emphasizes that Cynthia, like Westover, considers herself a moral judge of every situation. She expends much time and energy in keeping Jeff close to what she sees as the right path, and her moral scruples at his various misdemeanors are fully as obsessive as Westover’s. It is no wonder that after their long engagement is broken, Jeff feels relief and a new sense of freedom. When she solemnly admonishes him to return to Bessie Lynde and marry her, after he admits his flirtation, her complete disregard of circumstance and character is as idealistic as Westover’s. Not for a moment does she consider the possible happiness or misery of such a union; never does she wonder about Bessie’s or Jeff’s feelings or motivations. Like Westover, she knows and propounds only one moral standard.

It is precisely this stern and inflexible standard about which Howells intimates all sorts of doubts. On the one hand, he never overtly criticizes the general moral principles Cynthia and Westover proclaim; on the other, he shows time after time how narrow and partial they can be in application. By refusing to identify his point of view completely with either Westover, the Boston convert, or Cynthia, the rural maiden, Howells abandons his usual pattern of allegiance with a vengeance. In the process, he opens the way to a new sympathy and understanding of Jeff’s pragmatic approach to life.

As though to reinforce his implication that the old patterns of moral life, whether high-toned Bostonian or rigid New England, no longer have much relevance, Howells balances his surprisingly critical portrait of Cynthia with a compellingly attractive characterization of Bessie Lynde. Although he admits her flightiness and flirtatiousness, he is also clearly aware of her intelligence, wit, and magnetism. Her attractiveness is not purely mental. Howells emphasizes the vitality of the physical current that passes between these two young people; it is an obvious contrast to the repressed and formal relationship that exists between Jeff and Cynthia, as later between Cynthia and Westover.

Howells becomes so caught up in this developing “affair” that he allows it to shape the second half of the novel. He
dwells in sustained detail on Jeff’s and Bessie’s encounters, mock battles, and shifting victories. Many critics have commented on the passage in which Jeff kisses Bessie “as once she had happened to see one of the maids kissed by the grocer’s boy at the basement door” (300). Few have noticed, however, the equally explicit and provocative details that carefully and gradually lead up to this kiss. Almost compulsively Howells emphasizes Jeff’s physical attractiveness, Bessie’s awareness of his “rude force” of face and figure. Again and again we are told of his primitive qualities, of Bessie’s feeling that he was “really carrying me off to his cave,” her likening of him to “an animal speaking French,” her admiration of his handsome-ness as shown in her intimate observation of how “fine drops of perspiration stood on his clean-shaven upper lip and in the hollow between his under lip and his bold chin” (292).

Likewise, Bessie’s physical presence has an electric and vibrant quality, emphasized in many metaphorical images. Jeff notices that her mouth is “beautiful and vividly red like a crimson blossom,” a flower perhaps intended to contrast with Cynthia’s thorny sweetbrier. When she smiles at him, he feels “as if she had kissed her hand to him from her rich mouth” (192). In one of Howells’ most suggestively erotic descriptions, he describes their walk home together:

With subtle physical teasing, even a “certain pull and tilt of the shoulder” that Howells is quick to notice and interpret, Bessie entices Jeff until “the will to dominate her began to stir in him” (199).

Howells seems so intrigued by this pair, and by the passion they arouse in each other, that the reader almost expects the two to marry and fling their defiance in the face of Westover and his friends. But Howells backs off from such a solution. Although Bessie is a match for Jeff in physical attractiveness and in native intelligence, Howells qualifies his portrait of her
with one weakness that makes her unsuitable for Jeff's wife. Living on the edge of her nerves, she exists only for excitement; while Jeff has a firm purpose for his life, a drive for economic and social success, Bessie is motivated only by the thrills of the moment. She could not long be happy as the wife of the landlord at Lion's Head.

While Howells avoids the offense to Bessie's world implicit in a marriage between her and Jeff, he plainly shows how limited and deadening that tiny world is for a girl in her position. Confined to a family consisting of a deaf and aging aunt and an alcoholic brother, Bessie can only escape into a repetitive and inane round of visits and parties. Howells quietly satirizes this routine, from the well-meaning hostesses who occasionally admit "outsiders" into their circle as charitable projects, to the nervous and timorous girls who, unlike Bessie, do not dare to envision any life beyond that circle.

Such a girl is Bessie's friend, pallid Mary Enderby, one of Howells' triumphs of minor characterization. When Mary stiffly warns Bessie about the unsuitability of flirting outside one's set, her immense seriousness is almost comic: "It always seemed so easy, till now, to take Bessie in her arms, and appeal to her good sense, her self-respect, her regard for her family and friends; and now it seemed so impossible" (284). What Mary finds so appalling, what elicits this fierce anxiety, is simply Bessie's meeting Jeff at parties and sharing occasional chaperoned visits. Howells remains quiet about whether he shares Mary's sense of rigid social distinctions in such matters, but his gently ironic portrait of Mary ought to indicate at least uncertainty, if not criticism, about her fears.

Howells, then, is finally ambivalent about Bessie's world as well as about Cynthia's. Neither girl represents a satisfactory mate for Jeff Durgin, who is a new type altogether. When one sees Westover revealed as a deluded, over-confident, snobbish, and pathetically isolated man, when Cynthia is shown to be cold and inflexible, when Bessie's — and Westover's — world of Boston society is plainly restricted and decaying, Jeff assumes in contrast a kind of admirable toughness.

Although Howells does not necessarily admire Jeff's pragmatic morality, he admits its force. Practical, forthright, open to experience, free from restrictive codes, even pioneering in
his determination to turn his barren mountain farm into a society hotel, Jeff represents what Howells calls in his preface “the realization of that anti-Puritan quality which was always vexing the heart of Puritanism, and which I had constantly felt one of the most interesting facts in my observation of New England” (ix). From the context of the novel, it appears that Howells sees this “anti-Puritan” quality as the one most likely to dominate the new world that was gradually replacing both the rural, old-fashioned society of Lion’s Head, as best represented by Cynthia and Mrs. Durgin, and the effete, ineffectual social set comprised of Bessie Lynde and her friends.

Such a change did not, at least in his novel of 1897, seem to alarm Howells as much as has been assumed. Both his complex portrait of Westover and his admiring but regretful view of Bessie Lynde place the Boston world of traditional morality and rigid standards in a most dubious light. Both Westover and Bessie have been ruined by this world, the former by his blind absorption into it and the latter by her failure to recognize the possibility of leaving it.

Resembling his author in so many ways, Westover stands in The Landlord at Lion’s Head as a kind of warning signpost: there, but for his intense self-critical sense, might have gone one of our most perceptive and compassionate novelists. Once the reader recognizes this function of Westover’s, the novel becomes not a simple study of Jeff Durgin’s rise, but a richer and more complex configuration of characters. Together they lead us on a skeptic’s tour through Howells’ past, and through Bostonian New England. Its pauses and detours are much more rewarding than a straight trip down Jeff Durgin’s path to success.