

Joseph C. Murphy  
Associate Professor & Chair  
English Department  
Fu Jen Catholic University  
[murphy@mail.fju.edu.tw](mailto:murphy@mail.fju.edu.tw)

“Foregone Conclusions”: Howells’s Venice, America’s Civil War, and Global Risk

Near the climax of William Dean Howells’s early novel *A Foregone Conclusion* (1874)—set in Venice during the American Civil War—the Venetian priest Don Ippolito, on the brink of abandoning the priesthood and emigrating to America, stretches his arms into “infinite space” and exhibits “[i]n his visage . . . the sublimity and terror of a man who puts everything to the risk” (136). This dramatic moment portrays Ippolito as an unlikely figure for the American immigrant—and the immigrant, in turn, as the consummate risk-taker. Here I will study *A Foregone Conclusion* as a transatlantic novel about the risks of American immigration, and as a Reconstruction text concerned not only with regenerating the Union but with reconceiving the American novel on realist principles, from its roots in Hawthorne’s antebellum allegory. Whether interpreted as a political allegory about the Union’s emergence from the ruins of war in a period of rising immigration, or as a literary record of realism’s emergence from the ruins of allegory itself, Howells’s novel dramatizes the uncertain crossroads between the discourses of Providence and risk in late-nineteenth-century American culture.

Although usually considered a work of realism on the international theme, *A Foregone Conclusion* also exhibits the hallmarks of the Reconstruction novel, which used allegory to represent the problems of national reunion and regeneration. Howells’s center of consciousness is US consul to Venice Henry Ferris, a painter by vocation, whom Don Ippolito approaches with a model of a trick cannon to deploy against Confederate troops. Ippolito is a lightning rod for Union anxieties and hopes regarding Catholic Europe: at first glance, a black-cassocked alien in bondage to a shadowy, anti-republican institution; beneath,

a freethinking inventor who questions his vocation and dreams of America. Ferris installs Ippolito as Italian tutor to the beautiful seventeen-year-old American sojourner Florida Vervain, who—born in the South but raised in Providence, Rhode Island—appears as an ironized figure of the reconstructed Union: forthright but temperamental; receptive to immigrants, but glisteningly white. When Ippolito, secretly in love with her, confesses his religious doubts and his entrepreneurial ambitions, Florida helps plot his getaway to America.

By incorporating both allegory and realism, *A Foregone Conclusion* portrays the uneasy balance between Providence and risk in postbellum American culture. Howells pictures a global geography where the Civil War and its aftermath are a hazard of disparate actors rather than the providential triumph of republican government. By setting the action in Venice, an emblematic city of Fortune, he demystifies the daemonic machinery of Fate, while keeping his characters suggestively adrift from the city of Providence. However, Ippolito's perpetual statelessness (on the model of Shakespeare's Othello) frustrates his American ambitions and Howells's effort to incorporate him into the realist community of mutually shared hazards. Caught in the act of transitioning from allegory to realism, from type to typicality, Howells's novel alludes to, and advances, the fragmentation of allegory already underway in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, while theorizing its own realist program through the artist Ferris's struggle to paint Ippolito's portrait. Don Ippolito's elusive image is the ruin that Howells's realism cannot fully comprehend.