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Dark Satire in William Dean Howells' *The Shadow of a Dream*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the dark satire in William Dean Howells' *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890). Howells portrays the endurance or failure of characters in a confused and grotesque world of chance. Here is the final stage of satire, in which mere survival is a sufficient triumph. In order to make his material into satire, Howells develops such satiric devices as point of view (in particular the handling of the author's various masks and surrogates), symbolic action, explicit statement, undercutting or anticlimax, humors, and influential moods (fantasy, charm, glamour, and novelty). Explicitly, however, this novel offers a hopeful explanation of life's baffling nature, and is therefore ostensibly and officially optimistic. Implicitly, the book denies the interpolated explanations and often parodies them. Howells creates contrasts between theory and actuality, ideals and behavior, and from these contrasts he creates the grotesqueness and absurdity which are the weapons of dark satire.

Keywords: grotesque, baffling, ostensibly, parodies, absurdity.

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was an indigenous American realist novelist, satirist, literary critic and play writer. He dealt with numerous realistic issues of his time in his novels. His characters live fatalistically in a world of bondage to chance and capricious evil. Howells satirizes the belief in certainty and security, but wraps evil in uncertainty too. By presenting character and situation in a straight forward manner, he wrote novels characterized chiefly by their moral atmosphere and authentic domestic realism. Oscar W. Firkins' analysis, *The Shadow of a Dream* as a dark satire which makes a convenient beginning for this discussion of the characters and accurate statement of the problems (81).

Northrop Frye also studies dark satire as "mythos", "a structural principle of attitude" (Anatomy of Criticism, p. 310). That is, what Crane calls it as "power". This "power" is the shaping cause, the "actual final cause" (Crane, p. 166) of an organized artistic composition. The power involves conceptual form, mode of argument or rhetoric, and the purpose of the work; knowing the "power" one can say that "a poem…is…a certain matter formed in a certain way" (Crane, p. 153). In other words, the "power" is form, conceived of in a dynamic way. In this sense of the term, dark satire is one way of attacking deviations from a norm of morality. Here Howells tries to secure the reader's condemnations of these deviations by making them look absurd or grotesque in comparison to the norm. Dark satire is militant, because the clarity of its norms makes deviations plainly immoral and condemnable; it is often ironic as well. Characteristics of satiric works are the presence of an author (explicit or implicit); a set of moral standards, perhaps coinciding with the reader's and perhaps not; deviations from the norm; an attack on the deviations; the use in this attack of absurd or grotesque contrasts between the norm and the deviations; and whatever literary conventions and devices the author finds useful. Certain combination of these characteristics, in certain degrees, results in a given work of dark satire.

The Shadow of a Dream presents an awesome world of suffering and chance. The impacts of fantasy, confusion, and chance are compounded by the action and the techniques used, so that the word dream describes the total impact. In the action Howells develops the idea of the "shadow" thrown by a dream into the future lives of many characters.

> In a small, bustling Midwestern city, Douglas Faulkner, a moody lawyer, befriends Basil March (the narrator) and discusses with him and Nevil, a minister, many odd topics, including Kant's dreams of foreboding. After March has quarreled with Faulkner, moved to Boston, married, and entered the insurance business, he hears that Faulkner is married; later, when a Dr. Wingate tells March that Faulkner is ill at the seaside near Boston, March and his wife visit him. Faulkner is obviously ill and boorish to his beautiful, devoted wife Hermia, and his companion, Nevil. After Dr. Wingate arrives Faulkner dies of a heart attack while glaring at his wife. Some sinister repeated dream was evidently affecting Faulkner, but we are not told what it was. Dr. Wingate, March, and Mrs. March in various combinations, discuss the case. Later the Marches learn that Nevil has been engaged but was jilted and so strongly affected that he had to leave his parish. A year or two later Nevil and Mrs. Faulkner suddenly become engaged. Wanting to learn the truth before her remarriage, Mrs. her back to the Faulkner mansion in the Midwestern city. After an embarrassing scene in which old Mrs. Faulkner tells March about the

> dream (which he has guessed already), March finds that Nevil has decided not to marry Hermia. After March has overcome Nevil's scruples and gotten him to agree to the marriage, Nevil steps off the train on which March is going home, and is ground to a jelly between the train and the wall of a stone archway. A year later Hermia dies and the Marches are left to ponder the meaning and moral lesson (if any) of these dismal events.

The action here is in itself one of the author's most depressing, and becomes downright grisly at the end. There is one wasteful, unnecessary incident or accident after another, from March's youthful squabble with Faulkner to Nevil's death just before he is to wed Hermia. According to author, characters pop up and disappear at right times in right places; this characteristically free use of coincidence has an unnerving effect and adds to the sense of bad dream.

As in Howells' novels, small and coincidental events touch off the most important incidents. For instance, in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* backwoods French-Canadian doctor played an unexpectedly important role and in *The Shadow of a Dream* a similarly small bit of business leads to the death of Nevil. The coincidence here is doubly meaningful, because it is carefully prepared for. In the middle of the novel, after Nevil has been jilted and is sailing for Europe, March sees him off and discovers him in company with a wealthy parishioner "who is going along" to "watch out that Nevil took care of himself" (113). Toward the end of the novel, after March has convinced Nevil that he should marry Hermia, Nevil follows March into the latter's Pullman and prepares to see him off. In the car Nevil "fell into the hands of that rich and cordial parishioner of his"…. (213), who happens to be sitting there. Although Nevil is irritated, the rich parishioner holds him in discussion until the train begins to move. Then after a few hasty words with March on the platform, Nevil steps off reverse and is smashed between the car and an archway through which the train is moving. Howells wants us to trust that Nevil's death is caused by this parishioner. Popping up again out of nowhere to keep Nevil until the moment of his fate, this "parishioner," as one ponders about him, begins to resemble an agent of destiny. The parishioner even becomes rather sinister if one remembers his prior remark that he would "watch out that Nevil took care of himself." Howells is not necessarily referring to any legend involving a meeting with an agent or harbinger of death, but one is entitled to feel a deliberate and more than ordinary sense of fate about the two scenes of premonition and death.

The nightmare quality of the book is created not only by the action but even more by the narrator, Basil March. His actions and observations, and his association with the characters and with his wife are of the first importance, an inherent characteristic of first-person narration. In this novel Howells departs from the two most typical narrative styles

of previous novels: the omniscient author, and the combination of observer(s) and hovering author, to put the story completely in the hands of the narrator. Mrs. March also appears frequently, not as a major actor, but as a secondary figure, a confidante, of the greatest importance to our knowledge of the action and of March's observations. She and March, however, do form a binary system which is foreign to the group centering on Faulkner. The impact of this gathering is to make Faulkner, Hermia and Nevil seem other distant and strange.

March's comments, descriptions, and attitudes create this nightmare effect, and his philosophical remarks help to give us the official philosophical line. However the two functions are distinct. We can take March's specific statements literally, but thanks to Howells' implicit discounting of March's (and Mrs. March's) convictions, we cannot take his philosophy seriously. This effect ties in with the split between life and philosophy, and with the "undercutting" of the philosophical comments in such earlier works as *A Modern Instance.* Nightmare effect is quite literally that an unpleasant dreamlike quality. It is allied to Howells' earlier creation of the mood which may be called as "the fantastic", a mood opposite to the pleasant dreamlike one of glamour or romance. In this novel the unpleasantness emerges from the events themselves and the dream effect from the environment. The fantasy effect begins to be formed promptly. March recalls youthful romantic literary discussions which are now distant and dreamlike because they are exhibited from the perspective of memory. When March goes to see his sick friend at the shore, he stresses the disturbing contrast between the old Faulkner (fixed vividly in March's memory) and the new one, who is flesh and blood but seems unreal.

Throughout this episode at Faulkner's seaside estate the mood of dreamy or nightmarish fantasy is built up and maintained. As the characters play "at the futile and heart-breaking comedy which humanity obliges us to keep up with a dying man" (25): and act artificially gay, the fantastic mood is intensified. Obviously Faulkner's mysteriously moody behavior adds to the impact. March's description of the scenery lays a great stress on the apparent unreality of the ocean, with its "bodiless and impalpable" (30) traits. Faulkner points out an optical illusion on the beach, "when people were riding toward you and seemed to be walking on some kind of extraordinary stilts" (31). After lunch Faulkner takes his guests into an old garden, full of sagging fences and tumble down green houses and fruit trees which bore "crops of gnarled and misshapen fruits" and "leprous peaches" (48). March feels as if he's been there before, but says that he knows it's all "as unreal . . . as the shadow of a dream" (51). March and Faulkner sit in a decaying arbor and discuss dreams; later, March takes a gander at the sea, "that image of eternity" (64) and notes that a fog is coming up into which the sails of the ships are melting. He observes Hermia, "a solitary figure" (65), standing on a rock and looking out to sea. When he waves to Hermia, Nevil, and Mrs. March, to tell them that Dr. Wingate

has arrived, they rush madly toward him and Nevil falls down, because they think that something would go wrong. This scene on the beach finds everyone affected by the strange atmosphere. When they get back to the arbor, Faulkner dies, fulfilling the fears of the group and making fantasy real, while "a little wind, cold, keen" stirs the leaves, the fog rises, and "the roar of the ocean seemed solidly to fill the air" (79). March's observations and descriptions have created an elegiac, dreamlike mood appropriate to the event; the devices are rather trite, but are effectively handled. Later, March reacts strongly to the atmosphere of luxury and solid wealth in the Faulkner house in the unnamed Midwestern city, and thinks that such an atmosphere could well soften Nevil's scruples against marrying the widow of his best friend. Before March's conversation with the elder Mrs. Faulkner, he strolls in the garden and recalls his youth and Faulkner's death; a few minutes later, walking through the study to the conversation, he smells "a ghostly scent of tobacco" (163), which recalls the "specter" (164) of his youth. Thus the scenes are filled with a dreamlike mixture of past and present, life and death, reality and unreality.

March also contributes directly to the unrealistic mood by using labels like "fantastic" and "grotesque." He is not a naive observer; he is well aware of the qualities of situations. He refers to one of Isabel March's attitudes as "an instance of the grotesque and squalid element which is so apt to mar a heroic situation, in order apparently to keep human nature modest" (144); this is spoken partly in jest, but on the next page March is …. "Tormented, whether sleeping or waking, by a fantastic exaggeration of the whole business and exasperated by a keen sense of its preposterousness" (145). The situation involving Hermia and Nevil is "monstrous, illogical" (146); Faulkner, though dead, is "a demoniac presence" (146). In other moods March refers to the absurd rather than to the grotesque. He must repress a smile at the dowager Mrs. Faulkner's "mixture of mysticism and matter-of-fact" (169). At one point "something perversely comic" forms part of his reactions to the sight of Hermia, and he feels an urge "to tease, to mystify her, to keep her between laughing and crying" (156). March has the instincts of a satirist. He is very sensitive to relationships and in particular to the contrasts between the expected and the unexpected, the appropriate and the inappropriate.

March, however, is not a simple mask for William Dean Howells as in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Howells undercuts March's position, with the difference that in this novel the author must do the job implicitly and ironically. March is a familiar and congenial character. Sometimes he simply makes himself aware of his disappointments. At one point, in the crucial argument with Nevil at the end, as March tries to convince Nevil to forget that dream and marry Hermia, he finds himself "talking sophistries" (207) and retailing romantic views taken from novels. Mostly, however, the satire on March as faulty observer arises from the discussions between him and his wife. Mrs. March is not a perfect observer herself; she has a powerful prejudice against Faulkner and for Hermia.

She is, however, often much more acute than March. When Dr. Wingate tells Hermia about the dream and Hermia is prostrated, Mrs. March condemns Wingate for informing Hermia that the man in the dream is the man Hermia wants to marry. March says that, "perhaps Wingate did not know she was going to marry Nevil" (145), and, as March comically realizes his predicament, Mrs. March asks him why he did not tell the doctor. March is convicted of denseness, and goes off to brood about the "preposterousness" of the business. And since he is always on the edge of the action rather than in it, his opinions about it cannot have the authority of Faulkner's or Nevil's or Hermia's.

The position of Marches as spectators, and their relations to each other, affects their authority as commentators. They are essentially unconcerned, philosophical observers (as in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*) and they can discuss the characters, when they are dead, "as arbitrarily as . . . the personages in a fiction" (214) much as the Contributor treats the characters in Suburban Sketches. March himself goes out of his way to tell us that he and his wife are merely "spectators giving it a sympathetic and appreciative glance now and then, while we kept about our own business" (102).

Nevertheless, the Marches analyze the meaning of the story in terms of an official morality which is presented rather ambiguously. The Marches deny chance, but deny it in such a way that the case is left open. Midway of the novel, after Nevil and Mrs. Faulkner have gone through some more undeserved misery, March asks, "Was existence all a miserable chance, a series of stupid, blundering accidents? We could not believe that: for our very souls' sake and for our own sanity we must not" (108-109). The denial has a quality of desperation about it. March goes on to say that he and his wife gave up speculating because their "little corner of cognition afforded no perspective of the infinite plan" (109); they leave knowledge to God. This solution is not a positive one, either. Similarly, at the end of the novel the Marche turn over many alternative theories but can come to no conclusion. The last alternative offered is "simply fate" (217), from which March turns to the possibility that the dream did refer to facts and that Hermia and Nevil really were guilty of a secret passion. Such a suggestion opens up an interesting side issue and evades again a final answer to the question about the meaning of evil. In concluding sentences, Howells subtly satirizes and undercuts the Marches' "official" position:

> Knowing them [Hermia and Nevil] to be what they were, we have never admitted this hypothesis for a moment.. . . my wife . . . does not permit it to be said, or even suggested, that our feelings are not at our bidding, and that there is no sin where there has been no sinning. (218)

The excessive vigor of the rejection prompts us to consider the theory more carefully than if it had been discussed thoughtfully.

George N. Bennett says that, *The shadow of a Dream* is self-evident that whether this novel is called tragic or comedy, but it is a serious study of tangled human fantasy which ends disastrously (79). *The Shadow of a dream* denies the official theory entirely and ironically presents a strongly critical treatise of American society and American character.

Howells satirizes the belief in certainty and security, but wraps evil in uncertainty too. A discussion of the meaning and use of pain is followed by the action in which Faulkner suffers physically and mentally and then dies in agony. The denial that life is “a series of stupid blundering accidents” (109) has the previous incident (Faulkner’s death) to discuss with and then runs up against the grisly accidental death of Nevil. After that brief, underwritten scene in which Nevil dies standing upright while “a hideous crashing sound” (214) comes from his body, the Marches’ final ruminations seem grotesquely ironic if not inhuman. Drawing conclusion from Howells’ novel, he became increasingly pessimistic and fatalistic; his works move from the nonchalant comical satire to dark ironic satire using symbolic characters and settings**.** Thus the novel leaves a disturbingly blurred final impression, in which a sense of misery and waste predominates.

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