
Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* in the Context of Regionalist Fiction

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Charles M. Sheldon, pastor of the Central Church of Topeka, published his most successful novel, and likely the bestselling novel of the nineteenth century,¹ in 1896, urging Christians to consider their Christianity as a life of social action guided by the question, “What would Jesus do?” *In His Steps*, the primary popularizer of the social gospel, positioned Sheldon as a national religious leader whom many people looked to for spiritual guidance at a time when the relevance of Christianity to a modern and chaotic nation seemed questionable. Sheldon, insisting on the immanence of Christ and the practical application of Christianity in the world, always answered his fans’ requests for personal advice in the same manner: “I can not tell you what Jesus would do in your place. It is for each one of you to ask what Jesus would do if he were in your place and then do unhesitatingly what it seems probably that he would do” (Whittemore 18). Such radically individualistic and localized ethics demanded that the nominal Christian become personally involved in her discipleship as she sought to follow Christ’s steps in her community.

At the same time that *In His Steps* appeared as a serial in *The Advance* (a Chicago-based religious periodical), flew off four presses (due to a defective copyright), and was translated into as many as 30 languages, regionalist and urban local color writers were flooding leading periodicals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Century*, *Harper’s* and *Scribner’s* (Miller 86-87). Hamlin Garland, Sarah Orne Jewett, Harold Frederic, Stephen Crane, and W.D. Howells, to name just a few, were writing realistic novels depicting pockets of the rural and the urban and, in Garland’s celebratory words, “reflect[ing] the life which goes on around them” (*Crumbling Idols* 62). Howells, the primary advocate of regionalist writers in the literary market, hailed the importance of the new truthful fiction in his editorial columns first in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then in *Harper’s Monthly*. His *Editor’s Study* columns in *Harper’s* (1886-1892) praised realist and regionalist fiction, but also, Paul R. Petrie points out, “works that we would not readily classify as ‘Realist’ for those qualities in them that correspond to his sense of literary purposes” (xvi). Observing that “it is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really

unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a message or a meaning for them” (*Editor’s Study* 74), Howells argued for a “new sense of literature as ethically purposive communication” (Petrie 6).

Calling for a practical literature, “art for humanity’s sake,” Howells’ strategy was, Petrie suggests, “to subsume literature’s aesthetic value within its use-value, which thereby encompasses not only the literary artifact’s idiogenetic artistic qualities but also the effects of those qualities on the actions of the real readers in the world beyond the immediate act of reading” (18). Howells’ sympathies with the social gospel become clear as he explicitly calls for its influence on modern literature:

Christ and the life of Christ is [sic] at this moment inspiring the literature of the world as never before, and raising it up a witness against waste and want and war...[In] the degree that it ignores His spirit, modern literature is artistically inferior. In other words, all good literature is now Christmas literature. (*Editor’s Study* 169)²

Though *In His Steps* has been described as “theologically sloppy and literarily forgettable” (Miller 69) and suffering from “abysmal literary quality” (Boyer 61), Howells’ standards demand that the literary historian at least consider Sheldon’s novel for its practical aesthetics that so successfully influenced its readers.

Recently, Gregory S. Jackson has examined *In His Steps* as a “homiletic novel” exploring the specialized readership of works like it by taking the set of narrative strategies, including sentimentality, seriously and showing how they create “a practical link between reading and doing, knowledge and action, representation and reality” (5). Jackson’s reading assesses *In His Steps* within the tradition of “religious realism” “shaped by the sermon’s homiletic pattern,” which “emerge[s] as a powerful vehicle for transmitting pragmatic idealism into churches throughout the nation, redesigning the novel as an interactive tool for civic training” (26). As a homiletic novel, *In His Steps* shares a parallel genealogy with the realist novel, both drawing their narrative strategies from older Protestant forms, though the realist novel “disengaged the mechanism of activism so crucial to the tradition of homiletic fiction” (5). Jackson’s reinterpretation of the roots of the realist and the religious novel provides a solid basis for further inquiry into the relationships between these literatures that have been traditionally kept separate.

Howells’ angst over the use-value of modern literature and desire for realist fiction to effect social change materializes the split Jackson theorizes between the realist and homiletic novel and invites Christian fiction into the regionalist conversation. Both a part of the same culture that incessantly consumed regionalist writing, homiletic works introduce theology and religious experience into scholarly accounts

of regionalism, aspects previously under-attended. The broader cultural desire for regionalism at the end of the nineteenth century also gripped religious experience. Though *In His Steps* does not utilize traditional local color techniques, it nevertheless participates in regionalist fiction by regionalizing Christianity—that is, attempting to localize Christ in the believer’s life and actions.

Strauss’ *Life of Jesus* was an important influence on American theology, as were works such as Renan’s *Life of Jesus*, but, simply put, the liberal shift in American theology can be described not only as a historical and rationalistic shift, but also a realist or regionalist shift, in which the Gospels are historically reconstructed with “a novellike quality,” specifically the realist novel (Hodgson xix).³ Theologians composed new lives of Christ that described him as an immanent, regional man, not a transcendent universal God-man. In the midst of higher criticism’s ascendance in American seminaries and the traumatic result of textual criticism in 1881—the publication in the United States of the Revised New Testament that, among other changes, omitted the last line of the doxology⁴—Sheldon called for believers to imitate the life of Christ, an “ingenious move,” Richard Wightman Fox observes, “at the very moment when everyday Bible readers were forced to wonder how literally they could take the words of Scripture” (280).

Initially a series of Sunday night, pew-filling sermons whose cliff-hanging chapters brought listeners back week after week to listen to Sheldon read, *In His Steps* asked congregants, and later readers around the country, to imagine what their community would look like if they practiced a practical and social-interventionist discipleship. Presenting upper- and middle-class white characters, like the constituency of his church, who dared to make such a radical decision, Sheldon helped his listeners to visualize their God, and in turn themselves, as intimately concerned with the material world.⁵ Sheldon introduced the faithful to the character Rev. Henry Maxwell, pastor of the First Church of Raymond, who, impatient to finish writing his sermon one Saturday morning, turns away a tramp looking for work. That Sunday the same tramp interrupts Maxwell’s sermon walking to the front of the church to ask the congregation what they mean when they say they follow Jesus. Without a hint of anger or rudeness, the tramp explains that he lost his printing job to a linotype machine and has been searching for work for ten months. In the mean time his wife has died in a tenement house and his daughter has been sent to live with a friend. Assuring the people that he is not blaming them and does not expect them to get jobs for over five hundred men in the city presently without work, he nonetheless expresses a sincere and anguished puzzlement:

Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing ‘Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee,’ and remember how

my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl, too. Of course, I don't expect you people can prevent every one from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean?...It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following in his steps? (9)

In the middle of his speech, the tramp falls on the communion table and then to the floor, dying a week later in the Rev. Maxwell's home. This event sets in motion the pastor's reconsideration of the meaning of discipleship culminating in a proposal to his parishioners that they join him in vowing to consider what Jesus would do in all aspects of their life no matter the consequence to themselves over a term of one year. Those choosing to join the experiment stay after the morning service—the first after-service prayer meeting among many in which the Spirit fills the room as “plainly as if it had been visible,” marking the beginning of a radical new movement that changes First Church and soon spreads to Chicago (14).

Sheldon, through the Tramp, critiques nominal Christianity and in opposition to the historicizing impulse in higher criticism, he regionalizes Christ in the present. Stead's work *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894), which directly influenced *In His Steps*, exhorts the citizens of Chicago to “Be a Christ!” (443). In other words, Stead localizes Christ within the actions of the believer living in a specific community and, like Garland's description of local color, the strength of the life of Christ becomes his “hopelessly contemporaneous” nature (69). My argument here is that the desire for regionalism manifested in literary work also appears in religious experience, specifically as a longing for Christ's immanence and relevance in contemporary time and space. Sheldon's novel presents “a Christ to follow” by emphasizing the local—the individual conscience, material life, and action. What I am calling the local or regionalizing characteristics of Sheldon's work includes the tendency of his deployment of the guideline *what would Jesus do?* to insist excessively on the individual conscience and the immanent humanity of Christ in order to address the immediate material needs of the local community primarily through direct contact and experience with that community. To achieve this regionalization of Christianity requires that Sheldon deemphasize the historical Jesus, the Biblical text, and theology and relocate him in the present through the mechanism of Holy Spirit grounding practical lay-theology in the individual conscious.

Paul S. Boyer, in his reappraisal of the novel, observes that “the first surprise one experiences upon reading *In His Steps* is that the Christian religion, whether viewed in its historical, institutional, or personal aspects, plays an extremely limited role in

the novel” leading him to conclude that the novel “is concerned only minimally with religion” (62). The startling lack of Biblical references and quotations, classes for Biblical study, or any exegetical work in the novel, rather than indicating a minimal role for religion as Boyer suggests, within the context of historical Jesus studies immediately signals a preoccupation with religion as Sheldon helps dramatically revise American Protestantism by insisting on the individual conscience for his character’s discipleship above other aids. Though the Rev. Maxwell wants his parishioners to follow in Jesus’ steps there are no excurses through the Gospels or any suggestion of how one might go about figuring out what Jesus would do except by intense attention to the individual conscience. In the after-church prayer meeting during which congregants make their pledge to follow in Christ’s steps, Rachel Winslow addresses this vexing question asking what source they should consult to answer the question of Jesus’ probable actions. The Rev. Maxwell replies, “There is no way that I know of...except as we study Jesus through the medium of the Holy Spirit” (15). The source of their knowledge will be the Holy Spirit, who each individual must consult, and though Maxwell admits that he doesn’t expect that everyone will always come to the same conclusions, he firmly believes that “if Jesus’ example is the example for the world, it certainly must be feasible to follow it” (16). The most important thing, he reminds his flock, is that they ask the Spirit and then follow whatever answer they receive.

In each instance that the novel follows a person through this seeking process, the person must seek by himself and come to his own understanding of what Jesus would do. When Rachel seeks an answer about her situation from her sister-in-Christ, Virginia refuses to give her opinion encouraging Rachel to follow Rev. Maxwell’s exhortation for “each one us [to] decide according to the judgment we feel for ourselves to be Christlike” (39). That Sheldon advocated such a localized application of ethics without outside authority to direct the relationship between the believer and his God resulted in his loosening of doctrines, or what he called “untheological Christianity” in order to create unity and focus on action (Miller 183).⁶ This move away from theology and toward accepting individual conscious-led action Sheldon hoped would help believers remain intimately connected to an immanent God in the midst of devastating historical research on the life of Jesus.

The model of spiritual performance in *In His Steps* encourages a hyper-local application of Christianity, both theologically and spatially, by the insistence on an immanent Christ concerned with humanity’s material need. To ask what Jesus would do if he were in my place is to assume a God intimately concerned with the ordinary, everyday life, and also to reverse the classic *imitatio Christi*, which attempted to conform the believer’s life to Christ’s life not conform the believer’s life

to Christ-as-the-believer's life. Sheldon's ethic might endeavor to put the believer in Christ's steps, but it more accurately positions Christ in the believer's steps, a radical emphasis on the humanity of Christ that attempts to revitalize human volition earning Sheldon numerous critiques as he was dismissed as an idealist. James Callahan, summarizing the criticisms of Sheldon's version of the *imitatio Christi*, points out the paradoxical nature of his ethic, which "provided a spirituality that was unrealistic, impractical, impersonal, and ahistorical, precisely because it was so realistic, so practical, so individualistic, and so historical" (269). That the timeless divine did not just come to earth to provide atonement for sin, but to provide humanity an example of how to live as persons on this planet and also for God to experience life as "*the Divine Tramp*," added meaning to human life and demanded that high theological formulations, including the Trinity, become localized (*If Christ* 13).

Christ's experience as the intensely local "*Divine Tramp*" shaped Sheldon's ministry and message around the necessity of experience with the needy, and *In His Steps* dramatizes the methods Sheldon used to understand many different social positions, including walking the streets for a week as an undercover homeless man trying to find work.⁷ Sheldon exhorts followers to apply his creed through actual contact with other people by making a concerted effort to understand the experience of those at the mercy of the powerful. Near the end of the novel, two church leaders in Chicago step down from their offices in order to live and serve in the ghetto insisting that they must come personally in closer contact with the sin and misery of the city. The wealthy, viewing social ills from afar and never experiencing want and suffering alienated themselves from the very people they should be helping by never asking the true meaning of charity: "Is charity the giving of worn-out garments? Is it a ten-dollar bill given to a paid visitor or secretary of some benevolent organization in the church? Shall the man never go and give his gift himself?...Is it possible to organize the affections so that love shall work disagreeable things by proxy?" (185). Sheldon poses these rhetorical questions and then offers spiritual models that give up their positions, authority, and money and live among the poor or share their privilege in some way with the less privileged through actual interaction. The *kenosis*⁸ of Christ becomes more than a divine lesson but a practical guide for living in a believer's local community—disciples must empty themselves and be Christs by inhabiting the same spaces as the needy.

Sheldon's story helped train Christians to do just this as they read the novel as "a moral script for spiritual performance," encouraged to "identify with oppressed groups" as they witnessed "the struggles between moral temptation and suffering virtue" and "the greed of capital and the plight of the 'undeserving poor'" (Jackson 4). Sheldon's script propels the reader forward, challenging the faithful to continue

the Rev. Maxwell's exploration of a radically pragmatic gospel, a challenge that moves the potential social changes outside the immediate arena of the text and into the possibility of the believer's own quest. Appraising the novel as primarily a conservative, middle-class novel with little potential to spur progressive action, as Boyer does, ignores the very real challenge placed upon the reader to imagine a world outside her middle-class world and open herself up to the possibility that the Lord might want her to engage such a world on His terms, which, Jackson reminds us, is exactly what happened.⁹

While urban local color and rural regionalist fiction under the broader category of realism disengaged the mechanism of social action, homiletic fiction retained the ability to link narrative with real world effects. So, while regionalism displayed the local within the text through dialect, realistic description, and other aesthetic techniques, the spiritual script proffered by homiletic fiction produced localization outside the text. Brodhead's contention that regionalism acted as "a symbol of union with the premodern chosen at the moment of separation from it" (120) similarly applies to Sheldon's novel that precipitated a contemporary form of the *imitatio Christi* at the moment the traditional life of Christ was least accessible. Like Garland's "veritist" for whom "the present is the vital theme" (79), Sheldon's novel focused on the contemporary Christ presented to his readers, not in local color, but through a local theology that would create social action in the real world.

In the context of the late nineteenth century, the popularity of regional writing satisfied a public desire, whether that desire is defined in line with Amy Kaplin's theorizations of imperialism and nostalgia, Richard Brodhead's suppression of the "radically heterogeneous," or any number of other formulations or combinations of them (137). Whichever theory one ascribes need also take into account the manifestation of regionalist desire in lay-theology delivered to the reading public in a storm of homiletic novels and account for the difference reading a spiritual script in order to regionalize the transcendent might make in a cultural assessment of that desire as opposed to focusing only on regionalized aesthetic representations.¹⁰ Nathan Hatch in his important history *The Democratization of American Christianity* observes that in spite of "the deep commitment of a new generation of social historians to understanding common people's lives in the age of capitalist transformation" most "attention has been focused on the changing nature of markets, on the decline of independent artisans and farmers, and on the rise of the American working class" while "little energy has gone into exploring the forces of insurgent religious movements" (224). Neglecting the large population of homiletic readers internalizing a regionalized and contemporary Christ will surely skew any broad attempt to understand the cultural moment of regionalist writing.

When Howells proclaimed that “all good literature is now Christmas literature” he meant that literature, like God being united with the real world in the Christ child, needed to become immanent (*Editor’s Study* 169). Likewise social gospel proponents declared that good religion affects the real world in a practical manner. Placing homiletic novels alongside regionalist novels can also productively elucidate the many extra-secular moments in works by major realists like Howells, Jewett, and Garland. This is, of course, just one small example of the many possibilities that including regionalized religious experience within the literary moment of regionalism will open up for analysis.

Howells’ *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a book portraying the Marches’ middle-class consumptive and aesthetic gaze at the urban poor, ends with one of the three social gospel characters in the novel, Margaret Vance, looking at the Marches with “the peace that passeth understanding” (495). The two other characters, the young Dryfoos and Lindau, both dead by the end of the novel, have provided small glimpses of an intense religious activism, though their community always hangs on the periphery. The last words of the novel are Mr. March’s instructing Mrs. March that they need to trust the look they have seen in Miss Vance’s eyes—words that perhaps points us in her direction as well, and, though the novel does not provide a local view of the social gospel culture, it supplies the impetus to seek out those accounts. ✱

Notes

¹The number of copies and translations of the novel cannot be determined but Mott estimates 8 million copies were sold, though Miller considers this a conservative estimate. In addition to book printings, the numbers estimated do not take into account serial and periodical publications or the fact that many copies were passed around to several persons. The book, which originated the still popular evangelical phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” continues to be printed with over ten editions available by U.S. printers (Miller 86-87).

²Miller includes Howells as a social gospeler citing his membership in W.D.P. Bliss’ Church of the Carpenter in Boston and “his most compelling social gospel novels,” *A Traveller From Altruria*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and *Annie Kilburn* (70). May includes these novels as examples of high art that reflected the social gospel movement and names Edward Everett Hale, W.D.P. Bliss, and other leaders of the Boston Christian Socialist movement, as well as the Shakers and Tolstoi, as some of the social gospel influences on Howells. May is careful to distinguish these more radical influences from Howells’ actual opinions, which resided with the moderate progressives (210-211).

³Other works concerned with the historical Jesus cited by Jackson include Henry Beecher’s *Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871), Philip Schaff’s *The Person of Christ* (1865), August Neanders’ *The Life of Jesus* (trans. 1880), and Elizabeth Phelps’ *The Story of Jesus Christ* (1897), and the fictional works *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* by Lew Wallace (1880), *Quo Vadis* by Henry Sienkiewicz (trans. 1897), and *The Christian* by Hall Caine (1897).

⁴Matthew 6:13b, the doxology used by many churches and therefore a highly noticeable omission: “For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

⁵See Jackson’s articles on Sheldon and Jacob Riis, which provide important analyses of the use of visualization in social gospel literature.

⁶The move away from theology and toward morality was a shift occurring in the nineteenth century. Commager observes, “It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, religion prospered while theology slowly went bankrupt” (165).

⁷Sheldon considered himself a sociologist and condemned sociologists that just worked to produce numbers and graphs. “The investigation of conditions,” he warned, “is not sociology unless such investigation helps the man” (qtd. in Miller 24).

⁸A theological term referring to the “emptying” of Christ as he relinquished full participation in the Divinity in order to come to earth as a man.

⁹Paul S. Boyer’s appraisal has been recently challenged by Jackson. Jackson details the real-world effects of such homiletic novels, including Sheldon’s move to the black ghetto where he founded a kindergarten that educated many blacks, including one who grew up to father a son named Charles Sheldon Scott—the litigator of the initial stages of *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Charles Sheldon Scott “was a product of the education system established through interventions first imagined in a homiletic novel” (Jackson 23).

¹⁰Other homiletic novels include Albion Tourgée’s *Murvale Eastman* (1890), Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Washington Gladden’s *The Christian League of Connecticut*, W.D. Stead’s *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894), Milford Howard’s *If Christ Came to Congress* (1894), Edward Hale’s *If Jesus Came to Boston* (1894), Harold Bell Wright’s *That Printer of Udell’s* (1903). Also, producing on average one book a year for thirty years, Sheldon’s many other books include *Robert Hardy’s Seven Days* (1893), *The Crucifixion of Phillip Strong* (1894), *John King’s Question Class* (1899), and the sequel to *In His Steps, Jesus Is Here!* (1913).

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