

The Damnation of Theron Ware Study Guide

The Damnation of Theron Ware by Harold Frederic

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Introduction

This dramatic tale of a young minister seduced by ideas and infatuated with a beautiful woman presents a vivid portrait of the intellectual forces in late-nineteenth century America that were challenging the traditional verities of religion. Although the novel has not been accorded a place amongst the very highest achievements of American fiction, it has nonetheless attracted enthusiastic readers for more than one hundred years.

Author Biography

Harold Frederic was born in Utica, New York, on August 19, 1856. His father, Henry Frederick, who worked for the New York Central Railroad, was killed in a train accident when Frederic was two. His mother, Frances Ramsdell Frederick, remarried in 1861 to a businessman, and Frederic was raised in a middle-class environment. He showed an early talent for writing and drawing, although his formal education ended in 1871. When he was seventeen he went to live in Boston where he worked as a photographic printer and negative retoucher. In 1875, he was back in Utica, where his long career in journalism began as a proofreader for the *Utica Morning Herald*. Within five years he had risen to the position of editor-in-chief of the *Utica Daily Observer*. He had also started writing fiction, publishing several short stories in the newspaper. In 1877, he married Grace Williams, with whom he had four children.

In 1882, Frederic became editor of the *Albany Evening Journal*, but displeased its owner by supporting a Democratic rather than Republican candidate for governor. Frederic resigned his position rather than alter his views, and moved to New York, where he was appointed London correspondent for the *New York Times*. Arriving in London in the summer of 1884, he quickly forged a reputation based on his weekly dispatches on British affairs, especially British politics, in which he championed the cause of Irish independence.

In addition to his newspaper work, Frederic also wrote a stream of books, essays, short stories and reviews. In 1887, he published his first novel, *Seth's Brother's Wife*, set in the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York where he had grown up. *In the Valley*, a work of historical fiction set during the American Revolution, was published in 1890, as was *The Lawton Girl*, again about life in upstate New York. His fourth novel, *The Return of the O'Mahony* (1892), was set in Ireland. Frederic's ambition was to quit journalism and make a living as a writer. Although his books were favorably reviewed, he never made enough money from them to accomplish this goal, and his extravagant living left him in permanent debt. In 1891, he began living with Kate Lyon, an American woman with whom he had three children. Since his wife was reluctant to divorce him, Frederic divided his time between his two households, which further strained his financial resources.

In 1896, Frederic published *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, which became a best seller in England and was also popular in America. It also brought him financial success. About this time Frederic became friends with Stephen Crane, whose novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) he had reviewed favorably in the *New York Times*.

Frederic's final two novels were both set in England. *Gloria Mundi* was published in 1898; *The Market-Place* appeared posthumously in 1899.

In 1898, Frederic suffered two strokes. He refused to follow his doctor's instructions to give up cigars and whiskey. He died on October 19, 1898.



Plot Summary

Part 1

The Damnation of Theron Ware or *Illumination* begins at the annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, where the Reverend Theron Ware is disappointed that he has been assigned to the poor village of Octavius. He and his wife Alice soon discover how difficult life is going to be for them there. At a meeting with the church trustees, Loren Pierce, Erastus Winch and Levi Gorringer, Ware is told that Alice should not wear flowers in her bonnet, and that his sermons should be full of fire and brimstone, not book learning. Ware also discovers that the trustees hold mortgages on the church property, and that two of them charge an illegally high rate of interest. They also want to charge him for a new sidewalk, but Ware refuses to pay.

Walking home one day, Ware encounters four workmen carrying a badly injured fellow-worker named MacEvoy. Ware follows them to MacEvoy's house, where he meets Father Forbes, a Catholic priest who administers Extreme Unction to the dying man. Ware is impressed by this Catholic ritual, which is explained to him by a young red-haired woman, Celia Madden.

Ware later visits Forbes, who invites him to stay for dinner with his friend, Dr. Ledsmar. Ware enjoys the ensuing scholarly discussion, which opens his mind to new ideas. Later that evening, he meets Celia again, in the Catholic church. She is friendly towards him, and Ware is intrigued by her.

Part 2

After two months in Octavius, Ware is troubled by the fact that a dominant minority in his church is hostile to him. He is apprehensive about the approaching Quarterly Conference, and wants to ask for a salary increase. He consults Gorringer, whom he feels is an ally, and the lawyer hints that he would help Ware out if he had money troubles. It is clear that Gorringer also has a liking for Ware's wife, but Ware chooses not to notice the fact.

Ware occupies himself reading Renan's *Recollections of My Youth*, a book lent to him by Ledsmar, in which Renan tells of how he lost his religious faith. The book makes a deep impression on Ware, and he feels that meeting Ledsmar and Father Forbes was a turning point in his life.

Sister Soulsby arrives. She is an expert at raising money to pay off church debts. With her husband, she plans a series of revival meetings. Ware is impressed by her efficiency, but he now despises his activities as a minister surrounded by ignorant, narrow-minded people.



Ware endures the first revival meeting with distaste as the Soulsbys exploit the emotionalism of the congregation. He watches as Alice goes to the altar with all the others who declare themselves sinners seeking salvation. Gorringe kneels next to her. The spectacle is too much for Ware, who faints and has to be helped home. At the next meeting, which Ware is too weak to attend, Sister Soulsby raises over \$1,500 as Winch and Gorringe try to outdo each other in pledges. Soulsby later explains to Ware that she has manipulated the Presiding Elder, as well as Winch and Pierce, in his favor. He will get his salary increase. Following Soulsby's instructions, Ware refuses to let Winch off his financial commitment even though Soulsby tricked him into making it. Ware feels he has behaved inappropriately toward Winch, but Soulsby tells him that he should do whatever he has to do to accomplish necessary business.

Part 3

Disillusioned and depressed, Ware encounters Celia, who invites him to her home. She takes him to a room that contains marble statues of nude men and women, and pictures of the Virgin Mary. She explains her love of ancient Greek culture, and plays Chopin on the piano. Ware feels as if he has been transported into another world, and asks Celia to tell him everything about her Grecian ideals. He is becoming infatuated with her.

The next day he meets Celia at Thurston's, the large store in town, where she advises him about what piano to purchase for his wife. Coming back from the store, he visits Ledsmar, who shows him his laboratory and explains his experiments with plants and bees. He is also experimenting on his Chinese servant, testing the man's tolerance of large doses of opium. Ware questions Ledsmar about Celia, and finds that the doctor despises her. But when Ware tries to find out more about the relationship between Celia and Forbes, Ledsmar feigns an attack of rheumatism, and Ware has to leave.

Several months later, the annual Methodist camp meeting is held in the woods. Ware preaches well and wins over all the factions of the church. But he loathes the occasion and frequently goes for walks on his own. On one walk, he reaches a different part of the forest, where the Catholics are having a picnic. There is dancing and beer drinking, and everyone is enjoying themselves, in contrast to the Methodists. He meets Celia and Forbes, and is introduced to Michael and Theodore, Celia's brothers. Theodore is drunk and insults Ware. He also lets slip that Celia paid for the piano that Ware thought he was buying himself. Celia is upset by this remark, and she and Ware walk to a different part of the forest, where she explains more of her unconventional views. She believes in freedom for women, and says she will never belong to anyone and will never marry. Ware almost worships her, and makes his feelings plain. They go back to the camp, and Celia allows him to kiss her before they part.

Part 4

Ware convinces himself that Celia is in love with him. Hostile to his wife, he allows himself to believe that something is going on between her and Gorringe. He confronts



Gorringe and the two men quarrel bitterly. That night Ware dines with Forbes, and tells him that he plans to leave the ministry. But when Ware tries to probe into the relationship between Celia and Ledsmar, Forbes cuts the meeting short.

Wondering about the relationship between Celia and Forbes, Ware determines to see Celia again, but when he calls at her house, she is unavailable. Instead, he sees her brother Michael, who is sick with consumption. Michael reproaches him, telling him he has degenerated from the man he was when he first arrived in Octavius. Ware learns that Celia is traveling to New York that evening, and he is disturbed when he realizes that she and Forbes are traveling together. He decides to go to New York as well. Traveling by train that night, he follows Celia and Forbes to their New York hotel. When he surprises Celia in her room, she rejects him, telling him how objectionable she and Forbes find his behavior. Ware is shattered by this rejection, and wanders around in New York for days, drinking and contemplating suicide. He seeks refuge at the Soulsbys, and Sister Soulsby consoles him.

The last chapter takes place several months later. Ware has left the ministry, and he and Alice, having benefited from the generosity of the Soulsbys, are ready to depart for Seattle, where Ware dreams of a new career in politics.



Characters

Father Forbes

Father Forbes is a Catholic priest in Octavius. He is an urbane, cultivated man who no longer believes in the literal truth of the Bible or in traditional Catholic doctrine. This does not stop him performing his functions as a priest, although he no longer preaches. Father Forbes is an old friend of Dr. Ledsmar, and he also befriends Theron Ware, who is deeply impressed by his knowledge and his conversation. He is instrumental in Ware's loss of faith. Father Forbes has a close relationship with Celia Madden, even though he is fifteen years her senior. The exact nature of their relationship is never made explicit, but it arouses Ware's jealousy.

Levi Gorringe

Levi Gorringe is a lawyer, money-lender, and a trustee of the Methodist Church in Octavius, although he is not a member of the church. Gorringe is a bachelor in his late twenties or early thirties; the local people regard him as rather odd. He takes a liking to Alice Ware and buys expensive plants for her garden. At first, Ware regards Gorringe as a friend, but he later develops suspicions—not unfounded—that Gorringe has designs on his wife. He confronts Gorringe about the matter and the two men quarrel violently.

Harvey

Harvey is the young boy who works in Levi Gorringe's law office. He also delivers milk to the parsonage.

Dr. Ledsmar

Dr. Ledsmar is an old friend of Father Forbes. He is a middle-aged scholar and doctor but has not practiced medicine for many years. Instead, he has scientific interests and conducts various experiments in his laboratory at home—on reptiles, plants, bees and even his Chinese servant. Ledsmar looks at everything with the cool, appraising eye of the rationalist. He dislikes art and music. He is also a misogynist, or woman hater, who holds Celia Madden in contempt. Ledsmar befriends Ware and lends him some books about religion, a subject on which he is an expert even though he claims to be an atheist. But Ledsmar turns against Ware when the latter makes the mistake of inquiring about the relationship between Celia and Forbes. After this, Ledsmar never invites Ware to his house again.



Celia Madden

Celia Madden is the beautiful, red-haired, well-educated, independently-minded daughter of Jeremiah Madden. She loves beauty and the arts; she can paint, carve wood and speak foreign languages. She idealizes ancient Greece, contrasting it with Christianity, which she dislikes. Celia has advanced social views, believing that women should be free, and she does not plan ever to marry. Since her father is wealthy she can live as she chooses. Celia is a close friend of Father Forbes, and she plays the organ at the Catholic church. She befriends Theron Ware and, when she invites him to her room and plays Chopin for him on the piano, he becomes infatuated with her. She helps him to select a piano for his wife, but then unknown to him pays for it herself. After she talks alone with Ware in the woods, on the occasion of the religious camps, she allows Ware to kiss her. He takes this as a sign that she is in love with him. But when he goes uninvited to her hotel room in New York, she cruelly rejects him, explaining that she has a low opinion of him, and pointing out all the mistakes he has made in dealing with her, Father Forbes and Dr. Ledsmar.

Jeremiah Madden

Jeremiah Madden is the richest man in Octavius, the owner of several wagon factories. He is an immigrant who fled famine in Ireland. In America, he has had two wives and fathered more than a dozen children. He has a cheerful demeanor and keeps his grief to himself.

Michael Madden

Michael Madden is Celia's brother. He is nearly thirty years old and works as the superintendent of a sawmill. Everyone thinks well of him; he is good-natured, diligent and kind. Father Forbes describes his character as sweet and holy. Michael catches consumption (tuberculosis) and is expected to die quickly. When Ware visits him he reproaches the minister for not living up to the ideals of the religious life.

Theodore Madden

Theodore Madden is eight years younger than his brother Michael. He is a misfit, and had a poor record at all the schools he attended, but this does not stop him running for political office. When he and Ware meet, Theodore is drunk and insults the minister.

Loren Pierce

Loren Pierce is one of the trustees of the Methodist church in Octavius. He is an old man who has become rich through the quarries he owns, and he is respected by the townsfolk. Pierce is a tough, shrewd businessman who knows how to make the best



use of his money. A blunt-spoken man who likes his religion simple and old-fashioned, Pierce has no time for erudite sermons and nor does he want an organ or a choir in the church. He does not believe in science, and he is prejudiced against Catholics. When Pierce tries to impose unreasonable financial demands on Ware, the minister stands up to him. Pierce become hostile to him, but over a period of months Ware wins him over.

Brother Soulsby

Brother Soulsby is Sister Soulsby's husband. She is the stronger personality and takes the lead in the revival meetings. Before he met his wife, Brother Soulsby led an eventful if disreputable life as an actor, a medium and a phrenologist, among other things. He also had some trouble with the law. He was "a regular bad old rooster," according to Sister Soulsby. But since they became revivalists, Soulsby has shown himself to be a kindly, charitable man.

Sister Soulsby

Sister Soulsby visits Octavius with her husband to lead the revival meetings that raise money for the church. Ware finds her kindly, quick-witted, capable and charming, and she takes a liking to him too. Well traveled, and entertaining in her conversation, Sister Soulsby dresses in a more stylish way than is usual for Methodists. She also has a colorful background. Born in the South, she has been an actress and a singer in comic opera, a ballet dancer, a clairvoyant, and a medium. She was once within a single vote of being indicted by a grand jury, although she does not say what she was accused of. When she met Brother Soulsby, they both decided that they had enough of living as fakes (as she puts it), and settled down together. When they happened to attend a Methodist revival meeting they soon realized that they could do a better job of it themselves, so they went into the business together. Sister Soulsby knows how to play on the emotions of the congregation and is very successful at raising money. She has no qualms about manipulating people to get what she wants, and she gives Ware practical, common sense advice about how to get things done. She easily overcomes his objections that some of her actions may not be entirely ethical.

Alice Ware

Alice Ware is the wife of Theron Ware. The lively, self-reliant daughter of a farmer, she received an excellent education at a town seminary, and Ware considered himself lucky to marry her. For some years they are happy together, but when Ware meets his new sophisticated friends, Father Forbes, Dr. Ledsmar and Celia Madden, he becomes emotionally distant towards his wife and tells her little of his affairs. He thinks she is limited in her thinking. She feels neglected and her distress emerges at the emotional service where she joins the self-declared sinners at the altar. After this she becomes full of devotional zeal and seems to accept Ware's treatment of her without complaint. But she is also careful to preserve a distant manner towards him. At the Methodist camp in



the forest, he can hardly bear to be with her, and she offers no praise of his sermons. Not long after this, Alice resents Ware's insinuation that there is something improper about Gorrings's interest in her. Ware then lies to her about the reason for his trip to New York. After Ware's escapade in New York, Alice leaves Octavius and stays with her husband at the Soulsbys's home. She remains loyal to Ware, although life has taken its toll on her, and she no longer finds it easy to be cheerful.

Reverend Theron Ware

The Reverend Theron Ware is a young Methodist minister who with his wife, Alice, is sent to Octavius by the elders of the church. This is not the appointment he wished for, and he does not much care for the narrow-minded, tight-fisted Methodist congregation in the village. Octavius is his third appointment. His first was in a rural community, which he enjoyed, since he had himself been raised on a farm. This was where he met and married his wife. Then they moved to the village of Tyre, where they remained for three years. This appointment began well, but in the second year Ware fell deeply into debt, and a kindly benefactor had to come to his rescue.

Ware is ambitious, and believes he has the makings of a great pulpit orator. His talents are largely wasted in Octavius, since the congregation does not appreciate anything other than simple, old-fashioned sermons. At first he is determined to make the best of his life there. He wants to buy his wife a piano, and plans to augment his modest salary with income from a book he intends to write about the Biblical patriarch Abraham. But he is rather naïve and does not realize he lacks the learning to write such a book.

Ware's entire life changes when he meets three people from outside the narrow Methodist community: Father Forbes, Dr. Ledsmar and Celia Madden. These new acquaintances open his mind up to realms of thought that he did not know existed. He loses his simple Methodist faith and begins to despise his congregation. He also becomes conceited and vain, buying a book on the care of the hand and fingernails. Then he becomes infatuated with Celia and grows cool towards his wife. But the people he thinks are his new friends in fact despise him, and when Ware chases after Celia to New York, he loses all his integrity and makes a fool of himself. After this fiasco, Ware leaves the ministry and decides to move to Seattle, where he plans to use his oratorical gifts to make a career for himself in politics.

Erastus Winch

Erastus Winch is one of the trustees of the Methodist church in Octavius. He sells dairy furniture and farm utensils for a living, and he is also a cheesebuyer. He has a friendly manner, but in reality he is cold-hearted, and in financial matters he is even tougher than Loren Pierce.



Themes

Loss of Faith

When Theron Ware is sent to Octavius, he is disappointed because he thinks he deserves something better. He knows he is a fine preacher, and he is far better educated than his simple flock, having been trained at a Methodist seminary. He also possesses quite a high opinion of his own abilities, and shortly after he arrives in Octavius he plans to write a book. He thinks this will be a relatively easy task, since he does not have any difficulty composing sermons. He does not for a moment realize that his education is in fact rather rudimentary. He owns few books, and they are all written from the rather narrow point of view of Methodism. Ware is a man who does not know his own ignorance. When he meets Father Forbes, Dr. Ledsmar and Celia Madden he becomes exposed to contemporary currents of thought that, given his limited background, he did not even know existed. Forbes is deeply knowledgeable about the "higher criticism," which studied the Bible not as the inerrant word of God, but in the light of modern knowledge of history, literature, mythology, archeology, and other disciplines. Forbes can talk knowingly, for example, about the "Christ-myth," as if it is nothing special and can be found in different forms in many other mythologies of the world. Ware's lack of intellectual sophistication is conveyed when he tells Forbes and Ledsmar that he wants to write a book about Abraham, and he naïvely believes Abraham to have been a single individual. He has to be informed gently that no one believes any more that Abraham was an individual man; the name simply represents a tribe or clan. All this is news to Ware, and for a while he is thrilled by the intellectual world that has been opened up to him.

One of the most crucial events is his reading of Ernest Renan's *Recollections of My Youth*, a memoir of the Frenchman's loss of faith in Christianity. The book was lent to Ware by Ledsmar, and he reads it twice. Shortly after his first reading, he realizes that he has "passed definitely beyond pretending to himself that there was anything spiritually in common between him and the Methodist Church of Octavius." Some time later, Celia exposes him to another intellectual world of which he had known nothing, that of Greek philosophy, the ideals of Greek civilization, and the worship of art and beauty. Ware's horizons expand once more, and the following morning he feels he has emerged from a cocoon and "stood forth, so to speak in a new skin, and looked about him with perceptions of quite an altered kind, upon what seemed in every way a fresh existence."

Far from being a painful experience, Ware's loss of faith in the simple dogmas of Methodism is exciting for him. He thinks he is in a state of illumination, so taken is he with all the new ideas. He avidly reads some "higher criticism" for himself, and he thinks he has a sophisticated understanding of it. Thanks to Sister Soulsby's advice, he believes he can carry on as minister, even though he no longer believes in what he is saying, as long as he keeps up the appearances. This, after all, is what Forbes manages to do. Ware is so keen to ingratiate himself with Forbes that when he meets



him at the Catholic picnic, he offers the opinion that religion will die out in the near future: "The march of science must very soon produce a universal scepticism. It is in the nature of human progress. What all intelligent men recognize today, the masses must surely come to see in time." Forbes just laughs, and replies that there will always be religion. What Ware does not realize is that he does not really grasp the new ways of thinking in any depth. He can never hope to match the learning of Forbes and Ledsmar. Having discarded the simple pieties of Methodism, there is no place for him anywhere else within the religious fold. From that point on, it is only a matter of time before he leaves the ministry.

Moral Degeneration

When Ware first arrives in Octavius, he is a man of some moral decency. He may be somewhat snobbish, and a little conceited about his talents, but he fulfills his obligations to the best of his ability. But the more he falls under the influence of others, the more he loses touch with his moral compass. The more enlightened he thinks he is becoming, the darker in fact his character becomes. His exposure to new ways of thinking makes him despise everything that supported his life up to that point. He no longer thinks highly of his wife, and becomes cold and distant toward her, even suspecting her of infidelity. He becomes very puffed up with what he thinks is his superior knowledge, and also becomes insincere, thinking that he can continue as a minister even though he no longer believes the things he is called upon to say. As he drinks beer at the Catholic camp, he openly tells Forbes and Celia that he despises his own congregation and that he regrets having married.

When he becomes infatuated with Celia, and full of thinly disguised erotic desire for her, he loses his integrity altogether. Jealous of her relationship with Father Forbes, and indulging in ridiculous fantasies about their future life together, he chases after her to New York, lying to his wife in the process and stealing money from the church to finance his trip. When Celia rejects him, he has an impulse to murder her, and after he leaves the hotel he wanders around trying to get drunk and contemplating suicide. His moral degradation is complete.

Style

Ware thinks he is becoming enlightened through his contact with Forbes and Celia, an idea that is reinforced by repeated imagery of light and darkness. Celia, for example, is always associated with light. When Ware first meets her, "The bright light shone for a passing instant upon a fashionable flowered hat, and upon some remarkably brilliant shade of red hair beneath it." Then as he is about to part from her, "The strong noon sunlight . . . made a halo about her hair and face at once brilliant and tender." As he passes the church where Celia is playing the organ, he sees through the open door "A thin, pale, vertical line of light." As he enters the church and finds his way around it, a series of descriptive passages make careful use of the contrast between light and darkness. It is as if Ware is emerging from darkness into light. Similarly, when he first enters the dining room of Father Forbes's house, "for a moment he could see nothing but a central glare of dazzling light beating down from a great shaded lamp upon a circular patch of white table linen." When he leaves, darkness returns. As he stands still outside, "the sudden darkness was so thick that it was as if he had closed his eyes."

Imagery related to snakes, serpents and other reptiles is also prominent. In the Bible, the serpent plays the role of tempter, enticing Eve to disobey God and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the novel, the tempters of Ware are associated with snakes and serpents. Celia refers to Forbes and Ledsmar as resembling "gorged snakes," and when Ware is drawn to Celia's music in the church he feels as if he is being drawn against his will, "like fascinated bird to python." Ledsmar keeps lizards at his house, and he has written a book about serpent worship. The imagery is also transferred to Ware himself, as when Ledsmar renames one of his lizards that has a "pointed, evil head" after Ware. Ware is also associated with the serpent when he thinks that he has undergone a metamorphosis after spending an evening with Celia. He emerges with "a new skin," just as a snake renews itself by shedding its skin.



Historical Context

Higher Criticism

The "higher criticism" that Forbes and Ledsmar are so familiar with in the novel refers to a method of Biblical criticism that began in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Higher criticism brought a radically new approach to the study of the Bible. Using historical research and literary analysis, scholars endeavored to reach accurate conclusions about the authorship, date and place of composition of the Old and New Testaments. For example, traditionally it was believed that the first five books of Genesis, known as the Pentateuch, were all written by Moses. But the higher criticism revealed many inconsistencies and contradictions in the Pentateuch, which led scholars to conclude that it was in fact a composite work by several different authors (none of them Moses), reflecting different religious places and traditions.

Significant books reflecting the new approach to the Bible included *Essence of Christianity* (1854) and *The Life of Jesus* (1863), by a Frenchman, Ernest Renan, who later wrote *Recollections of My Youth*, which was translated in 1883 and produced such an effect on Theron Ware in the novel.

The conclusions of higher criticism put traditional faith to the test, and many believers fiercely resisted it.

Darwin and Scientific Rationalism

In the late nineteenth century, another branch of knowledge that threatened traditional religious faith was associated with the work of the English naturalist, Charles Darwin. In *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1870), Darwin hypothesized that humans evolved over a vast period of time from lower forms of life by a process of natural selection. Natural selection was often popularly known as "the survival of the fittest." Darwin's hypothesis of the evolution of species through random mutations undermined the traditional idea of the fixity of species created by God. According to the religious view, man was a special creation, set apart by God from the rest of nature. God created the world with a beneficent purpose in mind, and everything in it has its fixed place. But the implication of Darwin's argument was that there was no cosmic purpose in life. Life evolves through chance and blind struggle, and has no inherent moral meaning.

In the novel, Darwinism is represented by the scientist Ledsmar, who is testing a Darwinian theory about hermaphroditism and refers to man as Vertebrata, suggesting that he assigns to man no special place apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Aestheticism

Another current of thought in the late 1800s was known as aestheticism. It began as a literary movement in France and Britain and was a reaction against the belief that art should have a utilitarian purpose. The aesthetic movement believed that art should express beauty, not take stands on political or social issues. The movement was associated in France with the work of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert and Stéphane Mallarmé. In England, it was associated with Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater.

The tenets of aestheticism were popularized in America by Wilde, who visited the country on a lecture tour in 1882. Many of the most enthusiastic advocates of aestheticism in America were women, just as in the novel. Celia Madden, with her belief in the spiritual beauty of art, expresses some of the ideas of the movement.



Critical Overview

When published in March, 1896, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* or *Illumination* became a best seller in England, and was also popular in the United States. Critics considered it to be an important novel. In *Cosmopolitan*, Harry Thurston Peck praised it for its realistic depiction of American life, "the good and the bad, the fine and the crude, the enlightened and the ignorant" (quoted by Scott Donaldson in his introduction to the novel). Leading novelist and critic W. D. Howells, reviewing the novel in *Munsey's* in 1897, declared it to be a "moral" book of "great power." He also commented that at the end of the novel :

. . . although you have carried a hazy notion in your mind of the sort of man Ware was, you realize, for the first time, that the author has never for a moment represented him anywhere to you as a good or honest man, or as anything but a very selfish man.

The anonymous reviewer in the *Atlantic* admired the characterization of Ware and Forbes, and declared that the Soulsbys were "cleverly drawn and highly entertaining," but he thought Ledsmar was inadequately sketched and Celia Madden did not quite ring true. The masterstroke of the novel, according to the reviewer, was the last page, where Ware is shown as "just the same man he was in the beginning."

Although over the years the novel has not been regarded as one of the greatest works of American fiction, there was another wave of interest in it in the 1960s, when several reissues were published. Everett Carter, in his introduction to the edition published by Harvard University Press, praised the novel for capturing the spirit of the 1890s. In times when "old faiths were meeting new doubts and artists were struggling to find the forms to contain this turbulence [the novel] is an illuminating literary document, and one of the most satisfying aesthetic forms."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on nineteenth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the role that Sister Soulsby plays in Ware's fall from grace.

Poor Theron Ware. He goes from being an earnest young Methodist minister, well grounded in his faith and happily married, to a man who reeks of insincerity, embezzles money from the church and makes a complete fool of himself with a free-thinking young woman whom he can never, in spite of his fantasies, possess.

It is easy to see the triumvirate of Father Forbes, Dr. Ledsmar and Celia Madden as the ones who are chiefly responsible for Ware's fall from grace. When a man who is educated only within the narrow confines of the Methodist religion encounters a worldly-wise and learned priest, an atheistic scientist, and a cultured, artistic woman who lets nothing interfere with her personal freedom, it is not surprising that he is torn from his simple moorings and flounders. Stepping out of one rigid belief system, he does not have the intellectual training to join any of the others. The dying Michael Madden explains this to him, telling Ware that he should have stayed with his own people and his own religion; when he strayed into another domain he was ill-equipped to understand it and his character degenerated as a result.

There is obviously much truth in this reading of the causes of Ware's downfall. However, Ware also encounters another key figure, and that is Sister Soulsby. On the surface, the kindly Sister Soulsby seems like a beneficent influence on the minister, as well as being a very lively, entertaining character. She rescues the church from debt, gives the naïve Ware some good, common-sense advice, and in general tells him what he needs to know. This positive view of Sister Soulsby was how early reviewers and critics of the novel tended to see her. But since then, more than a few critics have reversed this interpretation. Rather than being a sympathetic character, Sister Soulsby has been presented as the direct cause of Ware's "damnation," a true Mephistophelean temptress in the guise of a friendly adviser. For example, Stanton Garner wrote in his book *Harold Frederic*, "It is she who touches Theron's weakest point, immobilizing his moral faculties with a vision of petty illusions disguising the sordid 'reality' of the world." Garner calls this a "cynical philosophy of sharp practice and self-indulgent rationalizations." Scott Donaldson, in his article "The Seduction of Theron Ware," also follows this line of argument. Sister Soulsby is a corrupting influence on Ware, since she teaches him to be duplicitous and also manipulates him and his congregation by every means she can in order to obtain her goals. This conclusion has been echoed by other critics since, although it is by no means the universal view. Thomas F. O'Donnell and Hoyt Franchere, for example, see nothing sinister in Sister Soulsby. In contrast, the Soulsbys provide "a sincere but realistic spiritual leadership of the kind that expedience demands."

The crux of the matter is the extent to which moral, ethical and spiritual absolutes can be applied in the complex, day-to-day business of human affairs. Those who condemn



Sister Soulsby do so on the basis of her willingness to manipulate others for what she sees as a worthy goal. For her, the means justify the ends, but for her critics, this attitude leaves her open to charges of cynicism and insincerity. Those who defend her see her *modus operandi* as she herself sees it: as a necessary way of accomplishing necessary things in a less than perfect world. In this view, common sense and pragmatism trump moral righteousness.

There is some truth in both these opposing views. There is no doubt that Sister Soulsby is a shameless manipulator. She is cunning, knows exactly what she wants to get out of people, and plans her actions accordingly, using every trick in the book. When she wants to persuade members of Ware's congregation to part with their money, she invites them to a revival meeting without divulging its real purpose, reasoning with some justification (and over Ware's feeble objections), that if people knew the meeting was a fundraiser, they would be unlikely to come. During the meeting she plays on the emotions of the congregation with ease. With her singing, her dramatic gestures, and her smooth, practiced patter, the meeting is more like a theatrical performance than a church service. And once the second revival meeting is under way, Sister Soulsby has no qualms about locking the church doors and saying that no one will be let out until the money is raised. Her methods of raising that money are dubious, to say the least, since she tricks Winch into making pledges that he thinks he will not be called upon to keep. But to Winch's dismay, Ware, manipulated by Sister Soulsby, insists that he meet his commitments. Ware feels his integrity is compromised by his part in this, but Sister Soulsby's attitude is that she uses whatever means are at her disposal to create a desired outcome.

If this was the extent of Sister Soulsby's influence on Ware, perhaps there would not be a chorus of critics ready to condemn her. There is a certain justice in the discomfiture of the tight-fisted Winch since earlier it was disclosed that he and Pierce were charging the church a higher rate of interest on the mortgage than the law stipulated. And surely few would quibble that Ware needs a proverbial kick in the seat of the pants from someone who possesses worldly common sense. His own performance during his second ministry in Tyre—where he ran up a debt of eight hundred dollars—his extravagant desire to buy his wife a piano he cannot afford, and his horror at the thought of a "debt-raiser" coming to his church, even though the church is sinking deeper and deeper into debt, all suggest that the Reverend Ware needs some sage advice about how to run his own affairs.

The more serious case against Sister Soulsby is that she encourages Ware to create a double self—a private one and a public one. She tells him that it does not matter what he believes, as long as he keeps up outer appearances and does what his congregation wants him to do. His notions of intellectual and moral integrity are irrelevant to Sister Soulsby, who wants him to emulate her and become a "good fraud"—manipulating people for their own good. It is not that she is an out-and-out hypocrite, since she seems genuinely to believe in the value of her work, but her religion is undoubtedly of the shallow variety. She and her husband first went to Methodist revival meetings just to kill time, but then found they "liked the noise and excitement and general racket of the thing." In other words, it was a good show and had little to do with matters of sin and



salvation. The Soulsbys then went into the revival business for themselves because they thought they could do it better than the preachers they were hearing. When pressed by Ware, Sister Soulsby claims that she was genuinely converted, but this seems to mean no more than that she was caught up in the excitement of the moment.

Overcoming his misgivings, Ware takes Sister Soulsby's advice and becomes a "good fraud" with a clear conscience. It appears to be exactly the solution he was looking for. Even before Soulsby's arrival, he had parted company, at least in spirit, with the Methodist church and was troubled about how to keep up the pretense with others. Sister Soulsby has convinced him that pretending is a perfectly acceptable solution, and for a while this appears to work very well for him. Attendance at the church is up, his congregation appears to regard him highly, he preaches effective sermons, and he feels at peace within himself as he pursues his new intellectual ideas: "He had put aside, once and for all, the thousand foolish trifles and childish perplexities which formerly has racked his brain, and worried him out of sleep and strength." He has no doubt that he can succeed in this double life of believing one thing and saying another. After all, the Catholic priest whom he so admires, Father Forbes, does exactly the same, although Ware forgets that Forbes, while still performing the ritual functions of the church, no longer preaches.

But all the time Ware thinks he is doing so well, he is going downhill morally. For one thing, he despises his own congregation, and he makes the mistake of confiding this to Celia and Forbes when he meets them at the Catholic picnic, as well as hinting to them about his dissatisfaction with his marriage. They are not impressed. However, Ware might have continued for some while in this double vein had it not been for his infatuation with Celia, which is a dizzy amalgam of sexual, romantic and intellectual feelings. This infatuation, which makes him lose all reason and judgment, would have proved costly for him even if he had never met Sister Soulsby and listened to her advice.

It thus seems unfair to put the blame on Sister Soulsby for Ware's troubles. She is merely trying to help a troubled young man remain in the ministry to which he has been called, and it would be hard to argue with the wisdom of much of her advice. For example, she tries to correct his eagerness to pass negative judgements on his own congregation, telling him they are no better or worse than any other. And at the end of the novel, when Ware indulges in an orgy of self-reproach about how in a few months he has gone from being a good man to a bad one, she insists once more that such categories are misleading, because everyone is a mixture of good and bad, and it is unwise to judge others. It is Ware's misfortune that he lacks the maturity and good judgment to take advantage of whatever wisdom Sister Soulsby has to offer him.

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Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

When *The Damnation of Theron Ware* was first published in England, the title was *Illumination*. Based on the content of the plot and the substance of the characters, write an essay that explains which title you think is more appropriate.

Is there a conflict between science and religious faith? Select one contemporary issue (political, social, personal) in which scientific research and progress may clash with religious belief, research that issue, and develop a report to be given in-class that details the conflict and/or agreement between science and religion as related to the issue you choose.

What is the attitude of Theron Ware and Loren Pierce to the Irish and to Catholicism? Does Ware modify his views? How does the author present Catholicism and Methodism? Which of the two is presented in a more favorable light? What was the real historical context like for the divisions of Christianity in early America?

Who bears most responsibility for what happens to Ware: Father Forbes, Dr. Ledsmar, Celia Madden, Sister Soulsby, or Ware himself? Is Ware a different man at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning, or is he just the same? If you believe Ware changes during the novel, provide examples to explain how his character develops?



Compare and Contrast

1880s—1890s: From May to October of 1893, an estimated 27 million people attend Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition (World Fair). The fair introduces many new inventions, from zippers to the Ferris wheel, as well as new architecture and machinery. The exhibition reflects contemporary confidence in human progress.

Today: The tradition of world fairs continues. In 2000, Expo 2000 takes place in Hanover, Germany. The theme is "Man, Nature and Technology," and 187 countries participate.

1880s—1890s: Irish immigration to the United States continues but is lower than during the 1860s and 1870s. Many Irish, who are also predominantly Catholic, face resentment and discrimination in largely Protestant America.

Today: More than 43 million people in the United States claim Irish descent. Irish immigration to the United States is only a small fraction of what it was more than a hundred years ago.

1880s—1890s: Conservatives within the Methodist Episcopal Church fight to maintain their traditional faith in the face of progressive ministers who are sympathetic to the "higher criticism," who seek to introduce more liberal interpretations of Christian doctrine into the church, and who bring innovations into church services, such as organs and choirs.

Today: There are twenty-three branches of the Methodist church in the United States. The largest is the United Methodist Church, which had about 8.5 million members in 1997. The most well-known member of the Methodist church is President George W. Bush.

What Do I Read Next?

Several critics have noted the close affinity between *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in terms of allegory, symbolism, and the relationship between science and religion. Hawthorne's novel is set in Puritan Boston, where a woman convicted of adultery is forced to wear a scarlet "A" on her clothing.

Frederic admired Stephen Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Like *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, it features a young protagonist who finds himself suddenly thrust into a new situation in which he must learn more about life and about himself. But for Crane's protagonist, Henry Fleming, the scene is not a village in New York but a Civil War battlefield.

Elmer Gantry (1927), by Sinclair Lewis, is a satire of fundamentalist religion that caused a storm of controversy when first published. Set in the Midwest, the novel centers around Elmer Gantry, a salesman turned charismatic revivalist preacher and conman who eventually becomes the leader of a Methodist church.

The Reckless Decade: America in the 1890s (1995), by H. W. Brands, surveys the United States during the last decade of the nineteenth century when it stood on the brink of modernity and was trying to absorb rapid social, political, and intellectual change. Brand covers topics such as economic upheaval, labor unrest, the "robber barons," race, immigration, and the Spanish American war.



Further Study

Briggs, Austin, *The Novels of Harold Frederic*, Cornell University Press, 1969, pp. 97—139.

Briggs argues that Ware does not really undergo a fall from grace, similar to Adam and Eve, since he has changed little at the end from what he was at the beginning: an ambitious "climber" and a "snob" who has contempt for his flock.

Crowley, John W., "The Nude and the Madonna in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," in *American Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 3, November 1973, pp. 379—89.

Crowley argues that Ware is torn by an unresolved oedipal obsession between the sensual and the maternal aspects of the female, and this distorts his relations with Alice, Celia Madden, and Sister Soulsby.

MacFarlane, Lisa Watt, "Resurrecting Man: Desire and *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," in *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1992, pp. 127—43.

This feminist analysis argues that Ware occupies an ambiguous position in terms of gender. This is because the cultural role of a minister is to exhibit male and female characteristics, and sometimes Ware takes on the role of the female. His gender identity shifts often during the course of the novel.

Myers, Robert M., *Reluctant Expatriate: The Life of Harold Frederic*, Greenwood Press, pp. 115—34.

Myers examines how the circumstances of Harold Frederic's life contributed to the novel. For example, the fact that Frederic kept two households, one of which had to be completely private, may have contributed to his presentation of how Ware tries to separate his inner self from his public persona as a minister.

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Donaldson, Scott, "Introduction," in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Penguin, 1986, pp. vii—xxx.

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Garner, Stanton, *Harold Frederic*, University of Minnesota Press, 1969, pp. 33—38.

Howells, William Dean, "My Favorite Novelist and His Best Book," in *W. D. Howells as Critic*, edited by Edwin H. Cady, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 268—80; originally published in *Munsey's Magazine*, Vol. 17, April 1897.

O'Donnell, Thomas F., and Hoyt Franchere, *Harold Frederic*, Twayne, 1971, pp. 108—17.

Review of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, in the *Atlantic*, Vol. 78, August 1896, pp. 269—76.