

Romantic illusion and vulgar realism essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gryndal —— Professor ——— English 2328 14 November 2006 Romantic Illusion and Vulgar Realism In the short-story “ Editha,” by William Dean Howells, Howells presents the movement in literature from the idealistic romantic period into modern realism showing the conflict that exists between these ideologies through the expression of sexual dominance. Howells uses the expression of sexual dominance from the highly romanticized views of war to show the catalyst for the conflict between the two forms. The story begins with an air of impending war showing Editha’s romantic views of war in general and her belief in the glory that wars bring those who fight them. Editha was “ a girl who embodied all the nonsense about the heroic romanticism of war...” (Carter, 231) This deeply romanticized idea of the hero leads her to involve her lover, George.

Initially she approaches George in a reserved manner as she “ put a guard upon herself against urging him, by any word or act, to take the part that her whole soul willed him to take, for the completion of her ideal for him. (392) Eventually, though not completely intentionally, she expresses her full nature and focused sexual energy, unguarded, upon her lover; “ her womanhood upon his manhood, without knowing the means she was using to the end she was willing. ” (392) As stated by Free, “ Howells implies that merely by expressing her feelings about the war Editha satisfied her own romantic sense. ” (Free 2) Continuing this manipulation of her lover to its climax, Editha makes even their courtship contingent upon his submission to her belief in this letter to him: “ George: I understood-when you left me.

But I think we had better emphasize your meaning that if we cannot be one in everything we had better be one in nothing. So I am sending these things

for your keeping till you have made up your mind. " I shall always love you, and therefore I shall never marry anyone else. But the man I marry must love his country first of all, and be able to say to me, ' I could not love thee, dear, so much, Loved I not honor more. ' " There is no honor above America with me. I have never expected to say so much, but it has come upon me that I must say the utmost.

Editha. (394) The letter, wrapped in red, white, and blue ribbon and a package full of all the things, including the engagement ring, that George had given her, were made ready to send to him. This letter exemplifies Editha's resolve in her romantic thought, fully expecting her lover to yield to her. Unable to resolve the reality of war with her romantic ideals, Editha fanaticizes of her lover returning home less a man, " with an empty sleeve..." so that he should be dependant on her and, "...should have three arms instead of two, for both of hers should be his for life.

(397) She expresses clearly her need for dominance over her lover, as Furia states, " with her " two arms" Editha will have a clear superiority". (Furia 1) Even after Editha's mother sternly corrects her manipulation of George saying, " I guess you've done a wicked thing," (394) she continues, as if unable to consider any view other than her own. George's death, killed almost immediately in the first wave of combat, causes her a great grief of " fever that she expected of herself" (398) while at the same time " she was not even delirious" (398) as she did not expect, nor " did it last very long. (398) Editha's inability to accept the reality of this undesired consequence further strengthens her fixed romantic views and her inability to deal with reality, " She had visions of him returning heroically home, with some slight

<https://assignbuster.com/romantic-illusion-and-vulgar-realism-essay/>

wound to testify his courage," (Carter, 231) however, he did not return home at all, sinking her into a deep, but short-lived depression. " In the exultation of duty laid upon her-it buoyed her up instead of burdening her. " (398) Ultimately, this is where Howells adeptly shows the real superficiality of romanticism.

Traveling with her father to her mother-in-law's home, dressed prideful " tall and black in her crapes which filled the air with the smell of their dyes," (399) Editha is unprepared for the reality that Mrs. Gearson, her mother-in-law, presents to her. Mrs. Gearson ends their conversation saying, "'I thank my God they killed him first, and that he ain't (sic) livin' (sic) with their blood on his hands! '" (399) She continues to express her disdain for Editha's prideful black clothes, "'What you got that black on for?'take it off, before I tear it from your back! '" (399) Mrs. Gearson shows Editha's delusion for what it is and manages to " nearly to destroy Editha's idealism.

" (Piacentino 6) Through out the story Howells has shown numerous examples of Editha's romantic views and her expression of dominance over her lover, however, it is not until the final paragraph that he shows the true inability of Editha to depart from her romantic ideals and accept any form of reality. In the closing scene, Editha, recanting the encounter with her mother-in-law to the artist painting her portrait, finds relief in the artists words: " But how dreadful of her! How perfectly—excuse me—how vulgar! " (400) with that word, vulgar, Editha " began to live again in the ideal. " (400) " By finding Mrs. Gearson's world vulgar, a world which Editha has always shunned, she can continue to live on in the non-world of the superlatives. "

(Englehart, 5) All is right in Editha's world now, regardless how it may be in any one else's world.

The shallowness of the romanticism leaves us with only "inscrutable silence of the Cheshire cat, content within herself, but unable to communicate with the neurotics that surround her." (Bellamy 5) This is the superficiality of romanticism; to live in one's own world without concern for anyone else within it. Howells shows how romanticism and realism simply fail to coexist. "What he was really doing was placing this drama within the context of the larger drama taking place in late nineteenth-century America—the conflict between the worlds of romantic illusion and of vulgar realism." (Englehart, 5)

Works Cited Bellamy, Michael O.

"Eros and Thanatos in William Dean Howells's 'Editha'." *American Literary Realism*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Autumn, 1979, pp. 283-87.

MLA International Journal. Gale. Carter, Everett. *Howells and the Age of Realism*.

Hamden, Connecticut: Arcon Books, 1966. Englehart, Carl W. "Howells' 'Editha'—Toward Realism" *Americana-Austriaca*, edited by Klaus Lanzinger, Wilhelm Braumuller, 1974, pp. 3-9.

MLA International Journal. Gale. Free, William J. "Howells' 'Editha' and Pragmatic Belief.

Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. III, No. 3, Spring, 1966, pp. 285-92. *MLA International Journal*.

Gale. Furia, Philip. "'Editha': The Feminine View. " *American Literary Realism*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Autumn, 1979, pp.

278-82. *MLA International Journal*. Gale. Howells, William Dean. " Editha. " *The American Tradition in American Literature*.

Ed. George Perkins and Barbara Perkins. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. 391-400. Piacentino, Edward J.

" Arms in Love and War in Howells' `Editha'. " *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Fall, 1987, pp.

425-32. *MLA International Journal*. Gale.