ANALYSIS

The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885)

William Dean Howells

(1837-1920)

"Novels like *Silas Lapham* mark a descent, a degradation. Of course art is debased when it has fallen so low into realism. Art is ever pointing upward, and the influence of true art upon man is to make him look upward, too...in the novel-writing of Mr. Howells we can already mark this scientific decadence. He began with people who were not quite commonplace, whose motives and acts and ideas were a little bit above the common. He now declares that nothing is worthy to be studied but the common feelings of common people; and having begun *Silas Lapham* with people who were inoffensively commonplace, he was unable to finish the book without falling a stage lower.

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. It might be explicable on the theory that it was the legitimate outcome of the doctrine of total depravity; but it is more probably the logic of the downward progress of godless science.... It is the progress from man to the apes, from the apes to the worms, from the worms to bacteria, from bacteria to--mud. It is the descent to dirt."

Anonymous
"Novel-Writing as a Science"
The Catholic World XLII (November 1885)

"The aspect of social life presented in this story is well-nigh universal; it is real, it is vital, and it is not without deep significance; in dealing with it Mr. Howells has approached actual life more nearly, touched it more deeply, and expressed it more strongly than in any of his previous stories. The skill of his earliest work loses nothing in his latest; it is less evident because it is unconscious and, therefore, more genuine and effective. There is the same humor, restrained and held in check by the major interests of the story... Mr. Howells has never shown more complete mastery of his art in dealing with his materials... His style has never had more simplicity and directness, more solidity and substance...such as to entitle it to very high praise...

And yet, when all this has been said, and said heartily, it must be added that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is an unsatisfactory story; defective in power, in reality, and in the vitalizing atmosphere of imagination. No one is absorbed by it, nor moved by it; one takes it up with pleasure, reads it with interest, and lays it down without regret. It throws no spell over us; creates no illusion for us, leaves us indifferent spectators of an entertaining drama of social life. The novelist wrote it in a cool, deliberate mood, and it leaves the reader cold when he has finished it. The appearance and action of life are in it, but not the warmth; the frame, the organism, are admirable, but the divine in-breathing which would have given the body a soul has been withheld.

Everything that art could do has been done, but the vital spark has not been transmitted. Mr. Howells never identifies himself with his characters; never becomes one with them in the vital fellowship and communion of the imagination... Perhaps nothing more decisive...could be said of Mr. Howells' stories than that one can read them aloud without faltering at the most pathetic passages; the latent distrust of all strong feeling in them makes one a little shy of his own emotion."

Hamilton Wright Mabie
Andover Review IV (November 1885)

"*The Rise of Silas Lapham* [is the one] the public has generally found the best of his novels... The theme of *Silas Lapham* is one very dear in a republic, that of the rising fortunes of a man who has no aid

but virtue and capacity. Lapham, a country-bred, self-made Vermonter, appears when he has already achieved wealth and finds himself being drawn, involuntarily enough, into the more difficult task of adjusting himself and his family to the manners of fastidious Boston. A writer primarily satirical might have been contented to make game of the situation. Howells, keenly as he sets forth the conflict of standards, goes beyond satire to a depth of meaning which comes only from an understanding of the part which artificial distinctions play in human life and a pity that such little things can have such large consequences of pain and error.

The conflict, while constantly pervasive in the book, does not usurp the action. The Lapham family has serious concerns that might arise in any social stratum. Most intense and dramatic of these is the fact that the suitor of one daughter is believed by the whole family to be in love with the other until the very moment of his declaration. The distress into which they are thrown is presented with a degree of comprehension rare in any novel, and here matched with a common sense which rises to something half-inspired in Lapham's perception--reduced to words by a friendly clergyman--that in such a case superfluous self-sacrifice would be morbid, and that, since none is guilty, one had better suffer than three. A certain rightness and soundness of feeling mark the entire narrative....

As, with the increase of the American population and the diminution of opportunity for the individual, the self-made man becomes a less outstanding figure than he was in the generation to which Silas Lapham belonged, Lapham will still continue to seem a standard example of his type. But his type is of New England and not of the United States at large. In other sections--at least in those not governed by New England habits transplanted--the adventures of the self-made have nearly always been more stirring, motivated less by lawful ambitions, colored by ranker senses.... The clang of the larger America, the sense of the manipulation of vast forces which give the story of the self-made American its stirring interest, do not appear in this quiet story.... Lapham represents the American magnate only as subdued to the domestic hearth.... One misses...the thrust and clutch and strain and sweat of actuality..."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel: 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940) 125-27

"Colonel Silas Lapham, a typical self-made businessman, has risen from a Vermont farm to wealth and prominence as a paint manufacturer. He establishes his family in Boston, where he begins to build a mansion, and urges his wife, Persis, and their daughters, Penelope and Irene, to enter Brahmin society, for which their wealth would seem to qualify them. Tom Corey and Penelope, the older and more intelligent sister, are in love, but he belongs to the social group to which the Laphams cannot attain and there is a misunderstanding when Irene, immature and impulsive, believes that Tom returns her love for him.

Penelope refuses his proposal, and, at the Coreys' dinner party, which Penelope does not attend, Silas gets drunk, and reveals himself as a brash and sturdy *nouveau riche*. He has meanwhile been speculating unsuccessfully and faces bankruptcy. His only hope is the sale of a milling property to an English syndicate, and his former partner, Rogers, presses him to this action, although both know that this will result in disaster to the syndicate. When Lapham's fair play and integrity cause him to refuse the opportunity, he is ruined and returns him to Vermont. Although he has fallen in the social scale, he has risen morally. Tom and Penelope are married and go to Mexico to escape the unhappy background of social distinctions between their families."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"The Laphams are the first *nouveaux riches* to be studied sympathetically in our fiction. A poor farm boy who has made his million in paint, Silas was (like Howells himself) building a house on the water side of Beacon Street. With complete mastery Howells notes the distinctive traits of the American; his massive physique inherited from generations of laborers, his casual dress, his love of speed, and wholehearted dedication to business are observed and recorded kindly. Persis, his plain, unpretentious wife, adapting herself to the city less easily, is helpless to guide her daughters' social life. Against the background of a preposterous drawing room or calamitous dinner party, Howells can describe their perplexities without

rousing ridicule so much as pity. Through it all they keep a kind of simple dignity bred of solid worth that makes one forgive mere ignorance of manners.

The Coreys, 'a little beyond the salt of the earth,' but studied more critically than Howells' earlier Bostonians, serve as a foil to the Laphams' homely virtues: 'stalwart achievement against sterile elegance.' Tom Corey, the link between the old order and the new, combines grace with an energy his father lacks; and though his behavior before he proposes to Penelope is so discreet that every one, including the young lady herself, believes him in love with her prettier sister, he is one of the most likable of Howells' heroes. For those days the business ethics that make Silas prefer poverty to a legal sale that would have saved him are perhaps somewhat idealized. But the episode was necessary to complete his 'rise,' and it gives the book a symmetry of form Howells seldom achieved. In contrast with *A Modern Instance*, the setting, masterfully rendered, is completely fused with the action. On the whole, popular taste has judged well in declaring this his best novel."

Gordon S. Haight
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 892

"*Silas* is partly a tragedy in the medieval sense of the term, the story of a man who encounters misfortune and falls out of his place in the world. But as the man loses his money, he finds himself; his history is the 'rise' of Silas Lapham in the sense in which *King Lear* tells of the spiritual rise of that fallen monarch. But with a very important difference: Silas does not die; neither is he altogether a new creature; for though he has vindicated his manhood and performed an heroic action, we find him beginning to brag again before the end in almost the old fashion.... Silas Lapham's reward for following the line of financial honesty until it ruins him is to feel like a monster because he has also ruined his ex-partner, the wily Rogers, whom dishonesty on Lapham's part would have saved!....

Howells' opposition to the romantic ideal of sacrifice...is most elaborately argued in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, where Penelope is finally brought to see that it is right she should wed young Corey even though all the Laphams had mistakenly supposed him to be in love with Irene.... Once more, Howells takes the common-sense view, opposing sentimentalism and self-torture... As an artist and as a man, he chose to live his life in a world of sanity and sunshine."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 138-44

"In the struggle between his conscience and the immoral requirements of competitive success in the business world of the Gilded Age (the novel's time is 1874), Silas at first succumbs to the strong romanticism of the Business Mind and devours a partner. Ultimately, however, he is able to fight and suffer triumphantly against a series of temptations to save his wealth and business by still shoddier practices. In restoring his conscience he loses his million--and this is the (moral) rise of Silas Lapham, Horatio Alger upside down....

Since Irene is blonde and pretty and Penelope dark and bookish, the Laphams make the unBostonian assumption that Tom has come courting the blonde rather than the brain, and this provides Howells with another go at a Romanticism he had already hammered in *Indian Summer*--the sentimental feminine quixotism of self-sacrifice.... Howells believed that the sacrifice of self to moral right and the good of others was essential. All good came from self-abnegation, all evil from selfishness. But the clarity of his moral vision perceived that, in a state of emotional anarchy, a sentimental quixotism of self-sacrifice was a peculiarly insidious and destructive form of egotism. The roots of this kind of self-abnegation were subjective emotional debauchery and ego-loving pride....

Seeking to grasp the psychological meaning of the emergence of the business mind, Howells concluded that it was founded on a new kind of Romanticism. 'Money,' says Bromfield Corey, 'is the romance, the poetry of our age.' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is the testament of a Realist who wishes his reader to see directly the moral confusion into which the new times have fallen. He also insists that the reader see critically how false, feeble, or irrelevant are the moral resources of the past, especially when those

resources are obsoletely Romantic... Silas is a businessman Faust. Wealth, and more meaningfully the pride of power in life which comes from money success in the Gilded Age, have poured in upon him. By trampling under his partner Rogers, Silas has elevated himself at the opening of the book to a position of sinful pride. Then the question becomes: what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?...

At first blush Mrs. Lapham might be taken as the moral *raisonneur* of the novel, Howells' spokeswoman. She sees and condemns Silas' treachery to Rogers; she understands and condemns his motives and emotions. She represents the stern Puritan tradition of the Vermont countryside from which the Laphams have come. For a long time she is Silas' conscience, unsparing, caustic, pessimistic. But the country culture from which her Puritan hangover comes Howells had long seen to be riddled with dry rot. All the Lapham boys had gone West... The vitality of cultural relevance is gone from Persis Lapham's morality (no longer rooted in religion)... Consequently, Persis cannot avoid becoming trapped in the sins of conspicuous consumption and yearning to help Silas and her daughters compete with the Coreys. She cannot avoid giving in to the code of respectability and so forcing Silas to be secretive in helping the wife and daughter of his old comrade-in-arms and so betraying both herself and him in flying into a fury of misguided wifely outrage when a malicious note intimates that Silas is really keeping Zerilla as a mistress rather than a typist. Consequently she falters and fails Silas completely when the crisis of his struggle for righteousness comes. In that crisis he is left entirely alone, deserted by the dry-rotted culture of his past as by the wife who embodies it....

This is the way an agnostic moralist and literary Realist will have us see the world. He has not written a novel against business, but against a world in the bonds of selfishness. The modern world had left behind such anomalies as feudal classes and slavery, but Howells wished to make it see that it had reclothed the spirit of fierceness in the business mind and in the gospel of wealth. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* remains important to us as one of its age's supremely suggestive aids to the historical imagination in its vivid presentation of the life of a lost era.... It has endured with great vitality the decades of ignorant and often malicious anti-Howells prejudice, and it may be expected to prosper further in readers' attention now that prejudice has begun to subside."

Edwin H. Cady
The Road to Realism
(Syracuse U 1956)

"The best known of Howells' works, this was also one of the earliest novels about the world of business, depicting the money-getting methods of Lapham, a newcomer to Boston as he proceeds toward wealth and ends in final ruin. In another sense it is a social novel, showing Laphams' efforts to introduce himself into the older Brahmin society of the metropolis; the novel's most famous scene is that in which Silas attends an important dinner party and disgraces himself by drinking too much. At its deepest level, however, the novel is a work of morality, showing Lapham's moral 'rise' from ruthlessness to a recognition of ethical standards. In the end Silas even contributes to his own financial defeat by refusing to engage in practices which he now considers immoral. Throughout the story is woven a love affair between the son of a Brahmin family and Penelope Lapham, the daughter of Silas; at the end the two find happiness by escaping to Mexico.

The novel is without doubt Howells' best and one of the triumphs of American fiction. The figure of Silas is skillfully drawn and presents an important American type: the self-reliant businessman, tough and shrewd and ambitious, although essentially honest, willing to accept the right so far as he can understand it. The novel is a complex of social and moral feeling that probes the significance of American civilization."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"At the beginning of *Silas Lapham*, Howells indulged his habit of reintroducing characters from earlier novels. As the story starts, the newspaper reporter, Bartley Hubbard, familiar to readers of Howells' finest previous novel, *A Modern Instance* (1882), is preparing to interview Lapham for the 'Solid Men of Boston'

series. Hubbard died in the earlier book, so the reader familiar with Howells' work knows at once that *Silas Lapham* goes back somewhat in time; the exact date of its beginning is 1875, when Lapham is fifty-five. Hubbard, whose irresponsibility and caddishness are indicated by a few deft strokes, is in this later novel only a minor functionary, merely a device for the introduction of the central character.... This feature-by-feature type of description is an example of the literary Realism of Howells. He never went to the extremes of Naturalism, either in its graphic extensions of Realism or in its pessimistic determinism.... The fastidious reader will find nothing in the book that might offend him....

The *nouveau-riche* Lapham, not a resident of Beacon Hill, has bought property in the next-most-respectable district, the South End; but when Back Bay becomes the fashion he decides to build a house out there, 'on the water side of Beacon Street.' Through all this, the atmosphere of Boston is wonderfully projected.... In the social-comedy aspects of the story, Howells is at his finest in his account of the dinner party at the Coreys'. As Mrs. Corey greets her guests she addresses Lapham as General Lapham and fails to hear his modest self-demotion to colonel. Just after this she is responsible for one of those social cruelties that could be so neatly depicted by Howells, a lifelong admirer of Jane Austen....

At the dinner table, the conversation is somewhat beyond Lapham's range, and he keeps rather quiet while taking in a good deal of sauterne, followed by Madeira. Then he suddenly talks too much and too loud. This ruefully comic social debacle foreshadows his financial catastrophes.... Lapham under stress shows that he is not a typical capitalist of the time. The action of the story occurs during the Grant Administration, when the men who have been called the robber barons were taking over so much of the country and its resources. Lapham proves not to be of their breed, although he shares with some of them an attitude later to be charted by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic* and by R. H. Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism:* business as a sacrament.... Lapham [has said of his paint], 'It's the best in God's universe,' and he has said this 'with the solemnity of prayer,' affirming the holiness of thrift and the profit motive.

Lapham has another characteristic in common with the robber barons: he is what the popular sociology of today would call an inner-directed rather than an other-directed man. Dreiser's Cowperwood was one of the last possible examples of the inner-directed, and *The Titan* of 1914 was a kind of *Gotterdammerung* of the old-style capitalist. By the time Lewis' *Babbitt* appeared, in 1922, the typical businessman was already the helpless prisoner of tribal customs. John Dos Passos, in a later study of a business official in an age of conformity--*Midcentury* (1961)--shows how the creative executive, Jasper Milliron, is crushed by committees. Most of today's gray-flannel-suit novels reinforce this theme. But Lapham, like Cowperwood, could for good or evil determine his own course of action....

It was the first novel of scope and of any artistic merit to be devoted to a study of an American businessman. Because Howells was essentially on Lapham's side, the book contrasts, in tone and implication, with most stories of such figures in later American writing: Theodore Dreiser's wizard-financier Frank Cowperwood, say, or Sinclair Lewis' less titanic George F. Babbitt.... Howells had an easier time with Lapham. First of all, he didn't portray him as a capitalist monster of the Cowperwood type, corrupting public officials and gobbling up traction companies. Cowperwood cares little for human consequences, while Lapham has a tortured conscience because of his shabby treatment of his former business partner, Milton Rogers.

In trying to make amends for this, Lapham brings catastrophe upon himself. As for the tribal mannerisms Lewis made fun of, Lapham shares only a few of them with Babbitt: his almost ritualistic worship of business, for example... Howells, who essentially admired his Yankee businessman, kept jesting at his expense to a minimum. He reminded himself in his notebook, 'Make Lapham vulgar but not sordid.' Indeed, when Howells' protagonist speaks foolishly after drinking too much wine at an upper-caste Boston dinner party, he attracts the reader's embarrassed sympathy....

In spite of this display of Victorian moral earnestness, the novel doesn't seem antiquated, partly because its language is simple and of the kind that doesn't date: good, clear English throughout the narrative sections and, in the dialogue, slightly flavored with Vermont or Beacon Hill locutions. Above all, the book

seems fresh and lively today because, as it examines an interesting corner of our heritage, it lives up to the finest and most important rule for the writing of novels: it tells a good story."

Harry T. Moore
Afterward, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*
(New American Library/Signet 1963)

"In the moments of calm before the storm of social discontent that changed his outlook, he produced his most popular novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). In this rich work, set in a changing Boston in the midst of a changing America, full of an affectionate humor and warm style, Howells created his most lasting characters, Silas and Persis Lapham, their two daughters Irene and Penelope, and Tom Corey. On the novel's canvas, Howells painted the changes that had overtaken and replaced the America of his own youth. Silas Lapham, 'raised on the simple virtues of the Old Testament and *Poor Richard's Almanac*,' symbolized the era's self-made man in all his glories and shortcomings.... Lapham was not a robber baron. He never lost sight of the rustic virtues that enabled him to make a fortune from a paint mine in Vermont and build an elegant new house in Boston's most fashionable district.... On the level of mere social criticism, the novel abounded with sharp comments on business practices, relations between the sexes, and a growing consciousness of the gulf between society's haves and have-nots....

The innocent young Irene, supposedly the target of young Corey's courtship, was in fact unworthy of him. The jolting discovery that he loved her plain, studious sister, Penelope, shook her from 'her normal state of innocent selfishness' to a condition in which she served others for her own reward.... Silas Lapham lost his fortune by refusing to bilk innocent buyers of his property. His fancy new home, symbol of his new status and fruit of his hard work, burned accidentally. Broken with advancing age and faced with poverty, he seemed to have lost everything. Everything but honor, for he clung to his old standards of conduct. As Howells said, trying to explain the 'rise' of Silas Lapham, 'I did not think it my part to point out that I had supposed the rise to be a moral one'."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 59-60

"From the perspective of the mid-twentieth century, it is hard to realize that William Dean Howells was once the most powerful voice in American letters and that his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, on its publication in 1885, was considered daring by some reviewers and 'depraved' by others.... The book is Howells' supreme eulogy to the integrity of the common man.... These characters have admirable traits but they are meant to resemble real people and thus they all have their foibles and weaknesses. Howells does not gild the lily; in fact the most frequent contemporary criticism of the novel was that the Laphams were too common. They were the kind of people, a critic wrote, that one avoided in real life.... Howells...was asked when he was going to create an Ideal Woman. Howells replied happily that he was waiting for the Almighty to begin....

Howells' anti-Romantic feelings are most clearly evident in the secondary strand of action, the Irene-Pen-Tom triangle. Here, in plot and in phrase, Howells re-echoes the dangers of Romantic sentiment that he had pointed out in *Criticism and Fiction*. Irene, the younger Lapham girl, falls deeply in love with Tom Corey, and Silas and Persis suppose the affection returned because of Tom's frequent visits to the house. In reality, however, Tom is in love with Penelope, the older sister, and when he reveals the fact, everyone is thunderstruck. Pen, crushed for her sister and guilt-stricken because she feels she may have done something to win him away from Irene, refuses to listen to Tom and sends him away.

Up to this point the plot suggests that of a typical Romantic novel of the time, one which Howells calls *Tears, Idle Tears* (from Tennyson's poem) and inserts into the conversation at the Coreys' dinner party. There, after Miss Kingsbury has expressed tentative approval of the 'wildly satisfying' self-sacrifice of the hero and heroine, the anti-Romantics take over. Nanny Corey renames the book, *Slop, Silly Slop*, and Reverend Sewall calls such novels 'psychical suicide'… In *Letters Home, Indian Summer*, and *The Minister's Charge*, as well as in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, [Howells] deals with virtually the same plot: a triangle in which one member considers sacrificing herself. Pen comments on the silliness of *Tears, Idle Tears* but when faced with the same situation in her own life she is unable to shake off the tenacity of the

ideal. Eventually, of course, she accepts Tom, but only because her love proves stronger than her other feelings....

Howells' insistence on the average, the commonplace, the usual gives *The Rise of Silas Lapham* its Realism, but it also gives it an evenness that keeps the novel from rising to heights. Howells' dislike of the melodramatic or sensational often undercuts the legitimately dramatic... There is no doubt that the last fourth of the book is less successful than the earlier portions, and though on the whole Howells is extremely skillful in his plotting, there is a general slackening of pace in the last six or seven chapters.... Though there are lapses, the book, on the whole, is masterfully put together...

The new house on Beacon Street functions as a symbol for Silas' material and social hopes. It rises as they rise, is destroyed as they are destroyed.... There are other smaller referents which clarify character or situation. Irene, for example, is constantly associated with ribbons and pins, and when she leaves Tom for the first time in the book, her 'blue ribbons [fluttered] backward from her hat, as if they were her clinging thoughts.' When Silas is seeking Persis' permission to build on Beacon Street, he takes her to view the lot. She has been holding back because she is reluctant to change their way of life. When she sees the plot, she is impressed. 'Yes, it's sightly,' she says, 'lifting her hand from the reins, on which she had unconsciously laid it.'' Immediately after, Lapham announces that *he* has made up his mind to build on the lot. Bromfield Corey declares that the relationship with the Laphams is something that cannot be done by halves; he then cuts his orange and eats it in quarters. With such symbolic action Howells is able to reveal rather than tell; he achieves, to a great degree, what he once called 'dramatic demonstration,' that is, letting the story tell itself. The symbols turn inward and explicate the action, thus allowing the author, to all appearances, to remain on the sidelines....

Howells was much impressed with James's 'scenic method,' partly, perhaps, because it allowed such scope for his own gift of recording conversation. Here Howells combines his own word sense and his ear for dialect to run the range from the blunt Vermont twang of the Laphams to the proper Bostonian accents of Bromfield Corey. As with all good dialogue, one can visualize the characters from it.... Beyond these aspects of Howells' technical skill, the book has the *sine qua non* of realistic fiction: the texture of life. This quality is cumulative; it comes to the reader through detail, speech, incident, and characterization. At the end most readers feel that they can accept Howells' characters as 'real' people and that the author is seriously interested in what happens to real people.... And if the book does fall short of total greatness, its failure is partly due to the goal that Howells set for himself. In the book Charles Bellingham calls for the novel of the commonplace [speaking for Howells]: 'The commonplace is just that light, impalpable, aerial essence which [writers] have never got into their confounded books yet'."

Robert Lee Hough
"The Rise of Silas Lapham"
The American Novel: From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner
ed. Wallace Stegner (Basic Books 1965) 73, 77-85

"The novel has always been popular, partly because it presents Lapham's financial and social failure as 'consciously and deliberately chosen' when he has to decide whether he shall cheat and stay on top in business, or tell the truth and fail irrecoverably. Lapham's true rise is therefore moral, and all the more dramatic in the context of the elastic business codes of the Gilded Age and his own business failure.... The vividest symbolic indication of Lapham's determination is Silas' 'letting out' his mare and cutter one winter afternoon on the Longwood road. Driving with iron control and unmolested by the mounted policemen, he passes a 'hundred rival sledges' with little apparent risk....

The Rise of Silas Lapham is more finely proportioned at the beginning than in the last third. This may be due to Howells' need to foreshorten Lapham's slow business decline; but it also stems from his inability to make business loss as interesting as social climbing, or even as Irene's error in love and her hardening into maturity.... But in terms of style, the novel deserves its reputation. Bromfield Corey's wit and Penelope's tartness gain from contrast with Colonel Lapham's boastful speech, in the idioms and rhythms of his New England vernacular. Howells' narrative prose is equally functional, concrete, and clear. This was the style that both James and Twain, themselves stylists, found so distinctive and took so much pleasure in."

William M. Gibson
William D. Howells
(U Minnesota 1967)

Michael Hollister (2015)