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The Fictions of Basil March

by ROBERT GILLESPIE

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS wrote nine short stories, novels, or travel books involving the characters Basil and Isabel March. In the order of publication, they are Their Wedding Journey (1871), Niagara Re­visited, Twelve Years After Their Wedding Journey (1883), A Hazard of New Fortunes (1889), The Shadow of a Dream (1890), “A Circle in the Water” (1895), An Open-Eyed Conspiracy (1896), “A Pair of Patient Lovers” (1897), Their Silver Wedding Journey (1899), and Hither and Thither in Germany (1920).1 Basil March is important to Howells for the character’s flexibility and his innocuous blending into various landscapes, particularly because he is the author’s “realistic hero” as well as an idealized version of Howells himself. A look at the March stories shows that they are all similar in construction and that Howells experimented with March as a point of view. But in stories other than A Hazard of New Fortunes Basil March is not satisfying as a narrator or a character. Often fatuous because of his limited concerns, March is most often a weak character in weak stories.

It may be that what goes wrong with Basil March explains what for us is wrong with so much of Howells’ fiction. From the beginning in Their Wedding Journey Howells uses March as a vantage point for characterizing and generalizing his awareness that some commonplaces of American life—aspects generally, repeatedly extant—constitute an important structural pattern of American culture; it is Howells’ virtue, and in the end also his limitation, to demonstrate commonplaces, and the supremely ordinary and “structured” Basil March is an important register of the author’s strengths and weaknesses.

March appears most frequently during the 1890’s. In that decade Howells returned several times to this genially objective character who, in Their Wedding Journey, made possible Howells’ method of contrast, allowed the fullest play to his social satire, opened up his realistic

observation of manners, and set the pattern for the social comedies and psychological romances to follow. To Howells, March is a solidly social man whose coherent point of view established a norm for evaluating action and character. March is an aristocrat. He is a historian of the cultural conscience, a transmitter if not a guardian of public virtue, whose ethical biases go back even beyond Boston to the American West and his adolescent years in Ohio. “Boston makes a great difference in one’s ideas; and I’m going to be married, too,” Basil says in Their Wedding Journey at the moment that he is explaining to his bride, Isabel, his reasons for giving up the muse of poetry, an irony of importance in 1871. In addition to the properly good effect of Boston and marriage, Basil means that poetry in Boston, like marriage, is high-culture intellect, reason, and moral lecturing, and he will have to find his poetry elsewhere, “divining the poetry of the commonplace” which unconsciously he associates with the frontier and with boyhood. That is, he would like to keep to the Boston ethical orientation, but he is willing to deviate a little if it does not satisfy his hankering for the aesthetic, or for the “unresponsible” and the youthful, the unusual, the earthy, the sensuous—for what he feels is “real” poetry. From the beginning, March balances himself between a commitment to the ethical biases of Boston and marriage on the one hand, and a commitment to hunt up and judge experience by aesthetic values on the other. His “aesthetic” interest in new experience, although it has less stomach than appetite, makes Basil eager to hazard new fortunes. Whereas Isabel March has only Boston for her ethical and aesthetic guides, Basil, a Westerner who has adopted the city, has wider American experiences that make him more responsive to other people and places than Isabel is, curious about contrasts in social values, and occasionally nostalgic. From the start of his career, March is prudently romantic.

His romantic interest also makes him shy of the necessity for change. The Marches of Their Wedding Journey are the same Marches of Their Silver Wedding Journey, in love with each other and with the innocent surfaces of life but a little afraid of the depths from which they veer away into the protectiveness of their marriage. They are fascinated with the customs and manners of particular environments and heredities, but not with individually difficult psyches. Basil’s greatest interest is the collective psychology of American cultural groups. As a couple, the Marches’ curiosity about the behavior of young married people determines their abiding concern with love and marriage customs. Basil’s temperament at the time of his own marriage has a predictable pattern, with qualities that Howells came back to again and again in plotting the March stories.

Most noticeable is that the Marches constantly retake their wedding journey. The stories all begin in a time of transition, typically a summer vacation (with the important exception in A Hazard of New Fortunes of the permanent move to New York City to change Basil’s economic and professional base) when the Marches leave home for new sites of leisure and entertainment such as the New England coast or Saratoga where their new impressions are sharpened by contrast with their own world of Boston. (In the late travel book, Their Silver Wedding Journey, even anticipation sharpens Basil’s consciousness. Before sailing from New York, he looks back over his “life’s journey” while he thinks of the journey ahead. “He had not easily reconciled himself to the place after his many years of Boston; but he had got used to the ugly grandeur, to the noise and the rush, and he had divined more and more the careless good-nature and friendly indifference of the vast, sprawling, ungainly metropolis. There were happy moments when he felt a poetry unintentional and unconscious in it.”) For Howells the journey is a convenience—even before Their Wedding Journey he had written travel books, and he thought the journey aspect of the picaresque novel perfectly suited to the needs of American fiction—but it is also symbolic of a vast and vital nation’s life in transition. To the Marches of Their Wedding Journey America is “vulgar” (commonplace), and they feel they are having a love affair with its “various vulgarity.” The Marches’ good humor and optimism fill them with a willingness to see the best in everything and everybody. Since change is continual in the journey, and they are not out to take unalterable moral positions, the spectacle of life is more interesting than the right or wrong of it. At the same time that they discover the poetry of America, they also discover themselves as a married couple. The journey for both is a revelation of new, unknown beauties, and quirks, of the American character, and of themselves as part of America. They bring America alive. In both senses of the phrase, they “see themselves” on their journey. All their later experiences are wedding journeys in this extended sense.

In the second stage of the pattern, the Marches happen into a “chance acquaintance” with lovers, would-be lovers, young-marrieds, or odd love triangles involving mothers or guardians as often as rival males or females. Throughout the chance acquaintance period, Basil March notices the contrast between the bridal pair and the Marches as old-marrieds. For March the bridal journey is a state of mind. There is glamor and freshness and a beautiful naivete in being young and married. He secretly likes the “irresponsibility” of a new beginning in life.


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and the security of hazarding a new fortune as two instead of one. As an older married man, March wistfully regrets the passing of this romance; he also feels a vicarious pleasure from involvement in others' love affairs and marriages as if he were recapturing the past through someone experiencing romance for the first time. "'You are always making up these romances about young girls being off and disappointed of a good time ever since we saw that poor little Kitty Ellison with her cousins at Niagara,' said Mrs. March. 'You seem to have it on the brain.'" Basil answers, "Because it's the most tragical thing in the world, and the commonest in our transition state." His reply reveals a good deal about Basil. Although there is little in Howells' fiction other than A Modern Instance and The Shadow of a Dream that suggests he was conscious of symbolic sexual rites, much less sublimation of marital inadequacies, the Marches' friendship with the Ellisons in Their Wedding Journey is the closest and most satisfying contact Basil and Isabel have with other individuals. The girl, "disappointed of a good time," provides one of the central incidents of Their Wedding Journey, and a meeting which initiates Basil's efforts to make up for the "tragical" disappointment of a missed good time is an important device in all the stories.

Probably unconsciously Howells refuses to psychoanalyze March who, throughout the stories, surely is a mild voyeur stuck with a sexually unresponsive wife and a dull life. Constantly retaking the "wedding journey" as a substitute for sexual fulfillment, March works out his priapic fantasies on these helpless acquaintances as they mistake his gentle interest in them, and in American culture generally, for something other than sublimated sensuality. Howells no doubt would be scandalized by this view of his hero, since his conscious format in the March stories is from the comedy of manners: "tragedy" is threatened by an antagonist who, mysteriously blocking the happiness of others, specifically their fulfillment through love and marriage, creates psychological and social disorder. The comic hero's function is to solve the mysterious blockage by revealing the frustrations and clarifying the misunderstandings that make for disorder, making a happy ending possible: a marriage, or a coming together so that marriage may occur, is inevitable. Relationships are once again made harmonious, and good health and social order are symbolically reconstituted. Sanity and above all the aristocracy of the mannered are preserved intact. Although not perceptive about his own deep frustrations, Basil is equipped to intuit frustration in others, and to become Howells' catalytic pointer to marital, psychological, and social health.

Intimacy gradually grows up between the Marches and the chance

acquaintances. As if to spite the Marches' efforts to avoid thrusting themselves on people, people thrust themselves on the Marches who find that they are accomplices, repositories of desires, dreams, frustrations, and fears that they would rather not be exposed to and yet find a guilty pleasure sharing. Basil March is inquisitive and open, but never aggressive in making acquaintances. The chance acquaintance, he explains in *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*, is built into American society because it is the American character to be "cautious, but not reserved" (p. 31). Even in his Boston insurance business days before New York City, Basil is always a "literary" man who naturally invests the people he meets with imagined histories. "I was aesthetically shadowing them," he says in *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy* (p. 14). In *Their Silver Wedding Journey* he is "one of those men who live from the inside outward; he often took a hint for his actions from his fancies" (I, 14). His day-dream-histories are to be understood symbolically, and probably as Howells' unconscious symbolism. Parallels exist between the Marches and their acquaintances, such as the broken, long engagement of Glendenning and Edith Bentley in "A Pair of Patient Lovers" which recalls the broken engagement of the Marches (and the Howellses). The fervor March feels for the Deerings in *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*, provincial souls lost among the vacationing metropolitan sophisticates at Saratoga, is an attachment strengthened by March's (and Howells') own recent experience of moving to New York City. Whether Basil projects the Marches' history in his fascination with Glendenning's, or sees some essentially American trait in action similar to his and Isabel's, or acts out unsatisfied impulses toward sexual contact, the match-making Marches always cautiously hazard some new fortune if not always their own.

Denying any suspicion we may have that the Marches are only snooping, Howells separates them and their acquaintances by distance and time. The acquaintances live onstage, out of Basil's sight, and are seen only at significant moments in their commonplace lives. The broken narrative makes every contact between the Marches and others significant but keeps it plausible, commonplace and "life-like." In the intervening time, changes in relationships, attitudes, and psychological stability occur even though only glimpses of the changes are given. Interest in the Marches' friends is kept up by these glimpses without much effort by Howells at extensive characterization.

Between the points of contact come Basil and Isabel, discussing, analyzing the acquaintances' problem, moralizing, romanticizing, realizing that indeed a severe problem exists. Their dialogues, really intellectual debates, point up the conflict of each story, and they also announce each crisis point. Always some mystery is involved: Basil only knows that there is a problem of a romantic nature, including mothers, children, ministers, and sicknesses or unnatural confinements.
that create sicknesses. This third phase of the March stories, in which Basil and Isabel probe into the mystery by examining their impressions of the information that has been deposited with them, expands the relationship between the Marches. As Howells resorts to his favorite device of a contrast in marriage, a secondary focus develops the norm in marital relations against which the other characters are contrasted.

For all her Bostonian reasonableness and propriety, Isabel March likes mystery and romance no less than Basil, but while Basil always tries, consciously at least, to see a case as common and ordinary, Isabel makes up amorous intrigues (and brings in the sentimental romance and mystery that Howells liked to satirize). Basil invariably undercuts Isabel's position—not that he wins their arguments—and his practicality is apparent in contrast with Isabel's fancifulness. Spontaneous and imaginative, she is usually the first to make critical judgments on the basis of her impressions and likes and dislikes. She is sometimes made fun of, but Basil respects her for an intuition that he knows he does not have. Isabel is the heart of their relationship, Basil the head. She introduces the emotional viewpoint and, in several instances, an irritatingly different outlook that Howells suggests is pure feminine unreasonableness. (Uncharacteristically it is Basil who first suggests in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that Fulkerson is in love with Miss Woodburn. "Why of course!" Isabel exclaims. "I wonder I didn't think of that."6 Isabel is the more "romantic" supposedly, but Basil probably out of frustration is the first to the insight. They are both less likely to act foolishly when Basil initiates.) Isabel makes Basil look again. Isabel's unpredictability, which may come from her lack of self-knowledge more than from moral scrupulousness, leaves Basil always a little uncertain of her reactions, and always delicate and circumspect in putting matters of conscience and behavior to her. Their discussions create mysteries as they unravel them, and deepen the moral crises the talks reveal; the Marches' dual point of view, introducing several possible interpretations, enlarges and complicates any problem.

Howells, who seems not to probe deeply into minds or sensations, probes by exhausting the visible surface; and knowing that appearances, striking different observers differently, are variously interpreted, he offers as many possible conjectures as the Marches can be legitimately used to propose. Their widely ranging discussions and analyses allow narrative retrospection, projection, and even the introduction of topics that Howells never handled in dramatic scenes reported by the disembodied voice. More than legitimate differences of opinion, the Marches' discussions are Howells' method of telling and showing at the same moment. Solution of a mystery, or discovery of the reality of a case, results from quantitative and qualitative revelation. As the Marches

contrast with their acquaintances and with each other, they arrive at a proper perspective; they see things as they are; truth comes through, Howells thinks, as does ethical enlightenment. Harmonizing the Marches’ aesthetic interests with their ethical bent as a married couple, he presents the reader with the basis for perfect happiness. Basil and Isabel are a pair of patient lovers perfectly teamed to get caught up in realistic romances. They correct each other’s inadequacies of vision and judgment, and help each other toward the sane view of life from which they assess their acquaintances’ failure—the failure to assume this sane view on their own.

Always present with opinions on other individuals’ behavior, the Marches usually affect action through suggestion. In “A Pair of Patient Lovers,” for example, Basil counsels elopement to Glendenning. (It is an idea he says he got from Isabel. At times they shuffle responsibility, at other times give each other moral support.) The elopement does not occur, of course, since it would solve Glendenning’s immediate problem, and there would be no story about the frustrations of long engagements owing to selfish mothers. For Glendenning, Basil clarifies the problem, because Basil as “happily married older man” is the counterforce, the advocate of happiness, kindness, freedom, conjugal love; by his example and counsel Basil aggravates the unhappy Glendenning and makes him see the causes of his unhappiness. Basil becomes Glendenning’s confidant, and Glendenning’s confession of his buried wish for the death of his fiancée’s mother so that he might marry the girl is the dramatic center of the story. Without forcing any action, March is a catalyst forcing psychological complications to the surface. He does, however, make mistakes, as happens in The Shadow of a Dream when he tells Nevil that Faulkner’s dream concerned Nevil and Faulkner’s wife. Immediately Nevil is killed by a train, and his death may be a suicide for which March is partially responsible. Whether he interprets rightly or mistakenly, Basil always interprets in a way that is dramatically functional. Even his imaginings and reveries and dialogues with himself are dramatic, setting up scenes and possible outcomes in the analysis of possibilities. When March has a conception he will try to move an acquaintance to fit the conception: his opinions create mystery and foreshadow a crisis of life-shaping magnitude.

Several times in The Shadow of a Dream March feels that he is involved in Greek tragedy in the Faulkner affair. (Jerome Klinkowitz has emphasized how the Marches in the beginning of A Hazard of New Fortunes think events are staged for their enjoyment.7) Never protagonists or antagonists, not even in Their Wedding Journey where they are the principal figures, the Marches look on like a chorus commenting on helpless mortals manipulated by a problem no one can control or understand. The Marches’ own sense of helplessness and futility is

involved, and their pity and fear at not being able to control or alter events. And yet they do have a fateful effect. Opinions transfer into actions, introducing a third force into the drama as Basil comes between the conflicting protagonist and antagonist. To Howells, the Marches are always detached, but always implicated, because they are always involved as agents of the forces that shape people's lives. March's analyses are choral expressions of traditional social values, and his meddling, Howells would have us believe, is nothing less than the action a moral universe causes him to take, to assert moral imperatives that have been denied by other men and women.

It is the meddling that brings the hidden conflict into the open, and makes March a participant in good and evil instead of an observer merely expressing cultural values. March's "complicity," the author's term for this participation, and his saving vision of tradition, explain his special importance. Basil is a sort of secular confessor, a priest of genteel proprieties, a good man of the best world, liked by men and fatherly with women, suffused with a gentle sweetness that Howells usually reserves for his favorite females. All those chance acquaintances are incomplete somehow without March, depending on him as if he had access to the source of life that is denied them. It is not merely a matter of Bostonian tradition. Basil is necessary to them, and only Basil, with his clear conscience, his healthy consciousness and "perspective," "reasonableness," and "great good sense," his unaltering eye that sees a case factually, common-sensically, practically, realistically, even legally. Basil is superior, but at the same time he demonstrates how dependent the Marches are on each other, the family, the home, the sufficient or satisfying jobs in insurance and editing. A similar relationship exists in A Hazard of New Fortunes between March and the New York community—from their first meeting, Fulkerson tells Basil, "I felt at home with you—thoroughly domesticated—" (p. 2), and the implication is that the community needs a man of such humble domestic virtues to sustain itself.

In A Hazard of New Fortunes March is convincing as Howells' culture hero—but only because Howells avoided the March family pattern so consistently. Howells still refuses to psychoanalyze March, but in the New York novel Isabel plays a more active economic and social role, and it cannot be said that March's life is dull or that he is merely sublimating. Basil and Isabel do not indulge in a vacation exercise in frivolous and silly tampering with others' lives: the Marches take a chance with their own lives; they are truly on their own, no longer extensions of the familiar and safe surroundings of Boston; and their own economic survival is on the line. Their difficult and uncharacteristic problems suggest that A Hazard of New Fortunes is not only Howells' most ambitious but also his most honestly challenging March story. The author is putting himself to the test of avoiding his own pattern.
by testing his characters in a disorienting break from habit and custom.

An immediate deviation in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* from the March pattern is that Basil is depressed by thoughts of the future; it seems "terrible" to him, and he suffers "anticipative homesickness" (p. 11). Another deviation comes when the Marches feel "effectlessly interested" in "a gentle-looking young couple. . . . This immunity from acquaintance, this touch-and-go quality in their New York sojourn, this almost loss of individuality at times, after the intense identification of their Boston life, was a relief" (p. 101). And although the house-hunting episode in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, coming in the "chance acquaintance" stage, involves the usual getting-acquainted period while Basil and Isabel hunt for a new adventure on another "bridal" journey; and although the Marches are, as always, "easily taken out of themselves," and looking for a house helps to recall "youth" (p. 12); nevertheless middle-age and real economic concerns take the edge off youth and pleasure, and force Basil and Isabel to rely instead on courage. (The emphasis is now psychological. The Freudian house-womb security symbol is inescapable.) That is, the Marches are forced back onto themselves and their own relationship. When they do have discussions, they follow their usual conversational practice for as long as they feel that New York "existed for their appreciation" (p. 17) (for instance, indulging early in the novel in some silly and sentimental racism toward blacks). That their sympathy should be expressed by allowing the poor to serve them is characteristic, but the important difference in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is that Basil and Isabel, because of this "aestheticism" which enables them to be blind to their own emotional and the world's economic life, lose safeness and self-respect.

The Marches are slowly sensitized to the fact of their trifling, and their insulation from and ignorance of suffering, as New York introduces them to real poverty and to real sympathizers with the poor like Lindau. Gradually being cured of their "purely aesthetic view of the facts," Basil and Isabel begin, as Basil says, "to think about the people who are not merely carried through this street in a coupé, but have to spend their whole lives in it, winter and summer, with no hopes of driving out of it, except in a hearse" (p. 21). Having started with the idea of writing "literary pieces" on New York City from a fresh, newcomer's point of view, Basil discovers that "Dryfoos seems somehow to take the poetry and the pleasure out of the thing" (p. 76) even though he continues, with Isabel's prompting, to believe that he can involve himself with the magazine's gas-tycoon owner, or in questionable acts with questionable characters, and not be sullied; he believes that "taste" will somehow keep him uninvolved and clean. By the end of the novel, an accomplice of "reality" as opposed to "spectacle," Basil has been driven from self-indulgent "aestheticism" into "social realism." Poverty, not picturesque any longer, affects the way he now sees all life.
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in New York. Pushed morally toward Lindau, who is symbolic of all those people betrayed by America's dream of equality and prosperity, and the novel's active conscience, and March's own spiritual mentor years before in the American West, Basil becomes more "ethical" and less "aesthetic" as he realizes that we are all morally involved—we all share "complicity"—in any system that supports our life. Basil is at the scene when Conrad is killed and Lindau beaten, and is at the hospital as Lindau dies, his complicity established without doubt by physical proximity. He also realizes that the strike, exactly paralleling his own conscientious argument with Dryfoos over the firing of Lindau, is not a cause but a symptom of an inequitable system in which wages may be used to enslave and punish. Howells knows that from bloody battles—the strike and shooting and beating: shocks, he believes, of redemption—we must learn to work for economic and social change.

For all the criticism of his aestheticism, however, March is far from being the "aesthetic" individual in the novel. In New York it is really advertising that is central to the magazine Basil edits, and his sentimental aestheticism is truly Old World, even Old American in 1890, next to Fulkerson's spirit of salesmanship. Fulkerson is the outspoken exponent of the new aestheticism (of non-art and the new sentimentalism in which supply creates demand and demand therefore must be manipulated artificially by advertising) as he urges Basil to take the artist Beaton with him to the streets and into the strike that directly or indirectly kills both Conrad Dryfoos and Lindau: "go round together and take down its aesthetic aspects," Fulkerson says, thinking only of the magazines those aspects will sell. Obtuse to Basil's abhorrence of his notion of the relationship of life and art, he is really thinking of profit when he declares, "It's a big thing, March, this strike is" (p. 141). Finally Basil is shocked out of his protective aesthetic viewpoint and sentimental liberalism by the callous and selfish realities of modern business as much as by the overt violence of bullets and clubs. Because Basil is made to "see" the connection between business and bullets, the Marches are forced to "grow," a development which, although he proposes not to be grateful for it, Basil suggests is "the blessing of Heaven" (p. 168).

Howells' own shock explains why the novel concerns itself in the last chapters with several marriages or attempted marriages, both spiritual (Conrad and Margaret Vance) and domestic (Fulkerson and Miss Woodburn, and Beaton's failing attempt with Alma Leighton). Marriage, whatever else may be made of the wedding of advertising and the reactionary South, and of the failure of the artists to connect not only maritally but socially, always brings us back to the Marches' relationship which is more than refuge and more than just response to a threatening world. For Howells the family is the one central stability and, finally, salvation in changing, confusing times. It is indicative of
Basil’s solid character that in his hazard of new fortunes he is still a steadfast and devoted husband and father at the same time that he must cope with confusion and frustration and must grow pretty much on his own. In the only sustained disagreement that the Marches have, Isabel maintains to the end a fearful dislike for Lindau and loyalty to Fulkerson, whereas Basil feels that she has no facts with which to argue against his criticism of American democracy and justice (p. 100) —still another divergence from their usual behavior, and one which makes the friction and therefore the sustenance of their marriage in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* more thematically central and more plausible than in the other March stories. Basil and Isabel are not allowed even as a couple to continue their refuge in “taste” or their easy aesthetic meddling in other people’s lives.

Although it is tempting to account for the falling off in Howells’ quality by the later cheapening of March’s “democratic instincts” (as if Isabel had won out in the long run after all? as if Howells’ condemnation of aestheticism and advertising was only a temporary thing?), the most significant difference between *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and the other March stories is that the New York novel is conceived as a tragedy of American life, not a genteel comedy of its smiling aspects. Two especially good and sincere men are destroyed, and their deaths contribute to the crises faced by Dryfoos and Margaret Vance and March. When we begin to see how dependent on social conditions these lives are, and how contingent the lives and deaths of these people are on one another, we begin to see the cumulative effect of social tragedy. Cumulative tragedy replaces the single tragic hero, who bears the fate of all of us, with group-suffering. Everyone is involved in actions that have moral consequences, as we find that ordinary ties connect human beings together in extraordinary ways. There is a human community dedicated to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and separation from this community of spirit is destructive to others and ultimately is self-destructive. The tragedy ends, consequently, with exhaustion; and then the bonds of sympathy and aspiration begin to mend and draw people toward health again. When Basil realizes that Dryfoos tries vainly to atone to Conrad by the burial service for Lindau, he feels there is “a poetry . . . in this reconciliation through death of men, of ideas, of conditions, that could only have gone warring on in life” (p. 157)—an emotion substantially different from “aestheticism.” If Basil also learns courage as he is tugged between the moral and social forces that Lindau and Dryfoos represent—so far as an average middle-aged middle-class family man whose economic livelihood is threatened can be courageous—then we may all learn to be less manipulative and more tolerant.

In the stories following *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Basil March, far from being a culture hero, is simply silly, because Howells earnestly imposes March’s fully developed “tragic” consciousness from *A Hazard*
of New Fortunes over the comic design of the stories and over March who, for his good marriage and clarity of vision, is the catalyst of good psychological and social health. It is preposterous to insist on a tragic overlay in those slight stories of manners, yet Howells does insist on it, and it does dreadful damage to the stories and to the character of March. Howells is either heavy-handed (the opening of “A Circle in the Water” has Basil on a stage, in an “amphitheatre,” pondering whether evil is eternal or has an end like a circle in the water that finally breaks on a shore), or he uses Basil as a convenience rather than an interesting or important character dramatically or thematically, as if just by being there March could salvage a poor pale plot. In The Shadow of a Dream, for instance, the Marches are minor characters outside the Faulkner-Nevil triangle. The story is narrated long after the events, not dramatized in the fictional present, and Basil is always between the reader and the events, an unfortunate choice of position for March. His reasonableness is incapable of comprehending depths of suffering, or his preference for the nicer kind of fantasy makes him an inadequate point of view for representing and inspecting psychological tragedy. Events are limited to official March diction, and Basil’s moralizing reflections are more important than the pervasive mood. Limited to the probability imposed by this particular narrator, the story is claustrophobic. March simply is too proper and pulls back into superficialities to the extent that he is embarrassed by realities of the psyche.

Howells’ genius is in pointing out the obvious and the ordinary in American experience, and his development of the method of realism to handle material. At his best he worked with a verifiable surface, steering away from direct treatment of the unconscious or the mysterious. In psychological observation Howells is rightly hesitant about employing the realist’s method, and Basil March draws attention to his hesitation. When March gets hold of a “psychological fact” he is impressed and points self-consciously at it as if it were a fact he made himself. One psychological fact in “A Pair of Patient Lovers” is revealed with extreme circumspection to the reader, who knew it at the first meeting with the Bentleys.

... she said that if he had released her, it would have made no difference—she should still have felt herself bound to him; and until he should tell her that he no longer cared for her, she should feel that he was bound to her. I saw no great originality in this reproduction of my own ideas. But when Miss Bentley added that she believed her mother herself would be shocked and disappointed if they were to give each other up, I was aware of being in the presence of a curious psychological fact. I so wholly lost myself in the inquiry it invited that I let the talk flow on round me unheeded while I questioned whether Mrs. Bentley did not derive a satisfaction from her own and her daughter’s mutual opposition which she could never have enjoyed from their perfect agreement. ... I divined a not unnatural effect of the strained relations between her and her mother.8

March is the right central consciousness for registering social tendencies and forces and economic mysteries, and wrong for the closer psychological scrutiny that Howells makes him perform. Basil narrates the four poorest March stories in the first person—*The Shadow of a Dream*, "A Circle in the Water," *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*, and "A Pair of Patient Lovers"—and they are failures because the first-person narrative, corresponding to a limited dramatic treatment, is spoiled by the failure of Basil to learn much about himself, to grow; spoiled, that is, by Howells' inability to develop either "complicity" or a convincing bit of tragedy out of the story of manners. In such slight stories March cannot get close to the awareness he came to in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and any recall of his character and world-view from that novel trivializes the problems in these shorter pieces. There is none of the darkness of tragedy in the stories, there is only melodrama.

The ending of "A Pair of Patient Lovers" is thrown away on Basil's shallow optimism that staging the human comedy is the daily business of life. "I have often had to criticize life for a certain caprice with which she treats the elements of drama, and mars the finest conditions of tragedy with a touch of farce" (p. 77) is supposed to ridicule the reader's expectations by undercutting the "tragic" possibilities and giving the "realistic" ending: since life is capricious and turns tragedies into farces, Basil's attitude is "right," because it is the "attitude" life appears to "present" to human beings. The effect of that conclusion is to make the whole story a farce retroactively. Howells thinks the irony undercutting March actually establishes the common man's tragedy by giving the reader a truly realistic, representative man who abides periods of boredom and stupidity and fantasy. He thinks this is realism, or that the story avoids sentimentality since a sentimental character is not the same thing as a sentimental author. The ending, however, is a parody of Howells' position on plausibility, it is dully coy narration, it is too short and quick a summation. It is as sentimental as anything Howells denounced in the 1870's and 1880's, and it looks all the more foolish in the mid-1890's when Howells' battle for realism was already won.

But the worst failure of March comes when he works hard to make something out of nothing. In "A Pair of Patient Lovers," his optimism looks like obtuseness. His hopeful claim is that suffering is ennobling, because "there is that wonderful adaptation of the human soul to any circumstances. It's the one thing that makes me respect our fallen nature. Fallen? It seems to me that we ought to call it our risen nature; it has steadily mounted with the responsibility that Adam took for it—or Eve" (p. 54). Ironic or not, that remark in the context makes Basil as vapidly unhealthy as the situation he reports. In the stories of the 1890's March has nothing to do but estimate by manners. In *The Shadow of a Dream* and "A Circle in the Water," his complicity in good and evil is the aesthetic exercise of an outsider wondering how
many evils can dance on the head of a pin. Only in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* does March behave according to an ethical code that evolves under stress and suffering, and only in that novel is he implicated in human affairs because only in that novel is sacrifice demanded of him. Complicity, like so much of Howells' writing, seems to be something he toyed with and then put away from himself. In the March stories of the 1890's, the "vast, natural, unaffected dulness" that Howells found so precious in people in *Their Wedding Journey* (p. 55) is his only material. As Basil says in *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*, "It was our sophistication which enabled us to taste pleasures which would have been insipidities to them" (p. 8). Dullness and tedious meddling had become virtues for Howells.

Frivolous without meaning to be, jarring with *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and spoiling Howells' best representation of the marriage state, the later Basil March compromises Howells' taste, judgment, aesthetics, and ethics, all of them involved in the method of literary realism. Clara Kirk's article on the Marches is extremely misleading, since *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy*, for instance, is set at the same time as *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Basil taking his first summer's vacation from New York; that March could be the same man in these two stories, reflecting Howells' growing concerns as a realist as Mrs. Kirk claims, is impossible to believe. Howells ruins the growing stature that March as a realist could have by setting four of the six stories written after *A Hazard of New Fortunes* before it in time. Even if the stories are read according to the chronology of their actions, Basil does not grow from a romantic to a realistic outlook, or, as Klinkowitz argues, from an aesthetic to an ethical orientation. Since the majority of the stories were written later than *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the realist Howells, with no intention to show such a growth in Basil March, chose not to keep up or could not keep up the character's aesthetic and ethical positions. When Howells took his later Basil March from the comic design of *Their Wedding Journey* and imposed on it and on March the tragic vision left over from *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he committed a character assassination. Basil March's character in the 1890's is all vacuous manner, not the serenity of an ethical position or aesthetic accommodation with reality won through sacrifice and suffering as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* makes it appear.

March may explain why Howells fails to satisfy us—they both equate the marriage state and the cultural aristocracy with abstract virtue, and literary realism with caring about people. Howells' realism in other works can be admired, but the caring in the March stories of the 1890's is little more than March's comic "romances about young girls" done with aggravating facility. The compromise of March's realistic orientation by the shift to an aesthetic appreciation of manners demonstrates March's decline into a winsome naivete that is neither credible nor cred-
itable innocence regained; and his turning backward in the later nar­
ratives, to times before his own move and before the shift of the Ameri­
can center from Boston to New York, actually marks the end of a cul­
tural tradition if March is taken as the cultural hero he is for Howells. His failure is in not hazarding new fortunes enough, and in vainly continuing 1870 Boston into 1890 New York. March’s 1870 is all gone, just as the frontier is, and in 1890 his ethical values cannot really exist within the harder conditions of social and economic life, no matter what tests Howells puts him up to. Against the challenge of abnormal psychology in *The Shadow of a Dream*, March abdicates. In the 1890’s Howells lets him look to the past, and March is a man quite simply playing with aesthetic structures to get back to the traditions—and the romance—that no longer exist for him in American life. It is appropriate that the Marches’ last two journeys are backward to Europe.

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