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# Money Matters :

The Materialism of the Spiritual in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*

KUGA, Shunji

## I

One of the main ambiguities in Harold Frederic's masterpiece *The Damnation of Theron Ware or Illumination* (1896; hereafter, *Theron Ware*) is whether the protagonist is already morally degraded at the novel's opening or becomes "damned" during the course of the story. The author obscures this issue, which continues to puzzle readers. One of the victims of Frederic's equivocation was William Dean Howells, his literary mentor; Howells commented on the novel that "When you get to the end, although you have carried a hazy notion in your mind of the sort of man Ware was, you fully realize, for the first time, that the author has never for a moment presented him anywhere to you as a good or honest man, or as anything but a very selfish man."<sup>1</sup> Although Howells concludes that Theron has consistently been neither "good" nor "honest" but instead "selfish," one wonders if the reason why such a perceptive reader as Howells fails to realize this until the denouement is paradoxically but precisely because the protagonist has degenerated subtly and gradually *in the course of the work*.

Several reader-response critics, empathizing with Howells, have cautioned readers not to be tricked by Frederic. Paul Eggers, for example, focuses his discussion on the novel's first chapter, specifically the scene of the annual Methodist conference at Tecumseh. Eggers enumerates the possible reasons for Theron's demotion, which readers and the hero himself are likely to overlook. For example, his sermon at the assembly may actually have been mediocre despite the audience's applause. Alternatively, there may be more suitable candidates at the conference for Tecumseh's ministry, despite the congregation's earnest desire to appoint Theron as their pastor. More broadly, the Bishops may doubt his fitness or competence as a minister.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to corroborate the first two possibilities because there seems to be no evidence either to counter the congregation's high appraisal of

Theron's speech or to support the existence of strong rival candidates for the Tecumseh church. The final supposition, however, is later confirmed when it is revealed that one of the Bishops did indeed doubt Theron's eligibility for such a large parish as Tecumseh and decided to send him instead to the minor parish of Octavius. The primary reason for his relegation to Octavius was Theron's money troubles at Tyre, his previous post, which is likely unknown to the Tecumseh congregation.

At the conclusion of the novel, Theron, having resigned the ministry, is leaving with his wife Alice for the rapidly developing city of Seattle to work in the "superintendency of a land and real estate company which ... ambitiously linked its affairs with the future of all Washington Territory."<sup>3)</sup> The details of his prospective job are unknown, yet the dramatic change in the hero's course, from following – an ascetic Methodist ministry to pursuing a secular and even speculative trade, hardly seems serious. Indeed, there is an element of farce in his optimism about his transformation; he seems to take for granted his success as a businessman and even dreams of "turning up in Washington a full-blown Senator" (344). Although he has been praised for his eloquence which may enhance his statesmanship, his weakness in mathematics and the poor negotiation skills he demonstrates in his interview with the church trustees cast doubt on his talent for commercial dealings, let alone for more speculative ventures. He may therefore stumble in his new career before attaining his goal.

Reverend Theron's future success aside, it is not unnatural that the novel should end by discussing such worldly topics as the hero's financial success and political ambition. The text addresses secular issues such as monetary affairs, including Theron's past history of debt scandal, as much as religious ones or perhaps it is more correct to say that the sacred always accompanies the secular. For example, the dignity of the First M. E. Church of Tecumseh is emphasized by the detail that "the pews in the first rows of their church rented for one hundred dollars apiece ... and that [the church] had almost abolished free pews altogether" (4). One of its members expresses discontent with the congregation's failure to secure Theron as the next minister by saying "his pew could be had now for sixty dollars" (8). Moreover, the reason for "the unctuous beaming of content" on the countenance of the incumbent Octavius minister is that "he was to get an additional three hundred dollars yearly in his new place" (9). The annual Methodist assembly is even compared to the place in which "the lucky numbers in a great lottery" are announced.

Theron himself comforts the disappointed Alice by mentioning that at Octavius “the salary is better – a little” (10).

## II

Why is this novel so concerned with monetary affairs? Is it simply because the novel is oriented toward realism? My contention is that the novel preoccupies itself with money because, paradoxically, the protagonist takes orders, a calling that typically has little relation to moneymaking. The novel’s first chapter traces American Methodism back to the first Bishop Francis Asbury and the noted circuit preacher Lorenzo Dow, extolling those missionaries who “gave their lives ... to poverty and to the danger and wearing toil of itinerant missions through the rude frontier settlements” (2), doing so “without dream of earthly reward” (2). However, the same chapter shrewdly adds that at the Methodist conference in progress, the “reverend survivors of the heroic times, their very presence there – [sat] meekly to hear again the published record ... of their dependence upon church charity” (3).

Charity is a reward from the laity and, in a sense, contradicts the self-sacrificing religious activities that the clergymen conduct “without dream of earthly reward.” When donations are collected directly by clerics, their size is readily known because they are made in the form of either money or goods. The clerics are understandably worried about the quantity of donations because their living depends on their congregation’s generosity. If the followers feel well “served by a fervent and devoted clergy” (2), they show their gratitude in the amount of their donations. Theron experiences this during his departure from his first appointment, when the parishioners give him “nearly two wagon-loads of vegetables, apples, canned preserves, ...” (16). However, he suffers financial pressures under the Octavius church trustees, who regard his sermons as unsatisfactory or “too flowery” (27) and threaten to reduce his living expenses.

Those practicing charity do not, by definition, expect remuneration. However, such expectations do exist, and the church conforms to the secular economic principle of equivalent compensation for offered labor or service. As a result, both donors and religious recipients become anxious about the practice of donation: the former naturally desires to contribute a fitting compensation for the latter’s services, and the latter spares no effort to obtain more from the former. This bargaining between donors and recipients constitutes

the climax of the novel, in which the hero, with the help of Mr. and Mrs. Soulsby, attempts to collect as many contributions as possible from his stingy church members to repay the church's debts. However, the hero's efforts to secure donations often seem to imply more, even to the point of contradiction. Despite his natural expectation of charity that reflects the quality of his services, he sometimes longs for generosity without strings, or a free ride. This is first suggested by his record of indebtedness at Tyre.

Theron recollects a series of episodes related to his Tyre debt in Chapter II. He first remembers his joyous newlywed days with Alice, who is ignorant of domestic details; she "ordered twenty pounds of steak and half a pound of sugar" (17). However, there are eventually consequences for such extravagance:

At the end of this first year the Wares suddenly discovered that they were eight hundred dollars in debt.

The second year was spent in arriving, by slow stages and with a cruel wealth of pathetic detail, at a realization of what being eight hundred dollars in debt meant. (19)

As a result of the "stony glare of people to whom he owed money" (20), their complaints of his "poor pay" (20) and especially "his creditors seated in serried rows before him" (19-20), his sermons "degenerated to a pitiful level of commonplace" (20). The donations from the church members were accordingly "grievously diminished" (20), ironically demonstrating the economic principle that the quality of ministers' spiritual services corresponds with the amount of charity they receive. Fortunately, however, the Wares eventually receive relief from their long standing debts and their meager earnings. In the third year of Ware's appointment, one benevolent person offers financial help. The Wares never feel disposed to repay the philanthropist and nonchalantly consider the money a gift. Theron never soberly reflects on the cause of this scandalous incident; to him, "all that was past and gone now" (22). As he recounts the incident, he treats the local magnate's help as if it is God's grace and unconsciously substitutes the pecuniary for the "spiritual" (22). His summary is laden with irony because the truth, contrary to the original sentences below, seems to indicate that "there was no impulse of his heart, no fiber of his being, which did stir" his inclination for reimbursement:

The call sounded, resonant and imperative, in his ears, and there was no impulse of his heart, no fiber of his being, which did not stir his devout response. He closed his eyes, to be the more wholly alone with the Spirit, that moved him. (22)

At Octavius, however, Theron must endure “spiritual” shock; the bigoted church trustees, Winch and Pierce, bluntly order Alice to remove the flowers from her bonnet, which they consider literally “too flowery” for a modest pastor’s wife. Theron notices that she is gravely hurt, and their married life is threatened. He feels the qualms of conscience because “having defended his own gas [bill of the parsonage] and sidewalk rights, [he] permitted the sacrifice of her poor little inoffensive rose without a protest” (36). In this moment, he does not confuse the “spiritual” with the “pecuniary” and therefore regrets having placed priority on the latter.

However, flowers, the symbol of Alice’s grief, are eventually also reduced to a material symbol of money. Alice finds compensation for her lost roses in the rectory’s flower garden, which she cultivates vigorously. Gorringer, the third church trustee, buys Alice most of the flowers without telling her husband, and a mention of the reference to the exact (and extraordinary) price of one box of flowers – thirty-one dollars and sixty cents – emphasizes the obvious fact that the flowers are part of a monetary exchange. Theron discovers the secret between Gorringer and Alice by overhearing a reference to the price of the flowers as two ladies pass by the parsonage garden: “My husband declares those dahlias alone couldn’t be matched for thirty dollars,” they gossip, continuing, “Some of those gladiolus [sic] must have cost as much as a dollar a piece” (267). These remarks remind Theron that he has previously heard the aforesaid sum of “thirty-one dollars and sixty cents,” and looking at the garden flowers, he feels as though they mockingly reveal the truth: “Yes, Livy Gorringer paid for us!” (268)

Theron never considers the flowers a pure donation from Gorringer but senses a mixed motive behind his behavior toward Alice. He finally initiates an argument with Gorringer with the words “speaking of the price of things” (271) and ends up breaking off relations with the lawyer, which also costs him his financial backing because Gorringer made “a promise to help him with money if worst came to worst” (119) in the church finances. Theron regards Gorringer’s prospective aid to the church as an act of charity with no strings attached, unlike the lawyer’s gifts to Alice.

Theron's contradictory interpretations of Gorringer's contributions as unconditional and conditional may appear arbitrary but are, to a certain extent, understandable. The lawyer's intentions are indeed confusing. One naturally wonders why Gorringer has secretly paid so much money for Alice's flowers for such a long period of time.<sup>4)</sup> After his argument with Theron, Gorringer insists to the neighboring photographer that his compassion for Alice is genuine. However, he has received unjust profits as a note shaver and is reasonably assumed to be tight with money. As Theron notes, Gorringer truly appears to be "not naturally a lavish or extravagant man ... [but rather] a careful and calculating man, who spent money only for a purpose" (271). Furthermore, Gorringer confides to Theron a bitter experience from his youth, when he fell in love with a girl in the church, "sitting down in front, right beside her," "thinking it would please her," and joining "the church on probation" (121). His love was unfruitful, and he says to Theron, half in jest, "the church still owes me a girl. I'll have one yet" (123). A similar scene is later reenacted when, at the revival meeting in Theron's church, Gorringer comes to the front, and kneels down next to Alice, and "the two touched shoulders" (156). Gorringer again decides to attend the church as a probationary member. The readers thus suspect that Gorringer may consider Alice a substitute for the girl he thinks the church still owes him. Whatever benign or malevolent intention he may cherish, the fact of his prodigality toward Alice invariably remains. Importantly, though Alice says of the flowers, "I'm ashamed to take them" (114), she nevertheless continues to accept them. One may wonder if her behavior is the result of being the wife of a minister who is frequently indulged with lavish, unearned gifts.

Gorringer actually hints at Theron's self-contradiction in a retort to Theron's criticism of his habit of giving secret presents to Alice: "And you object? I had not supposed that clergyman in general – and you in particular – were so sensitive" (272). Evidence of Theron's "insensitiveness" and even readiness to accept undue donations is apparent in his method of compensating for the flowers removed from Alice's bonnet: redeeming the piano the Wares were once obliged to dispose of when entangled in debt at Tyre. To comfort his wounded wife, he decides to buy a new piano in Octavius. Lacking funds to purchase it outright, he avails himself of "the beneficent modern invention, the installment plan" (37). Even an innocent minister like Theron is aware of this "invention," the fruit of capitalistic ingenuity in its sophisticated 19th century form. Furthermore, he initially intends to earn back the deposit for the piano himself, not entirely expecting the piano to

be paid for by donations. However, he plans to do so by writing a best-selling book. The incongruity between his practical reliance on the “installment plan” and his fanciful dream of making a large profit with his first literary effort is highly ironic; unable to make money himself, he inevitably depends on others’ pockets. Despite the obvious difficulty of writing a religious (and popular) book, Theron “comes to regard this prospective book of his as a substantial asset” (38). Moreover, he innocently suggests this to a clerk at Thurston’s, the department store where he buys the stationary for his planned masterpiece, postponing the purchase of Alice’s piano:

... he could not forbear hinting to the man ... that this package under his arm represented potentially the price of the piano he was going to have. He did it in a roundabout way, with one of the droll, hesitating smiles. The man did not understand at all, and Theron had not the temerity to repeat the remark. (57)

He returns to the rectory in high spirits only to discover that “the idea of beginning it [writing a book] impetuously, and hurling it off hot and glowing week by week, had faded away like a dream” (58) simply because he has no idea how to write, which, in this context, means that he has also no idea how to earn money. His realization that “he was an extremely ignorant and rudely untrained young man” (59) merely makes him more arrogant because he naively believes that in his case “ignorance was a thing to be remedied” (59).

Ironically but predictably, his “ignorance” of moneymaking does find a “remedy” when he receives a piano as a donation. He asks Celia, the daughter of a wealthy family, not only to choose a suitable piano but also to negotiate its price. He does not inquire about the “terms and dates of payment” (212), which would have caused him serious anxiety if he had used the installment plan. Although it does not seem that he immediately abandons his determination to pay out of his own pocket, he definitely changes his original purpose in purchasing the piano: it used to be for Alice, but now it is for Celia. He thinks,

Uppermost across the hurly-burly of his mind there scudded the singular reflection that he should never hear her [Celia] play on the new piano of his. Even as it flashed by out of sight, he recognized it for one of the griefs [sic] of his life; and the darkness which followed seemed nothing but a revolt against the idea of having a piano at all. He would countermand the order. (213)



Of course, he does not dare to countermand the order. However, because the piano has virtually become Celia's and Theron dreams that she is playing it even when Alice plays it at home, it may be, by his own logic, ironically appropriate that Celia should pay on behalf of Theron. In fact, he consistently shows a tendency to think of the piano as a free gift, beginning with his first visit to Thurston's when he hears that "they had special terms for clergymen and made him feel as if these were being extended to him on a silver charger by kneeling admirers" (56). Furthermore, without knowing that Celia has covered the cost, he innocently admires the "peculiarly graceful behavior" (233) of the store in neglecting to send him a bill. His nonchalance about the payment demonstrates his incorrigible inclination to depend on benefactions.

It is anything but coincidence that the man who reveals the truth about the payment is Celia's half-brother Theodore, though he and Theron seem a study in contrasts. Whereas the latter welcomes almost anything as a donation even when he ought to pay for it, the former readily pays for things that ought not to be for sale. Theodore is running for office in an election and buys votes by "blow[ing] in the last cent I've got in the world" (246) for the Catholics and "putting a twenty-dollar bill on [the charity] plate" (247) at the Methodists' camp-meeting. To Theodore the cash nexus is all that matters; he insists to Theron that "a hell of a lot of questions arise" between them because of the "piano that [his] sister bought and paid for" (247).

Theron later asks Celia why she paid for the piano, and she simply answers that it was appropriate because "people in your profession never do get anything unless it's given to them, do they? I've always understood it was like that" (252-3). Thoroughly accustomed to having things given to him, Theron naturally accepts her remark as "convincing" (254).

### III

As stated above, the climax of the novel occurs when Theron pays off the church's long-standing debts with the help of the competent "debt-raisers," the Soulsbys, who deceive the stingy church members into making uncharacteristically generous donations. However, unlike in Tyre, where Theron was able to relinquish the responsibility of paying his own debts to a specific benefactor, in Octavius he must join the clearance efforts, and he reluctantly forces himself to rob the wealthy Gorrings of a huge sum. Theron is "pained and shocked," believing that he has acted against his "conscience" (169), but Mrs. Soulsby

exposes his “conscience” and divulges his propensity for evading responsibility: “That is to say, you wanted *all* the dirty work done by other people” (170).

Theron takes Mrs. Soulsby’s reproof seriously. However, though he may no longer carelessly rely on the unstinted help of others, he still has little motivation to earn his own living. He decides to become an independent “fraud” (179), someone who exploits others without an accomplice. For example, he makes an unauthorized withdrawal from the church funds when he goes to New York. He first uses this money to tip a man “who had merely stood by and looked at him while his boots were being polished” (313). This tip is equivalent to a pure donation because virtually no service was offered in exchange. Through this capricious action, “in the very atmosphere,” Theron finds “a sense of ... affluence” (313). Theron, though briefly, feels like a wealthy philanthropist, closer to a disinterested donor, than the interested recipient he has always been.

Celia claims that acting on impulse, without considering the immediate profit or loss, is the key to a privileged life:

Now it is the one fixed rule of my life to obey my whims. Whatever occurs to me ... straight like a flash, I go and do it. It is the only way that a person with means – with plenty of money – can preserve any freshness of character. If they stop to think what it would be prudent to do, they get crusted over immediately. That is the curse of rich people – they teach themselves to distrust and restrain every impulse toward unusual actions. They get to feel that it is more necessary for them to be cautious and conventional than it is for others. I would rather work at a wash-tub than occupy that attitude toward my bank account. (253)

Just as Celia donates a piano on a whim, Theron impulsively tips the man at the hotel in New York. Furthermore, just as the “round sums” in Celia’s “bank account” (91) have been provided by her father, Theron’s pocket is filled with contributions from his innocent church members. Theron even attempts to fill his pocket more substantially from Celia’s, musing, “Would she not with lightning swiftness draw forth that check-book, like the flashing sword of a champion from its scabbard, and run to his relief?” (266) He expects endless favors from her, even imagining that she will support him entirely after he leaves the ministry. Celia’s mercy, however, is not directed specifically toward Theron but toward clerical “people” generally in need of benefaction. His expectations are naturally

disappointed, and he must face the truth: “I stole it [the church money]” (334).

It is implied that Theron returns the money he stole, again with the help of the Soulsbys. After recovering from his heartbreak, he starts a new life. Going west and separating from the Soulsbys, it seems he may finally attain true independence. However, his independence ironically means that he will lead an independent life as a “fraud” without an accomplice. A fraudulent life, by definition, can hardly be called independent because a fraud relies on others’ pockets, but for Theron, this lifestyle seems inescapable. In the novel’s final scene the hero fancies that he can become a successful statesman with his oratory, his most fearsome weapon and one that once enabled him to make money: “... my preaching has been rather ... a feature ... I have always been accustomed to attract to our services a good many non-members, and that ... helps tremendously from a money point of view” (120). Theron dreams of fascinating the audience at an imaginary political assembly, visualizing their “credulous” (344) countenances. Thus, he will continue to deceive others, and, if possible, take their money as well.

#### IV

In *Theron Ware*, two characters provide a stark contrast to the deceptive Theron. Whereas the other family members threaten to exhaust the family wealth, Jeremiah, the head of the Maddens, and his eldest son Michael have continued to keep their expenses well below their income. Michael “puts on no airs whatever as the son of the master,” and is content with his plain living as the “superintendent in the saw-mill” (86). Jeremiah, now a wagon industry magnate but “still toiling pertinaciously day by day, as if he had his wage to earn” (88), climbed up the ladder of success as a destitute emigrant from famine-stricken Ireland. The epitome of a self-made man, he nevertheless does not attribute his success to his own efforts alone. Lamenting the misfortunes of his countrymen, he realizes he has been lucky and that his success is therefore “all but empty and transient vanity” (84). Modest as he is, he, like his daughter, seems to exhibit the whims of the rich, which costs the life of one of his workers. MacEvoy is killed because he “had been deployed to trim an elm-tree in front of his employer’s house, and being unused to such work, had fallen from the top and broken all his bones.” (39) The bereaved wife’s protest is pointed: “An’ fwat would a wheelwright, an’ him the father of a family, be doin’ up a tree?” (46)

Theron, whose desire is to rise from a defrocked clergyman to a successful

businessman and finally to an influential statesman, must also walk the path of a self-made man, and his future life as a “fraud” will naturally involve dishonesty. However, even an apparent paragon of self-help like Jeremiah is not unblemished. Beginning with their archetype Benjamin Franklin, those categorized as self-made men have been more or less ethically problematic. Especially in the 19th century, they often pursued material success and social reputation to the exclusion of all other considerations, rarely hesitating to make money through illegal speculation and dubious dealings.<sup>5)</sup> Furthermore, this self-reliant attitude often masked more complex circumstances, as exemplified in the Horatio Alger success stories, in which the heroes are almost always blessed with good luck and others’ support (often financial), as John G. Gawelti and Micki McGee shrewdly observe.<sup>6)</sup>

In short, Theron’s ostensible independence but actual dependence on others seems nothing but a product of the times represented by Alger’s heroes. One also wonders, however, if Theron truly belongs to a particular time period. More precisely, one doubts whether this “particular time period” actually existed. Although the above-mentioned critics see dependency in Alger’s protagonists, Christopher Lasch continues to regard Alger’s characters as models of successful self-help, and attributes the inclination to depend on others to the subsequent or younger “self-made” men who “hope to win your heart while picking your pocket.” Lasch concludes, “The happy hooker stands in place of Horatio Alger as the prototype of personal success.”<sup>7)</sup> These contrasting views of Alger’s heroes seem to raise questions not only about the chronology of change in the culture of self-reliance but also about whether such change actually occurred. In Theron’s case, one wonders not only to which specific age he belongs but also whether there exists any *Zeitgeist*, distinct from all others, to which he can satisfactorily be assigned.

## V

Theron first appears to be split between the contemporary business-oriented (and occasionally amoral) world of the 19th century and the traditional society of Christian brotherhood.<sup>8)</sup> Fellowship seems secure but is often complicated. In Tyre, the Wares, in the spirit of mutual support, generously buy their household necessities from church members, who ironically become their creditors. In Octavius, in accordance with an article of the Methodist Discipline, the Wares “buy one of another; helping each other in business” (126) within their own religious community. Alice, however, complains of the

poor quality and high prices of a fellow believer's shop. Moreover, Theron, who previously criticized large-scale retail stores for unfairly overwhelming small shopkeepers, nonetheless finds himself frequenting the former. The transformation from a nostalgized brotherly community to a modern profit-based society seems inevitable, but did such a change actually occur? Chapter I at least acknowledges this change and considers it a degeneration from the pioneer days, when the preachers never wanted "earthly reward." Over time, "the impress of zeal and moral worth seemed to diminish by regular gradations as one passes to younger faces." As a result, "they were not the men their forbears had been" (3). The modern preachers seem to be profit-oriented; inspired by a young fellow clergyman's success in writing a best-selling religious book, Theron tries to follow suit but fails. In the same chapter, however, the novel suggests that both the "reverend survivors of the heroic times" and the "younger faces" are equally dependent on "church charity," a dependence that is essentially (though ironically) "in the nature of a benediction" (3). Father Forbes' repeated assertion of immutability that "there is nothing new" (69, 71) in history resonates throughout the novel, greatly influencing and eventually leading Theron to utter the same phrase, as we shall see.

Indeed, the idea that there is "nothing new" is paradoxically confirmed by the hero's announcement that he is starting over as a "fraud"; his epiphany merely perpetuates his earlier reliance on and even exploitation of others. Despite Theron's desire for transformation, his future life will be essentially the same as his past. He has not changed and will not change. This character stagnation, the negation of volitional personality change, is an element of literary naturalism, and it wickedly and retrogressively leads to the naturalistic equating of humans and animals. This grim vision finds expression in the novel when Theron renounces his faith; "Or isn't there any God at all – but only men who live and die like animals?" (336) His identification of "men" with "animals" is convincingly dramatized in the scene in which Theron witnesses an impoverished mother breastfeeding her baby on the night train to New York:

In one sense, it was scarcely more human than the spectacle of a cat licking her kittens, or a cow giving suck to her calf. Yet in another, was there anything more human? (304)

Money directs our eyes away from these unvarnished realities and makes us feel

advanced and sophisticated, which is precisely the feeling Celia attempts to produce by spending lavishly to over-decorate her room with furnishings and works of art. Lining the room with drawings of Buddha's mother, Olympias with her Alexander and Perictione holding the infant Plato, Celia insists that they symbolize the "maternal idea" (259). Theron's reply is exceptionally acute: "it is only your intellect that has reached out and grasped the idea" (259). Celia, in fact, travels in the same train to New York as Theron, but she pays extra to ride in a luxurious sleeping car. She thus distances herself from the unabashed maternity of public suckling and maintains her "intellectual" adoration of motherhood.

Theron also uses money to evade a hard truth, though he succeeds only momentarily and on a much smaller scale. He not only tips a passer-by but also indulges himself with a sumptuous breakfast. After discovering Celia and Forbes at the hotel in New York, Theron stops to think:

It remained to decide what he would do with his discovery, now that it had been so satisfactorily made. As yet, he had given this hardly a thought. Even now, it did not thrust itself forward as a thing demanding instant attention. It was much important, first of all, to get a good breakfast. (312)

He then decides to try a restaurant in the hotel. Throughout the novel, he consistently demonstrates a strong interest in good food and fine dining, and his taste for elegance is closely associated with his social ambitions. At Octavius, he reminisces about his first appointment:

He recalled ... the bountiful boiled dinners which cheery housewives served up with their own skilled hands. Of course, he admitted to himself, it would not be the same if he were to go back there again. He was conscious of having moved along – was it, after all, an advance? – to a point where it was unpleasant to sit at table with the unfragrant hired man, and still worse to encounter the bucolic confusion between the functions of knives and forks. (15)

After their marriage, Theron is surprised at Alice's ignorance of cooking, but he generously waits until she is able to make "the most delicious dumplings in the world" (52). On his first visit to Forbes' rectory, however, Theron admits that Alice's homemade

cuisine still has room for improvement compared to that served by a semi-professional cook, the priest's housemaid:

It seemed to him very remarkable cookery – transfiguring so simple a thing as a steak, for example quite out of recognition, and investing the humble potato with a charm he had never dreamed of. He wondered from time to time if it would be polite to ask how the potatoes were cooked, so that he might tell Alice. (65)

The dining atmosphere occasionally concerns Theron more than the food itself. In the only scene in which he dines out in Octavius, his meager dish is made much less savory by the waitress's inquisitiveness. Furthermore, when asked by a now-hostile Alice whether he will eat at home, he impulsively declines and goes to visit Forbes, seeking a pleasant dinner with friendly conversation. He is later impressed by the hotel restaurant's sumptuousness and politeness, and adjusts his demeanor accordingly, though it is actually a "less formal eating place" (313) than the one in which Celia and Forbes enjoy breakfast:

The little table in the adjoining room, on which Theron found his meal in waiting for him, seemed a vision of delicate napery and refined appointments in his eyes. He was wolfishly hungry, and the dishes he looked upon gave him back assurance by sight and smell that he was very happy as well. The servant in attendance had an extremely white apron and a kindly black face. He bowed then when Theron looked at him, with the air of a lifelong admirer and humble friend. (313)

This extravagant ambience momentarily prevents Theron from being bothered by the possible intrigue between Celia and Forbes. Even after being betrayed by her, he assures himself that his "outburst of fresh despair" is simply due to the excessive amount of "wine he had had for breakfast" and finds himself "not so unhappy, after all" (326). Just as art deflects Celia from the plain truth, food seems to serve the same purpose for Theron.

## VI

A few years after the publication of *Theron Ware*, Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), frankly stated that the pursuit of "viands" and "the cultivation of the aesthetic faculty" practiced by the rich result from their "instinctive repugnance"

toward vulgarity, such as the plain manifestation of the maternal instinct that Celia presumably evades or the “vulgar forms of labor,” such as “work at a wash-tub,” that she openly detests. Veblen argues that the pursuits and “cultivation” of the wealthy are made possible by their financial resources.<sup>9)</sup> *Theron Ware* may be read as a confirmation of this obvious fact that gastronomy and aestheticism are sustained by money, a point paradoxically made through a protagonist who is too accustomed to financial support to appreciate the importance of money. His lack of practicality is implied throughout the novel but is characteristically emphasized by the practical Mrs. Soulsby when Theron expresses his intention to resign from his ministry: “How could *you* earn a living? What trade or business do you suppose you could take up now, and get a living out of?” (173)

Nevertheless, her reproof does not immediately make an impact on the optimistic hero; he contemplates the religious alternative of Catholicism, which seems to promise him the easygoing life that Forbes leads. However, his naïve notions about the Catholic priesthood are dismissed by Celia, who stresses that Forbes’ life is fettered by the surveillance of his bishops. In addition, Mrs. Soulsby contends that Catholicism is “chuck-full of authority” (174). These “fettters” or “authority” occasionally exhibit themselves as economic pressures. Theron is puzzled when he learns that the properties of Catholic churches and rectories are all administered by the Bishop of the diocese, which means that the Bishop can easily evict any priest at any moment. Indeed, the seemingly casual Forbes acknowledges that he cannot escape religious (or financial) boundaries. Mrs. Soulsby, who has never met Forbes, sees through the external conditions of his life: “But you [Theron] don’t hear him talking about going and earning his living. *I’ll* bet! Or if he does, he takes powerful good care not to go, all the same. They’ve got horse-sense, those priests” (173).

Only Celia is unaffected by such restrictions; her wealth enables her to live a free life. However, the naïve Theron does not realize the obvious connection between freedom and money, until she describes her determination to obey her whims. To this declaration, Theron nonchalantly responds,

Somehow, the thought of Miss Madden’s riches had never before assumed prominence in Theron’s mind. Of course her father was very wealthy, but it had not occurred to him that the daughter’s emancipation might run to the length of a personal fortune. He knew so little of rich people and their ways! (254)



Nevertheless, the reader is left to wonder whether Theron, even at this point, truly understands the realities of “rich people and their ways.” As stated in the above quotation, Celia is rich because her father is rich. Her freewheeling life is maintained by a “playful hint” (91) to her father about her lack of funds, an act not far from extortion. Does Theron realize that extravagance, the privilege of the rich, is not always possible without foul play? Moreover, Jeremiah, Celia’s financial backer, has amassed his wealth through good fortune, without which, paradoxically, one can hardly become a “self-made” man. Does Theron perceive this inconsistency? It is unclear whether the protagonist notices the moral degradation of the fortunate rich or realizes that by seeking wealth through fraud he will be following the same track. The final scene, in which the hero naively imagines a hopeful future, seems to indicate his lack of awareness. His new-found confidence is not the result of deep introspection on bitter experiences, such as his miserable failure to gain Celia’s love and money, but rather is evidence of blissful ignorance in spite of them. Presumably, Mrs. Soulsby’s prophecy that “[Theron will] never make a really *good* fraud” (179) will eventually be fulfilled. Fortune may or may not smile on him, but despite his declaration that he is an independent “fraud,” he lacks cunning. This shallow hero with unfounded optimism will hardly achieve the higher levels of fraudulent trickery. He is unlikely to be able to support himself and will doubtless turn to others for mercy, not through calculation but from instinctive habit.

## VII

When Howells reached the end of the novel, he realized for the first time that Theron, the petty would-be swindler, was always depraved, and that there had been no intrinsic change in his character. As I argued earlier, Howells’ delayed realization, which occurs just before the denouement, could indicate that the protagonist seemed (or has virtually been) otherwise to Howells throughout the development of the story. This delayed realization leads to the conclusion, whether justified or not, that Theron is corrupted during the course of the events that precede his abandonment of the ministry.

From a broader historical perspective, have ministers really degenerated with the changing times, as the novel claims in Chapter I? Does Theron’s personal history demonstrate this degeneration as he falls from being an honest pastor to becoming “a bar keeper” (298), as the fastidious Michael states? Or is this apparent transformation actually

an illusion obscuring the reality that all ministers have always been dependent upon charity, as is also implied in Chapter I? If so, has Theron, too, always depended on others for his livelihood without qualms? Furthermore, because his future life as a “self-made man” will depend on others despite the terminology, is the choice between the ministry and trade of little significance? In Theron’s case, are the sacred and the secular essentially and ironically the same?

Donna M. Campbell brilliantly interprets Forbes’ acceptance of ambiguities in *Theron Ware*, which is manifested in his conflicting remarks, “the truth remains always the truth” (70) and “[t]he truth is always relative” (326). According to Campbell, Forbes sees in history both the absolute truth, the one existing in time, and “a relative truth, a history told from another perspective.”<sup>10</sup> We can adopt a similar standpoint to that of Campbell or Forbes when reading the “history” of Theron. As his story progresses, our interpretations of him vary and we experience “another perspective.” After finishing the novel, however, and reflecting on Theron’s entire story in an attempt to provide a final interpretation of him, as Howells did, we may feel or actually find that he was consistent throughout the work, and both interpretations are legitimate.

My intention is to describe a medium that allows for the coexistence of relational truth and absolute truth. Reducing everything to monetary terms, as in a classic Marxist analysis, is not satisfactory. As discussed, *Theron Ware* insists on the plain and “absolute” truth that money is all-important in making available everything from flowers, pianos and food, all of which Theron is deeply concerned about, to art, to which Celia is devoted. Because money thus universally and inevitably influences individual characters and society, it is unsurprising that neither the characters nor society seem to change significantly despite their prime mover. However, it is also money that liberates people from the sober truth, by making everything “a relative truth.” Through flowers, Theron convinces himself of his affection for (and, later, animosity toward) Alice. He understands, or misunderstands, that his increasing interest in food corresponds with the refinement of his mind. When readers attend to such “surface” developments, they may also consider him either deprived or improved.

In *Theron Ware*, the interchange between absolute truth and relational truth finds its characteristic expression in a conversation between Theron and Mrs. Soulsby. Theron has been “illuminated” enough by Forbes to repeat his remark that “there is nothing new.” He

confesses, “It oppresses me, and yet it fascinates me – this idea that the dead men have known more than we know, done more than we do; that there is nothing new anywhere” (175). This haunting thought of immutability is flatly discredited by the pragmatic Mrs. Soulsby: “Never mind the dead men, ... They have no voice in your salary” (175). This aphoristic response invites various interpretations, but her mention of Theron’s salary” invites the following interpretation: according to Mrs. Soulsby, only living men have a “voice” in one another’s salary. Therefore, they may exploit that salary. If one is defrauded of that money, prevents another from defrauding him, or even steals another’s in return, the protected or acquired money, the results of spiritual, physical or material struggles among living men, can be considered a new historical record showing that living men do, in fact, know and do more than dead men, and that there is, after all, something new in man’s condition. This interpretation supports the theory of social or character development or degeneration.

Mammon is, in the end, omnipotent, arbitrarily making every event in the novel relative or absolute, and it even appears to control prehistory in the novel. Theron initially “felt sure of God’s goodness” (13) as he surveyed the landscape from his parsonage, but by the end of the novel, the same landscape does not cause his eyes to “soften and glow this time, at the thought of how wholly one felt sure of God’s goodness” (343). This stark contrast makes one wonder why, how and when between these two moments the protagonist renounces his faith and suggests the potential for change or “something new.” However, before the story unfolds, possibly even further in the past than Howell realizes, the hero’s faith is called into question by his debt scandal. Therefore, Theron’s confidence in God’s goodness, even at the novel’s outset, may also be ironic and, conceivably a further example of Frederic’s trickery. In a typical pattern, every underlying fact, no matter what dialectic method is used to interpret it, is revealed through Theron’s dealings with, and resultant attitude toward, money.

## NOTES

- 1) *W. D. Howells as Critic*, ed. Edwin H. Cady (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 278.
- 2) See Paul Eggers, "By Whose Authority? Point of View in the First Chapter of Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," *Style* 31: 1 (Spring 1997), 81-95. See also another reader-response analysis by Thomas Becknell, "Implication through Reading *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," *American Literary Realism* 24:1 (Fall 1991), 63-71.
- 3) *The Damnation of Theron Ware or Illumination* (Penguin Classics, 1986), pp.342-3. All of the quotations from the novel are from this edition, and the page number(s) will hereafter be provided in parentheses after each quotation. All of the italicization in the quotations is present in the original.
- 4) The ambiguity of Gorrington's intention is discussed, for example, by the following critics: George Carrington, "Harold Frederic's Clear Farcical Vision: *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," *American Literary Realism* 19:3 (Spring 1987), 8; Marcia Smith Marzec, "*The Damnation of Theron Ware*: Farther Forbes as Structural Center," *University of Dayton Review* 21:3 (Spring 1992), 57.
- 5) For Franklin's typical affirmative image of the self-made man, see Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford, "Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 145-58. For the dark side of this stereotype, see David Waldstreicher, "Runaways and Self-Made Men," in *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Society, and the American Revolution* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2004), pp.3-26. On the self-made man in the 19th century, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1982), p.46; Toshio Watanabe, "Benjamin Franklin: The Self-Made Man as an American Hero," *The American Review* 11 (1977), 1-15.
- 6) See John G. Gawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p.115. Micki McGee points out that Alger's heroes typically pursue a course of upward mobility by relying financially on the daughter of a wealthy man, exactly as Theron vainly intends to do by marrying Celia. See Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005) pp.31-2.
- 7) Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), p.53.
- 8) Stephanie Foote discusses this dualism in the context of city and the country. See Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions, Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*

(Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp.58-72.

- 9) Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (rept., NY: Dover Publications, 1994), p.24, p.47, p.52.
- 10) Donna M. Campbell, "Relative Truths: *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Father Forbes, and the 'Church of America'," *American Literary Realism* 44:2 (2012), 110.