

The Rise of Silas Lapham

William Dean Howells , Kermit Vanderbilt (Introduction)

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William Dean Howells' richly humorous characterization of a self-made millionaire in Boston society provides a paradigm of American culture in the Gilded Age.

After establishing a fortune in the paint business, Silas Lapham moves his family from their Vermont farm to the city of Boston, where they awkwardly attempt to break into Brahmin society.

The Rise of Silas Lapham Details


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From Reader Review The Rise of Silas Lapham for online ebook

Jan-Maat says

My curiosity led me into reading this book because of review which said that it was unusual because the plot was resolved by means of double entry book-keeping.

As it turns out this is not the case. This is not the great accountancy novel that we have all been waiting for in which dastardly book-keeping is resolved by some forensic analysis and a last-minute audit.

Other points of interest the Romantic role of woodshavings, and civil war veteran novels, the imagery of house building in the modern novel

Margaretmcmillan says

This is a fabulous book, and it made me proud to be an American (no really!). It's a little slow in the middle, but persevere and you will be rewarded.

For a guy who said that novels were wicked, William Dean Howells sure did write a lot of novels. I've been told that his corpus is a very moral one, and there's very little innuendo in any of his novels. I'm reading "Sister Carrie" right now, and let me tell you, there's certainly not any prostitution in "Silas Lapham." Neither is there binge drinking, gambling, other Victorian wickedness, murder, theft, or smoking (except by upstanding gentlemen who gather in the smoking room to partake of expensive cigars). Even then, Howells carefully points out the evils of liquor by humorously getting the tea-drinking Lapham accidentally drunk. He makes a fool of himself and then promptly repents the next day.

Why did I like the novel so well? Because of the character of Persis, Lapham's wife, who, although middle-class, is a truly swell lady. At last, a woman with a strong back-bone who aids her husband rather than unmanning him. Also, she hasn't any interest in female flippery, but still behaves like a lady. The relationship between these two characters makes the book well-worth reading.

Also, I appreciated how clean this whole text was. It was a nice change after reading reading other 'unsavory' novels which I will not mention here ('Lolita' cough cough, by Nabokov. cough cough). Okay, so call me old-fashioned if you want, but is it so bad that I enjoy reading novels I could recommend to my Grandmother (who reminds me of Persis by the way ;))? Besides, this novel demonstrates that it doesn't need a plot-line full of garbage in order to be well constructed. Also, he tells a good story without being overly moralizing. If you know what I'm talking about, pick up "Silas Lapham." If you don't know what I'm talking about, then shame on you! You should also read "Silas Lapham."

Carol says

Another book I read as a result of my recent interest in the lesser-known authors and novels of the nineteenth century, Silas Lapham was pretty good. Part tragedy, part comedy of manners, it gave me a good

look at the late nineteenth century clash between old money and new money. The comedy part comes in with the irony that Silas Lapham views his honest earning of a fortune through commercial enterprise as a sign of his social worthiness, while the old money upper class society views that same thing as a sign of his social unworthiness. And neither side ever becomes aware of this difference in perspective as the root of the gap between them. The tragedy is Lapham's loss of his fortune through honest errors and an unwillingness to engage in shady dealings. And yet, Silas and his family come through their financial ruin with their characters not only intact, but also strengthened and edified. It is to Howells' credit as a writer that this aspect of the novel is not treated with mushy sentimentality.

Wanda says

15 SEP 2015 - a good, solid read. Silas Lapham is a self-made man who, when faced with a moral dilemma, did the right thing even when doing the right thing proved to be very hard on a personal level for him. I admire this trait in Silas.

Michelle says

I was pleasantly surprised by this rags-to-riches-to rags closeup of "nouveau riche meets bluebloods" story. Why had I never heard of Howells before? I'll be looking up more. I heard him referred to in a book as "The American Dickens" but he reminds me more of Wharton, just he is kinder to his characters. None of them were perfect or romanticized but all were sympathetic and I enjoyed reading about what happened to them. Howells' comments on novels were amusing. I'll definitely be looking up more from this author.

Shane says

Oh, the books I've read. This is by far the worst of them. The first forever of pages talks about nothing but paint and the Lapham family paint factory. The rest of the novel is nothing more than a poorly played out soap opera. The characters all seem shallow and despite the hard times that come about in the book - it never seems in touch with the hard times the rest of America was dealing with at the time. I don't have time to shed tears for the wealthy men (self-made or not) who mismanaged their empire.

Laurel Hicks says

A charming clash of generations and class.

Manray9 says

William Dean Howells was a late 19th century leader of American Realist fiction. Then he was prominent, but now has been virtually forgotten outside of a few classrooms. His *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a distinctly American novel of manners depicting the conflicts of life in the Gilded Age. It is a rags to riches

and back to rags again tale. Silas Lapham became wealthy as a paint magnate, but longed for the social prominence so important in the Boston of the 1880s. The novel sketches the parallels between the materialism of his business ambitions and the push for his beautiful, but flighty, younger daughter to marry into the aristocratic Corey family of Beacon Hill. Both endeavors came to lamentable ends. Lapham is redeemed morally after his business failure, while his daughter finds a new, more levelheaded, perspective on life. He regains happiness only with the loss of his fortune and the abandonment of his social aspirations. The coveted Mr. Corey finds true love in the arms of Lapham's less attractive, but sensible, older daughter.

Louis Auchincloss, who provided the introduction to this Signet Classic edition, was profuse in praise of Howells. He cited Howells' success in dramatizing the "process of amalgamation between the old and new rich." He assessed that amalgamation as already "hovering" in 1885. Auchincloss traced the literary figure of the social climber from Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age*, through Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, past Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and up to Nancy Mitford. Such stories are less weighty today. Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is of interest now only as a literary artifact of the Gilded Age and an early example of American Realism. As a novel it contains too much feminine hand-wringing and intense moral anguish over ultimately petty issues. I consider it Three Star material.

Rachel says

Silas Lapham is a self-made millionaire in the paint business, rich but lacking the social status that comes with inherited wealth. After his wife and daughters do a favor for the better-placed Corey family, the family scion Tom Corey begins to work for Lapham and also to call on the family regularly, presumably to court the prettier daughter Irene. Silas and his wife Persis become socially ambitious, not entirely on their own behalf, but more to ensure the future of their daughters, symbolized by the building of a \$100,000 house on Boston's Beacon Street. When Tom reveals that it is the older daughter Penelope who he wants to marry, the family is thrown into moral crisis. At the same time, Lapham enters into a series of bad business deals with his former partner in an effort to make up for pushing him out of the paint business just before it became successful. He leverages his business to the point of bankruptcy, and can save it only by compromising his own sense of fairness.

This is definitely not an action-packed novel and small events take on huge importance for the characters in a way that might not resonate with a contemporary reader. What made the book compelling to me was the innate goodness of all the major characters and their constant struggle to balance morality and self-sacrifice. Also, I just really liked Silas. He's rough and a bit of a blowhard, but he's so fundamentally decent you can't help but root for him. The scene of the Corey dinner party where he can't follow the conversation and drinks too much wine out of nervousness is particularly endearing in a horrifying, humiliating sort of way. The Corey family, despite their snobbishness, are likewise very decent people as they seem to feel it would be bad manners to be otherwise. Maybe it's just me, but I am finding good manners particularly refreshing lately. I would recommend this book to anyone who's in a patient mood; otherwise, the thing about the stupid wood shaving will make you insane.

David Lentz says

This is a good American novel which is well shy of greatness because the author's characters read with a few exceptions more like simple archetypes of the American Dream. The novel concerns the eponymous Silas

who has discovered a paint mine and brought his high quality paint to market. His business success generates sufficient revenues to merit the construction of a new home on the water side of Beacon Street in the Back Bay of Boston. There he meets the archetypal Brahmin family, the Coreys, who have issues with the Lapham family's humble origins. The writing style is straight-ahead narrative, which proves to be a struggle to become immersed in: there's no stylistic invention here but the craftsmanship is respectable. The dialogue seems stilted, cold and formal in places but that may tend to be so in Boston. The novel is emotively neutral: Silas is an honest man of action but deeply stoic with little to say even in the worst crises. Howells can write well enough but his style does not engage. I have a similar complaint of Henry James who seems to write elegantly and prolifically about little of importance. However, the writing style of James is luminous. As a Bostonian who has lived in the Back Bay, I was intrigued by his descriptions of it and Beacon Hill in the latter half of the 19th century. This book was also one of the earliest novels to focus upon the rise of business owners in pursuit the American Dream. The ethical idealism of Lapham and his wife -- some might say their naivete -- prove to be a challenge in the profitable pursuit of business in the big city. The family of Silas seems drawn credibly as is the young Tom Corey but pretty much everyone else seemed flat and archetypal. Howells was very well connected as a writer in Boston and traveled widely abroad during his life among the upper class. Howells is concerned about the true nature of the chimera of success and whether an investment in the dogged pursuit of it for financial gain is worth all the time and effort spent to gain it. That's a fair and relevant question, of course, to consider in your own life as you read "The Rise Silas Lapham." Sorry, but while I respect the writing, this novel simply left me fairly flat.

Jerry says

I didn't read much beyond the first half of this book. The more I read it, the less interesting it became to me. I'm sure that the book has merit, but I read for two primary reasons; to be entertained by reading books that are worthwhile and interesting, and to better myself in a way that expands my appreciation for literature. Having said that, though, I find it very difficult to read a boring book just because it is supposed to be good for me to read it. Silas Lapham just didn't catch my interest in time for me to feel compelled to finish it.

Chrissie says

I recommend this book to those of you who like American Realism - "a style in art, music and literature that depicted contemporary social realities and the lives and everyday activities of ordinary people. The movement began in literature in the mid-19th century." (Wikipedia) This book was published in 1885. Mark Twain, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair and Edith Wharton are authors of this school of writing and authors you most probably recognize.

William Dean Howells saw the value of the ordinary in everyday life. He sought a shift from the romanticism and idealism characterizing earlier literature. This is not to say that love and romance is absent from this book. Nor is this to say that morality is not a central theme. There **is** a love affair and morality **is** in fact its central theme. Morality in business and morality in love. What makes this a book of American Realism is how the story is drawn. Characters are not drawn in black or white but rather each character is splotted with black **and** white **and** gray. Each character is good and bad, makes mistakes, sometimes learns from a mistake and sometimes doesn't. I like this and the lives described felt very real too me.

There is humor. Tell me, how many times have you had to go to a party you did not want to go to?! The

hassle of the proper clothes to wear, the talk at the party and falling into the trap of too much alcohol. The time setting of this book is in the 1870s, but not that much has changed since then! Still today, many tie themselves in knots to be accepted into the right social group. That is another theme of this book. The setup is a family that has become successful in the sale of a unique kind of paint and they have moved themselves from Vermont to Boston. What happens then?

The plot has not just one but several elements that all tie together - business deals, a triangle love affair, disputes within marriages and a fire. It is the plot, how the different parts fit together and how the sum of the parts are so realistically drawn that is the attraction of this book.

When I closed the book, I marveled at its realism, but I must also acknowledge that I never became all that engaged in any of the characters' private dilemmas. I observed from the outside. Each character may have been well drawn, but in my heart, I felt for none of them.

The audiobook is narrated by Grover Gardner. What can I say? He always gives a very good performance. He reads clearly and with feeling but doesn't over-dramatize.

Jim Leckband says

The more accurate title would be "The Rise and Then Somewhat Depressing Train Wreck That Could Be Seen For 200 Pages of Silas Lapham".

Silas Lapham is a self-made millionaire from the very wrong side of the tracks who doesn't know what to do with his money. His only passion is his paint and his morality. Oh...his morality. Do we ever read about his morality. Apparently, early on he bought out his partner who brought capital to his business. The partner wasn't helping the business and didn't have the vision Lapham had. This colossal sin (!) sets up the rest of the novel for which Lapham pays with his business, house and all his fortune.

Of course, Lapham could have forestalled the bankruptcy at least 8,467 times by my count if he would have done a little moral jiu-jitsu that business people do every day. We're not talking Simon Legree here. But no, Howells sets up Lapham as the man who can't do wrong even as his paint empire spills out of the bucket. And this is the Paradise Lost paradox - we care about (or are more interested in) devils more than the saints. Here is an apt quote from a Balzac book that I'm reading after this one:

The moralist cannot deny that, as a rule, well-bred though very wicked men are far more attractive and lovable than virtuous men; having crimes to atone for, they crave indulgence by anticipation, by being lenient to the shortcomings of those who judge them, and they are thought most kind.

Lapham's sole wickedness that I can ferret out is that he loves to brag about his paint and his coming up from nothing. We get some comedy out of it, but it is still middling stuff.

The side plot of Lapham's daughters and the aristocratic Tom Corey is the best part of the book, if a little melodramatic. Everyone gets to self-sacrifice to their hearts content and it is fun to see them trying to beat each other to the pyre.

There are a lot of unsubtle digs in the novel at novels of the day and their unreality and sentimentality. It is obvious that "Lapham" is a rejoinder to those novels - but I'm not sure that it is much of an improvement as it

is not terribly exciting without the "amping" up that unreality and sentimentality can give.

Al says

This book, which might more accurately be entitled "The Fall of Silas Lapham", is set in late 19th Century Boston. Mr. Lapham is a self-made millionaire paint manufacturer, living with his wife and two marriage-eligible daughters in a reasonable house, and aspiring to a grander one. He is crude and rugged, and the family is not successful in mingling with Boston's moneyed elite. Mr. Howells explores the conflicts and stresses on the Lapham family as the son of one of Boston's First Families goes to work for Silas and begins to court one of his daughters. A series of social and financial debacles ensues, and Howells uses these development to illustrate the corrosive effect of class consciousness on social and business relationships. Howells has been criticized for not having much to say in his novels, but I found this book to be very interesting. Howells is fair with his characters, and doesn't whitewash any of them. His dialogue and character analysis ring true. There is a truly tragic element to the story, and the clash of nouveau riche and old money would have appealed particularly to the reading public of this era.

James says

Book Review

3 of 5 stars to *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells. Most of the works of literature that made up the canon during the late nineteenth century were classified as realistic literature. These realistic works resembled life as realistically as possible, ranging from youthful adventures in the South, to small town gossip of a few central families and to morals vs. business in Bostonian society. In Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Silas and his family moved from their farm in Vermont to the city of Boston where Silas hoped to continue making it big in the paint business. Throughout the time that he was earning all of his money and trying to settle in the elitist class of Boston society, Silas continually lost his morals and ethics. While Silas' loss of morals was parallel with his rise in wealth, his gain in morals was parallel with his loss of wealth. All of these aspects of American life at this time were "infused with a moral purpose which transformed society, sometimes for good, but also for evil." The moral purpose/guide in Silas' case was his wife, Persis Lapham, who constantly reminded her husband that his greed was overcoming him. Persis wisely said to Silas, "No; you had better face the truth, Silas. It was no chance at all. You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! 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" (IV, 47). Silas' moral decline and Persis' recognition of this was evident amongst people of similar nature in society of the late nineteenth century. Society at this time was sometimes holistic, but it was also dirty. When society was preserved, the baser aspects of human life were overcome with reason." Yet, it was not uncommon for morals to come and go during this time, better known as the Gilded Age. It may have seemed all golden and wonderful on the outside amongst the people (Silas' wealth in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*), but on the inside (Silas' wasn't really accepted into Brahmin society) it was a cheap version of the truth; every aspect of human life was corrupted, and reason was lost without the establishment of an honest society. Silas' greed is a representation of the life and times of the many [wo]men who lived in the realistic period. Everything was about keeping up appearances, but there was never anything to back up the facade that was put on. There was no straight black and white; shades of gray and murky ethics dominated during this period of realism known historically as The Gilded

Age.

About Me

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by. *Note:* All written content is my original creation and copyrighted to me, but the graphics and images were linked from other sites and belong to them. Many thanks to their original creators.

Werner says

Recently, I was looking over some of my old notes on classics that I've read; that list isn't as long as I'd like, but it was also startling to note how few of the books on it I've actually reviewed on Goodreads. I try to make time to do a book review roughly every week, and if I'm not reviewing a book I've just finished, I take the opportunity to review one that I've already read; but those number in the hundreds, and the choice of which one to review is often rather random. So I've decided, for the rest of this year, to try to concentrate my "retrospective" reviews on the classics as much as I can. (Maybe that will partly make up for flopping royally, as I surely will, on my classics reading challenge for 2012! :-)) This 19th-century masterpiece of American Realism was an easy choice for the first beneficiary of this agenda.

Critics reckon Howells as one of the three leading masters of Realist fiction in the era between the Civil War and World War I, the other two being Twain and Henry James; but he tends to be the least well known and read of that triumvirate today. That's a shame, because (based on what I've read of all three) his literary gifts were at least the equal of either of the others. And in this novel, which isn't nearly as well-known as it deserves to be (I read it only as background reading for teaching American Literature when we were homeschooling our girls; and I regret that I waited so long to read it!), he created, IMO, a landmark classic of American letters.

There's a lot for the fan of serious "mainstream," or descriptive, fiction to enjoy here: good storytelling that demonstrates that regular life can be the stuff of absorbing fiction; sharply-drawn characters (both male and female, though the focus is more on the former) who aren't stereotypes, and who come very much alive to the reader; a keen authorial eye for social foibles, without being harshly condemning of the characters; and a strong sense of place --Howells wasn't born or bred in Boston, but he lived there long enough to be familiar with it and to evoke it well. This is a tale of family dynamics, of romance with an unexpected twist, of the social conflicts between old and new money in that time and place; a "novel of manners" that succeeds in making that type of fiction more interesting than the conventional label for it sounds. All this is delivered in literate, smooth prose that (despite the 1885 publication date) didn't strike me as noticeably stilted nor convoluted (it really shouldn't be daunting for any intelligent modern reader). But the deepest dimension of truly great fiction is its moral dimension, a core message that bears witness to the bedrock truth that the most important earthly thing in our lives is how we treat each other; and it's here that this novel really shines. Howells casts a penetrating eye over the class snobbery of that day (which isn't really any different now), the false priorities and vanity that promote ostentatious waste of money to buy status, and the myriad small ways that we either treat each other with kindness and respect, or fail to do so. But the central, climactic moral choice of the novel is a single, simple one: will the title character accept his own total financial ruin --or save

himself from it by participating (only in the most passive way, by mere silence) in just one dishonest swindle, of people he doesn't even know and will never have occasion to encounter again?

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

From the very first paragraph, this felt as comfortable as putting on old comfy clothes and stretching out in the recliner. I read this in Complete Works of William Dean Howells where there is a very short introduction. I was reminded that Howells is among those of a group of realist writers. My favorites Anthony Trollope and of course Honoré de Balzac are also among this group. No wonder he feels so comfortable!

The GR description says: *After establishing a fortune in the paint business, Silas Lapham moves his family from their Vermont farm to the city of Boston, where they awkwardly attempt to break into Brahmin society.* I must admit I don't know who wrote this, but perhaps he did not read the book. Silas Lapham has indeed made a fortune in the paint business, but the family does not try to break into Brahmin society. Actually, they seem quite content to keep to themselves. Still, relationships form and people are not always as comfortable as they might be in other novels of the period.

Howells has a good time making fun of novels of the period. One such plot is discussed at more length by the characters, only to have the plot of *Silas Lapham* turn in the same direction. It was an interesting device to move the story along. I will happily turn to Howells again. Though this is perhaps his best known work - and maybe his best work also - this is still just 4 stars from me.

Elizabeth says

Various elements of this novel made me want to compare it with a variety of other much-loved authors (or mine and others). The titular character contains elements of Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, the trenchant social critique recalls Wharton, the plot (particularly the marriage plot) could have been taken right out of the pages of Jane Austen. And, despite these (worthy) comparisons, this novel is also all its own: its a realistic yet also somewhat satirical look at the rise of America's nouveau riche at a time when America itself was still in its building stages. The novel reflects on all of the complications such social striving engendered, and does so in a way that manages to be both critical and also sympathetic to those on both sides of the aisle (i.e., the social strivers and the born-wealthy). The clash between these two hits its crescendo in the novel's brilliant middle-section, particularly at a dinner party where the Laphams are guests of the Boston Brahmin Coreys. This scene alone makes the entire book worth reading, though I wish it ended on as high a note as this climactic moment.

Helynnne says

This is one of our most unappreciated gems of 19th-century American literature, I believe, since I rarely hear of it, and read it myself only as an assignment in a literature class. The novel, which is considered a classic in American realism, could also be entitled *The Rise and Fall and Subsequent Rising Again of Silas Lapham* because of the materialistic and moral lessons of the title character. Lapham is a simple man, who undergoes the classic rags-to-riches story by way of the development of a phenomenal new paint that comes from materials found on his own land. Lapham, his wife, and two daughters, are pleased with their new social

status, but ignorant in the ways of the upper class, and naive about proper behavior, protocol, etc., Silas's subsequent "fall" from the upper class could have been avoided, but comes about because of his own integrity, and moral choices he feels he must make. So, one is left to ponder if Silas is really a poor man at the end of the story or an infinitely better one. A subplot involving Lapham's two daughters--one pretty, one not so pretty--and the unlikely romances that face each one is also ironic.

Tim says

Going into this book I had been lead to expect a forgotten masterpiece of American literature and for at least the first third or so it was living up to my expectations. Ultimately, however, I think it fails in a couple of ways. A couple of narrative elements are dragged on for too long, specifically the romance plot and the business stuff. More importantly, by setting the titular character up as a representative of the new class of self made rich men and then having him make choices for moral reasons to his financial detriment seems highly unrealistic with regards to the actual history of unscrupulous robber barons. This lack of realism is especially appalling as Howells' stated purpose was to replace melodramatic sentimental novels with something a bit more like real life. He actually does a decent job with the realism in the romance plot although it would have been much more effective if he had let it proceed more quickly; it seems that he was afraid to go too far from the sentimental format he was so critical of.

Still, it wasn't all bad: when Howells allowed himself to inject an ironic tone into his novel it worked quite well; unfortunately this got less and less frequent as it went on. I really feel like he missed his chance to skewer those really deserving of it while he made Silas Lapham look pretty bad throughout...even though he ultimately seems to be treated as a hero.
