

The Rise of Silas Lapham

By William Dean Howells

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A Realist Novel

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by

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The Rise of Silas Lapham is a realist novel by William Dean Howells published in 1885. The story follows the materialistic rise of Silas Lapham from rags to riches, and his ensuing moral susceptibility. Silas earns a fortune in the paint business, but he lacks social standards, which he tries to attain through his daughter's marriage into the aristocratic Corey family. Silas' morality does not fail him. He loses his money but makes the right moral decision when his partner proposes the unethical selling of the mills to English settlers.

Howells is known to be the father of American realism, and a denouncer of the sentimental novel. The resolution of the love triangle of Irene Lapham, Tom Corey, and Penelope Lapham highlights Howells' rejection of the conventions of sentimental romantic novels as unrealistic and deceitful.

The novel begins with Silas Lapham being interviewed for a newspaper profile, during which he explains his financial success in the mineral paint business. The Lapham family is somewhat self-conscious in their sudden rise on the social ladder and often fumble in their attempts at following etiquette norms. They decide to build a new home in the fashionable Back Bay neighborhood, and Lapham spares no expense ensuring it is at the height of fashion.

Tom Corey, a young man from a well-respected high-class family, shows an interest in the Lapham girls; Mr. and Mrs. Lapham assume he is attracted to Irene, the beautiful younger daughter. Corey joins the Lapham's paint business in an attempt to find his place in the world, rather than rely on the savings of his father, Bromfield Corey. When Tom Corey begins calling on the Laphams regularly, everyone assumes his interest in Irene has grown, and Irene takes a fancy to him. Corey, however, astounds both families by revealing his love for Penelope, the elder, more plain-looking, but more intelligent daughter who

possesses an unusual sense of humor, a sophisticated literary passion, and a sensible but inquiring mind. Though Penelope has feelings for Tom Corey, she is held back by the romantic conventions of the era, not wanting to act on her love for fear of betraying her sister.

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