
Paul R. Petrie. *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 232p.

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In *Conscience and Purpose*, Paul Petrie addresses William Dean Howells' theory on the nature and role of literature in a time of a growth for both the American middle class and the circulation of literature. Within this growth is a call to write from Howells that contemplates how literature should engage its readers and society as a vehicle for social understanding and change. From there, Petrie explores the presence and application of this theory in the writings of American writers Howells, Charles W. Chesnutt, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Willa Cather.

Petrie's first chapter, "W.D. Howells's Literary Antitheory: Toward a Social-Ethical Aesthetic in the *Editor's Study*," revisits Howells' seminal theoretical work to lay the foundation for the discussion of what the writers were working from. This chapter's ultimate success is in the context it provides of the genesis of the theory driving and informing the literary work discussed in the rest of the book. Petrie takes care to explore both Howells' theory with regard to acceptance and detractors, and he explores the parameters of the scholarship—both its usefulness and shortcomings—on the theory up to the current time. Petrie in this section provides needed structure for the conversation in the following chapters to take place. Though Petrie sometimes takes brief tangents, in this chapter and throughout the book, that risk landing away from the topic, he brings them back around to support the claim he is making and they ultimately work to inform the context fully.

With the understanding of what Howells called for and how it was received firmly in place, Petrie moves his second chapter, "What Is To Be Done: Howells's Social-Ethical Fiction," in the direction of exploring the application of this aesthetic in Howells' own fiction. Petrie's most poignant context in this chapter shows that what Howells called for was not to be achieved by one author or work alone. Rather, Petrie illustrates that though individual works can function to address the Howellsian literary-cultural aesthetic, the success of such ultimately rests on the discussion created from a collective of works functioning in this manner, rendering it a multi-authored and fluid work in progress. Petrie ends the chapter noting that no one author or work can achieve this—as Howells' work shows—which is exactly the reason Howells argued writers should embrace the task.

The next three chapters illustrate how Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather each created works in relationship to Howells' aesthetic. Throughout, Petrie is critical of these

writers, Howells, and critics of the subject in a manner that perpetuates the larger importance of the obligations of both writer and scholar to engage in a dialogue outside of the art—a social one. Petrie illustrates that as writers worked with and from the Howellsian aesthetic, attitudes toward its usefulness changed, and so did the applications. In the final chapter, “Implications,” Petrie explains how objectivity and honesty are the clearest lenses through which to address this study, one that ideally should illustrate the impact of Howells’ aesthetic theory and the relationship of literary works that moved out from that epicenter.

Petrie’s handling of this subject is extremely appropriate in width and depth. *Conscious and Purpose* provides the necessary context for a well-informed discussion to take place and carries on that discussion relatively free of suffocating jargon or nebulous theory interfering with the book’s discussion and goals. Also, Petrie’s care for the reader is useful in allowing even the most novice scholar on the subject to navigate the complexities of Howells’ theory and its effects. Throughout, Petrie follows a consistent presentation of argument, evidence, and transition, and his examples and notes are appropriately informative. The depth and sophistication of the argument—not to mention the overall crux of the study to revisit Howells’ effects on literature with a clean and honest lens—rewards the serious scholar of American literature and, more broadly, American studies as a whole. ✱