

7-15-2003

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Recommended Citation

Barzun, Marguerite (2003) "Lizzie Borden and the American Realists," *Trickster's Way*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/trickstersway/vol2/iss4/2>

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*Lizzie Borden and the American Realists¹***Marguerite Barzun**

Lizzie Borden took an axe
 And gave her mother forty whacks
 When she saw what she had done
 She gave her father forty-one.

That little rime is not an accurate description of what happened in Fall River, Massachusetts in August of 1892; there were not nearly fortywhacks. But it helped to perpetuate the Lizzie Borden legend, and for over seventy years it appeared in every American anthology of humorous verse.

Children of the working classes began it, children who had likely not even seen the more affluent Bordens or knew where the murders occurred. They occurred, in fact, in the Borden's narrow two-story house near the business district, the father found on the sitting-room sofa and the step-mother on the floor of the upstairs guest room

The family had consisted of the two daughters Lizzie and Emma, their father Andrew—amiserly and unlikable banker and merchant—and Abby, the girls' fat and equally unlikable step-mother. Unlikable, at least to the sisters—and certainly to the murderer, if that was someone other than Lizzie Borden. For we do know that Lizzie was acquitted in a court of law. But Fall River society—stratified and Victorian in its mores—did not acquit Lizzie.

And so the legend began and the literature followed, continuing even to this day. In the 1930s at least two novels reproduced the murders; the years 1934 and 1957 saw five plays in addition to Agnes de Millès famous ballet. And most important is Jack Beeson's 1965 opera. In recent years a number of new and supposedly ever more accurate accounts have appeared; all but one names Lizzie as a conspirator if not the actual murderer of her father and step-mother.

Whether art imitates life or the reverse, the situation in Fall River was the raw material of art and a seamless match for much of American fiction that during the 1880s and '90s attempted a faithful and detailed portrait of ourselves. Literary Realism—for that is what it was called—was in part an awakened interest in American life, and in part an effort to discover an aesthetic pattern in what we call the Gilded Age, perhaps even a moral guide through a rapidly changing culture.

Under the leadership of William Dean Howells Realism introduced some of the finest of American writers: Henry James, Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane and of course, Howells himself. In addition there were the regionalists, each writing from the folkways of parts of America that suddenly seemed more interesting after the Civil War: Sarah Orne Jewett, Hamlin Garland, Mary Wilkins

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Freeman, and many others whom Howells, in his role of editor, nurtured to publication. Almost every one of them at one time or another described the kind of domestic crisis that invariably splinters the family or portends a tragic ending. I would like to draw upon a few examples from the best of the American Realists to validate their premise that art begins with the truthful observation of life. You will see parallels with what we know of the Borden's, all of which may help to explain why their story was a tantalizing subject for the creative arts.

As editor of the *Atlantic* in Boston and later of *Harper's Magazine* in New York, Howells spent his career encouraging young writers who saw beyond the so-called "Smiling Aspects" of American life. He credited his protégé John DeForest with having shown him that human passions, often in conflict with society, could make a compelling tale.

By 1881 Howells himself had written *A Modern Instance*, the first American fiction dealing with divorce—at that time alarmingly on the increase. In it Marcia Gaylord is the pretty, headstrong daughter of the leading lawyer of Equity, Maine. As is common only in America, in matters of courtship Marcia is left to command her own fate, being allowed the private use of the downstairs parlor for courting, with only the proviso that the old folks not be awakened. On the other hand, Squire Gaylord dislikes the idea of Marcia actually marrying Bartley Hubbard, the young newspaperman who has been courting her in the parlor. Nevertheless, in a romantic gesture of defiance, Marcia elopes with Bartley, who true to her father's fears—gradually becomes so dissipated with drinking and carousing that the marriage is hopelessly doomed. As Bartley grows ever fatter and more devious, Marcia becomes ever more jealous and demanding.

To make matters worse, her pride won't let her confide in her father or Ben Halleck, a young Boston Brahmin who silently adores her and tries to shield her from the disgrace that she must ultimately endure when her roving husband files for divorce for—of all things—desertion. Poor Marcia: all she ever wanted was to be everything to Bartley and to enjoy the larger social life of Boston. She is determined to stick, but uneducated as she is in independent thought, she is bound to act unwisely.

Halleck defends her against the correct Bostonians who think she is getting what she deserves for being at heart only a narrow country girl without sophistication. He contends, on the other hand, that marriages like hers are like "so many hells," in which self-respect dies and the bond becomes an enslavement. "They ought to be broken up" he tells his more traditional friend Atherton. But the social consensus, in Atherton's words, is that "the sort of men and women that marriage enslaves would be vastly more wretched and mischievous if they were set free." Atherton believes that the hell people make for themselves is the best place for them.

In the end, of course, Marcia is divorced, but instead of bringing liberation, it shrinks her spirit until she becomes as crabbed and cynical as her father, shut up with him in his old Maine house without friends or social standing.

And even the caring Halleck realizes that he could never marry her now. All his social and moral instincts forbid a union with a cast-off woman. He turns to the ministry for comfort and as the book ends, more or less confirms what his smug friend Atherton has always said: "I hate anything that sins against order and this

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whole thing is disorderly.” For Atherton any act against the common good of a Christian society should be condemned and certainly not forgotten. He said: “Every link in the human chain feels the effect of violence.” Actually, I think there was much of Howells speaking through the character of Atherton in *A Modern Instance*. It was a topic he took on with reluctance, and even he could not bring himself to liberate his heroine or make her more than the victim of her own impetuous nature. It would have been nice had he given her a little peace in the end, but in considering his theme almost as tragic as slavery, Howells was both reporting on a social condition and pleading for a more humane resolve of its consequences.

In the nineteenth century, unmarried young women of good family were under the protection of their fathers. When that protection was too restricting, they did sometimes revolt as Marciadid. Incidentally, one fictional representation of Lizzie Borden has her killing her father because he refused to let her marry a foreign nobleman with whom she had fallen in love while abroad. In real life, no such nobleman existed, and Lizzie’s resentment against her elders was more complex. Outwardly, she was calm as Mona Lisa, but both she and her mousy sister Emma resented their father’s stinginess with them and his generosity to their step-mother. When Andrew Borden deeded a small tract of land to his wife, Lizzie and Emma demanded—and got—equal value in another property. Over time the sisters quit taking meals with the elder Bordens and referred to their step-mother always as “Mrs. Borden,” although she had been Andrew’s wife since Lizzie was a small child.

If Lizzie did kill her parents, it was no secret lover that prompted it, but surely some long-festering resentment that centered upon her obsessive love of animals (her father had slaughtered her pigeons), or perhaps on her love of beautiful things and her yearning for a life beyond Fall River Sunday School. In addition, Andrew Borden’s house provided only the meanest approximation of modern life, though he was by Fall River standards a wealthy man. Their house was poorly arranged, with cramped bedrooms opening only on to each other, a kitchen with no running water, one basement water closet with tin bath tub, and a communal clothes closet upstairs. Andrew Borden was a shrewd businessman but he did not pamper his women.

I would be hard to think of a better comparison to Andrew Borden than Henry James’s Dr. Austin Sloper in *Washington Square*. Catherine Sloper’s father does not pamper her either, and in his arrogant authority looks upon his plain and stolid daughter as an inferior gift left to him by his wife, who died soon after the birth. When the grown-up Catherine appears before him in a rich crimson ball gown, Dr. Sloper looks at her with mock surprise and says “Is it possible that this magnificent creature is my child?”

We are told that he would have liked to be proud of Catherine, but there was nothing to be proud of, though nothing to be particularly ashamed of either. It was just that Dr. Sloper wanted a child as unusual as he considered himself. And he had passionately wanted a son, not this robust and cow-like creature.

But Catherine has one gift. Like Marcia Gaylord, she is constant to an ideal; unlike Marcia, she will not be crushed when the ideal proves false. When she falls in love with the young fortune hunter Morris Townsend, it is with her whole heart and

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commitment. Encouraged by her silly Aunt Penniman, Catherine sees Morris quietly until he persuades her to marry him. Being something of a scoundrel himself, her father recognizes one in Morris, but he is unable to break Catherine's determination, even after he takes her away to Europe and threatens disinheritance. "You try my patience," he says to her, "and you ought to know what I am, I am not a very good man . . . and I assure you I can be very hard." Constant Catherine is ready to endure it all—his wrath and disinheritance; not so Morris, who exits the scene once Dr. Sloper explains the facts.

Austin Sloper doesn't murder his daughter to keep her from Morris Townsend's clutches, but he kills something in her. Catherine closes in upon herself, acknowledging that now love is gone, there remains only duty to fill the void in her life. Years later her father attempts to extract a promise that after his death she will not marry Townsend. But she refuses outright, telling her father that he simply doesn't understand; she cannot promise such a thing. At which he replies, "Upon my word, I had no idea how obstinate you are."

Catherine is not obstinate; on the contrary, she has since childhood been the most pliant of children. But without reverence for her father, there remains only duty, and she refuses to extend that beyond death. Eventually he does die and Morris does return—and is firmly refused. But the refusal is Catherine's, not her father's. She has found a dry contentment in spinsterhood that will suffice her. Interestingly, the plot for this tale was a true one, related to James by his friend the actress Frances Kemble, whose own brother was the Morris Townsend of the story.

Unlikely rebellion by daughters or wives was a common theme in the fiction of women writers in the 1880s and '90s. One has only to cite the outstanding examples: Mary Wilkins Freeman's "Revolt of Mother" describes the New England farm wife who set up housekeeping in her husband's spacious new barn when her own house became unlivable. She justified this unheard of action by saying, "I think it's right just as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country 'cause they didn't have what belonged to them." And in "A Village Singer" Mrs. Freeman created a delightful rebel in Candace Whitcomb. When she is fired from her long-held post of church soloist for singing out of tune, she disrupts subsequent services from her house next door by simply singing and playing louder than the new soloist—but a different set of hymns. The New England nature has a "floodgate," we are told, "and the power which it releases is an accumulation of passion."

Sarah Orne Jewett wrote much the same thing in her novel *A Country Doctor* when one character says, "I tell you, that for intense, self-centered smoldering volcanoes of humanity, New England cannot be matched the world over."

Possibly no American has depicted New England's smoldering volcanoes better than Edith Wharton, particularly in her bleak stories of Massachusetts village life. *Ethan Frome* is, of course, the one that always comes to mind. Beaten down by a nagging, sickly mother, Ethan, upon her death, marries his mother's nurse, who proves to be equally neurotic and demanding. The unfortunate young farmer has gone from one bad bargain to another and is about to jump into a third when the story begins. The village is not named Starkfield for nothing.

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When a young relative of his wife's comes to keep house for them Ethan falls in love for the first time. Her name is Mattie Silver, and she is like quicksilver, symbolized in the bright cherry scarf that floats around her body as she dances or flies behind her in the wind. Ethan peeps through the window on evenings when she dances with her young friends at church sociables, as they were called. Back home with her, one thing inevitably leads to another until Ethan and Mattie, pledged to each other in a desperate love pact, first plan to run away, but ultimately conspire to drive a speeding sled into a tree and exit the world together in order to escape both his wife and the town that would never understand their passion.

The plan doesn't work. The smash-up in the speeding sled only maims them, and in the end Ethan is left with two crippled termagants to care for in his own old age. As he stands looking at the village tombstones one bleak day he imagines they all send him the same message: "We never got away, why should you?"

An even bolder work by Wharton but one in the same vein is *Summer*, which also draws upon her acquaintance with Massachusetts villages whose old people were narrow and self-satisfied and whose young folk yearned for larger lives and a city's bright lights. This too is a tale of domestic unhappiness, in this instance a young girl who despises her adoptive father—another New England lawyer. Wharton once wrote that people in Massachusetts were so busy trying to find a reflection of themselves in sentimental novels that they failed to look at their own Hawthorne, who truly understood the human pageant played out in the Massachusetts mountain and villages.

In Wharton's story—daring for its time—Charity Royall is a young girl who was rescued as a baby from the poverty and drunkenness of her mountain parents by lawyer Royall and his wife. The good wife dies, and ultimately Royall, in his loneliness and sexual frustration, seeks out his ward in his bedroom. The disgusted young woman seems at that point more self-assured than she really is, and when she chases the old man back to his room she vows to get away from him and the village that knows too much about her dreary origins. "It's no use trying to be anything in this place," she mutters into her pillow, and later dreams vague dreams of cities with beautiful people beckoning to her.

Unfortunately, her naïveté and intellectual laziness lure her into the arms of a young man who, while not positively evil, is ready to make her believe that the larger experience she craves begins in his arms. She becomes pregnant, of course, and is ultimately rescued once more by lawyer Royall, now contritely ready to be a real father to her—albeit through a marriage contract. Charity's doorway to the future is firmly closed before she has begun to live. The young man, by the way, marries the wealthy city girl, as he had planned to do all along. All the characters in these tales are in some way trapped by life, by place, by situations partly of their own making. As a result of their rebellion, small-town America would never quite accept them, but neither could it quite forget them.

Perhaps this is why the true-life story of Lizzie Borden haunts us today. If guilty, she dared the most outrageous rebellion possible; if innocent, her actions after the trial made the townspeople suspect she wasn't very much grief-stricken. For example, as is well known, she gave a large party to celebrate her freedom; and with her now inherited wealth she bought a new house that she snobbishly called "Maplecroft"

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and staffed with servants. She re-christened herself Lisabeth and took to buying art and fancy cars. Now that she had money she could travel to Boston and New York, where she befriended people of the stage, throwing parties for them and financing their stays at Maplecroft.

One such party finally broke the bond between Lizzie and her sister Emma. The older Emma had taken the role designed for Lizzie; she became the public mourner and wore black until her death. And when Lizzie was snubbed by her old Sunday School pals, it was Emma who became pious, while Lizzie pursued the actress Nance O'Neil, which in itself has caused much speculation among biographers.

It's all very well to see literary realists as notetakers of this sort of American drama, but what of murder? The act of murder? Generally, the realists shied away from it, possibly believing murder both too high and too low a subject for American fiction. Too high, because domestic murder was still linked with classical tragedy, which leaves one spiritually satisfied. Too low, because of the unsavory personalities needed to make it seem real. No, the public was not quite ready for that show of human depravity.

Ibsen's "Ghosts" prompted a public outcry when it was produced in New York in 1899 and in his review of it Howells commented that the reason audiences were so thrilled by Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and abhorred the pathological and revolting in contemporary literature was the vast difference in the nerves of the seventeenth century and those of the nineteenth. He contended that in the nerves of the present was an agonizing consciousness of things unknown to an earlier age, and it may be this tacit consciousness which recoils from the anguish of laying the emotions bare. Howells actually became quite ill while laying bare the souls of Marcia Gaylord and the disgusting Bartley. In any case, he believed it would be another century (i.e. the 1990s) before audiences could see such plays as "Ghosts" and read about morally diseased people without cringing. And by then, he prophesied, there would be other and more refined horrors to contemplate in real life.

The nineteenth century could read with pleasure in Sophocles' *Electra* of the pitiful cry of the homecoming father on his couch as the "sharp biting stroke of the brazen ax was driven home." But the same scene depicted in the *Fall River Globe* or the *London Illustrated Gazette* would not likely read well as fiction in the *Atlantic* or *Harper's Magazine*. For while the realists were interested in the detail of American life and in the social actions that were driving its culture, the grisly spectre of household murder was something only the sensationalists would depict, since presumably that act was an aberration of family life and not a societal trend.

All that said, one must account for the exceptions. In the 1890s Mary Wilkins Freeman co-authored a mystery called "The Long Arm," based on the sensational 1892 murder of a Tennessee woman by her lesbian lover. And although it won the prize in a fiction contest, to my knowledge it has not appeared in subsequent collections of Freeman's works.

The most singular tale of murder in a domestic setting is, of course, by the master Henry James. *The Other House*, published in 1896, was written originally for the stage. No producer ever wanted it, and even James cared so little for the novel that he did not include it in the New York edition of his works. It involves two families

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and the complicated relations between them, beginning when the young head of one household is left to rear his infant daughter alone when his wife not only dies, but upon doing so extracts his promise never to remarry during their daughter's lifetime.

All is well until Tony, the father, begins to care for a young woman who is a constant visitor to the house across the stream and who, since his child's infancy, has been a surrogate mother to her. On the other hand, the closest friend of Tony's dead wife has had her eye on him from the day of the death, obsessively plotting one way or another to break the wretched promise Tony made to his dying wife.

This devious woman, ironically named Rose, is of course the murderer of Tony's child, planning her drowning in the stream in such a way that suspicion will be thrown on Jean, the young visitor to the other house, whom she knows that Tony loves, consciously or not.

Simply relating this plot doesn't do justice to the Jamesian genius for nuance and subtlety of character. It is melodrama at its finest, and at its center is Rose so beautiful, so outwardly fine—who has such pure sexual power over the men in this novel that not only will she go free, but she will be defended by her admirers, even by the father of the drowned child. Tony will blame himself, acknowledging that he did not actually discourage her passion for him. And Rose, as she quietly prepares to walk away under the protection of another of her suitors, confesses to yet a third that she had simply “made a mistake.” She says to the astonished man: “I've failed, but I did what I could. It was all that I saw—it was all that was left to me. It took hold of me, it possessed me. . . . You'll say that my calculation was grotesque—my stupidity as ignoble as my crime. All I can answer is that I might, nonetheless, have succeeded. People have—in worse conditions.” At that the young man can only stare at her and breathe, “You're too horrible, you're too horrible.”

If, as the realists insisted, truth is the basis of all art, James has captured in this tale the essence of complex human behavior and relationships. As he once said of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, he might have said of Rose: that she is “various and sinuous. . . . She suffers, she struggles, she is human and by that fact exposed to a dozen interpretations.”

Obviously, the same can be said for the legendary Lizzie Borden. One biographer who grew up a few houses from Maplecroft remembers trying to converse with Lizzie as she tended her garden, but in return receiving only silence blank, pale eyes staring from a jowly face. She was inscrutable to the end, living in splendid isolation paid for by her murdered father's fortune. We are told that she owned a large library and lived much among her books. Did she, I wonder, meet herself in James, Howells, Freeman, or Wharton? And if so, did she suffer remorse? Or, if she reflected at all on her life, might it have been with the attitude of one of Freeman's characters who concluded, “I am a graft on the tree of human womanhood. I am a hybrid. Sometimes I think I am a monster, and the worst of it is, I take pleasure in it. . . .”

¹ This is an unpublished talk given at a symposium celebrating Jack Beeson's opera *Lizzie Borden*, presented during the 1996 season of Glimmerglass Opera, Cooperstown,

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New York