THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
A PUBLICATION OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Article 50

2024

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Abstract

Published in 1905, “Editha” by William Dean Howells tells the story of a young woman who convinces her fiancé, George Gearson, to fight in the Spanish-American War. Most scholarship regarding the work revolves around Editha’s relationship with George. While their dynamic is important to the story’s development and to Editha’s sense of self, each relationship Editha has with others reveals more about herself and her intentions. It can be argued that Editha is aware of her actions and is purposefully taking the steps that she can to feel separate from those around her. This paper relies on a close reading of select evidence from the text in conjunction with a historical analysis to support interpretations of Editha’s interactions. The argument is arranged by analyzing which characters are most hostile and resistant to Editha’s attempts at agency to those least resistant or even complicit: George’s mother, Editha’s mother, George, and the portrait artist.

Keywords: feminism, realism, Spanish-American War, ‘Editha’, William Dean Howells, womanhood

The narrator of William Dean Howells' "Editha" reveals the thought process of the titular character by remarking, "She was pushing, threatening, compelling. That was not a woman's part. She must leave him free, free, free" (Howells 132). Howells wrote this to describe the internal battle that Editha is going through as she navigates gender expectations. Editha reflects on the social dictate that she needs to stop meddling and leave her fiancé, George Gearson, in charge of his own life. The story is set in New York during the breakout of the Spanish-American War. The main character, Editha, is determined that her fiancé will join the army. While he is initially resistant, he enlists, subsequently dying in his first battle. Editha falls into a depression but remembers she promised her late fiancé she would visit his mother if he were to die in combat.

Editha's womanhood is admittedly a factor in not only her feelings that she has begun to overstep her gender role, but also in the power that she is able to have. Thus, she is left to gain a semblance of control in her life through those around her. Susan K Harris, an American literature professor emerita, writes that Editha "astutely formulate[s] the problem as the relationship between words and effective action and seeing gender as the crucial factor. The crux of Editha's problem is her relation to language, the fact that it is her only avenue to the world" (Harris 75). This means that Editha's only path to gaining agency over her life is through her words–her persuasive arguments. On the contrary, Selina Jamil, a professor of English, concludes that "[a]lthough [Editha], who is capable of comprehending 'justice', is capable of exploring her own selfhood, she is far too invested in her gender identity to launch into a quest for selfhood" (Jamil 286). In other words, Jamil believes Editha's status in society as a woman keeps her so occupied that, rather than try to attain a sense of self separate from those of her gender, she strives to conform. However, Howells' story contains evidence that Editha is aware of her actions, including the words that she utters, and is purposefully taking the steps that she can to feel separate from those around her and her gender role. Editha's yearning for agency in her life is made manifest in her interactions with George's mother, her own mother, George, and the portrait artist.

Editha's interactions with George's mother, who offers the most resistance to Editha's behavior, clearly show that Editha attempts to defy gender expectations. After George's death, the narrator explains Editha's outlook on visiting his mother: "In the exaltation of the duty laid upon her–it buoyed her up instead of burdening her–she rapidly recovered" (Howells 139). The prospect of this visit brings joy to Editha; she likely thought his mother would be understanding of Editha and her grief. This visit also gives Editha an action to take and a feeling of importance and purpose. When the two meet, Editha is described as "tall and black in her crapes which filled the air with the smell of their dyes" (Howells 140). She is filling the spaces that she occupies with her pungent grief, making those around her well aware of just how hard she is grieving and how much she has lost. According to Lou Taylor in "Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History", social etiquette dictated the wearing of mourning clothes for an extended period after someone's death. By the nineteenth century, these expectations for men were lessened to the point where they were only expected to wear an armband to signify their mourning (135). Meanwhile, women were constantly burdened with changing fashions and confusing mourning expectations. A writer for *Sylvia's Home Journal* in 1881 wrote that widows could move on to the second stage of mourning after one year and one day but should not make this change on that very day; "for the sake of good taste," they should delay the

transition (qtd. In Taylor 141). This difference in expectations regarding wardrobe is a good representation of the difference in social position between men and women. Taylor explains, "Women were used, albeit willingly and even eagerly by most, as a show piece, to display their family's total respectability, sense of conformity and wealth" (136). Editha acts as a show piece for her family, especially her father and his company. For example, Editha's father, Mr. Balcom, greets his host, Mrs. Gearson, by introducing himself as an extension of his company, and he begins to talk about his daughter when Mrs. Gearson cuts him off. He attempts another remark while Editha explains how much she has been suffering, saying "Daughter's life [...] was almost despaired of, at one time" (Howells 141). Editha's role in life is that of a daughter; the only other thing she can become is that of a wife. Taylor observes that:

> most Victorian women confined themselves to social maneuvering convinced that, in a man's world, this was their allotted function in life. … They tried by every means to gain access to the next step up the social ladder and organized their otherwise idle lives accordingly (Taylor 122).

Editha, not yet a wife and unable to start these interactions for her family, is trying to make sure that her future husband, the head of this family, would be suitable and live up to the ideal that she has created. In these ways, she appears to conform to the gender expectations of daughter and wife.

Howells' collection of short stories *Between the Dark and the Daylight* include an illustration depicting the interaction between Editha and Mrs. Gearson (Appendix 1). This image depicts the mourning clothes being worn by the women and the power dynamic being displayed. The clothes that George's mother wears are not described in the story, but in the illustration she is shown wearing dark clothes, with a white or lighter colored trim on her chest. This outfit can be compared to Editha's dark and heavy clothes, indicating visually her position in the stage of deep mourning. There are a couple of possible reasons for Mrs. Gearson's lack of deep mourning clothes. It is possible that she never left the mourning period for her late husband, who likely died during George's early childhood due to his only knowing him "from my mother's report of him and his opinions" (Howells 137), which would be similar to Queen Victoria who never transitioned from mourning attire in the forty years she survived her husband (Taylor 158). In addition, the fashion of mourning was everchanging and the etiquette surrounding the clothes do not seem to be anything that would concern Mrs. Gearson. She is presumably lower class, especially compared to the Balcoms, and could likely not afford or justify the purchase of a new wardrobe. Taking into consideration not only her temperament but also her age and condition, she is also likely to not be actively engaging in society at events where such outfits would be worn. She was supposedly not well enough to correspond with Editha upon George going to war (Howells 139), and during her confrontation with Editha, her frailty is underscored when she is described as angrily lifting herself by her "powerful arms so high that her helpless body seemed to hang limp its full length" (Howells 142).

Despite Editha's attempt to look the part of a bereaved fiancée, George's mother does not sympathize with Editha. In fact, she does the exact opposite, asking Editha, "What did you come for?", even though she almost immediately reveals that "[George] told me he had asked you to come if he got killed" (Howells 141). George's mother knows that George had asked her to visit, so her initial question seems like a more combative way of asking what it is that Editha is looking to gain from this visit. If it was understanding and sympathy that Editha seeks, his

mother is the last person who is going to offer those responses. When talking about George's death, she says to Editha, "You didn't expect that, I suppose, when you sent him" (Howells 141). She holds Editha fully accountable for George going to fight in the war and does not give in to Editha's protestations. Editha claims that she did not intervene and "tried to leave him free"; however, his Mother uses the letter Editha wrote to George as proof of Editha's intentions, saying, "Yes, that letter of yours, that came back with his other things, left him free" (Howells 141). The very letter that Editha writes to release her urge to force George to go to war and to fully express her desires, is now being used against her. While Editha gives this letter to George after he had already enlisted to fight, it compounds the pressure he felt. Editha's urging and insistence already leads to his attending the town meeting. Fighting in this war goes against his belief system, but he feels that he has a duty to Editha to act as this masculine figure. "'And you haven't simply done it for my sake. I couldn't respect you if you had.' "Well, then we'll say I haven't. A man that hasn't got his own respect intact wants the respect of all the other people he can corner'" (Howells 136). George abandons his morals and pacifistic views that he inherits from his parents who lived through the Civil War (Howells 137), losing his self respect in the process to be worthy of Editha's love. Even though Editha does not share this letter with George until the night before he leaves, it makes her intentions clear:

> George:--I understood when you left me. But I think we had better emphasize your meaning that if we cannot be one in everything we had better be one in nothing. So I am sending these things for your keeping till you have made up your mind. I shall always love you, and therefore I shall never marry any one else. But the man I marry must love his country first of all, and be able to say to me,
>
> 'I could not love thee, dear, so much,
> Loved I not honor more.'
>
> There is no honor above America with me. In this great hour there is no other honor. Your heart will make my words clear to you. I had never expected to say so much, but it has come upon me that I must say the utmost. Editha (Howells 131).

The writing of this letter exposes her as a woman who is not following the expectations of her society and makes it clear that she intends to part with George if he does not fight in the war. Even though Editha claims to have left George free to make this decision, her actions and this letter make it clear to Mrs. Gearson that Editha has an immense influence over George; she even concludes the discussion on the letter by saying that "he wouldn't read a letter of yours, under the circumstances, till he thought you wanted him to" (Howells 141).

George's mother is ultimately the one person whom Editha wants to have on her side after George passes away. Early in their conversation, George's mother appears to sympathize with Editha, as shown by the narrator describing her voice at one point as "seeming to compassionate Editha" (Howells 142). She speaks with a kind tone to Editha as she accuses her–and other girls–for sending George–their men–to fight in wars. The narrator then describes Editha's reaction to this faux sympathy by saying, "The tears began to run down Editha's face; she had not wept till then; but it was now such a relief to be understood that the tears came" (Howells 142). It is now clear that Editha does not cry at any other stage of her grieving, and she still has not been crying due to her loss of George. Editha begins to weep because George's mother seems to understand her motivations. Mrs. Gearson reacts to this distinction, becoming

infuriated with Editha for acting like she grieves her son, asking, “What you got that black on for?” (Howells 142). She ends the conversation by yelling, “Take it off, take it off, before I tear it from your back” (Howells 142). The crape that Editha wears is an interesting choice. While crape has traditionally been a very popular and common choice of mourning clothes, it began to go out of fashion, even with the leading manufacturer, Courtaulds, opening a retail establishment in 1887 in New York in an attempt to increase the sale of crape, it was a failure (Taylor 223). Editha is wearing a somewhat out of fashion mourning dress. This is possibly due to the romantic literature she consumes, which creates her ideals and visions of her life and love, being set in times when this was the expected attire. However, the black crape that Editha so proudly wears is now being questioned and repudiated by George’s mother. This is representative of George's mother’s lack of sympathy, if not disdain, for Editha. Thus, George’s mother is stripping her of the right to grieve for George. Being stripped of this ability and enduring the illuminating interaction with Mrs. Gearson further exposes her actions and her lack of social correctness.

Mrs. Gearson is not the only woman of the older generation that Editha challenges. The interactions that Editha has with her own mother almost seem as though Editha has something to prove and that she wants to assert whatever dominance she can achieve. After learning that war has been declared, Editha’s mother says, “Well, I hope *he* won’t go” (Howells 130). She emphasizes the word “he” in this statement, underscoring his ability to decide whether he will go to war. Editha responds by saying, “And, *I* hope he *will*” (Howells 130). She stresses the “I” and “will” in her statement, relaying her ability to influence George’s decision to go to war. Her mother thinks about this for a short time before responding, “Well, I guess you’ve done a wicked thing, Editha Balcom” (Howells 131). By saying this, she acknowledges the power that Editha wields in this decision and signals that she knows that Editha’s mind is already made up; she does not warn Editha that she could be doing a wicked thing, but that she has already done this wicked thing. Harris writes, “Editha can say whatever she wants because she does not have to experience the consequences of her words. The dark side of Howell’s vision, however, is that Editha is both wilful and active” (Harris 76). Editha’s “wilful and active” behavior contradicts the way her mother behaves. For example, when Editha’s mother interacts with her father after George enlists to fight in the war, she comments on his acting “curious” and reproaches her husband for laughing at the situation (Howells 135). While she shares her opinion on the unfolding situation, her husband dismisses her, and the conversation is over. Mrs. Balcom believes Editha should behave toward men in a similar manner, especially as a woman in a higher class.

The story provides additional evidence that Editha’s mother is someone who fits into her role as a woman in society. During her confrontation with Editha about whether George should fight in the war, she sits “in one of the large Shaker chairs and rocked herself for some time. Then she closed whatever tacit passage of thought there had been in her mind” before telling Editha that she hopes George won’t fight in the war (Howells 130). These actions and objects give the reader better insight into Mrs. Balcom as a woman. Tracy Fessenden writes about the separate spheres women and men occupied during the nineteenth century, asserting that women:

> devoted themselves to the home as a haven of tranquility and spiritual value and became avid consumers of the magazines, advice literature, sermons, and

> novels that trained them in their primary role as selfless and pious guardians of the family state (Fessenden 453-454).

Mrs. Balcom sits in a chair made by Quakers while she considers her own pacifistic and feminine nature that is in conflict with the nature of her brash daughter. While Editha is using her words to gain agency and take control of those around her, Mrs. Balcom rocks herself in her chair. She tries to convince her daughter of the right thing to do; the womanly thing to do. Similar to Mrs. Gearson, Mrs. Balcom sees Editha for the woman that she is and seemingly knows that her attempts to control her daughter are futile.

Ultimately, Editha urges George to go to war so that he can fulfill the ideal image that she has not only of a man but also of the man that she intends to marry. The narrator describes Editha's initial thought process involving George fighting in the war:

> "[S]he was aware that now at the very beginning she must put a guard upon herself against urging him, by any word or act, to take the part that her whole soul willed him to take, for the completion of her ideal of him" (Howells 126).

While Editha tries to resign herself to remain impartial, she knows that his taking part in this war would satisfy her needs to reach this ideal. Readers learn her views on what type of man deserves her affections: "She had always supposed that the man who won her would have done something to win her, she did not know what, but something" (Howells 126). Editha has built this image in her mind of what a man should do to earn her affections; he would have to have done something to win them. However, readers learn that George had "simply asked her for her love" (Howells 126), and she had given it to him "without, as it were, thinking" (Howells 127). The opportunity to fight in the war gave George the opportunity to finally do something worthy of her love.

Even though George does not yet fulfill her ideal of the man she will marry, she worries about losing him. George and Editha discuss the war for the first time, and the conversation ends with a conditional invitation to supper–as long as he returns "a convert" (Howells). He leaves her without a kiss, and "she felt it a suspension of their engagement. It all interested her intensely; she was undergoing a tremendous experience, and she was being equal to it" (Howells 130). In the same way that she is later reinvigorated by the call to action that visiting George's mother elicits, Editha sees this lovers' quarrel as an opportunity. Viewing the possible suspension of their engagement as a challenge, she feels that she is "equal to it". It is after this altercation with George that Editha engages in a brief argument with her mother and then sits down to compile and write the letter to George that expresses her desire for him to enlist in the war.

Jamil discusses the role that traditional notions of masculinity and femininity have in Editha's life. She establishes that Editha is oblivious to her human individuality "because she is unmindful of her nature" and that, "as a product of her patriarchal culture, Editha is oblivious of George's individuality and wishes to replace it with her ideal of manhood" (Jamil 286). However, while potentially naive, Editha does not seem to be oblivious. It is certain that Editha has not genuinely considered the looming possibility of George dying. Yet she has a passing notion of what it would be like if he were injured in the war. In a sense, she is secretly and morbidly courting the idea of how the valor of a wounded soldier would fit into her ideal of George, as is evident when the narrator conveys Editha's thought that she "thrilled with the sense of the arm round her; what if that should be lost?"(Howells 137). After learning about

George's father's own loss of a limb during the Civil War, not only is she aware of the grim possibilities George faces, but she also understands his place as an individual. She simply believes that she knows what is best for George. From the first time George announces to Editha that war had been declared, Editha makes her opinion and expectations of George known:

> I know you always have the highest ideal. When I differ from you I ought to doubt myself." A generous sob rose in Editha's throat for the humility of a man, so very nearly perfect, who was willing to put himself below her. Besides, she felt, more subliminally, that he was never so near slipping through her fingers as when he took that meek way. "You shall not say that! Only, for once I happen to be right." (Howells 128)

Even though George sometimes found Editha to be rather foolish, parroting the words she read in the newspapers and mocking her "pocket Providence" that she seemed to find solace in, he obeyed her wishes (Howells 130).

One could argue that Editha is all too aware of George's individuality because, in many ways, he does not conform to the expectations of his gender role. She finds the traditionally feminine characteristics that he possesses to be strange. She believes that "he might very well be reasoned out of his peculiarity" (Howells 126). Men of this time were expected to defer to their wives regarding moral and social matters (Mahoney), which George does dutifully. Many men at this time were working in offices or other professions that involved little to no manual labor. People were concerned with this new generation of seemingly emasculated men with soft hands and white collars. As Joseph Locke and Ben Wright note in "The American Yawp", "Gilded Age men were encouraged to embrace a particular vision of masculinity connected intimately with the rising tides of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism" (75). Described by his mother as "timid", George is conflicted about fighting in the war. Editha's urging not only benefits her as a means for George to fulfill her ideal of him, but also it acts as reassurance for George–the lawyer who had wanted to be a preacher–that he is making the right decision. His expression of uncertainty is met by Editha offering that "There are no two sides any more. There is nothing now but our country" (Howells 127). This declaration steers George to meet the expectations of masculinity. Moreover, the spirit of nationalism is embodied by Editha when George later says to her, "What a thing it is to have a country that can't be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway!" (Howells 133-134).

The blame for George fighting in the war cannot be placed entirely onto the shoulders of Editha. Other forces appeal to George's sense of manliness. He is egged on and, eventually, elected captain by the other young men in his town. George goes to a meeting at the town-hall with the intention of speaking against the war, but he finds himself endorsing the cause instead:

> I thought it would be a good joke to sprinkle a little cold water on them. But you can't do that with a crowd that adores you. The first thing I knew I was sprinkling hell-fire on them. 'Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.' That was the style. Now that it had come to the fight, there were no two parties; there was one country, and the thing was to fight to a finish as quick as possible. I suggested volunteering then and there, and I wrote my name first of all on the roster. (Howells 133)

While it was among his peers that George is riled up and at his most passionate, it is clear that Editha's "pocket Providence" affects George to the point where he is quoting her when discussing his thoughts on enlisting and joining his beliefs to hers involving "one country." Even the next day when George soberly returns to Editha, he explains that he "consecrated myself to your god of battles last night by pouring too many libations to him down my own throat" (Howells). While the blame cannot be entirely placed on Editha, it seems that George finds her culpable for his decision by aligning her beliefs with those of the men once again signaling to the reader that Editha has defied her gender expectations.

After George, Mrs. Gearson, and Mrs. Balcom posed challenges regarding her (unwomanly) words and actions, leading to some doubts about her course of action, her sense of self seems to be fully restored at the end of the story. The last person who Editha speaks to in this story is a portrait artist who is spending her summer nearby. The portrait artist is the perfect person for Editha to divulge her story to. The narrator characterizes Editha's beauty as something that "lent itself wonderfully to the effects of a colorist" (Howells 142-143). This statement not only asserts that she is a beautiful woman, but also, she/her visage is something that can be altered and changed to fit the needs of an audience. A portrait artist's job is to make the subject look their best. The narrator describes the relationship between Editha and the artist as having "come to that confidence which is rather apt to grow between artist and sitter, and Editha had told her everything" (Howells 143). Editha has not only built a bond with the artist but is also afforded the opportunity to control the narrative of her relationship and receive the validation and sympathy that she desperately seeks. Of all the features that Howells could describe the artist as having enhanced, his narrator describes the artist as "looking at Editha's lips in nature and then at her lips in art, and giving an empirical touch to them in the picture" (Howells 143). The artist specifically alters the very facial feature that is responsible for the sparse amount of control that Editha can gain in her life. The use of the phrase "empirical touch" implies that she not only does it for aesthetic purposes, but also based on her experiences with Editha. The artist says to Editha, "To think of your having such a tragedy in your life" (Howells 143). Editha is able to relinquish any of the blame that could, and is, laid upon her by the other (possibly more well-informed) people in her life. The artist confirms her belief that she is an innocent party in this situation.

Like Editha, the portrait artist is a lady in society. She understands as well as Editha the importance and emphasis of behaving in a way that is appropriate for a woman at the time. One of the main missteps to avoid was vulgarity–whether it was in the actions one took, the words one spoke, or the clothes worn. The portrait artist is keenly aware of these expectations, and along with Editha is a member of the upper-class society. Mrs. Gearson is not someone who feels these same pressures. As a lower-class widow late in life, she can be vulgar without any consequences to her station. The portrait artist is able to reframe the events for Editha. Instead of viewing Mrs. Gearson as rightfully calling out the woman who seemingly, without care, sent her pacifist son to war, the portrait artist presents a woman with no regard for the depressed and mourning Editha, one who acted in such an unrefined way. The portrait artist exclaims, "But how dreadful of her! How perfectly--excuse me--how *vulgar!*" (Howells 143) This reframing reaffirms Editha's place in society, a place that is untainted by these events, allowing her to realize that "[t]he mystery that had bewildered her was solved by the word; and from that moment she rose from grovelling in shame and self-pity, and began to live again in the

ideal" (Howells 143). In effect, Mrs. Gearson's defiance of class expectations eclipses Editha's violation of gender roles, at least from the perspective of the portrait artist who has only Editha's word on how the events took place.

While using a feminist perspective to read and understand a work of literature is nothing new, to read "Editha" with the notion that she is aware of the effect of her actions and is purposefully manipulating those around her to reach her goal alters the way readers view the titular character. Howells' work offers an interesting look at the complexities of relationships, especially a courtship involving two people who are not meeting the societal expectations of their genders. Both George and Editha went about trying to conform to these expectations poorly. George, wanting to win the affections of Editha, got caught up in the ideal notions of manhood. Editha, wanting so badly to gain agency over her life, takes such measures to ensure that George fits the mold of an ideal husband, thus ensuring her place in future society as an ideal wife. The gender dynamics presented by Howells would only complicate more as the century turned and the roles of men and women began to be renegotiated. In the end, Editha did not learn from her mistakes. She is afforded the ability to deflect the blame and chalk up Mrs. Gearson's protests to the vulgarity and lack of understanding that a lower-class woman possesses. While Editha was aware that a woman should leave her partner free to make their own decisions, she could not resist her inner need to perfect George, resulting in the perfect image of a martyr and the pitiable image of an upright widow.

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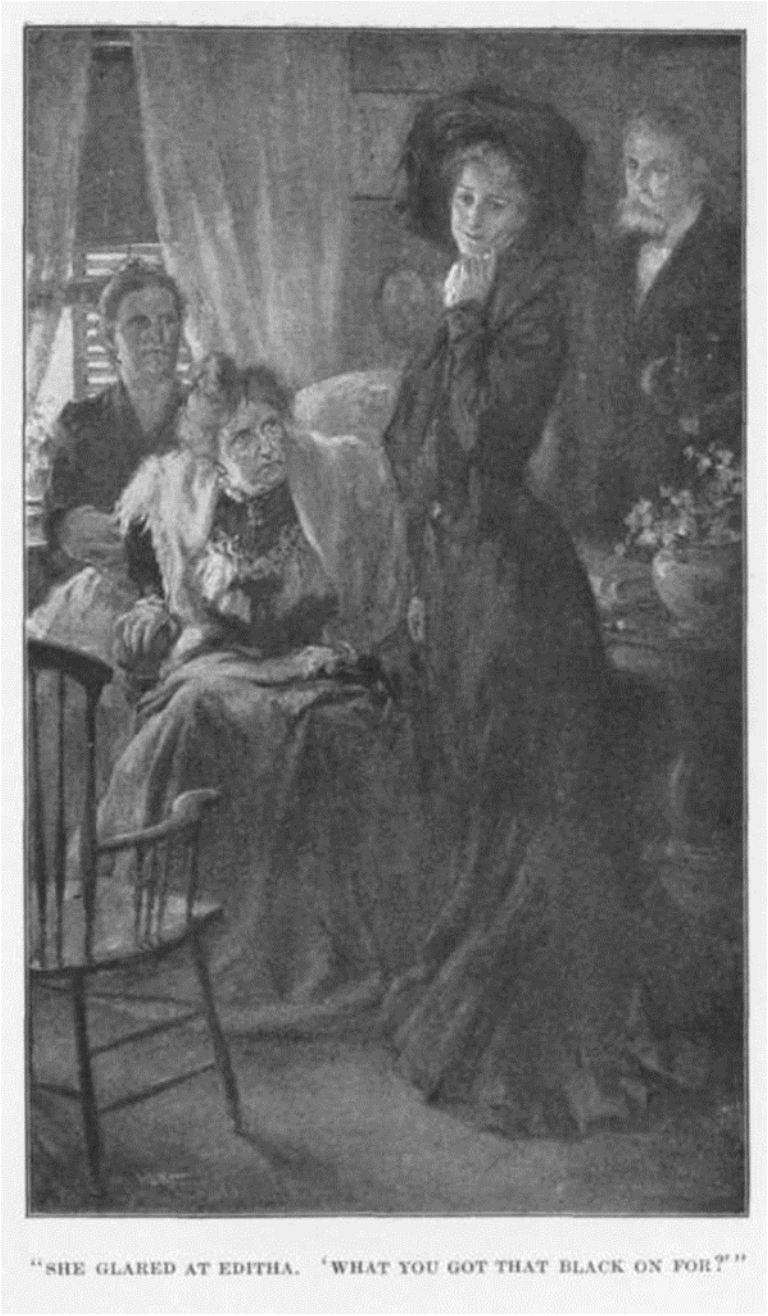
Appendix



"SHE GLARED AT EDITHA. 'WHAT YOU GOT THAT BLACK ON FOR?'"

This illustration appears in the 1907 collection of W.D. Howells' short stories, Between The Dark and the Daylight. This illustration does not appear in the initial 1905 publication of "Editha" in *Harper's Monthly*.