

moral purpose in howells' realism

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A century ago, William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* first appeared, serialized in *Century Magazine*. Twentieth century readers see *Silas Lapham* as a drama involving the moral predicaments brought on by a business failure. Indeed, Howells' novel has become a standard fixture in business school curricula, studied for its vivid and clear depiction of several business ethics dilemmas.

Such was not always the case. First readers of *Silas Lapham* focused on the love-plot, all but ignored the bankruptcy plot and very often found no moral message whatever. In an essay in *American Studies* five years ago I argued that Howells' contemporaries had difficulty with the ethical content of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* because they saw morality in a narrowly personal, not social, context.¹ Since they regarded business practice as a legal instead of a moral matter, they had difficulty in seeing the *moral* dilemmas involved in Silas Lapham's bankruptcy. My contention was based upon an analysis of nine reviews which appeared within a year of the book's publication—only one understood Howells' moral intent. I have now discovered a tenth review, in *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1885,² clearly the most perceptive of the lot. The identity of the reviewer, Horace E. Scudder, and his association with Howells provide an interesting case study of the reception of realism in American literature.

Scudder's review is, above all, an accurate reading of *Silas Lapham*. Scudder explains that Howells' central concern is not the love story, nor “. . . [the] mere vulgar rise in society through the marriage of a daughter to a son of a social prince, [nor] the possession of a house on the water side of Beacon Street” (555). Instead, the reader sees, “in the case of Mr. Howells' hero . . . the achievement of moral solvency unglorified by any material prosperity” (555).

Scudder also makes the striking suggestion that the foil for Lapham is not his business partner Rogers, but the journalist Bartley Hubbard (re-introduced from Howells' very successful *A Modern Instance*). Scudder suggests

. . . a possible comparison between Hubbard and Lapham. They are both self-made men, but Hubbard is essentially vulgar, while Lapham is only accidentally so; the former thrusts his vulgarity through the thin covering of education and aptitude for the world, the latter thrusts his essential manliness through the equally thin covering of an uneducated manner and a hopeless condition of social outlawry (556).

Scudder provides a clear, perceptive statement of Howells' moral intent: “. . . [he] has convinced himself of the higher value to be found in a creation which discloses morals as well as manners” (554).

Yet I still believe that Howells' contemporaries *did not* appreciate the moral purpose of his novels. Scudder's review contains a long but significant digression. He complains that despite his and *Atlantic Monthly's* steady efforts to call attention to the “ethical foundations . . . in Mr. Howells' work . . . , the casual reader . . . [and] the rough and ready critic . . . [have] failed to be sufficiently impressed” (555). Scudder insists that Howells' ethical purpose has been a long-standing commitment: a moral message was present, though slightly so, in *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), it was clearly present in *A Modern Instance* (1882) and it is strongly evident in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Perhaps, as some critics have averred, Howells is too subtle. Scudder offers two remedies. Howells has to put more stress on actions and less on the intentions of the characters. Howells could also help his readers by making a sharper contrast of good and evil: “. . . if we are to have a portraiture of moral baseness, we have a right to ask for some shadows so deep as to leave no doubt of their meaning” (555). It seems to me, then, that Scudder's complaints provide unexpected evidence that Howells' early readers indeed had considerable difficulty grasping the moral purpose of his novels.

Special circumstances enabled Scudder to understand Howells. In 1866 Howells became an assistant editor at *Atlantic Monthly* and Scudder joined the parent firm of publisher Henry Houghton. After four years of editing *Riverside Magazine for Young People*, Scudder became a partner, first editing a series of books for the Centennial of 1876 and then serving as an assistant editor at *Atlantic Monthly* under Howells, editor since 1871. Howells resigned in February 1881, to be succeeded by Thomas Aldrich. Aldrich served until 1889, and was followed by Scudder, editor from 1890 to 1898. No wonder Scudder understood Howells—they were co-workers for some fifteen years and for half a dozen, Scudder had worked directly under Howells.³

Scudder appreciated and admired the ethical message of Howells' realism. In his 1882 review of *A Modern Instance* he compliments Howells, saying that his newest “book is no less clever than its predecessors. Its realism is as firm and its naturalism as easy. The book is his greatest achievement, not in an artistic, but in an ethical apprehension.”⁴ Three years later, referring to *Silas Lapham*, Scudder repeated his high praise. Howells, he wrote, “never intended to waste his art” on a mere love story. “[H]e was using all this realism of Boston society as a relief to the heavier mass contained in the war which was waged within the conscience of the hero” (555).

Scudder was a deeply religious man. He read the New Testament in Greek every morning before breakfast; he was an active and influential parishioner, a church officer and a theological school trustee.⁵ As we shall now witness, so long as he judged Howells' realism to be a *moral* realism, Scudder strongly endorsed Howells.

In 1886 Howells joined *Harper's Magazine*. He was given the opportunity to discuss whatever literary subject he wished in a monthly column, “Editor's

Study.” He used his column to crusade for realism.⁶ However, “realism” now took on a new connotation. No longer a “moral” realism, it was an amoral, even, to some, an immoral realism. Howells offended his former colleagues at *Atlantic*, who called his fondness for Tolstoy, “His attack of the ‘Russian measles.’”⁷ When selected items from the “Editor’s Study” were published in 1891 as *Criticism and Fiction*, Scudder attacked Howell for “slandering Scott and Thackeray, and setting up a Russian idol in the place of our native gods.”⁸ Howells had lost the backing of his most astute reviewer for championing the new realism of Tolstoy and Zola, the harsh realism of Hamlin Garland and the tawdry Bowery realism of Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* and *George’s Mother*.

A year later, Scudder took the final step of retracting his previous warm endorsement. Scudder asked that authors, “. . . kindly label their works in some such way that one might be warned off by the title page from the perusal thereof.”⁹ Until a warning label becomes the accepted convention, however, Scudder tells his *Atlantic Monthly* readers, “I think that a preface by Mr. Howells, recommending a book for its realism, will hereafter be enough to guard me against it.”¹⁰ Readers, he argued, have to be warned because realistic novels cause depression. For example, despite the fact that Scudder had in 1882 thought *A Modern Instance*, “profound . . . with the joyousness of hope . . . the weightiest novel of the day,”¹¹ in 1892 he warns his readers that “to read such books as . . . *A Modern Instance* . . . is gratuitously to weaken one’s vitality . . . what we need is tonic treatment, and views of life that tend to hopefulness, not gloom.”¹² By 1892 he had firmly aligned himself with that inept critic who thought the realism of *Silas Lapham* was a decadent view whose “vigor is mainly on the side of moral pathology.”¹³

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notes

1. Patrick K. Dooley, “Nineteenth Century Business Ethics and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *American Studies* 21 (1980), 79-93.
2. (Horace E. Scudder), “Recent American Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly* 56 (October 1885), 554-556. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.
3. For details on Howells at *Atlantic*, see Louis J. Budd, “Howells, the *Atlantic Monthly* and Republicanism,” *American Literature* 24 (1952), 139-156.
4. (Horace E. Scudder), “*A Modern Instance*,” *Atlantic Monthly* 50 (November 1882), 710. In his 1885 review of *Silas Lapham*, Scudder specifically requests his readers to consult his 1882 review of *A Modern Instance*.
5. Alexander V. G. Allen, “Horace E. Scudder: An Appreciation,” *Atlantic Monthly* 91 (April 1903), 549-560.
6. Leonard Lutwack, “William Dean Howells and the ‘Editor’s Study,’” *American Literature* 24 (1952), 195-207, recounts the several efforts of *Harper’s* editor Henry Mills Alden to tone down Howells’ “difficult theorizing and controversial crusading” (205).
7. Letter of June 1, 1889, William Taylor to Richard Gilder relating the feelings of Scudder (and the others at *Atlantic*) about Howells’ crusade for realism, quoted by Lutwack, “William Dean Howells,” 198.
8. (Horace E. Scudder), “Mr. Howells’ Literary Creed,” *Atlantic Monthly* 68 (October 1891), 567.
9. (Horace E. Scudder), “The Contributors’ Club,” *Atlantic Monthly* 69 (May 1892), 717.
10. *Ibid.*
11. (Scudder), review of Howells’ *A Modern Instance*, 713.
12. (Scudder), “The Contributors’ Club,” 717.
13. Hamilton Mabie, “A Typical Novel,” *Andover Review* 4 (1885), 424.