



# **Dancing in Chains: The Youth of William Dean Howells (The American Social Experience)**

*Rodney D. Olsen*

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In this insightful study of the childhood and youth of William Dean Howells, *Dancing in Chains* demonstrates how the turbulent social and cultural changes of the early nineteenth century shaped the young Howells's emotional and intellectual life. His early diaries, letters, poetry, fiction, and newspaper columns are used to illustrate Olsen's argument, which also in turn throws light on the dominant tensions in antebellum America. Accepting the emergent middle-class ethos of civilized morality, with its new conceptions of child rearing and gender spheres, Howells's parents urged him to achieve self-control and individual success while also teaching him to seek the good of others rather than his own glory. For Howells the conflicts coalesced at the time of his leaving home, an increasing common rite of passage for antebellum youth. Trying to affirm his sense of literary vocation, he tested his aspirations against the family's Swedenborgian religious convictions and the antislavery commitments of his village while experimenting with competing literary ideologies in the process of meeting the demands of the new mass reading audience. For Howells the resulting tensions eased toward the end of his youth but reappeared in his more mature works of fiction and social criticism in later years. Portraying the ordeal of coming of age during a momentous period of American history, *Dancing in Chains* is a fascinating study with a broad appeal to general readers as well as scholars.

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