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Marriage: A Conflict between Dreams and Demands in William Dean Howells' Their Wedding Journey

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Abstract--- *Their Wedding Journey is an unpretentious presentation, at the beginning of Howells' career, to exploit those traits of skillful justification and elegance of style that had previously won recognition for his earlier narratives. The form of the description is rather strange -- "half-story, half-travel sketch" as Howells once called it -- and it is not surprising that readers have tended to ignore the story while flattering the sketch.*

Keywords--- *Marriage, Dream, Demand.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Their Wedding Journey is an impressive effort which marks a new outlet to the fiction: for it is the most significant realistic American novel to deal with modern wedding and its odd demands. The marriage of Basil and Isabel March, the two protagonists of the fiction, symbolizes the new shape of middle-class family life rising in this stage. Like many others of their generation (including Howells and his own wife, Elinor), the Marches live separately from their relatives and at considerable distance from their place of commencement. Basil is a transplanted mid-Westerner who hastens up the insurance company in Boston and has married rather late in existence, following an expanded commitment of the sort that had become quite ordinary by the seventies. Isabel, on the other hand, conforms in every foremost value to the character of the "perfect lady," having no functional relationship whatever to her husband's work but serving instead as a source of domestic companionship and as a consumer of commodities. But it is in their pronounced narrowness, that quality of being driven in upon themselves, that the essential modernity of their wedding is most clearly noticeable. It is a marriage held jointly not by mutual dependence or by the pressure of humanity and kinship bonds (as had been the case in former years), but by fondness alone.

There were many who followed this innovative pattern of genteel family life, referring to it as the "companionate marriage" and claiming that it not only conferred a superior measure of freedom and status upon women, but also encouraged an intimacy and a sense of equality between husband and wife which has never been credible. Now she has been released from the burdens of domestic drudgery and was no longer hemmed in by local parochialisms, the American wife could at last happen to be a true "companion" to her husband, sharing his interests while at the same time providing him with love and cultivating those ladylike refinements which would harmonize his rising position in humanity and ultimately contribute to the improvement of society.

In Their Wedding Journey Howells presents a far more cynical account of the "companionate marriage," one that is intentionally revolutionary of all the hopeful rhetoric surrounding in the respectable magazines of the day. From

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the opening pages it is clear that Basil and Isabel March have yet to achieve great companionship, and as the story develops they seem to raise further end. For a discussion of the growing nuclearization of the family in this period, further apart. While there are few open confrontations between them, the sources of their inaptness are everywhere apparent in their sharply differing responses to the events and scenes encountered in the course of the journey. In this way they become a disconnected series of travel sketches. Certainly, it can be said that there are two “journeys” in this fiction: one of them takes us on a honeymoon excursion to Niagara, from St. Lawrence to Quebec and back to Boston; the other leads us into an examination of the psychological dynamics of a marriage. This innermost dimension to the novel is further established by a series of private reveries in which both Isabel and Basil reflect on the meaning and value of their wedding, as well as by a complicated symbolic structure which injects an unconscious element of sexual fear into the story and enables us to understand some of the psychic tensions between Basil and Isabel.

It is to these disregarded aspects of Their Wedding Journey that we must turn if we are to be glad about its real stature as the first application of the techniques of serious realism to the problems of modern wedding. The study begins with analyzing Howells' description of the polarizing special effects of gentility on the male and female character and the incompatibilities resulting from it. The following content will be loyal to his portrayal of sexual repression in Isabel and Basil correspondingly, focusing on its particular manifestations in each and on the disruptive role it plays within their wedding.

At the very outset Howells sets in motion a symbolic divergence between marriage and experience which will remain present throughout the novel and will serve to perform his ambivalence about domesticity itself. As Basil and Isabel are discussing their forthcoming journey, a shadow falls across the room and the sound of thunder can be heard outside, interrupting their playful discussion and drawing them to the window. "In the square upon, which our friends looked ...the trees whitened in the gusts, and darkened in the driving floods of the rainfall, and in some paroxysms of the tempest bent themselves in desperate submission, and then with a great shudder rent away whole branches and flung them far off upon the ground" (6). From this incident until the end, Isabel refuses to look out the window of the train at a gaping chasm below. Basil and Isabel are always poised at the edge of their secure domestic humankind peering out at the troublesome world beyond. Each stop in their journey presents a new threat to their communal happiness, whether it is in the form of the squalid streets of New York or the dipping rapids of Niagara. And while the comfort they take in each other’s company provides a measure of protection against this disturbing element, allowing them to feel "in it but not of it" (as Howells says of their response to the awful heat of New York), the weight of their experiences inexorably begins to oppress and separate them. Again they seek refuge in a carriage, a train, a hotel room, a boat or whatever other safe, enclosed space affords itself and there attempt to recover their sense of intimacy and revive their spirits for still another altercation with the world outside.

The first of these several misadventures occurs during their day-long stopover in New York prior to departing on the night boat for Albany. They arrive early and Isabel, who loves “any cheap defiance of custom,” can think of nothing so “unconventional” as a stroll around the city at six o'clock in the morning. But her courage vanishes when facing the reality of the place, with its bleak tenements, its swarming crowds of shoppers and working people, its hot dusty streets filled with un emptied ash-barrels from which women and children can be seen “clawing for bits of

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coal" (30).

Troops of laborers straggled along the pavements, each with his dinner-pail in hand; and in many places the eternal building up and pulling down was already going on; carts were struggling up the slopes of vast cellars, with loads of distracting rubbish; here stood the half-demolished walls of a house, with a sad variety of wall-paper showing in the different rooms; there clinked the trowel on the brick, yonder the hammer on the stone; overhead swung and threatened the marble block that the derrick was lifting to its place. As yet these forces of demolition and construction had the business of the street almost to themselves (31-32).

It is clear that Howells relishes these scenes of lively urban activity, which are described here with something of the expansive, almost Zolaesque realism of his later novels. But Isabel, who had hoped to find out something brilliant and fine in the sight of New York, can only react with genteel disgust at finding them otherwise. "Why, how shabby the street is !" she exclaims at last. "When I landed, after being abroad, I remember that broadways impressed me with its splendor" (32). And when Basil tries to defend the city in much of the same terms that endear it to Howells himself, saying that the "Niagara roar" of its human rapids is like "strong new vine" to him, she is only too glad "to make her weariness the occasion of hailing a stage, and changing the conversation" (33).

Right through the episode Howells plays with Isabel's provinciality and love of tradition off against Basil's more worldly wise and cosmopolitan inclinations. She is a Bostonian both by nativity and conviction, for whom Boston stands as the embodiment of all that is untouched by the rough vulgarity of American life. Moreover, in her disparagement of New York she merely reflects the prejudice of all her sex, like a "true American woman", as Howells puts it later on in the novel, she is "content to know nothing of the barbarous regions beyond the borders of her native province." (105). In other words, Isabel's provinciality is more a matter of spirit than an appearance of some geographical faithfulness. It is a moral, academic and even a psychological provinciality, arising out of a genteel education which has led American women of the highly regarded classes to venerate a sentimental ideal of "culture" while remaining insulated from what Howells calls "the vastness of the great American fact." That is why Basil constantly plays the role of a "realist" in the novel, stepping to the fore from time to time as a spokesman for Howells' own ethical and artistic values. "Nothing is so hard as to understand that there cure human beings in this world besides one's self and one's set," he admonishes Isabel at the conclusion of the New York episode (68); Basil is open to both the promise and the malignity of city life because, unlike Isabel, he possesses a fundamental commitment to democracy. He is intrigued as well as disturbed by New York and is far more sensitive than Isabella to the intimations of repression and injustice lurking below the passing scene.

This is not to say that he displays everything like a developed political response to American society in this or any other episode of Their Wedding Journey; that will come much later (and even then in a rather tentative way) in A Hazard of New Fortunes, where he and Isabel are once again uprooted from their comfortable schedule in Boston and plunged into the more confused world of New York. But even in this, our first exposure to Basil March, we sense in him a social oddity that is wholly lacking in his wife. Despite his desire to show always as a "gentleman," he is unable to take his own position of social freedom quite for granted; but Isabel, who is "a bitter aristocrat at heart, like all her sex" (23) is in fact immune from such conscience. Like "all daughters of a free country," she

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knows “nothing about politics” and fears that she is “getting into deep water” whenever Basil raises the subject (33). The major strain of Isabel's character is the intense desire for privacy together with an innate conservatism; and as Howells repeatedly tells us, it is precisely this combination of traits that makes her “a true American woman.” In a society that had come to value men almost exclusively for their achievement in the public arena, it’s not surprising that women should have been expected to provide some source of solidity and love apart from the impersonal and often unpredictable pressures of the marketplace. In her hatred to the world of “facts,” in her squeamishness amid the bustling activity of the city — even in her woeful ignorance of public affairs — Isabel is simply fulfilling her role as the female member of their “companionate marriage,’ which is to offer Basil a place of refuge from the milieu depicted in this episode: from a society grown massive and impersonal, populated by limitless people driven by forces of demolition and construction is beyond their control. Yet because Basil’s adherence is divided between public and private realms, her absolute recognition with the latter must inevitably strike him as narrow, artificial and insular —in fact, a source of conflict between them.

Basil and Isabel are full of “infinite comfort” at finding themselves safely ensconced amid this whole Gilded-Age splendor, and once the boat has embarked, their pleasure is complete. They expend the waning hours of the afternoon basking in the glow of their booming love and purring in flattery of their gentle fate. When night falls they retire to the inner chamber of their cabin, where the jarring events of their day in the city seem far removed, indeed.

There was in the air that odor of paint and carpet which prevails on steamboats; the glass drops of the chandeliers ticked softly against each other, as the vessel shook with her respiration, like a comfortable sleeper, and imparted a delicious feeling of coziness and security to our travelers (87).

But even in this shelter of “coziness and security,” so remote from the world of “danger and oppression” they have left behind, there can be no final flee from the troubling realities externally, for in the dead of night Basil and Isabel are anxiously awakened by the sounds of a collision. At the first signs of danger, of course, the men and women aboard the ship, are immediately polarized. Basil and the other men are running to the deck to survey the damage while Isabel remains below with her female companions. Abruptly the tone of the entire chapter undergoes a dramatic shift, and what had been a refuge for Basil and Isabel alike is transformed into a completely feminine domain, “a world wildly unbuttoned and unlaced” filled with the “grotesque shapes” of women who creep “noiselessly round whispering panic-stricken conjectures” (87-88). It is a dark, silent region in which all the imagery of wealth and ease so fondly described before becomes somehow tainted in the context of the events outside; and in their complacency and almost callous gentility, the women are imaginatively fascinated within it. “Why, I only heard a little tinkling of the chandeliers,” says one of them to Basil as he returns from upstairs. “Is it such a very slight matter to run down another boat and sink it?”(91)

She appealed indirectly to Basil, who answered lightly, "I don't think you ladies ought to have been disturbed at ell. In running over a common tow-boat on a perfectly clear night like this there should have been no noise and no perceptible jar. They manage better on the Mississippi, and both boats often go down without waking the lightest sleeper onboard (91).

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The ladies respond with unconcealed discontentment to this sardonic speech as well they might — for it is clearly scornful of them. A woman, Basil implies, does not want to be disturbed by anything dangerous or upsetting if she can possibly avoid it; she would rather drown in the silent security of her own bed than be enforced to face realities. As if to verify the Justice of Basil's scorn, the ladies turn away from him "to bivouac for the rest of the night ahead the armchairs and sofas," while Isabel retreats to the safety of her cabin. "Lock, me in, Basil," she pleads with her typical tone of demanding frailty, "and if anything more happens don't wake me till the last moment" (91).

As indicated previously, the very pressures that drove men to seek love and companionship in wedding also served a distance from their wives; and when Isabel asks to be locked away in her cabin the full force of this dilemma is brought home. We are not told whether Basil resents her appeal, but it is clear nonetheless that their bulwark of privacy has abruptly become a prison, an arrow and insulated place where Isabel can remain barricaded from the cruel realities of life while Basil is thrust back into the ongoing actions outside. It cannot be accidental that the moment here aches the upper deck he confronts precisely the sort of experience Isabel has chosen to evade: a man who has been dreadfully scalded by an exploding boiler and who now lies panting before him with the "hollow, moaning, gurgling sound of death itself" (96). Nor are we surprised to discover that he avoids any mention of this horrible encounter to Isabel, for it stands as an instance of raw, naked suffering which cannot be readily assimilated within the "borders of her native province" — the province of the locked cabin, a static region of "comfort and ease" divorced from the terrifying and potentially tragic dimension of existence. Nonentity is more fundamental to Howells' considerate of relations between the sexes than his feeling that in moments of calamity men are left to face the musical one. But whatever may be his bitterness over Isabel's genteel cowardice, he is not willing to inflate Basil at her expense by treating him as a model of moral courage.

On the contrary, Basil is quite aware of his own accessory to the comforts of middle-class domesticity, and in the long revelry, he reflects on his hesitant response to the awful events of the evening in the context of his wedding to Isabel. He realizes that in the end he can summon up only "a certain luxurious compassion" for the dying man.

This poor wretch seemed of another order of beings, as the calamitous always seem to the happy, and Basil's pity was quite an abstraction; which, again, amused and shocked him, and he asked his heart of bliss to consider sorrow a little more earnestly as the lot of all men, and not merely of an alien creature here and there (97-98).

Though he tries loyally to visualize his response -- had Isabel herself been killed in the accident, it proves an idle attempt, for "where love was, life only was; and sense and spirit alike put aside the burden that he would have laid upon them" (98).

II. CONCLUSION

In spite of this concluding note of reconciliation, the facade of the "scalded man" marks one more confrontation between the dream of domestic pleasure and the demands of a larger and more menacing world outside wedding. Like the events surrounding the accident itself or like the difficulties encountered during the day in the city, it serves to remind us once again that Basil cannot devote himself to the life of luxury and safety with quite the same innocence that Isabel brings to their wedding. Indeed, he openly questions whether the very amenities that make his

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married life so pleasant have promoted within him a morally embarrassed kind of detachment from the often harsh realities he finds in the world around him. Even though the thought of Isabel finally bears him "far away from the sad images" that have invaded his intellect, the fact that he has permitted them to penetrate his imagination as a measure of the aloofness between them. In a word, Basil is less bourgeois than Isabel; or, more precisely, he is a troubled bourgeois while she is a complacent one resembling all her sex.

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