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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

A Modern Instance

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William Dean Howells, Edwin Harrison Cady (Introduction)

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A Modern Instance Details

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Humphrey says

Modern Instance, like many a Howells novel, seems to start slowly: as becomes clear around the halfway mark, however, this is only because the reader didn't know what patterns to be looking for. Howells' prose is subtle; one of his greatest achievements as a realist is that he doesn't flag things as significant beforehand, instead forcing the reader - like real life - to recognize significance retrospectively. The farther into Modern Instance one gets, the farther the novel forces them to think back. It's an excellent accomplishment of both style and plotting. Another classic Howells move here is the presentation of a moral center late in the novel (Atherton, speaking about divorce and society) that is well-reasoned and thematically consistent with the novel but is nonetheless depicted as under-satisfying and countered by another character (Olive). Howells gives us a conclusion which the novel would lead us to endorse, yet he slyly also voices its limitation. Excellent stuff.

Mia says

Reading the first few chapters alone was worth it because of the insights provided into the character of Bartley Hubbard. I first "met" Bartley in Howells' novel "The Rise of Silas Lapham" and thought him cynical, but likable (except for the way he treated his wife). "A Modern Instance" is Bartley's story and finding out that he was an orphan and a self-made man wannabe really shows how despicable he was during his interview with Silas Lapham in the aforementioned book. Howells very deftly lets us understand that Bartley is an immature and selfish narcissist and the reader's heart goes out to his poor wife (who is just as sweet in this book as she was in her cameo in the Lapham text). The device of highlighting a minor character from one text in another reminds me of Balzac (and why not? I think the American realists made no secret of their admiration for him nor his influence on them). Howells impresses me more and more.

Illiterate says

A solid study of marital breakdown marred by staid moralism and a one-dimensional heroine.

Tom James says

A story about a loyal wife and an ethically freelancing husband who begin their life together in near-bliss only to find things deteriorating with each little instance. It deals with the subject of divorce as well as other social/historical aspects of life in New England of the 1870s (religion, ethics, the legal profession, journalism, town life vs. country life, etc.). With sincere Victorian earnestness, the author takes the issue of marriage and divorce very seriously and nowhere does one get the impression that he is advocating the idea that attitudes toward marriage are outmoded and ought to be discarded. He does, however, present us with the plight of an abandoned wife, its effects on those around her, as well as the contention that there are cases in which divorce is justifiable. Even though the husband is clearly in the wrong throughout, he is not a villain, and has moments in which he desires to do what is right. Even though, the wife is clearly in the right,

she is not without her flaws as well. According to the back cover, this novel is one of the first attempts at dealing with the subject of divorce in American literature.

Christina says

As I grow older, I become more aware of how the seemingly peaceful "days gone by" were, in truth, filled with many of the same mistakes and frustrations that society and individuals still face today. Hence, while culture described in the story was very different from the culture I live in, the characters and their views felt very familiar.

Jordan Davidson says

This novel is an exposé of the doomed marriage (and, eventually and blessedly, divorce) between the jealous, overemotional Marcia Gaylord and her selfish, manipulative egomaniac of a husband, Bartley Hubbard. For some reason, this book was absolutely fascinating despite the fact that it portrays two deeply unlikeable people making each other miserable. Case in point: at one point while reading this I fell down the staircase in my house because I couldn't put the book down long enough to pay attention to where I was going. Reading this was almost like watching one of those trashy celebrity couple "reality" shows, except infinitely more intellectually fulfilling.

Melanie Daves says

A Modern Instance was an interesting read. I enjoyed how easily I could feel for the characters. I was angry with Marcia for being such a deluded idiot and I melted when Ben revealed that the picture he held on to was really a picture of Marcia. It is interesting that when I read the beginning, I actually liked Bartley, but by the end of the novel I detested him. I think Howells did that by changing Bartley's physical appearance towards the end. Howells could not be biased since he decided to write the novel in a journalistic way, so he had to create images in the minds of readers that would make each reader begin to form biases of his/her own.

Christopher Sutch says

This is an extraordinarily entertaining read. It's a strange hybrid of moral narrative and broad comedic satire. While the moral purpose of the novel will mean little to most people today, the satire and the plot events kept me interested and engaged. Howells's interest in developing "realistic" fiction ("naturalistic" as literary critics would say) is strongly apparent in this work, in which the two main characters' "love" and marriage are shown to take the courses they do because of the two parties' inherent psychological characteristics as well as how they react to outward events beyond their control. A very interesting novel.

Lucy says

I don't think I'm spoiling this for anyone by saying that no-one gets a happy ever after. But then, none of the characters deserve one, either: rarely have I disliked anyone as much as I disliked Bartley Hubbard. William Dean Howells is one of those authors who insists on telling rather than showing, but does it so pitilessly and clearly that the inevitability of the tragedy carries you along. The rather abrupt end lost it the final star, though I'd give it 4.5 if I could.

Dale says

I wish I liked it more, and I understand the novelty and shock of the theme, but my humble opinion is that it never got the reader there - what's common today, if then was an aberration, should still hit the modern reader like a blow, and the book just...treaded water, or rather did a dead man's float, all the way through. I was unmoved, untouched, and really didn't care at the end, even though Howells did create most of the characters as fully three-dimensional people.

Mary says

What a moving book.

It just goes to show how ambition and jealousy can threaten to destroy a marriage and how the innocent party would be looked on by a society where divorce was shunned.

An excellent read.

Karen Chandler says

I can see the historical importance of the novel: its careful focus on characters' psychology, its treatment of the largely man's world of journalism, its concern with changing estimations of religion are hallmarks of nineteenth-century realism. Yet I was bothered by Howells' assumptions about women's psychological and cognitive weakness and regional differences. As a champion of regional fiction, he might have been more sophisticated about people from outside the urban cultural centers. Yet Edith Wharton, who I find to be much more effective as a writer (and more modern in writing about divorce), also betrays this kind of bias in some of her work. Anyway, I like that the main characters in *A Modern Instance* are somewhat complicated, but I also wish they hadn't been so flawed--Marcia swinging between jealousy and self-recrimination and her husband Bartley so obviously a cad.

Kristi says

Howell's depiction of character flaws, failing marriage, and the corruption of individual isolation in modern, industrial, and capitalistic America, is one of heartrendingly desolation, reflecting a shift in American literature to realism.

Bradley Dyson says

This book is an American classic coming out of the Realism period of the American literary period, so this novel doesn't leave much for the reader in the sense of coming to conclusions or having to really figure anything out. As with the time period, authors wrote in painstaking detail every aspect of emotion and setting. However, this is a great novel that talks on the aspect of love and bad relationships, and people who just don't have a clue about their presentation to other people. Even for its age, it is a very relatable novel even in today's era, which speaks volumes on people in general and the timelessness of Howells.

Kwame says

A solid read. I enjoyed it. I think it accurately describes both the mechanics and the ethos of American journalism. To wit: Bartley Hubbard, a newspaperman blessed with "no more moral nature than a baseball," serves as the prototype of the glib and smiling journalist familiar to the audiences of *Nightline* or *Washington Week*.

Bob Newman says

Hick Duo Go Splitsville in Beantown

Since reading this novel first back in 1997, I've always felt that it has one of the most unattractive titles of any book I know. On re-reading it, I still think so. This should not put readers off, however, because behind that bland, unimaginative moniker, which reflected some long-since faded thoughts by the author, you will find a fascinating study of divorce in the 19th century, in a society that condemned it. Sixty five years ago I can remember my own mother whispering the word "divorced" when speaking about a couple no longer together---it was too shameful to say out loud. Yeah, well, times have changed. But what about the mid-1870s? Howells carefully draws the picture in his usual, nuanced style.

A handsome, but shallow youth, Bartley Hubbard, flirts with Marcia Gaylord in a small Maine town. We can see their union is ill-fated right from the start, her family opposes it (he seems to have no relatives), but Marcia burns for Bartley. They marry surreptitiously and head for Boston where Bartley gets a foothold in the newspaper world. He mouths idealistic pap like "I hope I shall never do anything unworthy of your idea." but basically he has no moral framework in his character; he's selfish, facile, opportunistic, and self-indulgent. Marcia, though beautiful, is ignorant, self-centered, and very jealous. Howells emphasizes their lack of religion as a key to their deficiencies. As the marriage falls apart, we turn more and more to other characters, all in the higher levels of Boston society, who have the moral fiber that the Hubbards do not. Ben Halleck, Bartley's ex-friend, wrestles with his conscience over his secret love for Marcia as he sees her suffer over Bartley's abandonment of her. In very 19th century style, he worships her "as a woman whose constancy to her mistake" makes her sacred. He suppresses all his desires, even disappearing to Uruguay for two years, but merely thinking of another man's wife, albeit a desperately unhappy one, is utterly beyond the pale. He castigates himself unmercifully and winds up a penitent minister. But *A MODERN INSTANCE* is not a simple melodrama---it is a complex mix of personalities. There are no simple answers---isn't it easy to be upright when you are financially secure?---and the end is indefinite. Though Hubbard is used as an

example of moral decay, a man without firm principles and moral rectitude, he is still the most vivid, most realistic character. He is a likeable scamp, no matter how he is villified by the Boston society people. The values that people live by in Boston circa 1875 are far from those we know today. They agonize about things that would not give us much pause. They emote on "civilization" because they, like Howells, could not imagine the horrors of the 20th century. Thus, in a sense, Howells' novel is passé. Yet, his conversations, his picture of relationships, his description of the times, and even of nature are excellent. For example the vivid logging camp scenes (pp.79-97) are pure genius. You feel that you know that time and place by the end. Even if there are certain melodramatic twists and turns in the novel, and even if the last 90 pages drag a little, I would certainly recommend that you read *A MODERN INSTANCE* if you have any interest at all in American literature. It is a startlingly powerful book whose characters will stay with you.

Kim says

"A Modern Instance" is a novel written by William D. Howells. The novel was serialized in *Century Magazine* in eleven installments between December 1881 and October 1882; it was published in book form in Boston by James R. Osgood and Company in October 1882. Howells got the idea for the novel after he saw a performance of *"Medea"* in Boston in 1875. When he witnessed on the stage the recreation of Medea's love for Jason, her husband who betrays her, and how her love changes to hatred, as Howells himself said, *"the novel was born."* *Up until the time of publication Howells continued to refer to his work in progress as "The New Medea."* Howells considered *"A Modern Instance"* his finest novel.

The novel begins in the village of Equity, Maine. A village where:

"winter was full half the year. 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."

The villagers are called *"captives of winter"* and watch out their windows where *"every movement on the street was precious to them."* In this first page the "movement" happens to be our hero and heroine Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord going down the street in a cutter, *"gay with red-lined robes"*. Bartley takes Marcia to the church social, and he brings her back to her father's house in the *"moonlight silence."* We are told about Marcia that:

"her beauty was of the kind that coming years would only ripen and enrich; at thirty she would be even handsomer than at twenty..."

Marcia is the daughter of Squire and Mrs. Gaylord. The Squire is the town lawyer and his wife seldom went out of her own door. Marcia is the apple of her father's eye and he has spoiled her.

Bartley is the editor of the *Equity Free Press*. Bartley's life had been quite different from Marcia's life. He was an orphan, dependent on his own exertions for a livelihood, he had entered college with difficulty, and with heavy conditions. We are told that:

"The fact of his smartness had been affirmed and established in the strongest manner by the authorities of the college at which he was graduated..." however; *"One, indeed, still felt it a duty to call attention to the fact that the college authorities said nothing of the young man's moral characteristics in a letter dwelling so largely upon his intellectual qualifications."*

This is one early clue as to Bartley's true character.

It is quickly obvious that Marcia is madly in love (or thinks she is) with Bartley, and Bartley is definitely not in love with Marcia, although he is fond of her. He seems to be fond of women in general though, and Marcia is extremely jealous of them all. Bartley's feelings towards Marcia are given here;

"Bartley was still free as air; but if he could once make up his mind to settle down in a hole like Equity, he could have her by turning his hand."

Although it seems to me that this relationship can go absolutely no where, Marcia and Bartley do become engaged at which time *"The house seemed too little for Marcia's happiness."* However, almost immediately something goes wrong when Bartley and his assistant have a fight over one of the office girls, Hannah Morrison, and Bartley's assistant is seriously injured. Marcia when she finds out breaks the engagement, not because of his violence, but because of Hannah. Because of this Bartley is asked to leave the newspaper, and he leaves town.

However, Marcia finds that she cannot live without Bartley, and even though she is hurt because of the other girl, she leaves her home and follows Bartley. They marry and continue on to Boston. I wonder if their marriage would have run more smooth from this point if they would have remained in Equity, but they aren't in Equity and I doubt it would have helped. From this point on the book centers on the quarrels and reconciliations of this couple, and there are a lot of them. Marcia is so absorbed in Bartley that it is annoying, if not for him, it is for the rest of us. She is extremely jealous and just a woman talking to Bartley throws her into a rage.

Sometimes during the novel you feel as if Bartley is a great criminal, as low as you could ever be; but really he isn't. He is just too handsome, too shallow, and way, way too selfish. But there was good in him, it seems as if he was really a good natured man; if he would have had the right influences in his life things may have turned out differently. However, as the book goes on he falls lower and lower, Marcia is absolutely no help; she seems to spend her time either gazing at Bartley with admiration and devotion in her eyes hanging on his every word, or slamming doors and locking them because she saw another woman speak to him at a party.

Here are some of the most memorable lines for me anyway:

"He still clung to his old-fashioned deistical opinions; but he thought no worse of a man for not holding them; he did not deny that a man might be a Christian, and still be a very good man."

"Well, I shouldn't begin to plough for corn just yet," replied Kinney. "It's curious," he went on, "to see how anxious we are to have a thing over, it don't much matter what it is, whether it's summer or winter. I suppose we'd feel different if we wa'n't sure there was going to be another of 'em. I guess that's one reason why the Lord concluded not to keep us clearly posted on the question of another life. If it wa'n't for the uncertainty of the thing, there are a lot of fellows like you that wouldn't stand it here a minute. Why, if we had a dead sure thing of over-the-river,--good climate, plenty to eat and wear, and not much to do,--I don't believe any of us would keep Darling Minnie waiting,--well, a _great_ while"

"But he was restored to reason when the composer sat down at the piano and played, amid the hush that falls on society at such times, something from Beethoven, and again something of his own, which was so like Beethoven that Beethoven himself would not have known the difference.."

"Halleck turned. "What could be a worse hell than marriage without love?" he demanded, fiercely. "Love without marriage," said Atherton".

I liked the book, I'll read it again someday. For me it was definitely a four star novel.

Johnathan says

I have a better understanding of what the title means in relation to the book and now. Naming the book A Modern Instance might seem a bit presumptuous but the story does relate well a hundred years later, which shows that this the theme of the book is indeed a modern one that still plagues us. I really like how I was able to see that this book was relatable to things like The Princess Bride or "The Dark Night" and it was easier to see how it could relate to my life. I definitely enjoyed this more than Middlemarch and would happily read it again.

Kimberly says

Knowing the two characters are going to divorce from the beginning made me look for clues to the relationship's dissolution in the early stages of their relationship. While her parents bemoan the fact that she loves Bartley more than he loves her as being the main problem, that and her pride and jealousy, the real problem is the abusive nature of the relationship.

The 'adorable' flirting at the beginning had a disturbing taste to it, Bartley holds Marcia's wrists until she accedes to what he wants, and when he releases them they are white where his hands were, and then red. This display of force is never repeated in the book, but it's still a hint that Bartley is abusive. This is not new to Marcia, this is exactly how her parents' marriage works. Her father has forced his ideas onto her mother to the point that she has been reduced to a hollow shadow, a woman who doesn't even mother her child as her husband has robbed her of all the comfort a marriage should give in the face of difficulties (they lost several children before Marcia). She has no friends, and never goes out, ceding everything to her husband -- basically she is an emotionally battered wife.

This is exactly what happens to Marcia. Bartley laughs at her when she feels sad, belittles her when she becomes justifiably angry, and flirts with women in her presence though he knows it hurts her feelings. Of course he alternates these abuses with an over measure of kindness to keep Marcia feeling that he does love her, all tactics of an emotionally abusive husband.

In reaction to this abuse Marcia becomes her mother, she allows Bartley to stay in journalism, to drink, to spend more and more time out with his friends, to spend money they don't have, and asks less and less of him. This of course is punctured with a few fights, but Bartley masterfully turns Marcia's feelings back onto herself each time. In the end he is suing her for abandonment, though it is he that abandoned her.

The experience destroys Marcia, and like her mother she ends up shut up alone in the house at Equity. It is likely she has no idea that Ben Halleck even loves her, as destructive and painful love is the only sort she has been taught to recognize. One can't help but feel her daughter is set on the same path, taught to worship papa just like Marcia worshiped her father no matter how terribly he treats her mamma.

Howells' exploration of divorce thus is actually an exploration of emotional abuse, and its self-perpetuating nature. Howells' himself doesn't seem to recognize this, painting the Squire in a positive light, and dwelling on journalism as an ill, and religion as failing the Hubbard's. Marcia does have failings, and is ill equipped for a happy marriage, but children's failings can be ameliorated by good parenting, something totally lacking from both her and Bartley's previous lives.

Marcia's pride and jealousy are even recognized by her parents, yet nothing is done about them, nor do the parents recognize that they haven't done their job in raising her. Which is why emotional abuse is self-perpetuating, those engaged in it do not even recognize what is going on. To Howells it is modernity that has doomed the Hubbards to divorce, but really, even without divorce the marriage was doomed, as any marriage is when one partner treats the other partner the way Bartly treats Marcia.

Jeff says

The best book with no plot or purpose ever!
