

# Criticizing american exceptionalism in "editha"



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William Dean Howells publicly opposed the Spanish-American War of 1898, believing that it was more of an evasive attempt by the United States to achieve territorial and economical expansion of Spanish colonial nations like Cuba and the Philippines, rather than an indefinitely unselfish effort to liberate Cuba from Spain. In "Editha", Howells characteristically portrays the contrasting opinions of those who supported the war, and those who denounced it. Although it is never specifically mentioned to have been the Spanish-American War which the story revolves around, it has been widely accepted that the story's political context corresponds and reflects that of the 1898 war against Spain.

As an advocate of Leo Tolstoy's - the Russian novelists' - ideas of nonviolence, Howells proved no reluctance in condemning war or violence of any kind. He brilliantly conveys his antipathetic views of war through the protagonist, Editha, by painting her as a shallow individual; one with no thoughts of her own, who is quick to echo chauvinistic phrases of the newspapers. She is introduced as a woman whose engagement to one George Gearson had been decided "without, as it were, thinking". What is certain however, is that "she had always supposed that the man who won her would have done something to win her; she did not know what, but something." This fairy-tale-like conviction outlines her childish and naïve mentality which is emphasized by her elation of the start of war. In Editha's point of view, George going off to fight in a war is paralleled to him fighting for Editha's love. To her, fighting gallantly in the war would be his act of doing "something worthy to have won her - be a hero, her hero", without

actually considering the consequences – the true enormity of war’s ramifications as a result of her romanticizing ideas of battlefield glory.

On the other hand, George patently harbors anti-war and anti-violence sentiments which, unfortunately, are proven to have no effect or bear any significance in the story as his opinions are ignored by Editha and the rest of society. When he hoped to bring down the enthusiasm during a meeting for enlisting men into the army at the town hall by attempting to “sprinkle a little cold water on them [the young men volunteering]” as a joke, George only ended up “sprinkling hell-fire on them” instead, therefore only causing the flames of patriotism within the meeting to burn even fiercer. Moreover, when Editha initially begins to coax him into fighting in the war, George utters, “with a vague smile, as if musing aloud, “Our country – right or wrong!”” which is obviously a sarcastic remark intended to mock the extremely chauvinistic belief that America is “a country that can’t be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway!”

George continues to chastise the war throughout the story in spite of his submission to it – his yielding not by choice but by force from his beloved Editha and the American public. He questions and doubts the mainstream notion that this war is a “holy war” which “God [had] meant it to be war”. Upon his first signs of surrendering to society’s expectations of gender roles, he says to Editha, “I’ll try to believe in your pocket Providence”: the term which he uses to suggest that this particular Providence that everyone is so sure of is not the real Lord; that it is only a conception of Providence. After enlisting in the army George goes to announce to Editha his appointed position as captain of Company A. In a drunken state, he gaily proclaims that <https://assignbuster.com/criticizing-american-exceptionalism-in-editha/>

he is going to war, " the big war, the glorious war, the holy war ordained by the pocket Providence that blesses butchery". With this unquestionably sarcastic statement, George ironically glorifies the war in its atrocities, implying his honest views about war as being that equal to butchery; that war reduces man to animals in a slaughterhouse.

Regardless of all his sarcastic remarks, Editha, like everyone else fervently supporting the war, is deaf to notice his implications and pays no heed to his true emotions and opinions. Society only cares that he is going to war and fight for their country which patriots like Editha claim :“ there is no honor above America”. She even places her love for her country above her love for George as she writes in a letter to him, “ But the man I marry must love his country first of all”. These phrases and sentences highlight the magnitude of America’s sense of nationalistic righteousness.

The idea that America “ can’t be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway” epitomizes the strong belief of American exceptionalism which William Dean Howells is evidently criticizing through “ Editha”. Just as how Howells had hoped to use his position as editor for the *Cosmopolitan* as a forum for his increasingly radical political views, he expresses such political viewpoints through this story. Like George, Howells was ignored for propounding America’s imperialistic ambitions, but his prominent works such as “ Editha” certainly gained recognition by challenging readers to question the country’s dogmatic propaganda; to reflect on whether Americans would mindlessly endorse such propaganda like Editha, or contemplate on the truth and reality of the information like George.