

# THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM

BY WILLIAM D. HOWELLS

EDITED BY Edwin H. Cady

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*William D. Howells*

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON

William Dean Howells: 1837-1920

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## INTRODUCTION

BY EDWIN H. CADY

ABOUT THE YEAR 1885 American literature seemed to strike a peak of accomplishment different from any known before and higher than any since the marvelous years around 1850, a full generation before, when Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Lowell all at once produced their finest work. Now there were new writers working in new forms and with a fresh outlook. With *The Gilded Age*, *Roughing It*, and *Tom Sawyer* behind him, Mark Twain had just completed the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. On the opposite hand, so to speak, Henry James had done *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Bostonians*, and was finishing *The Princess Casamassima*. Between, and uniquely bridging them both in friendship and in art, stood William Dean Howells, author of *Venetian Life*, *Their Wedding Journey*, *A Foregone Conclusion*, *A Modern Instance*, and *Indian Summer*, among others. As the new year of 1885 dawned, he was deep in the catastrophe which drives *The Rise of Silas Lapham* to its conclusion. Each of these major American novelists would find his vision and his art altering with the years so as to broaden the differences from man to man as time passed. At that moment, however, they stood together, without on the whole having intended it, as the inventors of a new but permanent contribution to the world of letters, the American realistic novel.

Of that new kind of literature no example is more entirely representative than *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. As the expression of a realist's vision of life, a realist's artistic method at work, a realist's moral imagination incarnate in characters and their actions, it is typical. One of the ways to understand this novel is to see it as a modern, realistic version of a morality play. Lacking adequate precedent in fiction for his intentions, Howells like his realistic contemporaries turned sympathetically to the stage for inspiration. There they found a new kind of play, sometimes called the *drame*, particularly useful. It was a serious, middle-of-the-road kind of play, standing as it were in the center and

reaching out in both directions toward comedy and toward tragedy without ever committing itself to either. Insofar as it is related to play-writing, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* may be said to be like a *drame*, seriously critical in its outlook, sometimes bordering on tragedy and sometimes on the comedy of manners, a new kind of novelistic morality play about a new kind of Dr. Faustus — the modern Businessman, who in 1885 was a new social phenomenon.

Howells, who had vital democratic convictions and was sensitive to his revolutionary era, had been experiencing startling insights into certain new developments in American life. These insights woke fresh and vivid images within the novelist's creative imagination. But they also threatened to force his moral and humane sympathies into a crisis of conscience. As a matter of fact, something very like that did happen to Howells while he was writing this novel. At the height of financial prosperity and great reputation, in good health and with his work flowing smooth and abundantly, Howells felt spiritually that "the bottom dropped out" of his world. So profound somehow was the exploration of the meaning of modern and American life which accompanied the production of *Lapham* that Howells felt inwardly devastated. He was not exhausted, not defeated, but suddenly emptied and left feeling naked and exposed, before he could bring the novel to a close.

## I

The realism which Howells's novel expresses could be either negative or positive in its attitudes. Negatively it was a reaction against the conventions, ideas, and feelings of the often worn-out romanticism Howells's generation had grown up with. His anti-romantic reactions appear in this novel in several ways. In the broadest sense, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is deliberately plotted as an antidote against the falsity of the Horatio Alger tradition in literature. Silas begins his fictional existence as a millionaire, and his "rise" ironically denies Horatio Algerism. Only by losing his fortune and sacrificing his worldly pride for righteousness' sake can Silas rise. His moral success is his worldly failure. At the brilliantly described dinner party held by the Coreys, one of the most sparkling conversational bits is the discussion of the intensely sentimental "heroism" of romantic self-sacrifice depicted in a novel called *Tears, Idle Tears* from a Tennyson poem much loved by Howells in his romantic youth. Now he arranges to

have that whole attitude cheerfully condemned by the realistic Reverend Mr. Sewell and the book proposed to be titled *Slop, Silly Slop*. Later, when Penelope, abetted by the other ladies of the family, tries to model her own relation to Tom Corey on just such "ideals" of sentimentality, Mr. Sewell and the common-sense logic of events conspire with Tom to make Penelope see how ridiculous, uselessly destructive, and ultimately egotistical it all is.

Positively, on the other hand, Howells's realism was at once a way of imagining and therefore visualizing life, a technique for expressing that vision through the art of fiction, and a set of moral convictions.

Some of the artists of the romantic earlier generation had yearned for ethereal, supernal, sublime emotions and had loaded their art with hazy idealities and atmospheric effects to achieve them. Others, like Emerson and his followers, had been philosophical idealists, convinced that there was so direct a connection between nature and the spiritual world that one had only to grasp the truth about some part of the world of fact to be translated intuitively into the world of spirit. That same doctrine of "correspondence" had been a cardinal part of the Swedenborgian religion of Howells's childhood home. But the grown novelist lived in a world made precarious for the old idealisms by Darwinism and other aspects of the new, "scientific" thought and feeling. Now incautious enthusiasts were becoming Robert Ingersoll-like atheists or hard-minded Social Darwinists. Sensitive, cautious men tended instead toward agnosticism, toward a waiting policy of going only as far as they could on what they thought they could see and on what they could reasonably deduce from that.

For Howells, thus, the possibilities of reliable artistic vision, the scope of his novelistic imagination, became at once narrowed and sharply intensified. What could be known? Why, the world of "fact": that is, the objective world, the world of ordinary men and women living the normal, average, commonplace lives which can be seen and agreed upon by everybody. The vision which can see such a world is shared and shareable in its most obvious, common sense. Conversely, the strange, the weird, the terrific, the superhuman — the romantic — are excluded from such a world as too rare for such a vision. Yet in the realist's intensely democratic world there remains one last thing of the utmost value. The human being, the simple, separate person, the individual man and woman, catch and focus all the light of the real-



ist's vision. His fictional imagination must be concerned first and last with his characters, and all other factors in his art will have to serve his view of them and their personal fates.

To body forth the people of his imagination in forms which could make them spring to life in the imaginations of his readers, the realist had to work out new techniques. That quest for the discovery of sound method made him a serious student and theorist of the form of the novel. The romancer had often been content to shoot off emotional fireworks — "effectism," Howells called that. Or, if he were a great romancer like Hawthorne or Melville, he commandeered intense emotional effects to serve as vehicles to carry the symbols of cosmic ideas home to the hearts of his audience. In the quieter world of the realist's vision, on the other hand, the emphasis fell not on "effects" but on characters. The symbols pointed not outward to ideas of general or ideal significance but inward to strengthen and clarify the force of the novel as a unified work of art. In short, Howells, in alliance with Henry James, became devoted to a concept of form in the novel which they derived in part from Ivan Turgenev, the Russian genius exiled in Paris, and called "the dramatic method."

That method of creating a novel could be called "dramatic" partly because it was "objective," partly because it was "scenic," and partly because, being so concerned with character, it often threatened to become overwhelmingly conversational. The opening chapter of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a brilliantly successful example of the dramatic method at work. It is "objective" because of the way it controls the various points of view or angles of vision by which Howells helps us to discover the present personality and circumstances of Silas and his family and, by shrewdly eliciting the key features of Silas's background, lets us understand him better by learning how he came to be that way. No work of art, nothing addressed from one human mind to another, can really be "objective" in the pure sense of existing independently of any personal bias. Indeed, the whole aim of art may be said to be the transmission of bias, of profound, intimately personal experience from the inward life of the artist into the inward life of the consumer of his art. But by letting us see and hear Bartley Hubbard and Silas as they talk, by letting us guess successfully at what Bartley sees and feels, and Silas too, Howells reaps great advantages through making it all *seem* objective. The playwright must stay out of sight and let the play speak to his audience unless he wishes to shatter the essential illusions of acceptance and participation on which all his dramatic

appeal must rest. When the novelist becomes equally "dramatic," he can induce a very strong sense of reality in his readers by enticing them to play the scenes upon the stages of their own imaginations rather than be told, "Once upon a time there were Three Bears." And since it is most the vision of a world, not big emotional effects, this kind of author seeks, he does well to keep himself and his own emotions out of the way.

By manipulating the points of view from which we see the characters and their settings and the internal viewpoints from which the characters see themselves, each other, and their circumstances, the novelist can stage his scenes with a completeness and flexibility to be rivaled only by the cinema at its best. Yet, just as on the stage, his scenic success depends most of all on the way he makes his people talk. As a young writer, Howells once despaired of success in fiction because he thought he could not write dialogue. Throughout *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, however, the talk is so expertly tailored to each speaker's voice and personality, is shaped to advance the development of the novel so subtly, and flows with such abundance and sparkle that Howells could even afford to crack jokes about it. Bromfield Corey, that beautiful but useless begonia of Brahmin culture, says dispiritedly at one point, "The whole Lapham tribe is distasteful to *me*. . . . I ask myself, what have I done nothing for, all my life, and lived as a gentleman should, upon the earnings of somebody else, in the possession of every polite taste and feeling that adorns leisure, if I'm to come to this at last? . . . It wasn't their behavior . . . ; but their conversation was terrible."

Howells can afford such a side-remark precisely because the reader has heard everybody talk in the book and knows just what — how much and how little — value to give to Corey's complaint. Readers have been living with his people long and intimately enough so they can make their own judgments within the world of his novel without obtrusive guidance from the author. That fact is the essence of his triumph as an artist; the qualities of that world and our sense of them constitute his triumph as a realist.

Contrary to the naïve notion that realism is like a thoughtless photography devoid of symbolism, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is rich in symbols. Careful consideration of the implications of the four houses (the Coreys', and Lapham's Vermont, Nankeen Square, and Beacon Street homes) or of the Persis Brand of paint would bring a student rich rewards in grasping some of the strong ideas at work. But the most dramatic example of the realistic symbol at work comes right at the climax of the novel.



Bereft of help even from the wife who has long been his conscience, Silas must choose between financial salvation and moral damnation on the one hand and sure economic ruin for righteousness' sake on the other. The slippery ex-partner, Rogers, whom Silas had ruthlessly forced out of the paint business just when it promised to pay well, has found a couple of English rascals administering a philanthropic fund for a commission. Collusion with them will let Silas sell off the Western mills which the robber-baron railroad, The Great Lacustrine and Polar, is squeezing out of his hands, and the resulting capital could save his business. Now Silas must decide once and for all. His million has been made through sin and pride — especially the sin against Rogers. Shall he keep it at the price of final, irrevocable rascality? Or shall he repent, do right, and go under?

His helpless wife listens to Silas "begin walking up and down; and then the rest of the night she lay awake and listened to him walking up and down. But when the first light whitened the window, the words of the Scripture came into her mind: 'And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. . . . And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' " The Biblical quotation is, of course, from the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. The charming, aggressive younger son determined to inherit the leadership of God's people, Jacob had always been a bit of a scoundrel. But the turning point of his life came at a moment of mystic vision in which his great ability and determination were turned round and so devoted to Jehovah that he became fitted to be God's patriarch. That event was symbolized in the story of Jacob's wrestling all night with an angel, not conquered, not conquering, until at dawn the angel begged, as Mrs. Lapham recalled, to be allowed to break off the combat and go. Jacob, hard bargainer to the end, refused unless he were blessed. Then the angel blessed him, and, just to show Jacob what the real situation was, concluded by reaching out and just touching Jacob's hip-socket, leaving it permanently dislocated and Jacob crippled for life.

The application of the story to Silas Lapham's case is easy to see. Silas finds the strength in his conscience to wrestle his pride to a stalemate and refuse to join Rogers's scheme. He finds the strength to be harder on himself than on Rogers. But no Horatio Alger miracle of worldly reward ensues. Silas is left saved but shorn. Wrestling with righteousness leaves him crippled. In his fall is his rise, but the rise is only out of the clutches of evil and

back to the level where he can hope to lead a moral life for the future. He cannot feel heroic. His defeat is salved by no heavenly balm, his virtue uncompensated by anything save mere self-rescue by the skin of his teeth. Even when scriptural symbolism is used by a realist, that is to say, it points back and inward into his novel. It reinforces and emphasizes the total impact of the particular work of the imagination with which he hopes to enthrall his reader. It provides no warranty for meanings to be grasped outside the context of the fiction in which it occurs.

Perhaps it ought to be added at this point that a fictional technique like that we have been describing, the technique of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and other realistic novels to this day, makes strong demands on the skill and attention of a reader. Fiction which is determined not to tell the reader what to think but to be as altogether artistic as it can in directing the reader's imagination to create experience for itself, and then think through to the meaning of the experience, demands that the reader contribute a good deal of himself. When it also is determined to avoid big, splashing emotional effects and to keep everything both unified in the single artistic form and harmonious with the realist's "average" view of life, it demands that the reader be mature enough to have outgrown "Jack-and-the-Beanstalk" and Western horse-opera far enough to care for the wonderful subtleties of life as he can live it. Some readers and critics have refused to meet these demands and have objected to being asked to meet them ever since this form of serious fiction began to appear. Others, however, have found that the imaginative hospitality and energy which they had to invest in a deep, thorough reading of this mature literature returned them large dividends in enjoyment, entertainment, and a sharpened insight into the lives they were living in the world of their time.

## II

Howells's realism was not only a way of imagining and seeing life and a technique for expressing that vision; it was also a set of moral convictions stemming from a particular moral vision. Because Howells's realism did let him focus very sharply on many aspects of the life of his time and teach him how to picture it in words for our later minds, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* has a rare, permanent value for the American historian. Boston life of the mid-1870's will never be more concretely available to the historical imagination. But, for all the great values inherent in the

study of history, if that were all, if it were just a matter of the pastness of the past, Howells's novel would hardly be worth the increasing public interest which reproduces it here. It is worth that attention because it now presents the American reader with a literary experience of vitality and significance. The vitality comes from Howells's enduring artistic skill. The significance comes from the importance for American life, both present and future, of the moral issues dramatized in this novel.

These issues are not now essentially different from what they were in the age of Howells during which they assumed their continuing significance for modern culture. At base Howells's questions are perhaps one. They differentiate meaningfully, however, with the roles of the sexes in modern life. Howells and his generation had been born into the ancient securities of mankind's adjustments to the farm-village-town system of a millennial agrarian culture. They lived through the onset of change accelerating upon change which produced modern industrial and urban culture. Howells himself was born in a raw, new boom-town on the Ohio River, the son of parents reared on the frontier. He died in 1920 in the early years of the present Air and Electronic eras. In the old culture men and women had known readily what their right responsibilities were and how they were supposed to fulfill them. Howells was one of the earliest among the artists who sensed that, as the new age came on, old patterns were made obsolete and people must be confused by the difficulties of creating workable substitutes.

Specifically, one of the most powerful and puzzling of the new phenomena was the Businessman — not the same as the old merchant or even the old banker — and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was the first important novel to deal with him. A potent social, political, and economic figure, the businessman both symbolized and wielded forces which were then as mysterious in their meaning as they were obviously gigantic in their power to alter the fabric of human life. As the great tycoons and the swarms of little bosses rose into public view, it could be seen that almost all of them came from obscure origins and owed small allegiance to the old dominant classes, their ways and ideals. What, then, were the businessman's first moral responsibilities to himself and society? What were his problems and temptations? And what of the businessman's women-folk? How did they fit in? What were their needs? What their potentialities for good or evil?

Howells's analysis of the moral condition of the new business class in American life grew devastating as the novelist explored

the creative insights his knowledge and intuitions supplied him in working out the fates of the Laphams and Coreys. Silas, he finds, has come from rural New England, once the cradle of a Golden Day, but now sunk into the dry-rot of cultural obsolescence. Silas's brothers have all moved West. Having tried Texas, Silas has returned, found Vermont impossible, moved to Boston and become a millionaire. For him the fires of New England moral idealism have simply gone out. In Mrs. Lapham, a temperamental puritan and a naturally conservative woman, they still burn — but with far more heat than light. Striving to be Silas's conscience, she is disastrously prone to oversimplification, rigidity, pettiness, and vindictiveness in her morality. Tragically, at the moment of Silas's great need for her help, she is sidetracked by her pettiness, confuses respectability with righteousness, and so far succumbs to her vindictiveness that she loses all contact with the real issues. Even what is left of Puritan morality and traditional rural Yankee culture proves irrelevant to the businessman's need.

Yet that need for help is desperately great. Unintellectual at best, Silas the businessman is at the mercy of the jungle ethics of the System. "Root, hog, or die!" "Every man for himself, and the devil take hindmost," cried the Gospel of Wealth. William Graham Sumner and the Social Darwinists gave that gospel philosophic sanctions. The rewards to business ruthlessness in economic success, political power, and social prestige in contemporary America made Silas wonder if the old laws, perhaps even the old gods, had not been repealed in favor of Fisk, Drew, Harriman, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Lapham's Mineral Paint.

But Howells's discovery was that objective, realistic consideration of the businessman's human condition revealed that the old laws had by no means been repealed. As John Woolman, the Quaker saint of colonial America, had said of what he called the Spirit of Fierceness, the root of all social evil was the condemnation of some men to slavery, suffering, or destruction that others might live in superfluous luxury and economic power for the sake of nourishing their pride of ego. When Silas was arrogant, aggressive, bull-headed, and rapacious, these were precisely the sins of pride Christian morality had long supposed them to be. Not orthodoxly Christian, Howells was convinced that he saw the moral laws of life rejecting and punishing such pride.

The villain of the piece, in fact, was a moral flaw in romanticism. It tempted men to think of themselves more highly than

they ought, to try to become Dr. Faustus, rising above humanity and seeking to rival God — man's primal sin. "Money," says perceptive Bromfield Corey, "is to the fore now. It is the romance, the poetry of our age. It's the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination." And Mrs. Lapham, in a very different conversation, brings the point directly home to Silas by making him face the truth about forcing Rogers out of the business: "No, you had got greedy, Silas. You had made your paint your god, and you couldn't bear to let anybody else share in its blessings." That is the reason for the necessity of the paradox of the rise of Silas Lapham. Only by falling from the heights of romantic arrogance can he rise anew to the possibility of human goodness.

Why is Silas so alone in his dilemma? Why does he get so little help from his wife and daughters? Because they also are trapped — by feminine romanticisms. They pursue egotistic will-o'-the-wisps into sloughs of frustration. Howells was a firm feminist, a believer in the innate superiority of women over men. Consequently, he grieved at the frivolity of women and the irrelevancy of their activities to the real problems of modern life, particularly to Silas's problems. What dissipated women's energies and distracted their fine perceptions and moral sensibilities? Romanticisms to which they were especially prone: the pursuit of social prestige; the pursuit of a largely footless esthetic cultivation, like that embodied in Bromfield Corey's sterile elegance; addiction to that quixotism of self-sacrifice for the sake of "heroic" emotions which Howells had the Reverend Mr. Sewell condemn in season and out.

Though married to a Yankee girl from Brattleboro, Vermont, Howells had been born and reared in Ohio. And when he came in 1866 to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and study Boston life, he felt the differences between East and West keenly. Most of his early fiction was devoted to studies of the "unconventional" or natural and usually Western gentleman or lady in conjunction with the "conventional" or socially accepted Bostonian counterpart. Uniformly in those books the "unconventional" person triumphed. As Howells's art and insights matured (and as American life changed), however, he came to the knowledge forcibly dramatized in the Corey-Lapham, woman-dominated half of this novel. That knowledge was that things had become so changed in American life that the old detached, gentlemanly forms of cultivation no longer really mattered. What has Bromfield Corey to offer Silas Lapham? Civilization, says Corey himself, is "really an affair of individuals — One brother will be civilized and the

other a barbarian." And again, "All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country" — and that is why Penelope Lapham, for all her family's vulgarity, can be more civilized than any of Bromfield Corey's own daughters and so really worthy of Tom.

The feminine warfare for social position and prestige Howells thought just as jungle-evil and destructive as the masculine fight for money-power. The Laphams are punished for seeking it and the Coreys for defeating them. The Coreys lose their son, not only to Penelope but to business and to the extra-Bostonian world. After bravely enduring their formal courtesies for a week before she leaves with Tom for his new job in Mexico City, Penelope heaves a long sigh of relief on her way to the station.

"'What is it?' asked Corey, who ought to have known better.

"'Oh, nothing. I don't think I shall feel strange amongst the Mexicans now.' "

The final verdict is that the major moral laws are still what the long experience of mankind has found them to be. The prideful spirit of fierceness will scorch and destroy, will condemn victor and victim to suffering and destruction. Fed by romantic superhumanism, that spirit is doubly dangerous. Unleashed by the falling into obsolescence of the old culture, it is triply so. The moral condition of modern man, the businessman, Silas Lapham and his family, is precarious indeed. Creative responses of the most fundamental sort are needed to restrain and reconcile the new man to the possibilities of his new conditions. Women as well as men, perhaps particularly women, will have to free themselves from bondage to the past and begin to create. Yet there is solid ground for hope in the moral view of Howells's novel. Individuals like Penelope can still become civilized on their own. Individuals like Tom Corey can throw off the fetters of obsolescence and be filled again with the energy and initiative of the founding fathers of a culture. In planning *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in his notebook, Howells remembered an effective symbol from the frontier forests of his youth which he implied in the marriage of Tom and Penelope but did not see fit to quote in the final text of the book: "The young trees growing out of the fallen logs in the forest — the new life out of the old. Apply to Lapham's fall." \*

\* Quoted by permission of the Heirs of William Dean Howells.



After more than two generations of the realistic novel, followed by the naturalistic, stream-of-consciousness, Freudian, and existentialist novels, it is hard for us to realize what a bombshell *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was in its own day. Sir Edmund Gosse reported to Howells that it was a major topic of conversation in London. Tourists pestered policemen in Boston to point out Silas's home. A Methodist preacher in Indianapolis was disciplined for daring to take the novel for his sermon text: it would be interesting to know all the motives of his critics! A Midwestern paint company applied for permission to use Silas Lapham as the name of one of its brands. Booth Tarkington, a boy in Indiana, used to lie in wait for the mailman and greedily intercept the family copy of the *Century Magazine* with the latest installment of *Lapham*; years later he recalled how he had choked up and sobbed when forced to confess that Silas had got drunk at the Coreys' dinner party.

Influential and perceptive readers detected greatness in the novel. The great French critic Hippolyte Taine recommended that a Parisian publisher have it translated. He thought it in 1888 the best novel written by an American, the most profound and comprehensive, the most (supreme French praise) like Balzac. He had read it in English, Taine confided, "*avec le plus grand plaisir et avec beaucoup d'admiration.*" William James raved about Howells's fidelity to the truth of human nature, the vitality, humor, and concreteness of his artistry, and predicted immortality for the novel for as long as novels can endure.

Romanticists, on the other hand, were furious at Howells's challenge to their dominance over American taste. Still more dangerous to the author and his novel's success, however, was the fact that widely different religious critics decided that their well-being lay in identifying their own positions with romantic idealism. One denominational writer called *The Rise of Silas Lapham* "poison" because its "moral tone" was "so hopelessly bad." Howells, said the righteous critic, was soulless and cold, his work a "degradation." The scene featuring Zerrilla Millon Dewey, he said — to what must have been Howells's utter astonishment — "for helpless depravity both in the author and subject, out-Zolas Zola." The realist's insistence on dealing with ordinary people in commonplace conditions, he concluded, is simply disgusting; it is really "the progress from man to the apes, from the apes to the

worms, from the worms to bacteria, from bacteria to mud. It is the descent to dirt."

Intemperately absurd as that criticism may seem, it represented accurately the response to *Lapham's* serious approach to American life on the part of the contemporary romantic idealist — as may be seen from the similarity of the argument constructed by a much more sophisticated critic in the journal of a denomination usually poles apart from the first one. For Howells and his school, this critic admitted, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was a first-class achievement. It was the school with which he proposed to quarrel. He did not agree that Howells was like Balzac. For Balzac, a romancer, had been true to "the essential reality of the old ends and subjects of art" — he had revealed the "ideality," the "spiritual types" and "spiritual laws" behind the facts of life. Howells's love of "commonplace people" he also rejected, partly on snobbish grounds (these are "people whom one would positively avoid coming in contact with in real life"), partly on romantic grounds (these are too ordinarily particular persons, not the "large, typical characters" of older fiction). The lack of declared emotional bias in the author the critic deplores: he has "no mist of tears" over his eyes as he writes. "It is certainly a mental or moral disease which makes such trivial themes attractive to men of real talent," says this religious critic. And, finally, "modern realism . . . is, in a word, practical atheism applied to art."

Since the writing of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* had been in fact a profound spiritual experience for Howells, as we have seen, such criticism must have seemed as strange as it was unfair to him. No doubt his reaction to it strengthened his resolve as he persevered through the following years in becoming at once the militant critical champion of American realism and a thoroughgoing critic of America's social and economic conditions at the latter end of the Gilded Age. His example of conviction, integrity, courage, and growth in art and philosophy failed in the long run to win American taste away from the romancers. But it inspired young writers as they came along in their generations, often profoundly. Each in his way and in his time, dozens of authors fell into Howells's debt for help, encouragement, or stimulus. The growth of an enduring realistic movement in America is studded with the names of those who knew or corresponded with, or were helpfully reviewed by or recommended to publishers by Howells, and who were all somehow conscious that he was their captain in what Stephen Crane called "the beau-

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TEXT: *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was published serially in the *Century Magazine*, November 1884-August 1885, and, after slight alterations by the author, by Ticknor and Co., of Boston, in the autumn of 1885, in what has long stood as the standard edition.