

## **Realism Advancing Above the Sentimentalism in “The Rise of Silas Lapham”**

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In his novel, “The Rise of Silas Lapham,” William Dean Howells presents his ideas on realism under the guise of a standard romantic novel of the day. He introduces us to a family flush with new money, two daughters, and aspirations to be accepted into society. In their interaction with an old money family, Howells moves beyond the stock characters and their predictable actions to paint a pragmatic and more interesting portrait of the family’s journey through this part of their life.

However, Howells does not make the full leap to a gritty and gripping modern novel, hanging on to sentimentality in some places and moving away from it at other points of the story. We only receive hints of the emotions the characters are feeling, and he never plunges deeply into their inner turmoil and never into acting out their passions. The best way to explore how he transitions the reader into realism is by looking at three key characters: Tom Corey, Irene Lapham, Zerrilla, and the titular character, Silas Lapham.

The hopeful young man, a true Boston Blue Blood, Tom Corey, is perhaps the strongest contrast between what we expect of such a character in a romantic novel and how Howells writes him. When we first meet Tom Corey (71), he shows up with the proverbial hat in hand and excitedly gushes over the beauty of Irene Lapham. This is the

expected romantic behavior - the wealthy son falls for the attractive daughter, which in turn starts down the predictable path of the family attempting to make the match happen so they can use the marriage to elevate their own social standing.

However, Tom Corey begins to deviate from the formula in a few ways. First, he does not want to live like his father off the wealth and reputation of previous generations. After bouncing around looking for a vocation, he concludes that he really wants to learn business from a self-made man and grow his own line within Lapham's company (102).

He then moves even further away from the romantic heir when he starts to show signs of affection for the unattractive, sometimes annoying, younger daughter. After professing his love (309), he appears to veer back to the stock role when he agrees to stay away to support the idea that it is unfair to the first daughter to be in love with the second. But, as usually happens in the real world, he struggles to stay away, and we see him stopping by more and more often. Instead of heading off to Mexico, where he would have probably died of some tropical disease in a romantic novel, he convinces Penelope to marry him and join him (505). He is not punished for this selfishness. Instead, his marriage flourishes, and he finds business success with his father-in-law by adapting to changing circumstances and flourishing (510). This breaks the traditional cycle of bad behavior leading to ruin and selfless action to humble rewards.

In many ways, Tom's character is brought to life through his interactions with Irene Lapham. Because she begins the story as a stock character and grows into a complex and believable woman, she represents the romantic novel's transition to realism.

Irene is the standard dull beauty. We learn she “spent her abundant leisure in shopping for herself and her mother” and “dressed herself very stylishly, and spent hours on her toilet every day” (34). Then she takes the standard behavior of even spending hours pining away “up two nights hand running” (314) in sorrow after being spurned. But, instead of wasting away or becoming a spinster, as in real life, she goes off to the country, flirts with a cousin, and with time gets over Tom. Her reaction to Tom’s rejection of her and his affection for her sister is something many readers could identify with. She is hurt on one hand, maybe even jealous, but understands that doing the honorable thing will make all three in the triangle miserable and that the most practical thing to do is encourage her sister to be with Tom. And, again, as many a reader has personally experienced, it makes her miserable. But with time, her mother announces that “You can see that Irene's all over it. (500).

For me, the most interesting character in the story is the beautiful and mysterious typist. We are introduced to her early on when the reporter admires her, telling Lapham, “What an uncommonly pretty girl!” (23) And then everyone that comes into the office makes some mention of her beauty, the implication often being that she must be Lapham’s mistress. Once we get to know her and her troubles, we find that Lapham has introduced her as a working-class character - the daughter of a needy mother and wife of an abusive sailer. The word was not around when the story was written, but the author has interjected a co-dependent triad that is reluctantly supported by Lapham because “he was hound to take care of Jim Millon's worthless wife and her child because Millon had got the bullet that was meant for him” (479).

Every angle of the relationship is complicated and ugly. blackmail (474), tearful begging for money followed by drying false tears, and the equivalent of tucking her manipulation-acquired money in her bra (415), The mystery typist, Zerrilla, is the most authentic character in the novel. Mrs. Lapham's assessment sums up the character when Howells writes, "She looked at this beautiful girl, who had blossomed out of her knowledge since she saw her last, and she knew that she was only a blossomed weed" (480). She is not a victim of anything but her own, and her mother's, bad choices. Zerrilla's beauty is not presented as some sign from nature that she is blessed and deserving of rescue by someone like Tom or one of his friends. Instead, she uses her attractiveness to manipulate people to get her way, as with her potential second husband (478).

Perhaps, if Howells had taken his look at realism even further, he would have written about the Millon clan and their struggles instead of the Laphams. Where the Lapham and Corey families expose hints at human nature, Zerrilla or her mother could very well be "that cousin" that every family seems to have, stuck in a cycle of alcoholism, poverty, sordid sexual encounters, and taking advantage of better-off acquaintances. People who are always desperate and always needing just a little money, and then things will get better. (414-415)

Howells is not so much telling a realistic story as he is sprinkling realistic characters and events into the framework of a standard romantic story. The one place he

strongly falls short of realism is in exploring Silis Lapham's response to his wealth literally going up in smoke. When the new house catches on fire, as a result of Lapham's own carelessness, and we also learn he has not renewed the insurance, a real person would have had some sort of breakdown. A modern novel would have explored the emotional response. All we get is, "He went to bed, and fell into the deep sleep which sometimes follows a great moral shock. It was perhaps rather a torpor than a sleep" (443). This is followed by his awakening the next morning with suppressed suicidal thoughts. "In that moment he wished that he had not wakened, that he might never have wakened; but he rose, and faced the day and its cares" (444).

In many ways, that sentence describing Lapham's thoughts the morning after his lowest point summarizes the use of realism in the story. We got a brief look at what people really think and feel but carry on with what is expected. From the reader's perspective, we get to experience just a little of what the characters feel and compare them with our own feelings and experiences. In a fully romantic novel, the characters are ideal specimens to aspire to or cheer for, or negative archetypes to avoid emulating and enjoy despising. They and their actions evoke sentimentality from the reader. Howells makes his contemporary reader comfortable with the expected, then scratches the surface just enough to go beyond that sentimentality and create empathy and understanding in the reader.

### **Works Cited.**

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