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Democracy and the International American Girl: Gender, Class, and Race in *The Lady of the Aroostook* by William Dean Howells

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INTRODUCTION: HOWELLS AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

Democracy in the United States began with the statement that "all men are created equal," which was significantly revised as "all men and women are created equal" in "Declaration of Sentiments" written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and sighed by one hundred women and men at the first organized feminist assembly in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. This new declaration demanded that American democracy include women and became one of the starting points of the first wave of organized feminism, which eventually won suffrage for women with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. William Dean Howells was conscious of the development of this organized feminist movement during his lifetime, and its dynamic development coincided with his literary career. While he disliked female radicals such as Victoria Woodhull, who advocated "free love," he consistently supported women's demand for equality (Crowly, *The Mask* 46).

As a critic, he prided himself on being fair and evaluating female authors on equal terms with male authors. He argued against the essentialist prejudice that as artists women are inferior to men. For example, when

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asked in an interview what the appropriate place for women in the literary field was, Howells, looking "as nearly disgusted as his unfailing good nature would allow," answered, "Why, the place they can get." Then he added that "one hears platitudes about woman's lack of breadth and power of generalization. They say she is intense but within narrow bounds, that her genius is better suited to the short story than to the novel. I call that nonsense" (*Interviews* 336). One of the most notable cases of his undiscriminating attitude as a critic toward women was his evaluation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." When the story was rejected by the *Atlantic*, Howells used his influence and helped it to be published in the *New England Magazine* and then reprinted it in his anthology, *The Great American Short Stories* (1920), which, according to John W. Crowley, saved it from oblivion (*The Mask* 53).

For Howells, the problem of gender inequality was caused by an insufficiency in American democracy, as "Declaration of Sentiment" stated. In an essay titled "Unimportance of Women in Republics," in which he compared the European monarchies with the American republic, Howells claimed, although humorously, that the United States needed more democracy and that it should treat women more equally so that American women would not find European monarchies more attractive than American democracy. Later, in his novel *A Traveler from Altruria*, he created a utopia in which women have the same political rights as men, including the right to participate in political meetings and the right to vote. Being true to his ideal of gender equality, he participated in the suffrage demonstration in New York City in 1912 (Crowly, *The Mask* 47).¹

Howells's sympathy for women, based on his belief in democracy, extended to his social criticism. He often pointed out in his essays and private letters how unfairly women were treated in society and often expressed sympathy, sometimes mixed with guilt, toward the talented women he personally knew. One such woman was his sister, Vic. According to his autobiographical essay *Years of My Youth*, Howells was aware of her wish to have a literary career and to live in a city, as Howells himself later did. But she had to be confined to a poor rural life and take care of her male family members, including their mentally disturbed brother Henry, because that was "her duty" (*Years* 108). Another case was a young woman who worked at his father's printing shop, whom he describes in his letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1861 as follows:

This girl had intelligence, taste, culture-she had read a great deal,

with the deep inner sense of the beautiful, belonging to so few readers. ... She was a woman who could have shone most brilliantly in any society . . . she worked at her trade three years in our printing-office. At last a very honest person, every way but in age her inferior fell in love with her and was to have been her husband . . . how wretched she must have been in a union with such a person, had not the good death forbidden.... She fell ill, and through cruel pain and long agony, died.... It seems a hard and cruel thing to say that the only thing one can do is to die. But for her, what else remained? Either a monotonous drudgery through life at the trade she detested, or a domestic round of tasks and stupid little duties. She could not have been religious. She did not believe enough ... she could not write well enough, or would not write ill enough to achieve that doubtful splendor and distinction of female authorship. From her nature, I think, motherhood would not have made her happy, for though passionate, I do not think she had much affection-though here I may wrong her. What then? Only death—(Selected Letters 73, 74)

In this essay, I focus on The Lady of the Aroostook (1879), which features the character Lydia Blood, supposedly a typical "international American girl" in a European setting, the type of character made famous by Henry James in his novella Daisy Miller: A Study (1879), which was first published in magazine form in 1878. The gender issues of his time, represented in this novel in the form of the confrontation of American democracy with the rigid and oppressive hierarchy in Europe and Europeanized American communities such as upper-middle-class Boston, are expressed with nationalistic sentiment. In this novel, he advocates equality for women as an American value that is best cultivated in a small town, cherished by downto-earth country people, and eloquently advocated with simple American English.² Gender issues, closely related not only to class but also to the contemporary and arbitrary definition of race, are also not ignored in this novel's international setting. The Lady of the Aroostook is representative of Howells's novels in that gender equality is portrayed as closely related to American democracy. To understand this, it is necessary first to place it in the context of the development of the trope of the international American girl, including, most significantly, Daisy Miller.

"INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN GIRL" CHARACTERS AND *THE LADY OF THE AROOSTOOK*

Howells himself, in his introduction to *Daisy Miller*, called Henry James the "inventor of the international American girl." But as Chieko Takeda, in her book on the international novels of Howells and James, points out by closely examining when and how James and Howells presented "international American girls" in their works and how they referred to each other's works in reviews and correspondence, these two authors influenced each other in creating and developing the "international American girl" character, probably starting with James's short story "Travelling Companions" (1870).³ Most likely, this short story inspired Howells to create Kitty Ellison, who was an important minor character in his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1872), and then as the heroine of *Chance Acquaintances* (1873).

Before he wrote *Daisy Miller*, James praised Howells for creating Kitty Ellison and Florida Vervain, another "international American girl," in *Foregone Conclusion* (1875). *Daisy Miller*, in turn, inspired Howells while he was writing *The Lady of the Aroostook*. Howells went on to create other international American girls, such as Lily Mayhew in *Fearful Responsibility* (1881) and Imogene Graham in *Indian Summer* (1886). It seems safe to say that the "international American girl" character was developed in a dialogue between these two authors. By comparing *The Lady of the Aroostook* with *Daisy Miller* and pointing out their differences, I will illustrate how Howells tried to represent democracy as an American value, with an "international American girl" as its representative figure, and how he dealt with gender issues that are interconnected with class and racial equality in the context of American democracy.

Lydia Blood, the protagonist of *The Lady of the Aroostook*, is a nineteenyear-old woman from South Bradford, a small town in Connecticut. Because she is an orphan, she was raised by her grandfather and her aunt Maria. She works as a schoolteacher but is also a talented singer. She leaves home for Venice because Mrs. Erwin, another aunt of hers, who is married to a wealthy Englishman and lives in Venice, has invited her to live with her and study music more professionally. As a result of her grandfather's arrangements, as well as some misunderstandings, she goes on board the cargo ship the Aroostook only to discover that she is the sole woman onboard the ship. The ship, unlike passenger ships, has no female crew members, and the other three passengers are all men—all of whom happen to be single, wealthy, young white Americans. All the crew members and the other passengers are astonished to find a young woman without a chaperone on a cargo ship, but, while all of them except Lydia find this situation awkward, they behave as if there is nothing unusual about it in order to save her from embarrassment. All the crew members openly adore her beauty, her stylish clothes, her talent as a singer, and her moral goodness. One of the passengers, Staniford, at first looks down on her, as he assumes that she is ignorant and unsophisticated because of her rural upbringing, but he is eventually impressed with her virtues and falls in love with her.

After the ship arrives at Trieste, Lydia leaves with Mr. Erwin, her aunt's husband, to travel to her destination of Venice. Staniford promises to follow her to Venice a few days later, where he intends to ask her to marry him in a socially proper setting with her guardians present. However, he is forced to delay the visit because his close friend and fellow traveler Dunham is badly hurt in an accident and is hospitalized in critical condition. Meanwhile, in Venice, Lydia is shocked to find out that it is considered inappropriate for a woman to be unchaperoned. Because Staniford fails to inform her of his delay, she is tormented by doubt about whether he had not taken her seriously but had only been flirting with her. She is also shocked to learn that the same society that allows so little freedom to young, unmarried women nonchalantly tolerates other immoralities such as extramarital affairs and illegitimate births. When she discusses her miserable situation with Mrs. Erwin, she indignantly criticizes men who look down on women who are unprotected by men. It also horrifies Lydia, who attends church as an essential part of her life, that Mr. and Mrs. Erwin, in the European manner, consider church attendance a tiresome social obligation that is best avoided whenever possible, and that they invite her to go with them to see an opera instead.

"Oh, I see how my coming the way I have will seem to all these people!" cried Lydia, with passionate despair. "I know how it will seem to that married woman who lets a man be in love with her, and that old woman who can't live with her husband because he's too good and kind, and that girl who swears and doesn't know who her father is, and that impudent painter, and that officer who thinks he has the right to insult women if he finds them alone! I wonder the sea doesn't swallow up a place where even Americans go to the theatre on the Sabbath!" (Ch. 24)

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By the time Staniford finally comes to see Lydia and clears up the misunderstanding and proposes marriage to her, she has already given up the idea of becoming a professional singer in Europe and is all but ready to go back to the United States. Although Lydia learns that Staniford had a low opinion of her at first, as she had suspected, she accepts his proposal, and the couple marry in Italy and settle in California, where Staniford buys a ranch and finds "occupation if not profit in its management" (Ch. 27).

As Annette Karr and others have pointed out, Lydia, as a typical international American girl, has much in common with Daisy Miller; they are both "innocent" in their particular American way, and therefore they are both unaware of the "society" around them and the manners and customs that "society" requires. Yet there are differences between the two characters, and, although these differences have not been discussed as much, they are nonetheless important.

Daisy Miller stirred up mixed reactions from reviewers and readers, starting with *Lippincott's Magazine*, which rejected the manuscript on the basis that it was "an outrage on American girlhood" (James, Preface v). It is true that from the protagonist Winterbourne's point of view, Daisy's behavior does look outrageous. While he acknowledges that Daisy is, after all, innocent and not flirtatious and admits his mistake by stating that he has "lived too long in foreign parts" (93), his judgment that Daisy's conduct was improper is shared by his fellow expatriate Americans and is never questioned.

Daisy's sins consist of two parts. First, she goes out alone with a man she is not engaged to. Second, she is friendly with men who are considered inappropriate for her to socialize with, namely, servants and Italians with no titles. Whether she is innocent or "common"(23) or "vulgar" (46), there is no question that her conduct is perceived by everyone as inappropriate and often foolish.

As for Lydia, while it is considered improper, from a Europeanized standard, for her to be the only female passenger on the ship, everyone acknowledges her respectability and treats her accordingly throughout the voyage. Lydia's friendliness with men of different social classes, such as the cabin boy Thomas and Captain Jenness, is never criticized but is perceived as a sign of her democratic mind and moral superiority. She calls the cabin boy by his name instead of calling him "steward" and sympathizes with him when he tells her that his father was killed fighting for the Union in the Civil War, thus revealing her democratic attitude along with her straightforward patriotism. She feels honored to socialize with Captain Jenness, although his

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manners are not sophisticated. He is pejoratively called "the marine animal" by Mrs. Rivers (Ch. 18), a socialite in Messina, but as captain, he is respected as the authority and father figure on board ship by American democratic standards.

The most obvious parallel and contrast between the two books is found in the episodes that involve riding in an open coach. Daisy, defying the advice of Mrs. Walker, refuses to join her in her coach and keeps walking with a young Italian man, Mr. Giovanelli. Later, Daisy even rides in an open coach with the same Mr. Giovanelli. Both incidents are witnessed by the local American community, found inappropriate, and are taken as enough evidence to condemn her as "vulgar." In The Lady of the Aroostook, this episode is duplicated with an important revision. While the ship is visiting the seaport in Messina on its way to its destination. Lydia takes a walk to the cathedral with Captain Jenness, while Staniford rides in an open coach with Mrs. Rivers, "with whom he had once violently flirted" (Ch. 18). In this scene, Lydia sees Staniford in an inappropriate situation, not the other way around. She herself is not being observed and evaluated. On the contrary, she makes a moral judgement about Staniford from an American girl's innocent and, thus, morally superior point of view. Lydia is disappointed that Staniford is willing to socialize with a married woman for whom he has very little respect.

As for Lydia's violation of the rule that a young, unmarried woman does not go out either by herself or with a man she is not engaged to, it is repeatedly emphasized that she violates the rule because she is not even aware of it. Unlike Daisy's case, it is obvious from everyone's point of view that she has no intention to flirt. Unlike Daisy, who defiantly goes out with Winterbourne and Giovanelli even after she is informed that it is "improper," Lydia is astonished to learn of the rule but does not defy it. Thus, in *The Lady of the Aroostook*, it is Staniford's moral quality that is scrutinized, found suspect, and then corrected by the American moral standard that requires mutual decency and respect for both men and women. The gender inequality of the European social norms is explicitly emphasized under Lydia's critical gaze, while Lydia's innocent behaviors and her intentions are never criticized.

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AS THE MORAL STANDARD

In *Daisy Miller*, it is repeatedly pointed out that the problem of Daisy's misbehavior is, to a large extent, her mother's fault, as she has failed to

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teach her daughter proper behavior. Mrs. Miller is portrayed as a goodnatured but foolish person who has no authority over her children. In Lydia's case, she has two mother figures: her European aunt, who instructs her in European manners, and Aunt Maria, whose American values are the basis for Lydia's behavior. These two mother figures are contrasted, and Aunt Maria advocates American democracy by supporting Lydia's innocent behavior as a representation of her moral superiority.

Aunt Maria, who has lived in a small town in Connecticut all her life and has no immediate knowledge of "society" either in Boston or Europe, is also astonished when she learns that in Europe women are not allowed to go out by themselves:

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Maria, petulantly. "I guess Lyddy'd know how to conduct herself wherever she was; she's a born lady, if ever there was one. But what I think is—" Miss Maria paused, and did not say what she thought; but it was evidently not the social aspect of the matter which was uppermost in her mind. In fact, she had never been at all afraid of men, whom she regarded as a more inefficient and feeblerminded kind of woman.... "She will know how to adapt herself to circumstances," said Mr. Goodlow. "I was conversing last summer with that Mrs. Bland who boarded at Mr. Parker's, and she told me that girls in Europe are brought up with no habits of self-reliance whatever, and that young ladies are never seen on the streets alone in France and Italy."

"Don't you think," asked Miss Maria, hesitating to accept this ridiculous statement, "that Mrs. Bland exaggerated some?"

"She talked a great deal," admitted Mr. Goodlow. "I should be sorry if Lydia ever lost anything of that native confidence of hers in her own judgment, and her ability to take care of herself under any circumstances, and I do not think she will. She never seemed conceited to me, but she was the most self-reliant girl I ever saw." (Ch. 5)

When Miss Maria is informed that Lydia is the only woman on board the ship crossing the Atlantic for six weeks, she is naturally worried but decides that Lydia will know how to behave properly in any circumstance and will have a good moral influence on the men around her, and Lydia actually accomplishes both these things. In Daisy's case, her "innocence" is another name for ignorance, and it leads her to a fatal illness. In Lydia's case, "innocence" means moral purity, a state of mind that refuses to accept any custom and manner uncritically just because it may be taken for granted in Europe or in the supposedly more sophisticated society in Boston.

Lydia's other mother figure, Mrs. Erwin, says that "I've lived too long in Europe to be of use in such a case [referring to the courtship of Lydia and Staniford], and I won't have anything to do with it" (Ch. 26). Echoing Winterbourne's last words in the novel that he "lived too long in foreign parts," Mrs. Erwin revises the sad ending. She urges the young lovers who are "Americans together" to follow their hearts and not the conventions and states that "this affair has been carried on so far on the *American* plan, and I think I shall let you finish it without my interference" (Ch. 26, emphasis added). Compared with *Daisy Miller, The Lady of the Aroostook* depicts a triumph of democratic values personified in the character of an innocent international American girl who is open-minded and nonhierarchical. Her self-reliance does not result in tragedy, as was the case in *Daisy Miller*, but leads to a triumph of American democracy.

GENDER, CLASS, RACE, AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Another important difference between Lydia Blood and Daisy Miller is Lydia's dark features. While James does not give any physical description of Daisy except that she is very pretty, Howells emphasizes Lydia's darkness. Lydia's beauty is attributed by Staniford in a scientific fashion, though halfjokingly, to her being one of the "dark Puritans," the darker branch of Anglo-Americans, whom he argues are commoner in New England than fair people like himself imagine (Ch. 7). Her darkness is also associated with other racial and ethnic categories, such as Italians and French Canadians, in Staniford's mind. As it was common in Howells's time to think of "Italian," "American" or "Yankee" as racial categories, Staniford's fascination with and aversion to Lydia's attractiveness are both expressed in racial terms. First, Staniford tries to explain her racial difference scientifically as being caused by geographical isolation:

You have no idea of the grotesqueness of these people's minds. I used to see a great deal of their intimate life when I went on my tramps, and chanced it among them, for bed and board, wherever I happened to be. We cultivated Yankees and the raw material seem hardly of the same race. Where the Puritanism has gone out of the people in spots, there's the rankest growth of all sorts of crazy heresies, and the old scriptural

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nomenclature has given place to something compounded of the fancifulness of story-paper romance and the gibberish of spiritualism. They make up their names, sometimes, and call a child by what sounds pretty to them. I wonder how the captain picked up that scoundrel. (Ch. 6)

When Staniford is more attracted to Lydia, while still trying to deny it, he describes Lydia's attractiveness in more explicitly dark terms. After the discussion of his possible future life as a rancher on the frontier, where he will marry "a savage woman who will rear [his] dusky race,"⁴ he states as follows and then agrees with Dunham that Lydia reminds him of the portrait of Evangeline, the popular heroine of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, with her dark hair and eyes:

"That girl ... is a type that is commoner than we imagine in New England. We fair people fancy we are the only genuine Yankees. I guess that's a mistake. There must have been a good many dark Puritans. In fact, we always think of Puritans as dark, don't we? ... This girl has the clear Southern pallor; she's of the olive hue; and her eyes are black as sloes,—not that I know what sloes are." (Ch. 7)

Later, when Staniford admits to himself that he is fascinated by Lydia's physical darkness, he compares her to Italian women, and he tells her:

"I'm sure that in the life before this you were of the South somewhere.... You have the color and the light of the South. When you get to Italy, you will live in a perpetual mystification. You will go about in a dream of some self of yours that was native there in other days. You will find yourself retrospectively related to the olive faces and the dark eyes you meet; you will recognize sisters and cousins in the patrician ladies when you see their portraits in the palaces where you used to live in such state." (Ch. 14)

Lydia's darkness is a marker of her sexuality, as Crowley and others have pointed out, but as the above quotations demonstrate, it is depicted and emphasized only from Staniford's point of view. In other words, it reveals Staniford's sexual preconception that connects female sexuality and darkness rather than any inner sexual characteristic of Lydia herself. Staniford associates female sexuality with physical darkness, which is considered a sign of cultural inferiority. This "othering" of sexuality in racial terms in Staniford's mind, however, obviously contradicts Lydia's characteristics. And this seeming contradiction of Lydia's physical appearance and her sexual and moral virtues exposes the gender and race hierarchy that Staniford takes for granted.

Moreover, Lydia's dark beauty reminds us of another "international American girl," namely, Rhoda Aldgate in Howells's 1891 novel *An Imperative Duty*, who, like Daisy Miller, Lydia, and other international American girls, is innocent and unaware of society around her but, unlike other international American girls, has an African American ancestor. It is likely that Howells was already aware of the arbitrary nature of American definitions of race and subsequent racial prejudices based on them. In connecting female darkness with indigenous Americans and Italians, whose racial identity Howells compares to that of African Americans in *An Imperative Duty*, Howells explores the process of "othering" of women from men's point of view and implies that it contradicts American democracy.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY COMPROMISED

In terms of gender issues, Lydia makes a compromise and betrays her own sense of morals and self-respect. Namely, she follows Mrs. Erwin's advice not to be "just with men" (Ch. 26). She learns that Staniford had at first thought that she was not worthy of his respect. Whether she should accept a man who looks down on women because of a false value system is the issue on which her sense of self depends. She asks him an apt question about "what you thought when you found me alone on that ship with all of you.... I want to know whether you were ever ashamed of me, or despised me for it; whether you ever felt that because I was helpless and friendless there, you had the right to think less of me than if you had first met me here in this house [of wealthy and socially respectable Mr. and Mrs. Erwin]" (Ch. 27). He answers evasively, "I will leave you to say." This does not satisfy Lydia, but its "generous uncandor" is enough to persuade her that their marriage is "right" (Ch. 27). The narrator is obviously critical of Staniford's attitude and attributes it to his sexist belief that Lydia does not have the right to ask such a question (Ch. 27).

Thus, Lydia's relationship with and marriage to Staniford is questionable to say the least. But as in the case of the young woman who worked in Howells's father's printing shop, referred to in his letter that is quoted above and who is likely to be a model for Lydia, Lydia does not have any other option but to marry. According to the same letter, the young woman's physical features significantly resemble Lydia's: she has "a strange kind of beauty" that reminds Howells of "that engraving of Evangeline to be seen in a million shop windows" with dark eyes and complexion that he had never seen "except among the women of the lake-shores" (*Selected Letters*, 73–74). It seems safe to assume from this quotation that this young woman was in Howells's mind when he was creating Lydia Blood. Lydia, however, is more explicit about what she wants in life as opposed to the young woman described in Howells's letter. She wants to be a singer but only wants to sing in church, and she wants to make a modest and virtuous living. She does not like teaching, and after her experiences in Venice, clearly, a professional career as a singer is not what she wants. Her talent, like that of the young woman Howells refers to, turns out to be nonmarketable.

Even though Staniford says that he will mend his ways and promises to live up to her moral standards, it is obvious that it is not such a serious matter for him. When Staniford flirts with Lydia earlier in the voyage in a mock aristocratic fashion, Lydia, trying to be taken more seriously, says that they are "all republicans," but he refuses to be serious and keeps his flirtatious attitude (Ch. 14). For Staniford, democracy between men and women is just an amusing conceit.

It is significant that Miss Maria has the final say in the novel's ending. Unlike her European counterpart, Mrs. Erwin, who instructs Lydia to compromise her moral standards to get married, Miss Maria does not value marriage very much. She is not impressed with Staniford's wealth nor his social status and approves of him only because "he does seem terribly wrapped up in Lyddy" and because "we ain't any of us perfect" (Ch. 27).

Miss Maria is an economically independent single woman and, in fact, a creative artist who designs and sews dresses for Lydia, which everyone admires, and she seems content with her situation. Her straightforward opinion of Lydia's marriage, though put rather humorously, reminds us that Lydia's is not a happily-ever-after story but the beginning of a possibly problematic life with a husband whose moral standards are obviously lower than his wife's. Miss Maria's disregard of gender and class hierarchies, rather than Lydia's, is presented as the true representative of American democracy. While Lydia compromises her belief in democracy in order to get married, Miss Maria, who makes no such compromises, gets to have the last word in the novel.

Howells believed in such a democratic ideal, and, as stated in the introductory part of this essay, he expressed his belief in the equality of women, despite the general atmosphere of his time and his fear of possibly drastic changes in the gender structure of society. In *The Lady of the Aroostook*, Lydia's innocent trust in American democracy contradicts the reality of gender and racial inequality in the United States, where racial othering is intermingled with the exclusion of women from the full citizenship of "all men," although women and men were supposedly created equal as the nineteenth-century feminists claimed. Her innocence and moral instinct, which is supposedly representative of American democracy, turns out to be problematic in terms of gender, if not class. The contradiction between democratic values and the American reality in terms of race, by implication, also remains problematic in this novel.

NOTES

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¹ As for the general tendency to perceive democracy as an American value and therefore to associate it with patriotism among the contemporaries of Howells, see Robert L. Hough's *The Quiet Rebel: William Dean Howells as Social Commentator*, 12, 13.

² As for the New England colloquialisms used by Lydia and other characters, see Elsa Nettles's *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America*, 121–125.

³ See also, Olov W. Fryckstedt's *In Quest of America: A Study of Howells' Early Development as a Novelist* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 134–161.

⁴ Staniford is quoting from Alfred Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" (1842), in which an interracial sexual union is presented both as an idyllic bliss and as a perversion. About this poem's interracial imagery, see H. L. Malchow's *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford UP, 1996).

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