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Silas and Bromfield Within Me: A Personal Look

by Scott F. Young

The interplay of my sympathies is intriguing and surprising as I read William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in terms of character and class association. Silas Lapham and Bromfield Corey interest me especially because both of them live in me. As will be noted later, this reality is not irrelevant to our understanding of the modern novel and American society.

Both my parents were among the first in their extended families who went through college. All my kin, a generation ago, were farmers in northern Iowa. My Uncle Dick clings to the old style of farming: a little livestock, rotated crops, and a nice patch of woodlot. He, like Silas, is a proud man who has learned his wants and limits. I admire Dick as I admire Silas for his honesty and orneriness; he'll not be pushed. I sometimes long for Uncle Dick's earthiness, but I like to push my limits. Like Silas I "puff up" with a little alcohol, though my reserved Norwegian ancestry usually reins in my boasts; in this expansiveness Silas's heritage is more flamboyant than mine. I sometimes envy flamboyance, though occasionally it repulses me.

My own schooling and wanderings and occasional employment have left me with a love for ballet, with eclectic tastes in music and poetry and for expensive beer and French wine. I like my cultured tastes and, like Bromfield Corey in Howells's novel, was born to conversation's joy and an observant cynicism--although I laugh more than Bromfield. In other words, I like Bromfield: he's cool, classy, and, like Fred Astaire--elegant. However, Bromfield's snobbishness and abhorrence of work, artistic or otherwise, hides an inner fear--like mine. The masses, the proles, may be wittier and more charming than we are! Unlike my Uncle Dick and Silas Lapham, Bromfield and I imagine that we have no limits, yet we only rarely seek to prove our belief--fearing failure, fearing the indignity of being no better, perhaps worse, than the masses.

This duality that I find in myself as I read the novel must also mirror the author's. Good novels flourish on tension, but why did Howells concentrate on this very American class tension between aristocratic

fastidiousness and middle class practicality? I think because he saw an increase in such tension as the boundaries of class in America began to slip and shift in post-Civil War America. What, after all, was and is American class demarcation based on: birth, money, education? Can there be a value in this tense ambivalence? Am I seeking reasons and answers only because humans have such a passionate craving for meaning and for self-understanding?

Howells concentrates his class observations on two groups that are closely related economically--the old monied aristocracy and the new monied middle class--Bromfield and Silas respectively. How odd that these two groups, and specifically these two men, find so little in common. In fact members of the aristocracy seek to prove that people in the middle class are unlike themselves; Bromfield is dubious of Silas's grammar and manners. And, the middle-class self-made man, convinced of his own inferiority, fidgets over how best to impress Bromfield. Silas is worried about the fit of his gloves and whether or not to take them off as he enters Bromfield's home. But he too questions his counterpart with the classic middle class question: What does Corey *do*? As if one's manner of making money leads to a major character insight and to a morally superior position.

Obviously Howells had more experience with these two groups than I have, and, as a middle-middle class man, it seems to me that such concerns regarding differentiation are much like those of my old neighbors in Alaska, the Tlingits. The comparatively wealthy Tlingits felt comfortable associating with Athabaskan natives from Alaska's interior, but they hated the idea of working or socializing with Eskimos, who like the Tlingits, were traditionally seafarers. The rich and nouveau riche, the Tlingits and the Eskimos, both felt an urgent need not to be mistaken for one another.

I, too, seek to separate my identity from others who are very similar--the other males in my extended family. They are all athletically inclined and were very successful in school athletics. I was not, though I tried for a time. Consequently I always attempt to disassociate myself from the athletic interests of my father, brothers, and cousins; I'm a writer not a jock, yet I still frequently jog and bicycle. I say, "I like to *do* it, not *watch* it," referring to my relatives' love of television sporting events. I'm into aesthetics not athletics, and those physical activities that I do enjoy are carefully selected in order to avoid competition and the possibility of losing. After all, my talents are limitless and I cannot afford to have that disproven.

Bromfield doesn't want to appear common. Silas doesn't want to appear lazy, though he rarely seems to work. The Tlingits don't want to be called Eskimos ("Eskimos eat their meat raw"). I am not like my jock relatives. If someone (anyone) is worse or less than we are, then we are

obviously superior people. We seem to crave hierarchies, with ourselves at the apex, and it is much easier to get to the "top" by pushing others down than by proving our own right to a superior position. All of us shore up our identities by denigrating someone else's.

I frown and then snicker cynically as I consider Howells's treatment of the poor in this novel. The frown is caused by the portrayal of Miss Dewey and her mother, who are stereotypical lower-class women: the gorgeous daughter, whose only thought is to improve her situation through marriage, and the besotted mother, once lovely but now carousing with her son-in-law, having no inner goodness like Silas who funds them. I want Howells to reinforce my own belief: one must be physically secure before one can afford the niceties of compassion and contemplation. Perhaps Howells shows this too subtly for me clearly to perceive it.

I snicker cynically at Bromfield's only reference to the poor, when he says the empty city homes of the vacationing rich should be opened to the homeless. Of course, no member of the after-dinner-brandy set takes him seriously, but what a droll thought! In this respect Silas remains a practical caring man and Bromfield's parlor concern is shown to be what it is--salve for the conscience that somehow feels the shame of its indifference. Silas grew up in rural poverty and he understands the hopelessness which still seeks dignity; he has overcome the barriers and maintained his dignity through personal independence and an instinctive knowledge of propriety. Can the wealthy ever truly help the poor? Will the wealthy and the poor ever understand each other?

The tension I perceive in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* I now perceive more clearly in myself. I have often lauded conflict (I am ornery like my uncle) and so, I think, does Howells. To be merely Silas or merely Bromfield is not enough; to see both aspects in ourselves, to attempt to understand and synthesize the two (though never completely possible) seems to be the key to Howells's statement in this novel. Of course an inherent danger in the awareness of endless conflict, in which we feel driven to act, is the madness of Don Quixote, but the opposite of such marvelous madness is the clarity of Cervantes himself, or even William Dean Howells.

What we have, then, is a dialogue in the novel between two aspects of ourselves, a dialogue that can be made audible through a reader's dialogue with the work. In other words, we can surface the inner dialogue--make it heard--through a personal dialogue with Howells. We thereby verify Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical principle: the modern novel is an arena--a *heterglossia*--where contending voices from the culture strive to be heard. Call this dialogue with Howells an interview for "The Former Solid Men of Boston" articles which will be published in a leading newspaper, thereby updating Bartley Hubbard's interview with Silas at the beginning of the novel for "The Solid Men of Boston" series.

The Former Solid Men of Boston

Now that you've returned to your father's farm, Mr. Lapham, and your financial anxieties seem to be lessened, are you happier back home than you were when money was no problem for you, in Boston?

"You ain't very tactful, are you, young fella? No, I'm no happier now, no sadder. First concern's always been my family. Persis likes bein' home; Penelope seems content with young Corey (Up 'n comin' youngster--not like his pa at all) and Irene is workin' at helpin' those hereabouts who need it. She don't cry much in the night anymore."

And you, Mr. Corey, your life hasn't altered as radically as Mr. Lapham's, but what is your reaction to your son's descent into business?

"Descent is an interesting choice of words, young man. I would prefer to say that Tom has chosen to alter his interests. His bride seems intelligent, though not attuned to social life; my wife and I feel that young Mrs. Corey's exposure to Mexican culture may be helpful, in that respect.

"My father earned his own money, you see, so I could hardly fault Tom for following in my own father's ways."

Mr. Corey makes an interesting point, one which is critical to the story. Mr. Lapham, didn't you hope to see your children independently wealthy and able to live a cultivated, leisurely life?

"Why course I did! Don't most fathers want their children to be happy --to get on better 'n their parents done? O' course Pen is doin' well in Mexico, and I 'spect her children'll be well took care of--even better'n she was. What's yer point?"

You faulted Mr. Corey Sr. for not working, yet you want exactly that lifestyle for you children.

"Well now . . . See here, young fella, hain't a man supposed to want more 'n he had for his young? That's all I wanted!"

But your desires would cause your children to be the same as Bromfield Corey, whom you feel has no purpose in life. Aren't you bothered by this contradiction?

Mr. Corey, didn't you hope that your son would learn to appreciate and cultivate a life of leisure?

"Yes, I did. How can one expect to enjoy the fine arts and fine necessities of life without ample leisure to do so?"

Though without your father's hard work, which seems comparable to Silas Lapham's, you would not have this necessary leisure.

“That is true, but are we all to work? There would be no one to enjoy leisure pleasures, only endless hours of sweat and toil. What would be the point? Shouldn’t some people be in a position to learn the true values of the arts and living?”

Mr. Lapham are you content to provide the necessary surplus monies that will allow Mr. Corey Sr. to properly use his leisure? Is it best that you provide the means for your children to live like he does?

“Son, it seems like ya’ got me over a barrel.”

We have ourselves over a barrel. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Corey?

“It certainly seems an insoluble conundrum, sir.”

William Dean Howells has laid before us a major problem of modern democracy: All have the right to ascend to wealth, if they can, but those struggling upward will rant against those above and pity those below. Those people of the lowest class often will hate all above them, and those of the highest class will disdain all below. There is no route to inter-class contentment nor will there ever be a single voice of aspiration.

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