

nineteenth century
business ethics and
the rise of silas lapham

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It is most obvious to twentieth-century readers of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* that William Dean Howells intends to provide moral education. To this end, he utilizes two plots: a love story and a bankruptcy to explore the tensions involved in both a private and a social moral dilemma. What is surprising is that Howells' point was frequently missed by the first readers of this novel. They focused on the love plot, all but ignored the bankruptcy plot, and had difficulty discerning any moral lesson in the novel.

The reading given to *Silas Lapham* by Howells' good friend, Francis Parkman, is an especially vivid case in point. In *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* Howells relates:

I remember his talking to me of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, in a somewhat troubled and uncertain strain, and interpreting his rise as the achievement of social recognition, without much or at all liking it or me for it. I did not think it my part to point out that I had supposed the rise to be a moral one. . . .¹

A close reading of Howells' remarks reveals why he did not correct Parkman's misreading. The above passage occurs in the chapter entitled "Literary Boston as I Knew It." Howells explains that even though Parkman's vast experience and research:

liberated him to the knowledge of other manners and ideals, he remained strictly a Bostonian, and as immutably of the Boston social and literary faith as any I knew in that capital of accomplished facts. He had lived like an Indian . . . consorted

with the Canadian archaeologists . . . every year he went to Quebec or Paris . . . European society was open to him everywhere; *but he had those limitations which I nearly always found in the Boston men.*²

This explanation contains two interesting claims. First, Parkman has a certain “social and literary faith” which blinds him to the point of the novel and, second, these same limitations are “*nearly always found in Boston men.*” There is good reason to believe that the first readers of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* frequently, if not “nearly always,” missed its moral point because of that “social faith.” By his assertion that morality applies to business, Howells challenged that “social faith.” An examination of the early reviews of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* will support the contention that Howells’ novel was frequently misread; an analysis of the leading moralists will reveal that until the latter part of the nineteenth century “business ethics” was considered a new, strange and even contradictory notion.

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initial reviews of *the rise of silas lapham*

In 1884, while William Dean Howells was having a new house built on Beacon Street in Boston, he began writing *Silas Lapham*. The novel was serialized in *Century Magazine* from November 1884 until August 1885. In September of 1885 it was published in book form by Ticknor and Company of Boston. From September of 1885 until early 1886, nine reviews appeared in magazines in the United States and England. (Actually only eight separate reviews were published, one of the later ones reprinted verbatim an earlier one. Therefore I will speak of *eight* reviews.)³ These reviews ranged in length from a single paragraph to a twelve page study; in discernment they range from total misperception to penetrating insight. We will look at them in three groups beginning with the most erroneous and ending with the most correct.

a) *Silas Lapham* as decadent realism. There were four such reviews. The worst of the lot was the last to appear in 1886 in *The Westminster Review*. This reviewer finds Howells’ title “a misnomer for the narrative of a rapid descent from the height of prosperity to hopeless insolvency.” The reviewer does recommend the book as “a gallery of illustration of various phases of transatlantic life and manners . . . [which succeeds in] throwing light on many obscure corners of human consciousness.”

Nonetheless the book is rather disappointing:

We are promised an ascent—“The Rise of Silas Lapham”—and as a matter of fact the story’s course is all down hill ending

in gloom and bankruptcy. This cannot be an inadvertence on the part of such an artist as Mr. Howells. No doubt it is intended, and contains a subtle lesson, but our eyes are sealed and we cannot see it.⁴

In November of 1885, *The Catholic Review* carried a long review article on Howells and *Silas Lapham* entitled, "Novel-Writing as a Science." Once again a retitling is suggested. Since "novels like *Silas Lapham* mark a descent, a degradation,"⁷ another title "Treatise on Commonplace People," or "Treatise on Drabs," or "Treatise on Drunkards" (280), would be more appropriate. Although Howells apparently intended moral edification he utterly failed:

It has seldom been our duty to read a book whose moral tone was so unpleasantly, so hopelessly bad; it is a book without heart or soul, neither illumined by religion nor warmed by human sympathy. This is all the more astonishing that Mr. Howells seems convinced that he is fulfilling a high moral purpose in writing it (279).

The reviewer explains that Howells' effort could be explained by the doctrine of total depravity but more likely by "the logic of the downward progress of godless science" (279). Therefore Howells ought to give up fiction and turn directly to science; his fiction is more akin to a series of scientific diagrams than is it like an inspiring painting or even an accurate photograph. All this degradation and "descent to dirt" (279) notwithstanding, there is no need for excessive alarm:

Mr. Howells will be read only by a species of scientific and hard-minded people, which we are lead to understand flourish best in Boston; and this species is past harming (280).

That is, the people who like these kind of books will not be offended by the scene in the bar with Silas, Z'rilla, the husband and her mother or even that "the worthy Mrs. Lapham suspect(s) her husband of infidelity . . ." (279).

The third review in this group also refers to the sort of people who might enjoy *Silas Lapham*. This review is the shortest — only about 250 words. It is part of a larger article, "Recent Fiction," published by *The Dial* in 1885. In this article, William Payne reviews *Silas Lapham* along with twelve other books. Payne says nothing about the plot, the bankruptcy, the love story or, for that matter, about any incidents in the book. Payne explains that, "it is almost a new species of work . . . the business man's novel."⁸ And then his back-handed compliment, "people who do not care for novels ordinarily can hardly fail to like this one . . . here at last are such people as one meets in every-day life, and who talk in a natural and familiar way" (122). Payne predicts that

the novel's impact will be temporary; it will only be valid "as long as people continue to talk and act in just the way which it describes" (122).

The final negative and faulty review is the longest. Entitled "A Typical Novel" and written by Hamilton Mabie, it occupied thirteen pages of *Andover Review* in 1885. The article offers a general analysis of "the dominant school of contemporary fiction . . . recent realism."⁹ After a lengthy commendation of Howells' skill at observation and description, Mabie states his case:

The Rise of Silas Lapham is an unsatisfactory story; defective in power, in reality, and in the vitalizing atmosphere of imagination. . . . It throws no spell over us; creates no illusions for us, leaves us indifferent spectators. . . . It leaves the reader cold when he has finished it (420).

If you should like to be convinced that Howells is too cool, too detached, too factual, Mabie offers this litmus-paper test:

Perhaps nothing more decisive on this point could be said of Mr. Howells's stories than that one can read them aloud without faltering at the most pathetic passages (421).

As a matter of fact, Mabie finds it even worse. Howells and other realists are:

crowding the world of fiction with commonplace people; people whom one would positively avoid coming in contact with in real life; people without native sweetness or strength . . . or accomplishment, without that touch of the ideal . . . (423).

Mabie totally misses Silas's moral rise; he finds that this modern realism examines "feeble, insolent unimportant men [and it analyzes] motives that were never worth an hour's serious study" (423). He diagnoses "a mental or a moral disease [which makes] Mr. Howells . . . concern himself with men and women of very slender endowments and very superficial conceptions of life. . . ." (423-424). He concludes realism in general and *Silas Lapham* in particular are malignant. The novel's "vigor is mainly on the side of *moral pathology*."

Hence, none of these first four reviews sees any evidence of a moral struggle, let alone a moral rise for Silas Lapham. All agree that Howells turned the high and lofty art of fiction into a depressing, even degrading depiction of the commonest of common men. Finally, all four reviewers hope that Howells' crass, morbid realism will have only a temporary impact on a small audience. That way other writers will resist any temptation to emulate him.

b) *Silas Lapham* as faithful realism. Here three reviews praise

Howells' realism, especially his ability to reveal the American character. When they speak of plot, these reviews focus on the Lapham family's fortunes in love, high society and finances.

A very favorable review in *The Saturday Review* appeared in October of 1885. This same review was reprinted by *The Critic* one month later.¹⁰ This review praises Howells' realism and his Americanness: "now Mr. Howells knows his America . . . he remains an American to the backbone. . . . *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a novel which no one can neglect who cares to understand American character." The most skillfully done parts of the book, for this reviewer, are the interview with Bartley Hubbard, Silas' steady movement to inevitable financial ruin and "the effect of these apparent [financial] fluctuations on the family, on the wife and on the two daughters who are the heroines of the story." This last assessment is reinforced in the reviewer's summary appraisal, "It is a love story with a happy ending."¹¹ And so, *The Saturday Review* likes *Silas Lapham* for its presentation of the American character and for its love interest. Neither Silas' moral struggles nor his moral rise is given the briefest mention.

A shorter but still very positive review was published in October of 1885, by *The Independent*. Again it is Howells' realism that is his forte, ". . . his power to deal with American life, particularly middle-class life . . . every day life . . . we must again applaud the accuracy of the study."¹² The reviewer is undecided:

which is better handled in the novel: the groping but persevering ascent of the paint-manufacturer's household toward a level of society to which their equipment unfits them . . . or, the cool and dignified patronage of the Coreys . . .

No mention is made of the love plot, the bankruptcy or Silas' moral struggle. The reviewer explains that Silas' rise is social for Howells is able to turn "an unromantic battle for social recognition of *un nouveau riche* . . . into a dignified prose epic (1295).

The *New York Times* review of September 27, 1885, also praises Howells' skill in depicting "a typical American businessman . . . Silas Lapham in his crudeness and shrewdness . . . his ostentation . . . gathers up in himself the traits of many self-made men of our cities and towns." We are told of the paint-business' success, the house building, the love story, the dinner party (the reviewer mistakenly has both daughters at the party) and finally the business crisis. In his summary statement the reviewer describes the book's two halves: part one, "the outsetting, the placing of the characters on the scene, and the painting of the background," and part two, "the love crisis of Penelope and the business crisis of her father." The first half is undoubtedly better for in the second "there is an overstrained note." The

reviewer also gives a curious analysis of the struggles of Silas, "the paint works fail and Col. Lapham goes back to his native hills a sadder, but the novelist wishes it understood a better . . . man." The reviewer knows that Howells intended to describe some sort of rise. But he is not sure if Howells meant that rise to be social, financial or moral. So he offers an ingenious mix; Silas returns to his native hills a better, that is, "a more *commercially moral* man."¹³ This observation is confused and halting but finally in the seventh review, the moral point of *Silas Lapham* is noticed!

The reviews of the second group are favorable. They appreciate Howells' realism and they admire his craft. They treat both the financial and love crises. One reviewer suspects some sort of moral rise. Our eighth reviewer is more perceptive and confident.

c) *Silas Lapham* as moral drama. The eighth review was published by *The Literary World*. Three ironies must be noted: it was the very first review published; despite Howells' reservations about the literary and social faith of Boston men, *The Literary World* was published in Boston; and finally, this review *totally* ignores the love plot. This review is by far the most favorable. We are told that *Silas Lapham* is even better than *A Modern Instance*. Both novels are marked by a "fresh, unsparing, almost pitiless realism," and in addition *Silas Lapham* "touches throughout a higher plane." There is no doubt that this reviewer fully understands Silas' rise to be a moral one. He finds in Silas "an underlying stratum of honesty . . . he is the protagonist in a great moral drama." The book "discerns and emphasizes the moral element which exists in every phase of poor humanity . . . [and it] proclaims the inherent strength of humanity in the rough!" Finally, though Silas is uncouth, crude, awkward, ill at ease socially and gets drunk at a dinner party:

he has in him the elements of genuine manhood . . . when the supreme moment of trial comes he rises to a dignity of achievement when his supercultivated acquaintances would perhaps have succumbed.

Thus *Silas Lapham* is not decadent fiction, it is even more than faithful realism, it is an uplifting moral drama, "as impressive . . . as a Greek tragedy."¹⁴ Unfortunately, only one of eight initial reviews understood Howells' moral point.

Gross misreadings of *Silas Lapham* were not confined to early reviews. Here are other examples. Alexander Harvey, in *William Dean Howells: A Study of the Achievement of a Literary Artist* (1917), argues that "from the standpoint of literature regarded as fine art, I consider *The Rise of Silas Lapham* the greatest novel ever written." The book is the most moving love story since Romeo and Juliet; the scene in Penelope's bedroom when Irene is told that Tom Corey never

loved her is “the most thrilling scene in fiction.” In Silas, Harvey sees no moral struggle, no moral rise. Instead Silas represents:

. . . the unredeemed ugliness of the material prosperity of his type [and] . . . race . . . He is typically American in his ignorance of human nature, of beauty, of ideas . . . (he is one of) the last survivors of the barbarian world . . . the American savage.¹⁵

A decade later, in a very large and impressive book, *William Dean Howells: A Study*, Oscar W. Firkins describes *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as a love story complicated by the tale of the business difficulties of the father of the family. Firkins explains that though Howells had two plots, “a love-affair and a bankruptcy. . . as it happens, the bankruptcy story is late; it is so much of a laggard that it has almost the look of a trespasser.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, concludes Firkins, the johnny-come-lately bankruptcy plot seriously weakens the novel.

Although modern commentators quibble whether the love plot and the bankruptcy plot are co-plots or a main plot with a subplot, there is no controversy about the strong moral message of the novel. Nowadays Silas’ moral struggle and rise are emphasized; the love plot is downplayed, even ignored. Why did earlier reviewers, Howells’ Bostonian friends like Parkman and critics like Harvey and Firkins, misperceive the novel?

I am sure several accounts are possible. For example, one might explain that Howells was attempting to recast the very nature and purpose of novels. His contemporaries did not recognize, let alone appreciate, the sort of innovation Howells contemplated. Certainly many of the reviewers cited above seem to fit this explanation. I do not wish to dispute such accounts. I will, however, advance a non-literary, complementary explanation: *Silas Lapham* was misread for although Howells saw business and ethics as connected, very many of his contemporaries did not. An analysis of moral philosophy texts from 1835-1895 reveals the very slow emergence and eventual acceptance of business ethics. At first, no special ethical demands were associated with business; next, a confused mixture of legal principles and accepted practices were applied to moral conflicts in business; and finally, a genuine business ethic was worked out. Early readers of *Silas Lapham* had not yet caught up to this third stage so they misread the book; later readers were accustomed to the concept of business ethics so they found Howells’ moral point obvious.

ii

nineteenth century moral philosophy

In the six decades from 1835 to 1895 American moral philosophy

was dominated by three college president-moral philosophers: Francis Wayland of Brown University and Asa Mahan and James H. Fairchild of Oberlin College. All three men wrote popular and well-regarded textbooks. The most popular of all was Wayland's *The Elements of Moral Science*.¹⁷ It went through four editions in its first two years and sold 200,000 in the sixty years mentioned above. All three men used their college presidencies to exert influence on the ethical questions of the day. All were highly visible, all were anti-slavery and Mahan and Fairchild were active abolitionists.

There were, however, important differences in the moral positions advanced by these ethicists. In regard to business ethics, Mahan's *A Science of Moral Philosophy* all but ignored the topic,¹⁸ Wayland's *The Elements of Moral Science* presented a simplistic and confused position and Fairchild's *Moral Philosophy: The Science of Obligation* laid out a clear, sophisticated and practical set of moral principles as they apply to business.¹⁹

a) General moral obligations. Before we look at business ethics, a brief comment on nineteenth-century moral philosophy is in order. A typical moral philosophy of this period would devote most of its attention to personal and interpersonal ethical obligations but practically none to civil and social duties. The divorce of the private from the public and the separation of personal from social duties was not accidental or unconscious. Especially in view of the slavery issue, nineteenth-century moral philosophers worried a great deal about the ethical obligations of individual citizens. What should a moral man do in the concrete?

The most influential of these three moral philosophers, Wayland, advanced the standard, conservative position in his *The Limitations of Human Responsibility* in 1838.²⁰ After a lengthy caution about the dangers of moral fanaticism and excessive zeal (he cites temperance societies), Wayland states his central principle: "our responsibility for the *temper of mind* is *unlimited* and *universal*, our responsibility for the *outward act* is *limited* and *special*" (19). That is, we are responsible for intentions (motives), not consequences (results). Therefore, we are obliged to preach the gospel; we are not obligated to convert our fellow men. As to slavery, it is clearly evil. However the issue is what mean should be used: "what *manner* it be proper [to use] to remove or to arrest the evil . . ." (162). Wayland offers the advice to preach the immorality to the slave holder and leave the rest to God:

They (the slave holders) have as good a right to their ears, as we have to our tongues. Hence, if they will not hear us, our responsibility is at an end. We have no right to force our instructions upon them, either by conversation, or by lectures, or by the mail. If they still determine to go on, in what we believe to be wrong, we must leave them to God, who is perfectly

capable of vindicating his own laws, and executing justice among the children of men. If they will not hear us, the indication is plain, that God does not mean to use *our* instrumentality in this affair. We must retire and leave the case in his hands, and turn our attention to the doing of good, in some other way (185).

Wayland then opts for a narrow and limited zone of personal responsibility.²¹ Just how limited this responsibility is can be seen in another concrete moral assessment he makes.

Exactly what is involved in our duty to tell the truth? Wayland gives an interesting answer. Not only is this answer repeated in his ethical textbook, *The Elements of Moral Science*, it is exactly the same *moral* advice that Rogers will give to Silas regarding the mills and the English buyers. Wayland's advice, "the moral precept respecting veracity, is not a positive but merely a negative precept. It does not command us to *bear witness*, it merely forbids us to bear *false witness*."²² More of this and its application to *Silas Lapham* below.

Two aspects of an individual's moral obligations need to be stressed. First, according to Wayland those obligations are very limited. Second, and more important, the demeanor of the moral agent is passive and not active, "Don't be immoral but then again don't crusade!"

If the nineteenth-century reader was accustomed to thinking of morality as limited to personal, even private, matters, does it not seem natural for that reader to focus on the love story and the ethical questions involved in the Tom-Irene-Penelope triangle? Would not that reader, like the reviewers cited above, either see Lapham's bankruptcy as a superfluous plot or fail to perceive the ethical dilemmas which confront Lapham in his business dealing with Rogers? Let us now turn to the matter of business ethics. I will confine my treatment to Wayland and Fairchild since Mahan did not develop a formal position on these matters.²³

b) Business ethics. Francis Wayland's treatment of business ethics occurs in the section of *The Elements of Moral Science* entitled, "Justice in Respect to Property" (24), especially in a subsection called, "modes in which the right of property may be violated by the individual" (216). Although this subsection is detailed and gives a wide assortment of concrete examples, the principles espoused by Wayland are shifting and vague. In the last analysis, it is clear that the principles of Wayland's business ethics are *non-moral*. Wayland is candid: both the buyer and the seller know the business of business and each knows he must look after his own interest, "hence . . . a seller . . . is under no obligation to assist the judgement of the buyer *unless* the article for sale is defective, and then he is under obligation to reveal it" (219, emphasis added). But even this proviso about declaring defects is sus-

pending in cases where known risk is involved, say, at an auction or in a speculative enterprise. Apparently buying mills in a foreign country would be just such a speculative enterprise. Later Wayland asserts: “while the seller is under no obligation to set forth the quality of his merchandise, yet he is at liberty to do so, confining himself to the truth” (220). However, in the examples which Wayland analyzes to illustrate his truth-in-merchandising principle, his advice is quite simple: one must not lie but one need not volunteer information. As above, no need to bear witness!

The tenor of Wayland’s business ethics is most clear in his position on three issues: liability for the delivery of defective goods, exorbitant interest rates and bankruptcy. In the case of the delivery of defective goods he concludes, “[liability] must be settled by precedent; and can rarely be known in any country until a decision is had in the courts of law” (223). As for exorbitant interest rates:

If it be said, men may charge exorbitant interest, I reply, so they may charge exorbitant rent for houses and exorbitant hire for horses. And, I ask, how is the evil or exorbitant charges . . . [to be] remedied? The answer is plain. We allow a perfectly free competition. . . . (224).

Finally as to bankruptcy, “the question is often asked whether a debtor is *morally* liberated by an act of insolvency” (226, emphasis added). Wayland’s reply is tentative and qualified, “I *think* not, if he ever afterward have the means of repayment” (226, emphasis added). Notice that in all three of these issues it is not a moral principle but either a practical consideration or a legal precedent which furnished the “moral” solution. What is even more surprising is that Wayland himself seems not to have noticed his slippage from morality to legality or practicality; he does not even notice that he is no longer functioning as a moral philosopher. He is codifying existing business practice, not furnishing a business ethic.

Wayland pawns off another descriptive and legal treatment of business as a normative and ethical treatment in a second, well-known textbook, *The Elements of Political Economy*. This book was first published in 1837 and by 1860 it had sold 30,000 copies. Here again Wayland convolutes values and facts:

The principles of Political Economy are so closely analogous to those of Moral Philosophy, that almost every question in one, may be argued on ground belonging to the other.

However, business practices not moral principles are primary. On the question of whether contracts are binding he explains, “with this question, Political Economy has nothing to do. Its only business is, to de-

cide whether a given contract were or were not *wise*.²⁵ In other words, in business the prudential is the moral. Further, the prudential is what is customarily allowed and legally permitted. For Wayland, then, writing a business ethics is not a normative project; it is a descriptive one.

James H. Fairchild's *Moral Philosophy: The Science of Obligation* is very different in tone and result. He is very precise in his separation of the realms of morality and legality. He carefully and consistently maintains that, in business, what is legal may have little or nothing to do with what is ethical. His premise is the opposite of Wayland's: "The ordinary business maxim, to assume that every man in trade will attend to his own interests, is, by no means, a safe [that is, an acceptable ethical] principle of conduct."²⁶ When Fairchild treats the duties of sellers, he does not waver; he speaks of "commercial honesty," "an honest bargain" and "true commercial integrity" (247-248). He judges monopolies, artificial shortages and market glutting as "utterly unjustifiable" (249). Whereas Wayland only tentatively and reluctantly linked morality and bankruptcy, Fairchild does so without doubts or reservations:

Morally, debts are never outlawed . . . There is, doubtless, propriety in the law which set a limit to the collectability of a debt, but such a law cannot discharge the moral obligation. The proper force of bankrupt laws, is not in any power to release the debtor from his moral obligation. They have no such power; but it is in the protection they afford to the debtor, in his effort to recover himself, and acquire the ability to meet his obligations. The release from indebtedness is technical and legal, not real (253).

Thus with regard to bankruptcy, conduct morally permissible to Wayland would be immoral for Fairchild. The difference between Wayland and Fairchild is vast. In the end it comes to this: Wayland sees business in legal not moral terms, while Fairchild holds that there are moral obligations in business which are more extensive and much more binding than *merely* legal obligations. In a work, Wayland is concerned with avoiding fraud; Fairchild seeks to promote honor and honesty.

In any number of situations wherein Fairchild would see a moral duty, Wayland would judge the situation in practical and legal, that is, in *amoral* terms. Chapter XXI of *Silas Lapham* describes such a situation. Rogers announces to Lapham that he has found some English parties interested in buying the mills. Lapham explodes: why had Rogers not told him that the railroad intended to buy the mills? "You lie . . . you're a thief . . . you stole."²⁷ Through all of this Rogers maintains "self-possession" (385). After he is called a liar, Rogers calmly sits:

. . . listening, as if respectfully considering the statements . . . [He] sat wholly unmoved . . . with dry tranquility ignoring Lapham's words, as if they had been an outburst against some third person, who probably merited them, but in whom he was so little interested that he had been obliged to use patience in listening to his condemnation. . . . (385-86).

The fact that those details about the railroads had not been volunteered is, for Rogers (as for Wayland), a practical matter, a matter of business acumen and shrewdness. If Lapham had only bothered to ask, Rogers might have complied; but as it stood it was Lapham's, not Rogers', responsibility. However, for Lapham (and for Fairchild), Rogers' craftiness is immoral and despicable. Thus the same action, viewed by two different persons from the perspective of two different ethical systems, is either highly unethical or blandly amoral. Perhaps Rogers is not putting up a front at all; perhaps he is not morally callous. He can confront Lapham with "dry tranquility" for although Lapham finds Rogers' conduct morally outrageous, Rogers himself sees it as standard business practice.

Lapham himself had advanced an identical argument earlier. In Chapter III, Persis attempts to prick Silas' conscience on the matter of his buying out Rogers. Silas claims that his conscience is clear: "It was a business chance . . . it's a thing that's done every day" (63-64). Lapham fails to see the obvious parallel: Rogers had turned over the mills to Lapham just before they became practically worthless; earlier, Lapham had forced Rogers out just before the paint business became highly profitable. Persis observes, "you unloaded [your partner, Rogers] just at the time when *you knew* that your paint was going to be worth about twice what it had ever been" (64, emphasis added). Howells' tit-for-tat is very neat: Silas had not alerted Rogers to his paint's imminent boom; Rogers had not warned Silas of his mills' impending bust!

Finally, witness Rogers' notion of the limits of personal responsibility. In Chapter XXV Lapham will not sell the mills. Rogers offers a way out: "then why don't you sell to me? Can't you see that you will not be responsible for what happens after you have sold?" (466). Clearly, Rogers is appealing to Wayland's concept of limited personal responsibility.

If Rogers dramatizes the ethical stance of Wayland, then Lapham amounts to a moral exemplar for Fairchild. Lapham is clear about legal and about moral responsibilities and because he responds to the latter not the former he loses his fortune. Much has been written about the moral quandries and ethical calculations of Lapham. My point is more basic. Lapham's ethical intuitions are sometimes clear and decisive, at other times clouded and halting. But his eventual ac-

tions are clearly ethical as opposed to prudential or legal; Lapham responds to a *business ethic*.

I will cite only three examples. First, although Lapham claims that his "conscience is easy" (63) about buying Rogers out of the business, his conscience was not clear. Listening to it and to his wife lead him to loan Rogers the money which initiated Lapham's financial plunge. Although it took him a while to see it, he did do his moral duty. Afterwards (Chapter X) he and his wife, "did not celebrate his reconciliation with his old enemy . . . by any show of joy or affection. . . . She was content to have told him that he had done his duty, and he was content with her saying that" (186).

Again, in the climactic Chapter XXV, after the meeting with the English parties, Rogers comes to the Lapham home with a final offer. If Lapham would sell the mills to Rogers the matter (and the responsibility) would be out of Lapham's hands:

It was perfectly true. Any lawyer would have told him the same. He could not help admiring Rogers for his ingenuity, and every selfish interest of his nature joined with many obvious duties to urge him to consent. He did not see why he should refuse. There was no longer a reason. He was standing alone for nothing . . . (466).

But after wrestling through the night, Lapham ended by "standing firm for right and justice [even] to his own destruction" (468).

Third, in the concluding Chapter XXVII, Lapham and his family lived in near poverty until "every dollar, every cent, had gone to pay his debts; he had come out with clean hands" (510). Lapham has not sought, in Fairchild's words the technical and legal release of bankruptcy! Lapham had discharged the real, moral responsibility of his debts.

iii conclusion

If the reader of *Silas Lapham* is ignorant of changes in nineteenth-century moral philosophy, including the emerging business ethics, a shallow reading will result. Misreadings were common with early readers and shallow readings are just as common with current readers.

Just how commonly was *Silas Lapham* misread by his contemporaries? This is certainly an arguable point. However Howells' own comments, seven of eight initial reviews and some early commentators indicate that early on the moral point of *Silas Lapham* was not understood. Important confirmation of this claim can be found in a most unlikely place, *Andover Review*. This is the journal which published the review, "A Typical Novel." As we saw above, that review missed

Howells' moral point and misread *Silas Lapham*, concluding that "its vigor is mainly on the side of moral pathology."²⁸ Seven volumes and four years later, *Andover Review* published its own rebuttal, "The Moral Purpose in Howells's Novels." In this article Anna Laurens Dawes laments that Howells' moral purpose in writing has "been too little considered."²⁹ Indeed she is saddened that Howells' moral purpose has been "*altogether* ignored or . . . deplored as an acknowledged lack" (24, emphasis added). Dawes argues that "a distinct ethical intention" (25) has always marked Howells' works and she wonders how he could have been more obvious about it! Nonetheless, ". . . the general reader, as well as the critic, has somewhat capitiously misunderstood Mr. Howells" (26). The body of the article delineates the moral purpose in all fourteen of Howells' novels from *Wedding Journal* (1872) to *Annie Kilburn* (1889). For those still unconvinced, Dawes offers three additional items of evidence. First, an ethical concern permeates Howells' poetry, even his sketches, and his "Editor's Study," especially his book reviews consistently stress ethical elements. Finally she cites Howells' brave "petition for clemency to the Anarchists" (35).

So I maintain that the moral point of *Silas Lapham* was frequently missed by its early readers. If they liked the book, they saw it as a love story with a happy ending; if they didn't, they saw it as decadent realism. The moral dilemma involved in the bankruptcy plot escaped them. I have argued that a lack of awareness of changing moral standards, especially in business ethics best explains this blind spot. Early readers, not yet accustomed to connecting business and ethics, saw bankruptcy plot as a financial not a moral matter. Only the more perceptive, and ethically sensitized readers and critics appreciated the moral drama of *Silas Lapham*. Following the lead of the moralist James Fairchild, business ethics gradually gained popular awareness and support. So too, the moral drama of *Silas Lapham* came to be widely appreciated. Eventually it was regarded as the main message of the novel.

What of shallow readings given by current readers? The figure of Rogers is the key here. Rogers is quickly and universally dismissed as a scoundrel. Rogers, if he is noticed, is seen as the ignoble foil of the exemplary Lapham. Such a reading fails to capture the complexity of Howells' task. Howells was quite aware that in the eyes of his contemporaries, Rogers could be crafty and moral at the same time. In Francis Wayland's views of personal responsibility and ethical practices in business, Rogers' schemes *are* moral. Howells strongly disagrees. He writes this novel to convince his contemporaries to reject Wayland's hair-splitting, casuistic morality. Howells and moralists like Fairchild were successful. They were so successful that it is difficult to fathom Rogers as a moral figure. But that must have been as obvious to the nineteenth-century reader as Lapham's moral excellence is to us. In

The Rise of Silas Lapham, William Dean Howells was attempting to change theory in novel writing and ethical practice in business. His success in *both* tasks deserves acknowledgment.

notes

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1. William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, (New York, 1900), 141.
2. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
3. The latest Howells bibliography by Vito J. Brenni, *William Dean Howells: A Bibliography*, (Metuchen, New Jersey, 1973) lists only four reviews. I have found five others.
4. *The Westminster Review*, 125 (1886), 303.
7. "Novel-Writing as a Science," *The Catholic World*, 42 (1885), 278. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
8. *The Dial*, 6 (1885), 122.
9. Hamilton Mabie, "A Typical Novel," *Andover Review*, 4 (1885), 417, 420, 421, 423, 423, 423-24, 424 (emphasis added).
10. *The Critic*, 7 (1885), 224-225.
11. *The Saturday Review*, 60 (1885), 517, 518, 518.
12. *The Independent*, 37 (1885), 1294-1295.
13. *New York Times*, September 27, 1885, 5, emphasis added.
14. *The Literary World*, 16 (1885), 299.
15. Alexander Harvey, *William Dean Howells: A Study of the Achievement of a Literary Artist*, (New York, 1917), 147, 146, 154, 155, 158, 159.
16. Oscar W. Firkins, *William Dean Howells: A Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1924), 71-72.
17. Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, edited by Joseph Blau (Cambridge Mass., 1963). Although originally published in 1835, Blau here reprints Wayland's 1847 fourth and standard edition.
18. Asa Mahan, *A Science of Moral Philosophy*, (Oberlin, Ohio, 1848).
19. James H. Fairchild, *Moral Philosophy: The Science of Obligation*, (New York, 1869).
20. Francis Wayland, *The Limitations of Human Responsibility*, (Boston, 1838), Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.
21. For a more detailed analysis of this work by Wayland see: Edward H. Madden, "Francis Wayland and the Limits of Moral Responsibility," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106 (1962), pp. 348-359. For more on the issue of slavery and northern moral philosophers (some 48 are treated) see: Wilson Smith, *Professors and Public Ethics: Studies of Northern Moral Philosophers before the Civil War*, (Ithaca, New York, 1956). Smith observes, citing H. R. Niebuhr, "Protestant churches and churchmen in America have been concerned primarily with the problems of the individual in society rather than with the problems of society as a whole" (197).
22. Wayland, *The Limitations of Human Responsibility*, *op. cit.*, 68.
23. Mahan does make scattered observations on ethics and business, but his comments are unsystematic and usually amount to disclaimers. For instance, he explains that a contract, business or otherwise, is only a mutual promise and hence needs no special treatment beyond what he has already given concerning promises, see: Mahan, *op. cit.*, 367-369.
24. Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, *op. cit.*, 210, subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.
25. Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, (New York, 1837), vi.
26. James H. Fairchild, *op. cit.*, 248. Subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.
27. William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, (Boston, 1885), 385. Subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.
28. Hamilton Mabie, "A Typical Novel," *Andover Review*, *op. cit.*, 424.
29. Anna Laurens Dawes, "The Moral Purpose in Howells's Novels," *Andover Review*, 11 (1889), 23. Subsequent page references cited parenthetically in the text.