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of Silas Lapham*

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Rethinking the Politics of American Realism
Through the Narrative Form
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The Rise of Silas Lapham

Americanist literary scholars have long considered W. D. Howells the central theorist and practitioner of American realism. The most frequently cited text from this late nineteenth-century genre is probably Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Well into the twentieth century, American realism was frequently understood as a politically progressive genre that sought to mimetically represent all levels of society and all manner of social issues. American realism was contrasted with the genre of romance, which was said to avoid depicting society as it was, in favor of depicting society as authors (and specific audiences) believed society should be.¹

However, many Americanist scholars of the late-twentieth century have come to understand American realism quite differently. Among these scholars, Amy Kaplan influentially argues in *The Social Construction of American Realism* that "realism has turned into a conservative force whose very act of exposure reveals its complicity with the structures of power." As part of the voluminous evidence used to support this central claim, Kaplan cites the end of *Silas Lapham*. Kaplan notes that the final pages render Silas—the novel's central and working-class character—"more ungrammatical and inarticulate than ever." Kaplan refers here to some of the points of character—poor grammar and diction—that mark Silas' class position: markers that the narrator of *Silas Lapham* repeatedly requires the reader to notice. Kaplan goes on to claim that the narrative "returns [Silas] to his origins in a kind of wish-fulfillment to undo his entire life story."² In the course of the novel Silas rises from impoverished rural obscurity to urban fame and wealth and comes close to attaining higher social position. By the end of the novel Silas sinks back into relative poverty and returns to his farm. Kaplan is

thinking of Howells when she describes Silas' financial and social decline in terms of "wish fulfillment," and Kaplan is theorizing that the whole genre of American realism, while consciously intended to be politically progressive, is in fact a reactionary literature. Kaplan's reading suggests that the upper-class-sympathetic Howells constructed not only a single novel, but an entire literary movement untrue to its conscious political aims.

Though Kaplan published her book twenty years ago, we still have much to learn from her arguments and those of similarly-minded scholars about the place of American realism in literary history. However, this paper adopts an opposing thesis: *Silas Lapham* is an artfully designed narrative that does not hold a significant upper-class bias. Howells' novel is—as the existing work of many scholars already suggests—the rhetorical communication of a moral message. This message is contained in the actions of a working-class hero, Silas, whom Howells directs the authorial audience to admire. Most important to my argument about the egalitarian message of *Silas Lapham* is the explanation of *how* Howells constructs his narrative progression. *Silas Lapham*, as several scholars already note, is a polyphony of character voices, none of whom serves as a direct representative for the author.³ Furthermore, I argue that the usually reliable narrator is deliberately designed to act as part of the character polyphony: we make a mistake if we try to read the narrator as a constantly reliable representative of Howells. A close rhetorical reading of *Silas Lapham's* narration leads me to conclude three things: first, *Silas Lapham* conveys an egalitarian message; second, we must reevaluate our present understanding of the form and function of American realist narration; third, we may need to rethink current dominant ideas about the politics of American realism. I only have space to argue for the first of these conclusions, but my assumption is that if I can persuade on the first point, the other two points logically follow. Also, I hope that we will learn something not just about the rhetorical communication of *Silas Lapham* and American realism, but that we will be able to take away a broader and transferable lesson about how one particularly masterful work of narrative is put together.

The first section of this paper shows how Howells uses his characters to create a polyphony of voices speaking from different class positions. Work by scholars including John Cyril Barton, Patrick Dooley, and Irene C. Goldman helps me to establish that Howells carefully refuses to decisively privilege any one of these character voices. Significantly, just as the novel's moral message is not rooted in any one character, neither is the novel's moral communication tied to any one social class. In the second section I show how Howells works to distinguish the narrator from the implied author. The third section argues that the implied Howells (hereafter, "Howells")

deliberately uses the narrator's beliefs and judgments to add to and detract from the actual audience's sympathy for particular characters over the course of the narrative. Finally, the fourth section uses the work of the preceding sections to move towards understanding the egalitarian moral message Howells seeks to communicate to his audience.

No Single Character Speaks for Howells

From the title forward, readers of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* may be tempted to try to locate the novel's moral center in a particular character and, consequently, to privilege the moral point of view belonging to that character's social class. The title forecasts that the working-class Silas may be destined for moral distinction. The first chapter opens with Silas being interviewed by journalist Bartley Hubbard. Bartley's superior education and cultural refinement mark him as perhaps possessing greater social mobility than Silas. The audience quickly learns that Bartley is an unsympathetic character who will use his superior education to write an article intended to mock Silas in ways Bartley knows Silas will not understand.⁴ In contrast, Howells guides the audience to view Silas sympathetically: not suspecting Bartley's mockery, Silas looks at the young reporter and is empathetically reminded of his own beginnings in the world (871). This empathy leads Silas not only to offer Bartley a ride back to the newspaper offices but to send an assortment of the best Lapham paint to Bartley's wife Marcia (875–76, 878–79). The net effect is for the authorial audience to clearly prefer Silas' bluff generosity to Bartley's acid snobbery: score one for the working class.

However, the novel's title may equally suggest that at the beginning of the narrative Silas is not yet in a state of grace. And sure enough, Bartley's character functions as much more than a foil against which the reader sees Silas' moral superiority. One of Bartley's more crucial functions in the first chapter is his utility in introducing what will develop into the central instability of the novel. At one point in the interview Silas mentions that he once had a partner in the paint business. When Bartley lightly remarks on the partnership, Silas responds with a "scowl": already we have seen enough of Silas' open, friendly demeanor to judge that this response is uncharacteristic. Bartley is instantly sensitive to the change in temperature, divining "through the freemasonry of all who have sore places in their memories, that this was a point which he must not touch again" (874). What catches the reader's attention is the surprising "freemasonry" of "sore places" that Bartley senses. We have already gained the sense that, no matter how morally offensive he may be, Bartley is at least perceptive. Thus we tend to trust Bartley's sense that both he and Silas have events in their past that have left

them with bad consciences. This disturbs the reader, who is forced to accept that the likeable Silas is in some ways comparable with the unsympathetic Bartley. Howells uses Bartley to keep the reader from placing Silas on a pedestal: with the identification of the “freemasonry” that exists between Bartley and Silas, Howells informs the reader that Silas cannot yet function as the novel’s moral center. Because Howells has clearly and deliberately marked a class difference between Silas and Bartley as a major component in the scene, the news that the two men are in some distasteful way similar detracts from our feeling that Howells grants the first chapter’s moral palm to a working-class perspective.

But if the close of the first chapter does not grant moral supremacy to Silas, successive chapters bring the authorial audience into closer sympathy with Silas’ equally working-class wife Persis. In chapter 1 Howells signals that details of Silas’ former business partnership will form the central instability of the narrative. By chapter 3 Silas and Persis unexpectedly encounter Silas’ former partner Rogers. Persis rebukes Silas for taking advantage of Rogers: Persis claims that Silas used Rogers for his capital and then pushed Rogers out of the partnership just as the paint business was becoming profitable. Persis wants Silas to admit that his actions towards Rogers were morally reprehensible, but Silas insists that his conscience is easy. Referring back to the opening scene with Bartley, the reader knows that Silas is not being truthful with his wife. One central question on which the narrative tension hinges—was Silas morally correct in his treatment of Rogers?—is being asked, and the reader looks around for a moral guide. Persis knows her husband and insists that he is *not* easy in his conscience. Because Persis’ judgment coincides with the reader’s judgment, the reader tends to assume that Persis’ moral judgment is correct. Silas’ promised rise will have to be measured against some kind of moral standard, and at this point in the narrative Howells has guided the reader to select Persis as the moral authority.

Goldman suggests, however, that even as the beginning of the narrative portrays Persis as Silas’ moral superior, Howells begins working to reduce her moral authority. Goldman’s main contention is that as Silas rises, Persis falls. One of Silas’ central moral tests is whether or not he will sell a potentially worthless property—a milling operation Rogers effectively sold to Silas without disclosing that the mills might become worthless—to buyers without making full disclosure of the financial risk involved. The reader is led to believe that selling the mills might save Silas from bankruptcy, while being strictly honest and failing to sell the mills may cost Silas his fortune. Significantly, the reader is at first unable to tell whether it is Persis or Silas who first realizes that for Silas to sell the mills without full financial disclosure would be an immoral action. Persis speaks first, telling Silas he can’t

sell the mills without being as immoral as Rogers, but Silas replies that he has already thought of this. Silas tells Persis not to worry; he will not sell the mills without giving full information to the buyer (1121). Later in the narrative Silas recalls this scene and remembers that he understood *before* Persis the immorality of selling without disclosure (1162). The prior scene's narration seems to leave the accuracy of Silas' judgment of temporal order an open question, but what seems certain at this point in the narrative is that Howells is in the process of placing Silas rather than Persis on the novel's moral high ground. Under increasing financial pressure, Silas asks Persis whether he might after all sell the mills without making disclosure. Persis reluctantly says that he may, and Silas is made miserable over the fact that Persis is not helping him make the moral choice (1129). Silas loses Persis' aid completely as he continues to wrestle with his conscience: Persis mistakenly believes Silas is having an affair, and Persis won't talk to him about his financial problems (1138). Even after Persis realizes her mistake and the couple is reconciled, we find that Persis has lost all her original moral resistance to shady business practice. When faced with actual buyers who might save him from bankruptcy, Silas "stole a troubled glance at his wife, and saw that there was no help in her . . . now in the crucial moment, when he had the utmost need of her insight" (1167–68). Silas thinks he needs Persis' help, but Howells has carefully prepared the authorial audience to understand that Silas has become capable of making a moral decision without his wife's advice. When the central instability involving the Rogers partnership is introduced, Persis is our moral guide, but by the time this instability is resolved, Howells has seemingly caused the reader to prefer Silas as the moral standard.

I say "seemingly" because what Howells is doing is in fact much more complicated than a simple shift of the moral center from Persis to Silas. Dooley's work on *Silas Lapham* shows us that we cannot wholeheartedly adopt Silas as our moral guide, either: consequently, we cannot be certain of the moral superiority of the working class. In a detailed close reading of Silas' financial affairs, Dooley shows that he may not be able to clear his debts even if he sells the mills at full price without making disclosure. Dooley's point is that this financial close reading creates an additional potential ethical interpretation of Silas' decision not to sell without disclosure: in this interpretation Silas' decision not to sell is *amoral* rather than moral, because Silas recognizes that even a sale at full price is not enough to save him from bankruptcy. Dooley adds the interpretive ethical judgments of "amoral" and "moral" to a list of options that also includes "heroic beyond morality" and "immoral." Silas' refusal to sell is "heroic beyond morality" if the reader remembers that his honesty is far beyond the requirements

of nineteenth-century business practice, and perhaps even “immoral” if the readers consider that Silas’ potential buyer is a combination of wealthy persons who do not even seem to want the mills for their ostensible purpose, and failing to sell to these buyers results not just in Silas’ financial downfall, but the poverty of his and Rogers’ families as well. With these four possible judgments of Silas’ decision, Dooley shows that Howells deliberately leaves “his readers with numerous moral and philosophical problems to ponder.”⁵ William R. Manierre states that “At no point does Howells depict Lapham as a saint,” and Dooley’s work shows how true a statement this is.⁶ Even as the reader is guided away from Persis and towards Silas—perhaps expecting that with Silas’ “rise” the reader will locate the moral center of the novel—Howells deliberately complicates the issue and makes it impossible for the reader to embrace a single character and class as the definitive representative of an absolute moral standard.

In a second essay, Dooley underscores the reason Howells’ authorial audience cannot choose Silas as an uncomplicated moral hero representative of superior working-class ethics. We have already seen how the beginning of the narrative uses the characters of Bartley and Persis to introduce Rogers as a central instability: Rogers is at first portrayed as a gentlemanly and inoffensive victim whom Howells uses to tarnish and complicate Silas’ sympathetic character. But as the narrative progresses Howells shifts audience attitude to Rogers. From an inoffensive victim, Rogers is transformed into a plotting villain largely responsible for Silas’ financial troubles: by the time Silas announces “that there isn’t a slipperier rascal unhung in America than Milton K. Rogers!” (1163) we tend to agree with him. Or do we? Again, Howells is playing a complicated game, as Dooley discovers by reading contemporary reviews of *Silas Lapham* and popular nineteenth-century texts concerning business ethics. Dooley finds that most nineteenth-century reviewers missed the point—since taken by nearly all twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics—that *Silas Lapham* conveys a moral message. Dooley argues that many or most of Howells’ 1885 readers did not understand Rogers’ business practice as immoral: that is, Rogers does not transgress against standard later-nineteenth-century business ethics when he gives the mills to Silas without making full disclosure about the mills’ possible future downgraded value. Dooley further claims that the flesh-and-blood Howells was fully conscious of his actual audience’s beliefs about business ethics.⁷ We in the authorial audience of *Silas Lapham* can take a point from nineteenth-century flesh-and-blood reader response without losing sight of Howells’ moral message. The point is that Howells does *not* necessarily agree with Silas’ assessment of Rogers as the slipperiest rascal unhung in America. If Rogers has not clearly violated contemporary real-world business

practice, on what ground does Silas accuse Rogers of immoral action? The more socially-refined Rogers is not clearly a villain, so in the latter portion of the novel he does not serve as a perfect foil for Silas' working-class heroism. In fact, the closer we read Howells, the less we understand Rogers as a villain, and the less we understand Silas as an unalloyed hero.

We can't give up on Silas entirely—after all, we always have to deal with the title, in which Howells insists that Silas is destined for moral improvement—but Howells may excuse us for seeking the novel's moral center in some other character. And who better to look to for moral guidance than a minister? Several critics point to Reverend Sewell as the key to understanding the moral message of the novel.⁸ When Persis and Silas discover that the Lapham family assumption about Tom Corey's intentions is incorrect—Tom wants to marry the older daughter Penelope rather than the younger daughter Irene—they go to Sewell for advice. Sewell instructs them to follow an "economy of pain," by which Tom and Penelope should marry, since they love each other. Irene, who is in love with Tom, will be badly hurt, but according to Sewell it is better that one person should be hurt rather than all three suffer (1085). The novel's end proves Sewell right: Tom and Penelope marry and Irene gets over her hurt. Some critics have tried to extend the lessons of Sewell's economy of pain to explain Howells' moral message regarding Silas' business affairs. Donald Pizer compares the economy of pain to the ethics of utilitarianism and suggests that by choosing to hurt only his own finances rather than the collective finances of a group Silas follows the economy of pain and makes the moral choice by refusing to sell his mills.⁹ Walter Benn Michaels claims that the economy of pain is essentially anti-capitalist, and in having Silas abide by the economy of pain in business practice Howells conveys an anti-capitalist message to the audience.¹⁰ John Seelye goes so far as to say that Sewell's economy of pain is "Howellsian advice," thus characterizing Sewell as a point of access to authorial intention.¹¹

There is evidence, however, that Howells is *not* pointing to the upper-class-aligned Sewell as the moral center of the novel. It is noteworthy that almost without exception the central characters come to an "economy of pain" solution with regard to the Penelope-Tom-Irene love triangle independent of any help from Sewell, and regardless of their own class origins. Penelope (1063), Persis (1074–75) and Silas (1081) all formulate an economy of pain before Sewell has a chance to speak. Sewell confirms Persis and Silas in their original opinions, but Irene (1093), Tom (1099) and Bromfield Corey (1109–10) advance an economy of pain solution with no help from Sewell. Does Sewell still figure as the central moral guide? Just before they decide to consult with Sewell, Persis asks her husband, "what's the use, Si? Nobody could make us see it any different from what it is" (1082). As is to

be expected in the storyworld of *Silas Lapham*, Persis is part right and part wrong. She is right that Howells approves of her initial decision in favor of the economy of pain, but she is wrong in going back on her first intuition and feeling disapproval for Tom and Penelope's prospective engagement. To this extent, Sewell is morally useful through his role in confirming Persis and Silas' initial impulse to follow the economy of pain. However, Barton shows that Howells does not want the audience to feel unmixed regard for Sewell. Sewell dominates the conversation with Silas and Persis, cutting off their speech and interrupting to respond to his own questions, after Silas and Persis have begun to answer (1084–86). Sewell also stridently dominates the conversation in the scene in which his character is introduced (1044–45). Barton persuasively argues that the narrator provides clues that Howells wants us to consider Sewell as something of a crank on the topic of sentimentality in fiction and readers' attempts to imitate the morality of sentimental fiction in real life.¹² When the narrator describes Sewell as getting “upon a battle-horse of his” careering “onward in spite of some tacit attempts of his wife to seize the bridle” (1044) and growing “quite heated and red in the face” (1086) as he fires his monologue at the Laphams, we may decide to take Barton's point.

Barton's larger point is that no single character in *Silas Lapham* functions as a clear indication of Howells' moral message. Nor is Barton the only critic who makes this point. Manierre notes that the scene in which Tom Corey's character is introduced is discussed later in the narrative from no less than five separate points of view (358). And Fleda Brown Jackson points out that during the sophisticated table conversation at the Corey's chic dinner party, none of the upper-class guests are able to clearly resolve any of the artistic or moral questions that come under discussion.¹³ Holding this accumulated evidence in mind leads us to the conclusion that Howells wants no single, unequivocal character- or class-based morality to dominate the narrative. Howells deliberately—and artfully—guides the reader to listen carefully and sympathetically to the morality of many characters, including the working-class Persis and Silas and the upper-class-aligned Sewell and other members of the Corey social circle, but Howells also subtly introduces doubts and qualifications that lead the authorial audience to reject unquestioning reliance on any single character or class viewpoint as an unambiguous moral standard. The characters of *Silas Lapham* create a polyphonic moral conversation which the reader is encouraged to overhear—but only with caution. Neither Persis, Silas, Sewell, nor any other character can individually serve as a moral standard, but we *can* read part of Howells' moral message by interpolating the polyphony of combined voices.

Perhaps what is most recalcitrant in my claim about Howells' moral polyphony is evidence that doesn't involve particular characters so much as the narrator. When Seelye suggests that Tom and the Coreys represent a standard of social judgment with which readers tend to align themselves, my impulse is to disagree, for reasons given above: I do not see that Howells wants his authorial audience to permanently align with any particular character viewpoint.¹⁴ Rather, I interpret Howells as requiring his authorial audience to constantly shift point of view as the narrative progresses, thus continually reevaluating moral judgments. However, I am ready to grant Seelye's point provided I may introduce a distinction between Howells' actual nineteenth-century audience, whom the narrator initially encourages to at least partially identify with the Corey's upper-class viewpoint, and the authorial audience, which recognizes the distance between Howells and his narrator. In the following section we will see how in earlier portions of the narrative the narrator addresses a narratee, or listener, who has upper-class sympathies similar to those of a large part of Howells' 1885 actual audience.¹⁵ As the narrative continues, the originally upper-class narratee becomes more egalitarian in nature, revealing the initial distance existing between actual and authorial audience. The narrative draws to a close with the narratee and actual audience having been drawn much closer to the authorial audience's democratic sympathies.

The Distance Between Howells and His Narrator

From the first chapter forward, we see that the narrator frequently snipes at Silas, and this sniping seems to serve an elitist agenda. Goldman notes that while we are clearly meant to comprehend Silas' basic decency and dignity, the narrator also targets Silas for being ungrammatical and uncultured.¹⁶ Arlene Young agrees, stating that the narrator seems particularly interested in revealing Silas' lack of culture and aesthetic taste. Indeed, Young argues, the narrator's treatment of Silas is so harsh that Silas is almost, though not quite, reduced to "a comic figure beyond plausible moral redemption."¹⁷ For example, the narrator contradicts Silas' characterization of his Vermont home as "pretty": the narrator calls the house "ugly" and suggests that the house's bad looks have only been aggravated by a coat of Lapham paint and the addition of a veranda-style porch (865–66). Just as Silas recounts the triumphant moment in which he first uses his paint, the narrator interjects to comment on the provincial quality of Silas' pronunciation (867). Silas of course has no chance to respond to the narrator's snarky attacks, and the reader tends to accept the narrator's judgments as authoritative.¹⁸ Silas is marked as working-class by his poor aesthetic taste and uneducated speech,

and the narrator claims the upper-class cultural capital of aesthetic sense, syntax, and pronunciation.

A question that we ought to answer is whether the narrator's snobbery is shared by Howells. In the course of Bartley's interview we learn that Silas advertises his paint by applying it to about any flat man-made or natural surface he can find (871–72). Seelye notes that what Bartley refers to as Silas' "landscape decoration" will later in the narrative offend the aesthetically-minded Bromfield Corey "and would have been equally offensive to Howells or any sensitive reader of the day."¹⁹ Seelye is presumably speaking of the flesh-and-blood Howells, while we are concerned here with the implied Howells, but the question is still whether we should 1) follow Seelye's lead and infer an author who desires us to form a negative judgment of Silas' aesthetic sense; and 2) identify with the narrator's upper-class slant, thus modifying our otherwise sympathetic identification with Silas' working-class character? My answer to both halves of the question is "yes," but this answer comes with qualifications. We are asked to make negative judgments of Silas' aesthetic taste, but we are also given clear indications that upper-class aesthetic taste is not the final standard of judgment for all interactions between humans and nature. When Silas comments, "I wish some of the people that talk about the landscape, and *write* about it, had to bu'st one of them rocks *out* of the landscape with powder, or dig a hole to bury it in, as we used to have to do up on the farm; I guess they'd sing a little different tune about the profanation of scenery" (872), we understand that Howells has bypassed the upper-class alignment of his narrator and is instructing the authorial audience to consider aesthetic issues from a practical, working-class perspective. Yes, Howells wants us to treat the narrator's upper-class judgments as in some degree authoritative, and Howells does expect this to create distance between the reader and Silas, but Howells is also clearly able to separate himself from his narrator's judgments.

When we proceed to the following section I will explain what I believe to be Howells' reasons for his complicated use of the narrator's judgments. For now, I intend to focus on substantiating my claim that the narrator is Howells' tool, not his representative. One indication that there is distance between the narrator and Howells is the fact that the narrator does not consistently display an upper-class orientation. Young claims that the narrator is almost as willing to poke fun at the refined Coreys as he is willing to go after the unrefined Laphams. For example, the narrator provides a synopsis of Bromfield Corey's life—told partly from the point of view of Anna Corey, Bromfield's wife—that is heavily ironic. Three decades before the telling of the narrative Anna "had married the rich young painter in Rome, who had said so much better things than he painted." Anna brought Bromfield

back to Boston, where “he had kept on saying the charming things, and he had not done much else. In fact, he had fulfilled the promise of his youth” (948). As Anna’s character fills in, we realize that she is incapable of this kind of ironic conclusion about Bromfield’s unproductive, upper-class existence: this conclusion belongs to the narrator. Young tells us that the pervasiveness of this kind of irony “makes it difficult to ascertain just where the narrator’s sympathies lie.”²⁰ Since we cannot decisively say with which class perspective the narrator sides, we may move further towards concluding that Howells does not want us to adopt any of the narrator’s class-oriented judgments without circumspection. Yet it is worth noticing that Young characterizes the narrator as *almost* willing to form unsympathetic judgments of the Coreys as of the Laphams. The reader still receives the signal that Silas and the Laphams are slightly more frequent and more vulnerable targets. Should we link the responsibility for the narrator’s treatment of Silas back to Howells? My answer is “no,” because I am attempting to extend Barton’s important claim—no individual character represents Howells—to the claim that the narrator does not represent Howells.

This distance between Howells and his narrator is partly indicated to the reader through contradictions between some of the narrator’s earlier judgments with information the reader receives elsewhere in the narrative. In “Business Made Her Nervous: The Fall of Persis Lapham,” Goldman uses the title of her article to focus on a particular judgment of Persis the narrator makes early in the novel: “Up to a certain point in their prosperity Mrs. Lapham had kept strict account of all her husband’s affairs; but as they expanded, and ceased to be of the retail nature with which women successfully grapple, the intimate knowledge of them made her nervous” (888). The effect of this isolated judgment by the narrator certainly makes actual readers—including Goldman—inclined to believe that Howells wants the authorial audience to understand that Persis is incapable of handling complex business affairs. However, this judgment is complicated and perhaps contradicted by information supplied elsewhere in the narrative. For instance, even before the narrator gives us his estimate of Persis’ business capacities, we learn that it is Persis who first presses Silas to use his paint, and it is Persis who first claims that the paint is valuable and points to the particular place the paint can assume in the market: Persis understands that since Silas’ paint is peculiarly non-flammable, it can be sold to advantage in light of several recent fatal steamboat fires (867–68). Silas even acknowledges his belief that without Persis’ help his paint would never have been a commercial success (871). After the Lapham paint becomes profitable and Persis loses track of the intimate details of the business, Persis remonstrates with Silas regarding his treatment of his onetime partner Rogers.

SILAS: "I'll manage my business without your help."

PERSIS: "You were very glad of my help once."

SILAS: "Well, I'm tired of it now. Don't meddle."

PERSIS: "I *will* meddle." (902)

Persis' words seem to contradict the narrator's prior judgment, and subsequent events also tend to cast doubt on the narrator's assessment of her business capacity. Persis advises Silas to set a maximum cost on their new home, putting no more into the construction than can be safely got out again by sale. She orders Silas to stay away from high-risk investments, presses him to make only a relatively small loan to Rogers, and tries to make Silas treat the loan as a gift (979, 982, 993, 1119). After Silas ignores her advice and gets into serious financial trouble, the authorial audience understands that following Persis' advice would have kept the Lapham business solvent, and even Silas eventually admits that this is so (1139, 1199). The narrator informs us that Persis' mathematical skills are much better than her husband's, but Silas still refuses her help with his bookkeeping (1126). And when after much delay Silas finally admits his financial difficulties to Persis, she faces him "with a look of grave, steady courage in her eyes," a look that seems to contradict the narrator's prior implicit judgment that Persis is rightfully nervous because women can only "successfully grapple" with relatively minor business affairs (1119).

Rather than agreeing with the narrator's initial assessment of Persis' business capacity, the authorial audience comes to understand that Persis may well have better business skills than her husband. Howells is, I believe, deliberately asking us to question the accuracy of the narrator's judgments. As we look closely at the narrative we see that these tactics extend to the narrator's judgments about Silas as well. In the first chapter the narrator begins to make clear, negative judgments about Silas' aesthetic sense. Silas thinks his parent's Vermont farmhouse is pretty; the narrator assures the reader that the farmhouse is ugly (865-66). The narrator is no more complimentary about the Lapham's first Boston home, which the narrator informs us is decorated with "abominable" paint, paper, carpet and artwork, including statuary the narrator can only describe as chilling "phantasms" (882, 1060-61). Nor, according to the narrator, do the Laphams have any better aesthetic sense about the outside than the inside of homes. As Silas and Persis look at new Boston construction and plan their own house, the narrator reminds us of their "crude" sense of architecture and reports that they admired only "the worst" of the houses which they hope to imitate in their new home (890).

The narrator's judgments, taken in isolation, would tend to make actual readers form a purely negative sense of Silas and Persis' aesthetic ideals. Yet,

as with the case of Persis' business capacity, close attention to the narrative reveals clues that Howells does not completely agree with the narrator's judgments. One noteworthy indication of the distance between narrator and implied author's judgments is the frequency with which characters comment on the high aesthetic value of Silas' premium paint, the Persis Brand. First Bartley and Marcia Hubbard comment on the paint's beautiful packaged appearance (870, 879), then the aesthete Bromfield Corey and the Lapham's fashionable architect Seymour are smitten with the Persis Brand's appearance (992, 1151). It's a small victory for Silas' aesthetic taste, perhaps, that he's come up with a very attractive brand of paint, but in light of all the praise the paint receives from even the most aesthetically-sensitive characters, the absence of any similar praise from the narrator seems conspicuous. It would seem that in the case of Silas' aesthetic sense Howells is trying to create some distance between the judgments of the narrator and the judgments of the authorial audience.

As the narrative progresses we see that Silas is in fact capable of aesthetic education, though many of the narrator's specific judgments are designed *not* to lead us towards this conclusion. Clearly, Silas is able to learn something about proper taste from Seymour (978). By chapter 24 Silas has a new sense of comparison between his new home and other houses in the same fashionable Boston neighborhood.

There was no such façade as that on the whole street, to his thinking. Through his long talks with the architect, he had come to feel almost as intimately and fondly as the architect himself the satisfying simplicity of the whole design and the delicacy of its detail. It appealed to him as an exquisite bit of harmony appeals to the unlearned ear, and he recognized the difference between this fine work and the obstreperous pretentiousness of the many overloaded house-fronts which Seymour had made him notice for his instruction elsewhere on the Back Bay. (1151)

In this passage the narrator clearly depicts Silas as being capable—with sufficient guidance—of making proper aesthetic judgments. This judgment stands in sharp contrast to prior judgments the narrator has made about Silas' aesthetic sense, and the audience understands that Howells is showing us the aesthetic progress Silas has made in the course of the story. But the audience must also contrast this passage with what the narrator's prior negative judgments suggested about Silas' aesthetic potential. It seems clear that in early chapters the narrator holds out little or no hope for Silas' aesthetic education. However, at the same time Howells is planting clues (e.g., characters' admiration for the Persis Brand) that the narrator's initial judgments of Silas and Persis are not altogether trustworthy.

The task of this section has been to demonstrate the distance that sometimes appears between the judgments of Howells' narrator and the judgments of the authorial audience. In the next section we will begin to discover *why* Howells creates some distance between his own judgments and the judgments of his narrator.

Howells' Use of the Narrator to Control Reader Response

In *Writing Realism*, Daniel Borus tells us that American realist authors like the flesh-and-blood Howells wanted to construct a "common culture" in which all classes could participate. The realist culture of literature was intended to speak to and for all Americans, and in doing this the realist novel was intended to unify the nation. To do this, the realists sought to create a distinct kind of narrator. The ideal realist narrator does not intervene to pause and comment upon the action. Instead, the realist narrator is "a removed and unacknowledged intelligence" that controls the course of narrative events. Borus calls the omniscient, nonintrusive and neutral narrator the "crucial litmus test" of realist fiction. However, Borus also admits that even the most classic American realist texts spend almost as much time violating as abiding by this theory of narration.²¹

As I am sure Borus would happily concede, the narrator of *Silas Lapham* frequently acts as an exception to the realist rules of narration. Therefore, one of three conclusions must follow: 1) *Silas Lapham* is not realist fiction; 2) Howells is out of control; or 3) Howells is in control and the formal rules of realist narration need modification. Neither Borus nor any other scholar of American realism is likely to admit the first conclusion. *Silas Lapham* will probably remain a classic text of American realism, and against the second conclusion we have the judgment of more than one critic. Manierre claims that Howells is highly conscious of the benefits to be had from proper control of narrative perspective, while Barton characterizes *Silas Lapham*'s "intrusive" narrator as a classic element of Howellsian realism.²² I submit that the third conclusion is correct. Howells' narrator *is* a crucial part of Howells' realist technique and performs a specific role in creating a text that seeks to speak for and even create a democratically-inclined reading audience, while at the same time acknowledging the upper-class biases present in much of Howells' actual nineteenth-century reading public.

Young notes that as Silas is ethically tested and proved during his financial decline, the narrator becomes gentler with Silas, drastically reducing the number of occasions in which the narrator makes upper-class-biased remarks on Silas' lower-class characteristics.²³ Young's comment helps us to notice that the narrator's snarky attacks on the Laphams are mostly

frontloaded into the first half or two-thirds of the narrative. Howells' goal, as we saw in the first section, is to introduce the reader into a storyworld with a clear protagonist but without a clear moral hero. This is one reason why the narrator occasionally expresses negative judgments about Silas and Persis: judgments that are clearly tinged with a class-bias favorable to the Coreys, but judgments that, as we have seen, are not necessarily shared by Howells. By my reading, the occasional distance between the narrator and Howells is a deliberate tactic. The narrator is a tool that Howells uses to appeal to the upper-class cultural standards of his actual nineteenth-century audience, subtly leading the actual audience to believe that the narrator guiding them through the storyworld of *Silas Lapham* is one of their own. If the narrator shares many of the actual audience's cherished biases, then the effect is for the actual audience to, perhaps unconsciously, place an increased amount of faith in the narrator's judgments. Silas—the narrator, narratee and actual audience conclude in the beginning and middle of the narrative—is something of a clown. Yet he is also admirable, and the actual audience sees that he is admirable even when viewed through the lens of their own class prejudice.

As the narrative progresses and Howells feels that the narrator has captured the trust of the actual audience, the narrator begins to abandon his original class biases. If one were to look for a turning point in the narrator's class-biased address to the narratee, one could do worse than to point to an incident that occurs in chapter 18. In this chapter Silas and Persis go for a drive: both want to talk about family problems. Silas wants to talk about his financial difficulties, while Persis wants to discuss the problem of both their daughters being in love with the same man. Persis prefers to drive quietly so they can speak without distraction, but Silas says, "When I can't drive this mare and talk too, I'll sell out altogether" (1078). This line is significant, because a few pages later Silas crashes the buggy (1082). From this chapter forward, Silas does in fact move towards selling out altogether, though his final bankruptcy does not occur until chapter 27. Along the way, Silas forgets his social ambition and focuses his attention on the dual goals of saving his financial situation using only ethical business practice and providing for the emotional well-being of his daughters. Silas becomes an increasingly admirable character at the same time that the narrator drops his class biases. The actual audience—habituated by the first half of the narrative to trust the narrator's judgments—is perhaps also persuaded to consider Silas' increasingly obvious merits from a more egalitarian point of view.

In order to achieve this final effect, Howells is careful to appeal to the actual audience's class biases before chapter 18. Howells deliberately de-

signs a narrator who occasionally addresses a narratee with clear upper-class bias. In one instance at the opening of chapter 10, second-person pronouns show us the class position of the narratee:

It was June, almost July, when Corey took up his life in Boston again, where the summer slips away so easily. If you go out of town early, it seems a very long summer when you come back in October; but if you stay, it passes swiftly, and, seen foreshortened in its flight, seems scarcely a month's length. (976)

In the storyworld of *Silas Lapham*, as in actual nineteenth-century Boston, only the well-to-do are able to afford to leave town for the summer months. The narrator's "you" clearly marks the narratee as a member of the upper class. Here, I would argue, the flesh-and-blood Howells is attempting to remind his presumed flesh-and-blood readers of their privileged class position and, consequently, of their allegiance to the standards of social judgment shared in common with the upper-class Coreys, not the working-class-origin Laphams. Likewise, at the opening of chapter 14 the narrator appeals to a narratee whose sympathies run towards the upper class:

The Coreys were one of the few old families who lingered in Bellingham place, the handsome, quiet old street which the sympathetic observer must grieve to see abandoned to boarding-houses. The dwellings are stately and tall, and the whole place wears an air of aristocratic seclusion, which Mrs. Corey's father might well have thought assured when he left her his house there at his death. . . . It has a wooden portico, with slender fluted columns . . . nothing could be simpler, and nothing could be better. . . . the simple adequacy of the architectural intention had been respected, and the place looked bare to the eyes of the Laphams as they entered. (1034)

The narratee is the "sympathetic observer," and the narrator is sympathetic both to the "aristocratic seclusion" and aesthetic perfection of the Corey home: an aesthetic perfection to which the Laphams are conspicuously blind. Again, I would argue that the flesh-and-blood Howells is attempting to remind the actual audience of their class allegiance to the Coreys. Howells' occasional manipulation of the narrator/narratee relationship prior to chapter 18 is a rhetorical device by which he seeks to temporarily reduce the actual audience's sympathy for the Laphams while simultaneously increasing their confidence in the judgments of the narrator.

As the instability of Silas' financial difficulties moves towards resolution, Howells puts Silas through the moral tests from which he will emerge as a hero—albeit a hero that Howells tries to cut down to what he believes are limited, human proportions. After chapter 18 the narrator seems to lose most of his bias in favor of the upper-class. If anything, the narratee seems to have changed from an aristocrat into a democrat. When Persis and Silas

consult with Sewell, the narrator reminds the narratee that “each one of us must suffer long to himself before he can learn that he is but one in a great community of wretchedness which has been pitilessly repeating itself from the foundation of the world” (1084). Not much seems to remain of the narratee’s prior class bias: now the narratee is reminded only of their place in an undifferentiated mass of humanity. The narratee is asked to identify with Persis as she prepares to leave Boston in the wake of Silas’ bankruptcy: “This thing and that is embittered to us, so that we may be willing to relinquish it; the world, life itself, is embittered to most of us, so that we are glad to have done with them at last; and this home was haunted with such memories to each of those who abandoned it that to go was less exile than escape” (1190). Again, the narrator appeals to a narratee in terms of a common human experience of suffering rather than to an elite experience of privilege.

Howells no longer seeks to appeal as strongly to the class biases of the actual audience as we approach the end of the narrative. Previous details that the once upper-class-biased narrator used against the Laphams now turn into information damaging to the Coreys. For example, we have already seen that the narrator makes negative judgments of the aesthetic value of decoration of the Lapham’s original Boston home (1060–61). The narrator particularly turns up his nose at some statuary in the Lapham’s drawing-room: “an Italian conception of Lincoln Freeing the Slaves.” But by chapter 27 we notice that the narrator no longer attacks the aesthetics of this statuary. Free indirect discourse tells the reader that Penelope understands Bromfield and Anna Corey to perceive the statuary as hopelessly gauche, but the narrator has conspicuously detached himself from sharing the Corey’s class-tinged aesthetic judgment (1185). Moreover, chapter 26 concludes with the narrator remarking that Bromfield Corey eats an orange in the “Neapolitan” manner (1184). Here Howells reminds us that Bromfield’s sense of aesthetics was primarily cultivated in Italy, the very country that has produced the statuary Bromfield finds so abhorrent. Bromfield does not catch the irony implicit in his snobbery, but that irony has been carefully placed by Howells. From using the narrator to make overt judgments damaging to the Laphams, Howells has now switched to using the narrator to make covert judgments against the Coreys.

Howells concludes the narrative addressing a narratee who occupies an indeterminate social position. In the last passage in which the second-person is used, the narrator states, “it is certain that our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these. Perhaps we pay too much; but it will not be possible to persuade those who have the difference in their favor that this is so. They may be right” (1198). The

passage begins by assuming a narratee who is receptive to the idea that civilization depends on counting "manners and customs" as more important than a person's "qualities." If the narratee agrees that, if this is the case, we "pay too much" for civilization, then this judgment is democratic in nature. But the narrator's qualifying "perhaps" is vital to our sense of the narratee, who consequently does not know for certain whether or not we *do* pay too high a price for civilization. The narrator refuses to answer the question for certain, implying that there is something to be said for the aristocrats, who "may be right" that civilization is after all worth the price of valuing a person's manners over their moral worth. This seemingly impartial ending is appropriate to Howells' realist project, which attempts to speak to and for the entire nation. But the authorial audience recalls the relatively democratically-biased narratee present in the second half of *Silas Lapham* and understands that Howells has directed the majority of our sympathy towards the working-class Silas and Persis. Indeed, the entire trend of the narrative is a subtle movement away from the upper-class biases of Howells' actual audience. By this reading, *Silas Lapham's* narrator spends the first half of the novel capturing the trust of the actual audience, in part by playing on their class prejudices. In the second half of the novel, Howells uses the narrator to subtly modify the actual audience's class perspective, bringing the narratee and actual audience into alignment with the authorial audience's more democratic values.

This new understanding of the rhetorical role of the narration in *Silas Lapham*, I hope, does a couple of useful things. At the level of the novel, understanding the rhetorical role of the narration may lead us to a clearer sense of the novel's moral communication: the final section of the paper takes us to this task. But obtaining a better understanding of the function of *Silas Lapham's* narration may also perhaps teach us a broader lesson about narration in the genre of American realism. We may be able to sharpen the existing theoretical definitions of American realist narration. Certainly Borus' existing formal definition seems to work well for large portions of *Silas Lapham*, but perhaps we must now include the rule that a realist narrator may cease to be omniscient, non-judgmental and removed from the action, when by doing so the implied author is able to create the illusion of a more balanced, polyphonic effect. And perhaps we also learn a broader lesson about narration in general: about how a talented author may discreetly use the narrator to modulate an audience's emotional responses to characters over the progression of the narrative. Certainly the specific means by which audience response may be controlled are practically endless, but in *Silas Lapham* we have an important and durable example of how one particular effect is achieved.

Towards Understanding Howells' Moral Message

The work of critics such as Barton, Dimock, and Francis A. Berces tends to reinforce the conclusion that the morality of *Silas Lapham* lies in its polyphony of character voices. Berces suggests that Howells never wanted to be an overt moral preacher. He wanted to create depictions that would appeal to the reader, but intended that his texts should make readers work to form moral judgments of characters and social situations.²⁴ Berces is correct, and the polyphony I am describing is the means by which Howells simultaneously conveys and obscures the moral message of the novel. Barton comes to a similar conclusion when, punning on the Reverend Sewell's "economy of pain," Barton describes the story world of *Silas Lapham* as an "economy of paint." "Within this economy," Barton tells us, "an aesthetics of realism, like an ethics of realism, is not to be found at one stable point within an exchange, but precisely within the movement of the exchange and circulation itself." This "exchange and circulation" is the polyphony of character voices. Only by listening to each individual character's judgments—and, I would argue, by treating the narrator's judgments as part of the polyphony—and by interpolating amongst these judgments can we arrive at an accurate sense of the moral message Howells is trying to convey.²⁵ And while this conclusion means that we must revise Dimock's conclusion that Sewell is the key to the moral message of *Silas Lapham*, she is right in wanting us to focus "less on the actions and psychologies of individual characters and more on their aggregate configuration."²⁶ Dimock's "aggregate configuration" is the Howellsian polyphony.

I would furthermore argue that this polyphony finally conveys an egalitarian-inclined moral message, but not all critics will agree with this conclusion. Goldman and Seelye in particular point to the last scenes of the novel as evidence of an aristocratic bias introduced by the flesh-and-blood Howells. The story ends with Silas, Persis, and Irene returning to rural Vermont, while Penelope and Tom leave Boston for Mexico. Goldman claims that this figurative banishment of the Laphams from Boston society is evidence of the flesh-and-blood Howells' social distaste for the Laphams and preference for the Coreys.²⁷ Seelye contributes to this interpretation by arguing that Penelope and Tom's departure for Mexico leaves the social divisions between the Laphams and the Coreys "intact." Seelye claims that *Silas Lapham* "has a carefully programmed denouement in which all of the major characters are led to make decisions or take actions that do not challenge the established order but enforce it." For Seelye, Silas goes broke and is exiled to Vermont because the flesh-and-blood Howells can't sustain in fiction the real-life "compromise he had himself managed to

maintain between his own deep democratic faith and the aristocratic values of his adopted Boston."²⁸ Both Goldman and Seelye would read the novel's conclusion as part of a moral message clearly inflected with the flesh-and-blood Howells' aristocratically-biased politics.

My concern, however, is that readings such as those made by Goldman and Seelye may not pay enough attention to the text's polyphony and narrative progression. As I have argued, changes in the relations between the narrator and narratee may demonstrate that *Silas Lapham* is democratically-inclined, and that Howells only uses the narrator's aristocratically-sympathetic judgments to deliberately create the proper conditions for polyphony. However, by pointing to the conclusion of the novel Goldman and Seelye do present significant evidence that may be recalcitrant to an egalitarian reading of Howells' moral message. Peter Rabinowitz's claims about the heightened rhetorical significance of beginnings and endings suggests that focusing on the ending of *Silas Lapham* is critical to any attempt to understand what Howells is trying to get across.²⁹ Why is it so implausible to suggest that the flesh-and-blood Howells, finally preferring the society of the upper-class Coreys to the working-class Laphams, chose to pack Silas off to the Vermont woods?

I prefer to understand Howells' treatment of the dénouement as a deliberate stylistic choice rather than motivated by personal political bias, because the final disposition of the characters seems to correspond to the polyphonic character relations Howells works so hard to create throughout the narrative progression. The Laphams go to Vermont and Penelope and Tom go to Mexico because this is a realist novel, not a romance. In the course of the novel we are not intended to listen to any particular voice exclusively—including the voice of the narrator—even though we know from the beginning that Silas is destined to be the hero of the story. In the same way that Howells uses the narrator to pull Silas down a bit in part to prevent him from becoming a romantic hero, the novel's conclusion also pulls Silas down a bit while still giving him a kind of social as well as moral victory. Tom Corey *has* married Silas' daughter Penelope, but what Silas and readers might once have hailed as a social coup has turned into nothing more than Penelope "giving herself to the man who loved her" (1196). Silas has risen morally in terms of his business ethics and by marrying his family to the Boston elite Silas has also won a social victory . . . sort of. Tom and Penelope are *not* poised to take Boston society out of the hands of the Brahmin elite, and Silas and Persis are *not* going to sit down to tea every Sunday evening with Bromfield and Anna Corey. If these things were to happen *Silas Lapham* would not be part of the genre we have learned to call American realism.

By focusing our attention on the narrative progression and polyphony of *Silas Lapham*, we move towards the rather paradoxical interpretation favored by many critics, who lean towards finding no *centrally definable* moral in this novel of moral communication. Jackson suggests that Howells' novel does not make claims to any final moral solutions but instead "is composed of the background music of natural rhythms and the discordant scales of the civilized world played together, one on top of the other. The result is no particular music at all, a deliberate jumble of sounds."³⁰ This "deliberate jumble," or polyphony, is the system of conflicting character and narrator judgments among which the reader must navigate. Dooley claims that this act of readerly navigation provides us with insight into "Howells's gift for laying open the systemic ambiguity that moral agents confront" and that confronting this moral ambiguity is the "real reward" that we receive from close study of *Silas Lapham*.³¹ Yet I would claim that in the center of this system of polyphony and moral ambiguity Howells is transmitting a general moral communication. As Young notes, Silas "emerges at last not as a man of great heroic stature, but as a man of limitations."³² To put Young's point another way, Howells uses the polyphony of character and narrator judgments to create our sense of Silas as a realist—not a romantic—character. At the same time, Howells' artful creation and development of Silas' character and circumstances serves to convey a general moral message foreshadowed in the novel's title. By stressing Silas' isolation at the time of the business decisions that cost him his fortune, Manierre claims that "Howells rams home the point that the only source of morally responsible action in a fragmented society is the individual human being."³³ As Dooley's work amply demonstrates, we can never finally determine whether Silas' most crucial decisions are in fact morally correct, and this moral ambiguity is part of Howells' deliberate design. But what is finally clear is, as Manierre suggests, Howells' focus on the moral responsibility of the individual. Clearly—even if Howells intends little else to be clear—we are intended to admire the quality and tenacity of the working-class Silas' moral struggle. This struggle constitutes his "rise," and the fact that this struggle occurs in the face of a never-to-be-resolved moral uncertainty is an important facet of *Silas Lapham's* place in the genre of American realism.³⁴

Notes

1. See Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 12–26.

2. Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 1, 42.

3. For a definition of "polyphony," see *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed.

David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 443–44.

4. Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in *William Dean Howells: Novels 1875–1886* (New York: Literary Classics, 1982), 863. Subsequent references to the novel are cited parenthetically.

5. Patrick Dooley, “Ethical Exegesis in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *Papers on Language and Literature*, 35 (Fall 1999), 378. My observation—which dovetails with Dooley’s “immoral” interpretation of Silas’s decision—is that the wealthy group seeking to buy Silas’s milling property are not primarily interested in *milling*: they want the land and the mills not as a commercial operation but for the purpose of founding a utopian community (1163). Consequently, the buyers presumably wouldn’t care if the value of the mills plummeted. I believe this is one more subtle twist thrown in by Howells, making it that much more difficult for the reader to award the unambiguous stamp of “moral” to Silas’s decision.

6. William R. Manierre II, “*The Rise of Silas Lapham*: Retrospective Discussion as Dramatic Technique,” *College English*, 23 (February 1962), 361.

7. Dooley, “Nineteenth-Century Business Ethics and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *American Studies*, 21 (1980), 79–93.

8. E.g., Wai-Chee Dimock, “The Economy of Pain: The Case of Howells,” *Raritan*, 9 (Spring 1990), 99–119.

9. Donald Pizer, “The Ethical Unity of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *American Literature*, 32 (1960), 322–27.

10. Walter Benn Michaels, “*Sister Carrie*’s Popular Economy,” *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Winter 1980), 373–90.

11. John Seelye, “The Hole in Howells / The Lapse in *Silas Lapham*,” in *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 47–65.

12. John Cyril Barton, “Howells’s Rhetoric of Realism: The Economy of Pain(t) and Social Complicity in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Minister’s Charge*,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 29 (Autumn 2001), 166–68.

13. Fleda Brown Jackson, “A Sermon without Exegesis: The Achievement of Stasis in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 16 (Spring 1986), 139.

14. Seelye, pp. 55–56.

15. J. Arthur Bond’s work provides insight regarding the readership the editors of *Century* believed and hoped they were addressing. In 1883—the year before the start of *Silas Lapham*’s serialized publication—Henry Beers published an article in which he described the ideal *Century* reader, whom according to Bond he characterized as “well-educated” and “upper-middle-class.” Bond elaborates that while Beers described this ideal reader as “not a member of the lower and middle classes,” he also claimed that the reader is “sympathetic toward those who are ‘beneath’ him” and “qualified to serve in multiple ways as a cultivated and sympathetic leader of the masses” (“Applying the Standards of Intrinsic Excellence”: Nationalism and Arnoldian Cultural Valuation in the *Century Magazine*,” *American Periodicals*, 9 [1999], 62–63).

16. Irene C. Goldman, “Business Made Her Nervous: The Fall of Persis Lapham,” *Old Northwest*, 12 (Winter 1986), 420.

17. Arlene Young, “The Triumph of Irony in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 20 (Spring 1992), 45, 47.

18. David Herman uses a section of *Story Logic* analyzing style in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* to argue that “All other things being equal, a reported utterance is evaluated more negatively the more it differs from the degrees of formality, type of speech variety, and mode of situational appropriateness of the style in which the report is couched” [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002], p. 201). In the case of *Silas Lapham*, Herman’s

point suggests that Silas's speech, markedly different in style from that of the narrator, tends to distance the authorial audience from complete sympathy with Silas.

19. Seelye, p. 50.
20. Young, pp. 45–46.
21. Borus, pp. 4, 23, 96, 97, 17.
22. Manierre, p. 357; Barton, pp. 170–71.
23. Young, p. 53.
24. Francis A. Berces, "Mimesis, Morality, and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*," *American Quarterly*, 22 (1970), 195.
25. Barton, p. 183.
26. Barton, p. 8.
27. Goldman, p. 420.
28. Seelye, p. 57.
29. Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1998), 58–65.
30. Jackson, pp. 131, 146.
31. Dooley, "Ethical Exegesis," p. 387.
32. Young, p. 54.
33. Manierre, p. 361.
34. This paper owes its greatest theoretical debt to four books by narrative rhetorical theorist James Phelan: *Reading People, Reading Plots* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), *Narrative as Rhetoric* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996), *Living to Tell about It* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005) and *Experiencing Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2007). Thanks to James Phelan for his comments on a draft version of this paper.