

The Rise of Silas Lapham Study Guide

The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells

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Plot Summary

The novel "The Rise of Silas Lapham" is the story of a man's rise to high moral standards even as his prosperity diminishes and he finds himself facing financial ruin. The side themes of a mistaken love, the construction and destruction of an expensive home and the bad dealings of a former partner are among the subplots that are woven masterfully into the main theme of the novel. Through all of their troubles, the Lapham family manages to stay together and stay strong in their family bonds. Even though they lose their money and physical possessions, they maintain their dignity.

Soon after meeting the Corey family and believing that Tom Corey is interested in marrying Irene, Lapham's youngest daughter, the Laphams become dissatisfied with their situation in life. They decide to build a fine home in an affluent neighborhood as a way to break into this society. As they are in the process of building, a ghost from Lapham's past in the form of his old partner emerges. Lapham's wife remembers her belief that Lapham split with this partner out of greed and a division forms between the husband and wife.

Lapham seems on his way to breaking into Corey's social rank when the young man asks for a position in Lapham's office. At about this same time Rogers comes to Lapham's office asking for money and Lapham lends it to him. This action heals the rift between Lapham and his wife. In addition, the Lapham family is also invited to dinner at the Corey's home, an invitation which they seem to believe will change their futures.

It is at this time, that Lapham's luck in life seems to turn. Paint sales are down and he is forced to shut down the Works. Rogers has also come to him again and again asking for money. Each time Lapham has tried to help him but soon realizes the man is a liar and a thief. Lapham is also being pressed by Molly Millon, the wife of a war friend who took a bullet for Lapham, for more money. In addition, the entire Lapham family had believed Corey was interested in Irene when instead it was her sister Penelope he was in love with. This discovery causes a rift between the sisters and a great deal of sorrow for all involved. Finally, Lapham has just received an offer to buy the new house he has been building when the house burns down in a freak accident.

At this completely rock bottom time of his life, Lapham is forced to sell his business to a West Virginia paint company. Lapham also sells his family's Boston home and relocates his family to his old family homestead in Vermont. Despite his hardships, however, Lapham prides himself in never having hurt anyone but himself. Even when faced with the possibility of being able to sell some worthless property at a great profit which would have saved his business, Lapham turns down the offer because he knows how much the deal would hurt others. In the end of the book Penelope ends up marrying Corey who lives out his dream of selling paint in foreign countries through the West Virginia paint company. Although Lapham is no longer rich and has not become part of the highest rank of society, he is happy with his own decisions in life.



Chapter I

Chapter I Summary

The novel "The Rise of Silas Lapham" is the story of a man's rise to high moral standards even as his prosperity diminishes and he finds himself facing financial ruin. The side themes of a mistaken love, the construction and destruction of an expensive home and the bad dealings of a former partner are among the subplots that are woven masterfully into the main theme of the novel. Through all of their troubles, the Lapham family manages to stay together and stay strong in their family bonds. Even though they lose their money and physical possessions, they maintain their dignity.

Chapter I opens as Bartley Hubbard, reporter for "The Events" meets Lapham in Lapham's private office for a newspaper interview. Hubbard will be writing an article about Lapham for the paper's Solid Men of Boston series. Lapham shares with the reporter that he was born in Vermont on a farm. During his growing up years, his family was very poor. Lapham credits his mother with his good, Christian upbringing. Hubbard brings Lapham's attention back to his paint business, the main reason for the article. Lapham describes how his father first discovers the paint mine on his farm. Lapham's father tries all of his life to make of business of the paint with no success. When Lapham is running a hotel in Lumberville, he paints the tavern with paint from this mine. Lapham's wife is so enthusiastic about the paint that Lapham has it analyzed and tested, then begins to market the product. This paint is successful because its chemical composition allows it to withstand fire, water and acids without damage.

As part of the interview Lapham leads Hubbard on a tour of the offices and warehouses. Among the items he shows Hubbard are the glass jars of The Persis Brand of paint. These paints are named after his wife and are his finest products. Lapham recalls how his wife supported him through the early days of his paint production. Lapham also mentions that he drummed up business by marking barns, fences and rocks with three colors of his paint. With the money he made from the paint business Lapham donated funds to build a town hall for the city of Lumberville. As a result of this donation, the townspeople voted to change the name of the town to Lapham.

Just as the paint business is doing well, the Civil War breaks out and sales drops. Lapham goes to fight in the war while his wife cares for the business. When he returns from war Lapham's wife urges him to take a partner. Lapham does so but the partnership is not successful and the two split after a few years. Even after this hitch Lapham's paint has achieved worldwide success. After the interview is finished Hubbard accepts Lapham's offer to take him home. Later, at his own home, Hubbard finds that Lapham has sent his wife several jars of The Persis Brand of paint as a gift.



Chapter I Analysis

In this chapter Howells uses an interview for a newspaper article as a device to introduce much information about Lapham, and his life and experiences. It becomes clear very quickly that Lapham and Hubbard have differing views of success. Hubbard believes it is only Lapham's money and fame that make him interesting to the public. Lapham, however, wants the public to understand it is the good virtues that his parents taught him that have allowed him to become as successful as he has become.

During this first chapter, the reader learns much about Lapham and his life. He is born into poverty and works on a farm as a young person. He marries the town school teacher who has supported him and encouraged him in all of his endeavors. Lapham also has a firm faith in God and a conviction to do what is right. He and his wife have had their share of hard times. A son dies in infancy and they are separated while Lapham fights in the Civil War. Despite these trials, their relationship has remained firm. Lapham shows his love for his wife by naming his best brand of paint after her. He brags to the journalist time and again how his wife has been supportive of his business even through all of its ups and downs.

Note the gift that Lapham gives Hubbard's wife. While some might take this gift as a bribe to write a positive article, Lapham does not seem the kind who would engage in this sort of politics. It appears the gift is given because he remembers how hard the first years of marriage are. He remembers Hubbard's statement that the two are planning to buy a house and knows the paint will come in handy. Also keep in mind the mention of the partner as well as the good-looking typist in Lapham's office; both of these people are central to the story line. The house which Lapham mentions that he and his wife are having built is also a significant structure as the story moves along.



Chapters II and III

Chapters II and III Summary

In Chapter II, Lapham heads back to his family's home of twelve years. The home is located on Nankeen Square. Although it has never bothered them before, the Laphams become self-conscious of living in this unfashionable neighborhood after meeting the Corey family while on a trip to Canada. The Corey ladies have lost some of their luggage and the mother has become sick. Since she has training as a nurse, Persis Lapham, Lapham's wife, is able to nurse the lady back to health. The Laphams also loan the Coreys some clothing until their trunks arrive. It is at this time that Persis and Irene, her youngest daughter meet Tom Corey.

Although well off financially, the Laphams are described as being deficient in social graces. Neither of the daughters go to school beyond grammar school, neither knows how to dance and the family is very inactive socially. Irene's association with Tom is the first interaction she has with a male outside of her own family.

After both families return to Boston, the Coreys pay the Laphams a visit to thank them for their hospitality in Canada. During their visit they irritate the Laphams by telling them they are unfamiliar with the neighborhood since most of their friends live in more desirable places. Persis discovers her husband owns land in the Back Bay area and they decide to build a new house on this property. During this time the Lapham family is asked by the Coreys to donate to a charitable organization. Lapham donates \$100 at his wife's insistence, though he had at first written his check for \$500.

In Chapter III Irene receives a newspaper clipping from Texas that she believes is from Corey. The clipping details a ranch owned by one of Corey's friends. Irene keeps this article stuck in her dresser mirror and looks at it each day. Although the ladies encourage Irene to believe it is a sign that Corey is interested in her, Lapham does not see its significance.

In the spring Lapham has work begun on the house on the water side of Beacon Street in the Back Bay area. The family finds a hobby in driving to their house regularly to see how it is progressing. On one of these trips to the new house Mr. and Mrs. Lapham meet with Milton Rogers, Lapham's former partner. This encounter brings up a division of opinion between Mr. and Mrs. Lapham about the morality of Lapham's decision to let Rogers go. Lapham believes his decision was fair because Rogers was unable to add anything else to the business. Mrs. Lapham believes Lapham took advantage of Rogers and bought him out at a time when Lapham knew his paint was about to increase in value.



Chapters II and III Analysis

In Chapter II Howells introduces the Laphams' newly formed relationship with the Coreys. The Coreys do not work at any business for their money, they inherit their riches. Although the Laphams actually have a higher net value than the Coreys, the Coreys live in a better neighborhood and are more socially affluent than the Laphams. Since their daughters are of marrying age and have not yet begun to have any suitors, the Laphams begin to think of ways to get their girls introduced to society. Their idea is to build a house on Lapham's Back Bay property where they will live among the more affluent.

It is also during Chapter II that Irene and her mother meet Tom Corey. Although Persis notices he pays as much attention to her as to her daughter, she still begins to believe that Corey is interested in her youngest daughter. This belief is compounded when Irene receives a newspaper article from Texas, where Corey is staying with a friend. Irene believes this clipping is from Corey and treasures it as a token of his affection.

In Chapter III Lapham and his wife have the misfortune of meeting with Lapham's former partner, Milton Rogers, on one of their trips to see their new house. This meeting brings up an old disagreement that Lapham did wrong when he separated from his partner. Rogers apparently helped Lapham out financially with the business, but then did little else. When Lapham decided to part ways with Rogers, both Rogers and Persis believe Lapham did so because he did not want to share his profit with his partner. Lapham, however, insists this was not the case. He claims he never intended to trick Rogers or keep him from any earned profit.



Chapters IV and V

Chapters IV and V Summary

The Laphams soon recover from their quarrel and as a family visit the construction site of their new home in Chapter IV. As Lapham and his daughters sit in the frame of a bay window talking, Corey comes walking up the street. Lapham leads Corey on a tour of the home, then they meet with Persis. After a few moments discussion the others move to the back of the house and leave Irene and Corey alone for a moment.

Lapham later remarks to his family that he likes Corey's looks but does not like the idea that the young man lives off his father. As they are going to bed that night Lapham tells his wife he could "make a man" of Corey if Corey would come work with him. The Lapham sisters also discuss Corey as they are preparing for bed. Penelope pokes fun at her sister over her crush on Corey.

In Chapter V Howells turns his attention to Corey. As the chapter opens Corey is entering his house where he meets with his father. Corey's father initiates a discussion about Corey's future. The two talk about the possibility of Corey becoming married. His father describes the kind of girl Corey should look for, then mentions the Lapham family. Corey immediately tells his father that Mr. Lapham is not the kind of person of whom he would approve. The younger Corey describes Lapham as one who brags about the satisfaction of being able to spend. At one point in their conversation the younger Corey expresses an interest in joining Lapham in his mineral paint business. Ironically, the Laphams are also talking about Corey entering the paint business. Mrs. Lapham, however, is telling her husband Corey would never go into business in mineral paint.

Chapters IV and V Analysis

One of the main themes of this novel is the differences between the newly rich and those with old money. These differences are stressed in chapters IV and V as Tom Corey and the entire Lapham family meet each other for the first time. Lapham believes in work and looks down on Corey for allowing his father to pay for his keep. However, Lapham does see some promise in Corey. He believes that if he could get Corey into his business he could make a man of the youth. Corey also sees the same promise in Lapham and the business he runs. Despite his father's discouragement, Corey shows an active interest in joining the Lapham business. Notice though that Bromfield Corey's first idea for a future for his son is for him to marry into a rich family. In his favor, the younger Corey does not think this is the best idea.

In Chapter V it is learned that the older Corey never found a career for himself. First he traveled, and then he painted. Since he had so much money, he lost interest in painting either as a hobby or a career. Soon he found his family grown and his money dwindling.



This description of Bromfield Corey's life is completely opposite from Lapham who grew up with nothing and earned his money through hard work.

Also in this section it is important to note in Chapter IV that when Corey has first opportunity to speak to the Lapham sisters, it is to Penelope that he first speaks, not Irene. It is only out of respect for Irene that Penelope does not encourage the conversation. Also, when her father is criticizing Corey's habit of joining men's clubs, it is Penelope that comes to Corey's defense.



Chapters VI and VII

Chapters VI and VII Summary

Tom Corey visits his mother and sisters in Bar Harbour, their vacation spot. His mother indicates that Corey's ideas of going into the mineral paint business are distasteful to her. Despite his mother's discouragement Corey goes to see Lapham about joining his business. Lapham tries to treat Corey as just another worker coming to him for employment. Corey first suggests he might add some capital to the business, an idea that Lapham discourages. Then Corey sets forth his real idea. He is familiar with some foreign languages and is interested in seeing the paint business spread to foreign countries such as Germany, South America and Mexico. Corey suggests he work on commission only. Corey cements Lapham's allegiance when he tells him that he believes in the paint.

After giving Corey a history of the paint, Lapham suggests the young man come to his cottage in Nantasket where they can finish their business talk. Penelope meets the boat at Natasket with a carriage and driver to take them home. She reports that Irene has developed a headache during the day. When they arrive home Mrs. Lapham meets them on the porch prepared to lecture Lapham but holds her tongue when she sees Corey.

In Chapter VII Lapham teases his wife by not telling her why Corey has come home with him. Lapham finally gives in and tells her that the young man came to him wanting a job in the paint business. At the same time Penelope takes the opportunity to poke some fun at Irene because Corey is spending the evening with them. Although Irene refuses to join the family for tea, her mother insists that she come down to meet with the entire family and Corey in the parlor later.

As they sit in the parlor together Corey notices a copy of *Middlemarch* on a table. He questions the girls and discovers it is Penelope who is reading the novel. Lapham soon tires of the close air in the parlor and suggests the young people go show Corey the view from the rocks. As soon as they are alone Lapham tells his wife the whole story of Corey's desire to go into business with him. Although Lapham believes the young man's interest lies solely in the paint, Persis believes he is also interested in Irene. Although he does not admit it the fact, the idea of a member of the Corey family wanting to join his business, and possibly his family brings about one of the proudest moments in Lapham's life.

Chapters VI and VII Analysis

Two important themes addressed in this novel are incorporated in these two chapters. First, these chapters deal with the relationship between the Coreys and the Laphams, or old money versus new money. Although the Coreys' estate is in decline and they are no



longer able to live up to their former standards, this family still considers themselves to be "better" than the Laphams. Note that in Corey's conversation with his mother that it is not until she learns that the Laphams live in an unfashionable area of town that she begins to think of them as common people. Before gaining this knowledge of the area of town in which they lived, she thinks highly of the Laphams. Her opinion does not improve even after Corey tells her the family is building a new house on Beacon Street. It is also important to consider how proud Lapham is that a member of the Corey family would consider joining his business. Although he is actually more financially profitable than the Coreys, Lapham believes the very Corey name carries with it prestige and importance. However, Lapham is actually a better person than the Coreys because he works for his living. He also does not unfairly judge people in the ways that the Coreys do.

A second theme of importance that is touched on in this section of the book is the idea of the content of books or novels versus real life. When the family is discussing the books that Penelope has read, her mother indicates that she was not allowed to read books as a child because her mother thought they contained nothing but lies. While it is true that the material of novels is not necessarily factual, there are many aspects of novels that are mirrored in real life. This theme will be addressed again further along in this novel.



Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII Summary

Anna Corey returns home to her husband after her vacation at Bar Harbor. Bromfield Corey tells her that their son has decided to join Lapham's business. Mrs. Corey insists he should have stopped the boy. His father offers the hope that Corey has become disinterested in all of the other careers he has tried and might become disinterested in this one also. Mrs. Corey divulges that she wishes her son would have married. Mr. Corey reminds her that Tom still might marry Lapham's daughter. Mrs. Corey believes this arrangement would be even worse than Tom's going into the paint business because the daughter is so dull. She adds that there is no need for Tom to earn a living either through work or marriage. Mr. Corey defends his son by saying that the boy wants to do something for himself.

Mr. Corey goes on to state that they must let Tom find his own way in life both in career and marriage. He adds that Tom has done his research and believes mineral paint is an ideal business to enter. Mrs. Corey, however, states she will speak to her son on the matter. When her son does approach her on the matter Mrs. Corey finds herself unable to defend her position as she had hoped. Tom tells her that he has even consulted his Uncle Jim, her brother, on the matter and that Jim believes joining the paint business is a sound decision.

At this point Mrs. Corey turns the discussion and tries to feel Corey out for information about his feelings, if any, for Irene. Corey gives her little information besides telling her the family seems to be good people who are very close in their family relationship. They like to talk, he tells her, more than they like reading. Mrs. Corey seems to be engrossed with the idea that the Laphams are not literary people. She believes the idea that they borrow books from the library makes them more common than ever.

Instead of mentioning Irene, Corey remarks that the oldest daughter, Penelope, is humorous. Mrs. Corey tries to bring the conversation back to Irene but Corey once again avoids this subject. He instead says that he hopes to be present when his father first meets Lapham. His mother seems concerned simply about the kind of business Corey is entering. Corey rebuts with his belief that any business is better than one where dirty or dishonest money is involved. Corey adds that once he earns an influence on Lapham, he plans to put in action a plan to scrape his paint advertisements off the landscape. Tom tells his mother he will start work the next day. Mrs. Corey asks Tom if he believes there is any personal interest on Lapham's part behind Lapham taking Tom into the business so quickly. Tom states that he does not know what she is talking about, though he does not believe it is bad for his boss to like him.

Later when speaking with her husband Mrs. Corey tells him she was unable to persuade Tom away from the paint business because he already had his mind made up. Mr. Corey also adds that Tom appears to be entering the business on the merits of the



paint itself, without any ideas of marriage to Lapham's daughter. Mrs. Corey seems to be more at ease because her husband approves of Tom's decision. As far as his marrying Irene goes, Mr. Corey states he would rather see Tom marry a girl with the same sort of rearing as Tom, but if that was not feasible, it could be worked so that there was no disgrace to their own family.

The conclusion of this chapter details Corey's first day at work with Lapham. At the end of the day Corey is lingering near the door of the offices when he hears Lapham talking to the girl who does the typing. Lapham seems to be advising her to get a divorce. The next day Walker, the head book-keeper in Lapham's office, makes acquaintance with Corey and talks freely about their boss. During their conversation Walker alludes to the girl who works at the typewriter. No one knows where she came from or how she got the job. Her remarks that most pretty girls do not like to work as hard as Miss. Dewey does at her typewriter. As the two walk back toward the office they witness a disturbance where a lady frees herself from the hands of a drunken sailor.

Chapter VIII Analysis

Howells uses this chapter to develop many of his themes. It is in this chapter that he gives the first real view of the way the Corey family views the idea of their son entering the mineral paint business. Anna Corey seems to be the only one who disapproves of the idea in its entirety but she seems to accept it more after she learns both her brother and her husband don't disapprove. Both Mr. and Mrs. Corey do not like the idea of Tom marrying into the Lapham family. Although the Laphams have more money than the Coreys, it seems to be the length of time that the Coreys have been a successful family that makes them believe the Laphams are beneath them. In addition, Mrs. Corey notes that Irene has a very bland personality. She doesn't believe Tom would be happy with her.

Although Miss. Dewey, the typist in Lapham's office has been mentioned in previous chapters, it is in this chapter that any real attention is paid to her. First, Corey overhears Lapham advising Miss. Dewey to get a divorce. Then Walker adds to the mystery of Miss. Dewey by telling Corey that no one in the office knows where Miss. Dewey came from or how she got her job.

Also in this section marriage is a recurring topic. First the Coreys discuss the idea of Tom's marriage to Irene, whom they refer to as the "paint princess." They believe this would be a bad match because Irene's background is so different from Tom's. However, Mr. Corey mentions that he believes he could work things so that the marriage would not reflect badly on their own family. Also during Corey and Walker's discussion, Walker talks about the way marriage changes people. His comment comes in regards to the mysterious Miss. Dewey whom he believes has been married in the past. Of course, Tom already knows she's married since he overhears Lapham advising her to get a divorce.



Chapters IX and X

Chapters IX and X Summary

Although Lapham does not treat Corey with any special favors while at work, he is fond of letting the public know that he has a member of the Corey family working for him. He brags of the young man's work ethic and his desire to do well. Lapham's wife discourages him from bringing Corey to the house. She instead wants him to come of his own accord. Therefore the only time Lapham gets to spend with Corey is those times when he leaves work early and takes the young man for a ride in his horse and buggy. The two often talk about the house Lapham is building on Beacon Street and sometimes visit it.

On one of these visits to the Beacon Street house Lapham and Corey happen to meet Irene and her mother there. Corey and Irene have a chance to talk while Mr. and Mrs. Lapham talk to the carpenter. Corey and Irene discuss the novel *Middlemarch* for awhile then Irene become engrossed in trapping a pine shaving with the point of her parasol. Irene mentions the fact that they will have a room for a library in their new house. She asks Corey for suggestions of which books they should purchase for that room. Corey writes down his suggestions and Irene returns to playing with the shaving. Finally Corey holds the shaving with his foot so Irene can jab it with her parasol. He later offers her the shaving as if it were a flower.

Later at dinner with his father, Corey talks over his experience with Irene, specifically her desire to have good books in their family library. Although Corey defends the Lapham family's intelligence, his father still carries the conceited notion that their family is below the Coreys. Despite this feeling, Mr. Corey suggests the idea of a dinner where the two families could meet. Lapham shares a similar feeling with his wife that he should meet Corey's father. He mentions, in fact, he does not like the idea that he has not yet met the young man's father. Lapham's wife tries unsuccessfully to make Lapham understand that the Coreys believe they are socially higher than the Laphams without much success. The chapter concludes with Irene telling Penelope about her experiences with Corey.

In Chapter X Corey settles into the routine of his job at Lapham's office. Meanwhile because the business is slow Lapham spends time engrossed in the details of his new house. His wife puts a one hundred thousand dollar limit on the structure. When his wife asks Lapham how he has come by so much extra money recently, Lapham tells her he has been dabbling in the stock market. His wife refers to these actions as gambling and tells him to stop playing in the stock market.

One day Lapham comes home from work in an unusually jovial mood. He tells his wife that Rogers, his old partner, came to his office to borrow money. In respect for his wife's feelings about the failed partnership, Lapham loans Rogers the requested money. This



action pleases Persis but she makes Lapham promise he will never ask Rogers for any of the money back.

In light of his wife's good mood, Lapham takes the opportunity to bring Corey home for dinner. After dinner Penelope, Irene and Corey sit on the veranda to watch the moon on the water. Penelope talks to Corey while Irene is content to watch the two of them and listen. Although Persis asks Corey to stay the night with them, he insists on walking himself to the boat. While walking to the boat Corey finds himself unable to concentrate on where he is going because he has found one of the girls so charming.

Chapters IX and X Analysis

Chapter X relates directly to the main plot of the book as Lapham takes the step which his wife says turns the direction of his morality. In this chapter Lapham's old partner comes to him for a loan. Lapham gives him the money without expecting anything in return. Lapham's wife feels this loan makes up for any wrong Lapham may have done years ago when he separated from his partner.

Also note in these chapters, the relationship between Corey and the Lapham girls seems to be developing. Corey has a chance to talk one on one with Irene. However, the conversation seems to leave him unimpressed. After talking with Penelope and Irene on the veranda, however, it appears one of the girls has made quite an impression on Corey during this time.



Chapter XI

Chapter XI Summary

When he arrives home Corey suggests to his father that it is time for Mr. Corey and Lapham to meet. The next day Mr. Corey visits Lapham at his office. Lapham is so excited over the visit and upset about his wife's reaction to the visit that Lapham is unable to go to the office the next day. After work Corey visits the Laphams to be sure his boss is not badly ill. Penelope refuses to help Irene entertain Corey this evening, insisting that they should be left alone to learn if they really like each other. Later that evening Penelope learns the two talked about Penelope all evening. The next week Corey comes to visit the Laphams again. This time Persis insists Penelope join Irene and Corey because he has asked about her. The chapter concludes with Lapham and Persis discussing whether or not Corey likes Irene and whether or not Corey feels Irene is worthy of him.

Chapter XI Analysis

Although Irene's parents seem to be confused as to whether or not Corey likes Irene, it is becoming clear that Corey may be coming to visit to see someone other than Irene. Penelope also seems ill at ease when Corey is there. At first, she refuses to come down and see him. She instead leaves Irene alone to determine if the two really like each other. Then Penelope helps Irene through all of her calls with Corey. She even acts as a cheerleader for Irene, sitting up with her far into the night dissecting each of their interactions.

The idea of differing social classes is seen very clearly in this section. Lapham and his wife are at odds about whether or not it is proper for them to ask the Coreys to dinner and who should ask whom first. When considering Irene's developing relationship with Corey, Persis questions whether or not Irene is good enough for him. Lapham becomes angry saying he is better than the Corey since he has worked for his money. He is annoyed by social differences and does not believe they should be an issue. Persis, on the other hand, is concerned her husband is unknowingly trying to enter the Coreys' social level.



Chapters XII and XIII

Chapters XII and XIII Summary

In Chapter XII the attention turns back to the Corey family. The Corey ladies have returned home and are dismayed to find how often the brother has been associating with the Laphams. Tom tells his mother the sisters are both nice girls and that the older is more intellectual than her sister. He remarks he expects his family will like her once they come to know her. Like the Laphams, the Coreys also discuss whether or not Corey is really in love with Irene.

In light of the turn of events during her absence, Mrs. Corey decides to pay another visit to the Laphams. This time she meets Persis and Penelope. Persis finds herself afraid of and in awe of this woman whom she thought of as her equal before. She is hardly aware of the visit until Mrs. Corey asks about Irene. Persis tells her that Irene is out but Penelope is there. Mrs. Corey questions Penelope about her feelings about the new house, but with an interest in any other attractions Penelope might have. As the two converse, Mrs. Corey begins to show a true dislike for Penelope. Irene returns just as Mrs. Corey's carriage is driving away. Irene asks her mother and Penelope how the visit went. Penelope is visibly upset by the uncomfortable call and after giving Irene a brief skit of the particulars of the visit, runs to her room in tears.

When Mrs. Corey describes the visit she tells her husband that Persis was uncomfortable and excited. Mrs. Corey does report, however, that she has discovered that "the girl" was in love with their son. She adds that Irene was not at home, only Penelope was there. Mrs. Corey describes Penelope as sly and completely disagreeable. At the conclusion of the chapter Mr. and Mrs. Corey decide that it is in their best interests to have the Lapham family to dinner.

In Chapter XIII the Coreys decide to move forward with their dinner for the Laphams based on the kindness the family showed them the summer before, in addition to their generous donation to charity. They next compile a guest list of people whom they do not believe will be terribly offended by Lapham and his family.

The Lapham family is in a downcast mood when the Coreys dinner invitation arrives. Lapham decides for the entire family that they will attend. Penelope, however, refuses to go. Lapham has his wife go ahead and reply to the invitation on the idea that Penelope will change her mind closer to the actual dinner date. Throughout the remainder of the chapter the Laphams are obsessed with the proper way to go about dressing for the dinner, what they should talk about while there and how they should handle Penelope's absence.

Chapters XII and XIII Analysis

Despite their differences, the Coreys and Laphams decide to press ahead with their strained relationship. Mrs. Corey pays a visit to the Laphams in which she makes Persis and Penelope both feel degraded and belittled. It is quite possible that Penelope's feelings of degradation came from the idea that Mrs. Corey is able to tell that it is Penelope who is in love with her son. Mrs. Corey also develops an immediate dislike for Penelope, which the girl also senses. Just on the tail of this devastating visit, however, the Coreys send the Laphams an invitation to dinner. Irene, of course, believes this invitation fixes her future with Tom. Penelope, on the other hand, refuses to go and be hurt by the situation once again.

It is interesting to consider the pains that each family is taking to impress, or at least not offend, the other. For instance, the Laphams, including Mr. Lapham, purchase entirely new outfits and consult a book of etiquette concerning how they should behave. The Coreys, on the other hand, try to find a balance between an intimate family dinner and a large group. They also try to invite guests whom they believe will not be badly offended by the Laphams.



Chapters XIV and XV

Chapters XIV and XV Summary

The night arrives for the dinner party and Lapham waits anxiously on the landing in front of the Coreys' drawing room for Irene and Persis to come down from upstairs. Tom meets Lapham outside the drawing room, just as the ladies are coming down. He is visibly disturbed that Penelope is not with them, but does not ask questions.

Lapham's major mistake at dinner is drinking the wine offered to him even though he is unaccustomed to it. They talk pleasantly about the house that Lapham is building. The conversation moves about from topic to topic until a popular novel of the time, *Tears, Idle Tears*, is discussed. While most of the guests believe the novel is wonderful with its self-sacrificing hero and heroine, the minister believes it is this type of novel that ruins good people. He claims this type of novel rivals suicide of the mind and teaches that sexual love is an emotion to be revered above all others.

After the ladies leave the gentlemen alone in the dining room Mr. Corey asks Lapham about his experience in the Civil War. As a result of the wine he has drunk Lapham is unable to follow most of the conversation but finally speaks up and tells his personal story. Jim Millon, a man in his company, was a good man. He sent all of his pay home to his wife and daughter even though his wife was good for nothing. At the last battle they went into, Millon confessed to Lapham that he knew he would not come out of this battle alive. Millon saw a shooter aiming for Lapham and jumped in the way to save Lapham's life but lost his own. Although the other men wait for Lapham to finish his story, he is unable to because his mind is so clouded by the wine. The men finally go and join the ladies.

During the after dinner conversation Lapham loses all of his reservations and talks loudly and importantly. In fact, he talks too much and says things that he should not. Persis and Irene leave before him and are forced to wait for him to finish bragging and come downstairs. The ladies are happy with their visit, but have their doubts the next morning. Lapham also suffers with his doubts as he asks Corey after work the next day if Lapham was drunk during the dinner.

In Chapter XV Lapham expresses his shame to Corey that he did not act as a gentleman at the party. Corey excuses Lapham behavior, indicating that it was the Coreys who were at fault. They knew Lapham was not accustomed to drinking wine yet they offered him no other option. Lapham goes on about the incident until Corey is embarrassed and leaves. Later as Corey thinks over the situation, he goes to the Lapham house in hopes of talking again with Lapham.



Chapters XIV and XV Analysis

In Chapters XIV and XV Howells seems to be heading toward the climax of his novel. Lapham has accidentally become drunk and has embarrassed himself in front of the Coreys. He has been everything that he has always sworn he was not. Corey, however, recognizes Lapham's innocence in the matter and wishes to make things right between the two of them.

The dinner conversation, particularly about the novel *Tears, Idle Tears*, should be kept in mind when reading the remainder of the book. The fictitious novel tells the story of a heroine who gives up her true love to another even though she does not love the man as much as the heroine does. Keep in mind also that the minister, Mr. Sewell, degrades the novel as being suicide of the mind and the cause of the downfall of morality. He tells the others that it gives too much importance to the idea of romantic and sexual love. There is also talk of the hope that one day a novelist will be able to capture the true story of an upright and conscientious man.

Also in the section the identity of Lapham's typist is revealed. She is the daughter of Jim Millon, the man who was killed in battle while saving Lapham's life. Zerilla wishes to speak to Lapham after work that day but he is too preoccupied with his behavior the night before to pay her any mind. He promises to see her later at her home.



Chapters XVI, XVII and XVIII

Chapters XVI, XVII and XVIII Summary

Lapham is not home when Corey arrives, so Penelope goes downstairs to greet him. The two converse stiffly for a few minutes before talk turns to the book Penelope is reading, *Tears, Idle Tears*. Penelope is outwardly critical of the girl in the novel having given up her love for another just because that one cared for the man first. She wonders why characters in novels are not allowed to act reasonably.

It is in the midst of this conversation that Corey admits that it is Penelope that he loves and not Irene. Penelope is shocked at his admission and tells him that if this is true, he must leave and not come back. Corey begs her to tell him why but she refuses. Just before her father enters the room Penelope asks Corey once again to promise not to say anything to her father. She hugs Corey then runs from the room. Corey leaves without speaking to Lapham on the premise of the time being so late.

In Chapter XVII Lapham tells Persis that Corey was at the house last night but left without telling him why. Persis goes upstairs to question Penelope about the circumstances. Penelope tells her mother that Corey admitted his love for Penelope the night before. Persis admits that she saw signs that Corey was not interested in Irene but tried to blind herself to them. They discuss how best to break the news to Irene. Persis decides to talk to Lapham first, then promises to tell Irene to leave Penelope alone. She then sends a note to her husband to meet her early in the afternoon so they can talk.

In Chapter XVIII Persis has trouble bringing up to her husband the subject about which she wants to speak. Lapham starts out talking about Rogers and the trouble he is causing Lapham by trying to get him in on some of his schemes. Persis angrily changes the subject to that of Penelope, Irene and Corey. They discuss the situation and try to think of someone they can call upon for help in deciding what to do. Finally Lapham suggests Mr. Sewell, the minister, and they make their way to his house. The minister encourages them to do the right thing, which came to all of their minds first, to allow Penelope to have a chance with Tom. In this way only one person, Irene, would suffer instead of all three of them.

Chapters XVI, XVII and XVIII Analysis

These three chapters, Chapter XVI and XVII in particular, serve as the turning point for the entire novel. It is finally out in the open that Corey loves Penelope and not Irene. Penelope is most concerned with not hurting her sister. After all, it was she who teased Irene about Corey and made Irene believe he was interested in her. However, Penelope feels that in a way she has also been trying to make Corey notice her. Any way the situation is turned, there is coming misery for the family.



Chapters XIX and XX

Chapters XIX and XX Summary

As they are nearing their own home in Chapter XIX Persis tells her husband she wants to see Irene in her room as soon as she gets home. She harshly tells the girl the truth of where the matter stands. Irene takes the news well, then asks to see Penelope a minute. Irene gives Penelope the souvenirs she has collected of Corey, and then requests that her father go walk with her. They walk aimlessly until they stop in front of the new house in which Irene says she will never live. Irene stops again at an apothecary store where she requests her father get her something to make her sleep. Irene then requests to be allowed to go to the family homestead in Lapham the next day. Lapham tells her she must wait until Sunday and she consents.

The next morning Irene comes to breakfast, then takes Penelope's breakfast to her. She spends her day cleaning the house and packing. Irene's parents, on the other hand spend their time discussing the way in which their children are handling their burdens. They also address whether or not they believe Penelope should accept if he offers himself to her again. Before leaving, Irene encourages her sister to tell Corey why she sent him away that night.

After work that day Corey talks with Lapham about his feelings for Penelope. He tries to get Lapham to tell him what the trouble is that keeps Penelope from wanting to see him. Lapham does not tell him, nor will he tell him he is allowed to come and see Penelope. He does, however, ask Corey to come by the house and see him. Penelope agrees to talk to Corey during this visit and tells him the whole family had thought it was Irene in whom he was interested. Corey denies that he was ever attracted to Irene and adds that even when he talked to Irene, he talked about Penelope. Corey tries, with no luck, to convince Penelope they have done nothing wrong and do not deserve to have to give each other up.

Chapter XX opens with Persis returning home to Boston. She is afraid Irene will wear herself out with work. Lapham promises to take Irene out west with him on a business trip he is planning. It is at this point that Lapham admits he has gotten into trouble with Rogers. Rogers, it appears, is a scandalous person who has thrown money at all sorts of bad deals. It is some mills of Rogers' that Lapham is going to see, the mills have been very profitable. Lapham has taken these mills from Rogers with the intent of selling them. The only problem is that the railroad is looking to buy the mills. Since the life of the mills is dependent on the railroad, Lapham must take what the railroad offers instead of being able to bargain.

That same evening Corey tells his mother the way he feels about Penelope. She admits she had suspected the way he felt before. However, she too misunderstands Corey and believes he is talking about Irene. She realizes he is talking about Penelope after she has already made a hateful statement about the girl. Corey admits to his mother that it



is the way that Penelope has handled the entire situation that has made him think even more highly of her. Later when Mrs. Corey tells her husband of the situation, he laughs at its absurdity but believes the right thing has been done.

However, during their conversation Mr. Corey admits to his wife that he dislikes the Laphams just as much as she does. They wonder together how Tom managed to fall in love with the plain sister and not the beautiful one. The two also try to determine ways in which this relationship might work better than the one with the pretty sister would have.

Chapters XIX and XX Analysis

In these two chapters Corey tries to convince Penelope that there is no wrong or sin in their relationship. Although he would have liked for her not to argue with him as she does, he admits to his mother later that her unwillingness to do anything to hurt her sister further makes him only love her more. When Corey tells his mother of his feelings for "Miss Lapham" his mother also misunderstands and believes he is referring to Irene. In her misunderstanding, she says some hurtful things about the actual object of Corey's affection.

Note that in this section the idea of the novel *Tears, Idle Tears* figures back into the plot. Penelope has told Corey that she believes the heroine of the novel acted wrongly in causing the man she loved to go to another woman because the heroine knew the other woman had loved him first. Corey sees exactly the same scene playing out in his relationship with Penelope and reminds her of her distaste for the actions of the heroine. These actions are also important because they echo the words of the minister about the content of novels ruining the morality of everyday people. Penelope is trying to do the right thing by her sister, but in the same way is acting in a way in which she herself has claimed to be cowardly and shameful, the same way the heroine in the novel acted. One must question whether this situation will turn out as the one in the novel did or if things will work out as the minister believes they should.



Chapter XXI

Chapter XXI Summary

Lapham returns from his two week trip out west in a sullen mood. Walker confides in Lapham that he feels there are bad times coming for the company. He seems to feel recognize the fact that Rogers is pulling Lapham down with him. Walker also points out that they are facing a lull in the paint business and the construction of Lapham's house is draining his profits.

About mid-afternoon Rogers drops in to see Lapham. Lapham asks Rogers if he knew the value of the mills and what the railroad planned to give for them. When Rogers replies he assumed the railroad would pay a fair price Lapham accuses him of lying. He also tells Rogers that he now realizes Rogers is a thief. Lapham tells the man he has allowed him to use him as much as he will allow. Lapham is now prepared to sell Rogers' stocks, as well as the mills, for however much he can get for them. Rogers listens patiently, and then tells Lapham that there are some English men who want to buy the mills. Lapham again accuses Rogers of lying but tells Rogers he must produce these parties within 24 hours to keep him from selling the mills to the railroad.

At dinner that night Lapham shares with his wife how much trouble Rogers has caused for him. Persis tries to make Lapham believe that Rogers is not really the villain Lapham believes him to be. Lapham, however, retains his doubts. Later that night Persis wakes up her husband with the idea that if he were to sell the mills to the English parties without telling them about the G.L.P. he would be just as bad as Rogers. Lapham admits to his wife he had already realized this.

Chapter XXI Analysis

The significance of this chapter is that it compares the badness of Rogers' actions with the fairness of Lapham's. In trying to help Rogers, Lapham has gotten himself caught up in the snares of one who makes a career of using people. Now Rogers has drained Lapham of nearly all of his profits and has given him nothing but some low value stocks and property in exchange.



Chapters XXII and XXIII

Chapters XXII and XXIII Summary

In Chapter XXII the Laphams receive a letter from Irene. Penelope is still so mopey that her mother loses patience with her and decides to try to shock the girl out of her mood by telling Penelope of her father's trouble. This information is enough to make the girl get up for her father's account. She first sends a note to Corey telling him not to come see her any more. At supper that night Lapham tells his wife that Rogers did not produce the buyers for the mill as he had expected would happen. Seeing Penelope at dinner he decides to take the whole family to the theater.

More trouble at work turns Lapham into a sullen and old man. He has even developed the habit of bringing work home with him, a habit he had always despised before. During these hard days he depends on Penelope to help him. Penelope uses the trouble as a way to hide from her own problems. One day Lapham drops a piece of paper from a pile on which he has been working. His wife picks it up and puts it in her work basket, meaning to give it to him, but forgets.

Chapter XXIII opens with Lapham trying to talk to his oldest daughter about the depth of the trouble he is in. He has come to the point that he wishes Penelope would marry Corey so that Corey would help them out financially. Persis realizes her husband has reached a new low when he tells her the new house on Beacon Street must be sold. He also tells her he has ordered the Works to be shut down, an action he has never taken during his entire career. There is also a paint company in West Virginia that has become real competition.

As he studies over his paper that night Persis remembers the scrap he lost and brings it to him. She asks who the Wm. M. who is listed on the paper is. He tells her it is nothing and burns the paper. However, a scrap flutters out and as Persis looks at it she realizes the name is Mrs. M. She asks Lapham about this name the next morning at breakfast. He tells her he does not know what she is talking about.

That same day at the office Corey proposes to invest some money in the business, a proposition Lapham is pondering when Zerrilla and her mother enter the office. Her mother demands money but Lapham threatens to have the woman arrested if she comes again. The next day Miss Dewey waits for Lapham after work is finished. She needs help dealing with her drunkard husband. Lapham goes to Zerrilla's home that night and tells Hen to get work. Zerrilla is not allowed to work at the office until Hen does find work.

Chapters XXII and XXIII Analysis

In these chapters Lapham's troubles become worse as he has to shut down the Works and makes plans to sell the new house. It is also learned that Lapham has been paying



money to Zerrilla to help support her and her mother. This generosity, coupled with Rogers demand on his finances has helped to drain Lapham's resources. The trouble has changed Lapham and he has become worried and old. He has even taken to bringing work home with him, something he had always sworn against.

In a different light, Lapham has made a great impression upon Corey with his high moral standards. One night Zerrilla and her mother come to the office to ask for money. While the porter and book keeper suggest that there may be some hint of misconduct on Lapham's part against these two women, Corey refuses to believe these rumors. He instead insists his boss is not capable of such a base action.



Chapters XXIV and XXV

Chapters XXIV and XXV Summary

In the opening of chapter XXIV Uncle Jim talks to Corey about the reasons why Lapham rejected Corey's investment offer. He tries to give the young man an idea of just how bad Lapham's situation is even though he does not know the full extent of it himself. Penelope's mother, in the mean time, tells Penelope about Corey's offer. Persis believes this causes the girl's feelings towards Corey to soften. After a few failed attempts Penelope manages to send Corey a letter stating her feelings about her father's circumstances and attempting to explain why she requested he not come to their house again. Corey writes asking permission to come see her again, but she refuses to allow it.

Also in this chapter Lapham finally puts his house on Beacon Street up for sale. The very next day Lapham receives notice that someone is interested in buying his house. In trying to make a decision about the house, Lapham goes to it and looks up at it again. It has become a symbol of his pride and prosperity. He has been intimately involved in its creation. Lapham lets himself inside and looks his house over from top to bottom. He then decides to try the chimney in the music room and builds a fire in the fireplace. While sitting in front of this fire, he decides not to sell his house. Lapham believes he can buy out the West Virginia paint business and in this way save himself financially.

That night Lapham and Penelope go to the theater. After their play is finished, they decide to take a walk past the new house. As they near the house, they begin to realize something is wrong. Soon they find the cause for the trouble, their house is on fire. The structure is a complete loss because there is no active insurance on the building.

In Chapter XXV, Lapham walks past the ruin of his house on his way to work. During the day he also meets with Bellingham and presents his plan to offer to buy out the West Virginia paint company. Bellingham suggests that instead of offering to buy, Lapham should offer to sell his business, a suggestion that angers Lapham. He meets with the West Virginia paint owners and they make a tentative proposal to merge their businesses. Lapham tries to raise the money he needs to seal the deal but is unable to do so.

In a turn of events Rogers comes to see Lapham at his office and tells Lapham he has found the English men who want to buy the mills. Although these English parties do indeed want to buy the mills, Lapham is unable to sell the mills to them. He feels it would be dishonest to take so much money for property that might turn out to be worth so little. When Lapham returns home after turning down the English men, he finds Rogers in his home, talking to Lapham's wife. While there Rogers also offers to buy the mills. Lapham does not feel right selling to Rogers since he knows Rogers will sell to the Englishmen. Lapham's mind is made up the next day when he receives an offer for his property from the railroad.



Chapters XXIV and XXV Analysis

It is in this section of the book that Lapham goes through and resists the most severe temptation. He has basically lost everything. His business is on the verge of bankruptcy, his new home has burned to the ground with no way to regain any of the money he put into it, and he has no way to raise the capital needed to even go into business with his competitors. On the cusp of this situation comes Rogers with a group of men who want to buy his mills. Lapham does not feel that it would be a moral decision on his part to let these men buy the property. He feels he would be allowing these men to rip off the people who are going to invest money in the relatively worthless property. For this reason, he tells these men he will not sell to them. Since Lapham will not sell to the Englishmen, Rogers suggests Lapham sell to him. Lapham does not feel right about his deal either, knowing full well that Rogers plans to sell the mills to the Englishmen. When Lapham does receive an offer for his mill property from the railroad company, Rogers knows that there is no use trying to deal with Lapham any more. Rogers does, however, play on Lapham's morality throughout the entire time they are trying to reach an agreement. He feels this play on Lapham's emotions will make him more likely to sell. Lapham, however, holds out for what he knows to be right and refuses to sell and put anyone else in the position that he was in. Even in his darkest time of need, Lapham knows that money is not everything.



Chapters XXVI and XXVII

Chapters XXVI and XXVII Summary

In Chapter XXVI Lapham leaves town to meet with the West Virginia paint people again. Persis goes to Lapham's office to talk to him and instead finds Zerrilla there by herself. After she has returned home, Persis receives a note instructing her to ask Lapham about the girl in his office. She questions Lapham as soon as he returns from New York. Lapham angrily instructs her to find out for herself, and then leaves. Persis goes back to the office where she meets with the girl again and discovers her identity.

After this encounter Persis feels unwell and has Penelope question Corey about Lapham's whereabouts. Corey comes to the house personally to tell them he is in Lapham. Corey stays at the house late and is about to leave when Irene returns home. Irene is mature in her act of receiving both her sister and her suitor. Back at his own home, Corey encourages his mother to go see the Laphams.

Chapter XXVII begins with the Coreys meeting Penelope. To Mrs. Corey's surprise, her husband actually takes a liking to the girl. Lapham returns from New York with the realization that he must file bankruptcy. The family moves back to the homestead in Vermont. Lapham still has the Persis brand of paint to work with; the West Virginia company has told him they are unable to produce such a fine brand of paint.

Lapham is, however, able to get Corey a job working at this West Virginia company. Corey asks for Penelope's hand in marriage and she agrees. They go to Mexico together on business with the paint company. Before they leave for Mexico, Penelope and Corey spend a week with his family in which they learn to get along with each other. After the Laphams settle in Vermont, Lapham invites the minister, Mr. Sewell, and his wife to visit. During this time he admits that he believes it was his original wrong with Rogers that caused all of his problems.

Chapters XXVI and XXVII Analysis

These final chapters tie things neatly together with Penelope finally agreeing to marry Corey despite her feelings of indebtedness to Irene. Corey gets a job with the West Virginia paint company and he and Penelope move to Mexico, far away from the Corey family who finds her so distasteful. Since the Laphams have moved to Vermont, there is no need for the Coreys and Laphams to have any sort of unwanted social interactions.

One interesting thing to note in this section is the comment that when Lapham declares his bankruptcy he does so with such prudence and good sense that others are in awe of him. Remember that during the Coreys' dinner party, the guests bemoan the idea that there are no characters in novels that act with good sense. Here is Lapham, a character in a novel, who has acted with good sense. Even in the real world of this novel, the



Coreys and their guests do not appreciate a man who acts with good sense when they meet him on the street. How could they appreciate a man with good sense in a novel?

Also note Lapham's final realization that it is his initial actions with Rogers, even though he does not think them wrong at the time, which lead to his downfall. He admits to the minister that every thing he did after this decision was built upon that initial bad or wrong decision. He feels that since his life was based on that initial bad judgment, every thing else he did was bound to fail. He has, however, found peace in his new situation.



Characters

Silas Lapham

Silas Lapham is the hero and main character of the novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. He is born in 1820 to a family of poor farmers. He credits his success in life to his mother's lessons in morality and good living. His real wealth in life has come from a paint mine his father discovers on the family's farm in Vermont. Although his father tries his entire life to make this paint profitable, it is his son who actually turns the paint into a business.

As an adult, Lapham lives in Boston with his wife and two daughters. He is also the father of a son who dies. After the death of his son Lapham leaves his wife in charge of the paint business while he goes to fight in the Civil War. His life is spared when another man takes a bullet for him. Lapham feels forever indebted to this man and his family. He creates a position for the man's daughter so she can work in his office. He also tries to protect the young lady from her worthless mother and drunkard husband. Lapham returns from the war with part of a ball still embedded in his knee.

Since he has worked so hard for his money and his position, Lapham is rightly proud of his achievements. Some members of the older society families, such as the Coreys, find his bragging tiresome and offensive. Lapham is stuck in a lower social class than these families because he has new money. His family has not enjoyed the luxury of a rich upbringing but has instead had to work for their living. Lapham's social troubles begin when he tries to break himself and his family into a social circle with which he is unfamiliar.

Financial troubles for Lapham begin when he tries to right a wrong by lending his old partner, Rogers, money. After this initial loan Rogers clings to Lapham and continues to borrow from Lapham and persuade the man to go into foolish projects with him. Lapham does not refuse, believing the man is truly trying to get his money back. It is at the point that Rogers gives Lapham some mines that can only be sold for much less than they are worth that Lapham realizes that Rogers is nothing but a liar and a cheat. At this point the damage has already been done and Lapham is forced to sell out. He loses his business, except for one paint line and is forced to sell his home in Boston. In a freak accident, the expensive house he was building burns to the ground, leaving him no way to get collateral from its sale.

Although Lapham and his family financially end up back where they started, living on the old homestead in Vermont, Lapham has risen to a high moral standard. Although Rogers has accused him of all sorts of things, Lapham ends his career knowing that he has made no decisions that have hurt any other people. Throughout his life, Lapham has never stooped to the level of those who have hurt and swindled him.



Persis Lapham

Persis Lapham is Lapham's wife. Before she marries, she is the school teacher in the town of Lapham. By marrying Persis, Lapham improves his social standing in the world. Persis is a very dedicated and hard-working wife and mother, even if she is slightly misguided. It is after she meets and assists the Corey ladies that Persis insists that the Lapham family build a house in a more socially respectable neighborhood. It is also Persis who gets in her mind that Corey is attracted to Irene and leads the entire family in believing so also.

In the early days of their business, Persis is just as involved in paint sales as Lapham himself. As the years have passed she has become more distant from the work. However, she retains her position as Lapham's conscience and always tells him when she believes he is doing something he should not. Although Lapham sometimes pretends not to listen to or take his wife's advice, it is clear that he respects and admires her opinion very highly. Lapham's finest brand of paint, the Persis Brand, is named after his wife as an honor to her.

Irene Lapham

Irene is Lapham's youngest daughter. She is described as being very beautiful with red hair and blue eyes. Since she does not have to work or attend school, she spends a great deal of time primping and buying clothes and hair fashions. She is satisfied to spend her time napping and straightening the house. As presented in the book she does not seem to be very intelligent either in book smarts or common sense. She is content to sit and look pretty rather than to join in conversation with company. She depends on input from her sister and family to help form her opinions and decide how she thinks about things. She is, in fact, very dependent on her family. Irene does not seem to develop into her own individual until she learns it is Penelope that Corey loves and not herself. Although the entire family is afraid Irene will break when she learns Corey does not love her, she holds up wonderfully and behaves in a very mature fashion.

Penelope Lapham

Penelope is Lapham's eldest daughter by three years. She is named after her grandmother. Penelope is different from her sister in every way. She is shorter than Irene and has an odd, serious, dark look about her. She enjoys reading and bettering herself. She enjoys talking, especially to her family, about the things she has seen and people she has met. She has an unusual way of putting things which Corey describes as being "droll." One might also say that Penelope has a very unusual, very highly developed sense of humor. It is this sense of humor that first attracts Corey to Penelope.

A second aspect of Penelope's personality that attracts Corey to her is her unwillingness to hurt her sister in order to make herself happy. Penelope somehow believes that by



refusing to love Corey, she will keep her sister from hurting as badly. Corey is finally able to convince her there is no use in all three of them being hurt. He is first, however, impressed by her devotion and loyalty to her family.

Tom Corey

Tom Corey is the only son of Bromfield Corey. Although his family has enough money that he does not have to work, Corey decides to take a job in Lapham's paint business. Although his family is not supportive of his job, Corey sees the good moral and character traits which he has himself in Lapham. He admires Lapham for his ability to earn his own living as well as his work ethic. Although Corey recognizes the differences between himself and the Laphams he does not think these differences are enough to keep him from socializing with the family.

Tom creates quite a stir in the Lapham family when Irene's mother believes Corey has developed an attraction for Irene. In reality, however, it is Penelope whom Corey loves. When he tells Penelope of his attraction, this sets up a string of unfortunate offenses where Irene is upset at having believed he loved her, and Penelope is upset because she loves Corey but feels she cannot be open with this feeling because her sister loved him first. Irene and Penelope's parents are also upset as a result of the turn of events but believe their girls will do what is best.

Bromfield Corey

Bromfield Corey is Tom Corey's father. He is a member of high society and although he tries to hide it at first, believes himself better than the Laphams. Mr. Corey has never worked a day in his life. He has instead lived off the money his father earned. Although his son talks to him often about what is going on in his life, the son seems more likely to take advice from his uncle than his father. The father and son do not seem to have a very close relationship with each other.

Anna Corey

Anna Corey is Bromfield Corey's wife and mother of Tom, Nanny and Lilly Corey. While on vacation near Canada, the Lapham women help out Anna and her girls. At this initial meeting Anna is pleasant and grateful to all of the Laphams for their help. In their next meeting she offends the family by making a comment about how unfashionable the area of town in which they live is. It is this comment that sparks Mrs. Lapham's desire to build a house and move to a more socially acceptable part of town. During her second visit to the Laphams, Anna again says hurtful things and acts in a hurtful manner toward Mrs. Lapham and Penelope. Mrs. Corey also takes an immediate dislike to Penelope, who is to be her future daughter-in-law. This dislike is deepened when Penelope does not attend the dinner party to which she has been invited and does not send word ahead of time.



Milton K. Rogers

Rogers is Lapham's former partner in his paint business. Although Rogers contributes capital to the business at the beginning of their partnership, he adds little else. While Lapham views dissolving the partnership merely as doing away with an unprofitable employee, Lapham's wife believes he is unfair to Rogers. In reality Rogers leaves the business with more money than he invests initially. Later in the story Rogers comes to Lapham to borrow money, a request that Lapham honors. Lapham's wife believes he has eradicated any guilt Lapham should have had as a result of his dealing with Rogers.

After he borrows this first sum of money, however, Rogers continues to come to Lapham until he has nearly sucked the man dry of funds. It is not until Rogers gives Lapham some mills that, because of circumstances, are worth only a fraction of what they should be worth that Lapham recognizes Rogers for what he actually is, a cheat and a liar. Rogers again tries to bluff Lapham by producing some Englishmen who want to buy the mills even though they know how little they are worth. Lapham refuses to take part in the sale because he feels it would be immoral of him to sell this worthless property to another party at a great profit to himself.

Uncle James Bellingham

Anna's brother from whom Tom seeks advice about his decision to enter the paint business with Lapham. This uncle is one of the family members invited to attend the dinner the Coreys give for the Laphams.

Zerrilla Millon Dewey

Zerrilla is the daughter of Jim and Molly Millon. Zerrilla is the Miss Dewey who works in Lapham's office as the typewriter girl. She, like Irene, is very beautiful and there is at first a hint that there may be some foul reason why Lapham has her there. When Persis visits Lapham's office after a long absence, even she is offended to find the highly attractive girl there. On her next visit, however, she realizes who the girl is and loses her jealous suspicions.

Zerrilla also comes to Lapham for help in getting free from her drunkard husband. Although there is another man who wants to marry her, she cannot get her husband to give her a divorce. He is either working on the ships, or at home drinking with Zerrilla's mother.

Jim Millon

Jim Millon is a soldier who is in the armed forces with Lapham. Millon is killed when he runs in front of a shot intended for Lapham. As a result of this heroic act Lapham feels responsible to help out Millon's daughter and wife.



Molly Millon

Molly Millon is the wife of Jim Millon and mother of Zerrilla Millon. Although Jim was devoted to his wife and sent her all the money he got from every paycheck, Molly was not a good wife. It is known in the book that she drinks regularly and possibly even messes around with other men in her husband's absence.

Hen Dewey

Hen Dewey is Zerrilla Dewey's useless husband. He alternates between trying to find work on the ships and staying at home drinking with Zerrilla's mother. Hen will not allow Zerrilla a divorce so she can marry Mr. Wemmell, a man who loves her and would treat her fairly.

Mr. Wemmell

Although he never takes an active role in the novel, Mr. Wemmell is important to the plot because he is the man who wants to marry Mrs. Dewey. Unfortunately Mrs. Dewey's current husband will not allow her to have a divorce.

Mr. Sewell

Mr. Sewell is the minister who is invited to attend the Coreys' dinner party. Mr. Sewell later advises Mr. and Mrs. Lapham on the way in which they should proceed in their quandary with Irene, Penelope and Corey.

Mr. Seymour

Mr. Seymour is the architect who designs the Lapham's new house. He is also one of the guests that the Coreys invite to their dinner party.

Walker

Walker is Lapham's lead bookkeeper who befriends Corey. Although Walker claims to know little about Lapham and his business, he likes to talk about what he does know. Walker seems particularly interested in the background of the pretty Miss Dewey who works the typewriter in Lapham's office.

Bartley Hubbard

Hubbard is the reporter for "The Events" who writes a Solid Men of Boston article about Lapham and his paint's success. Hubbard is known for poking fun at his subjects in his

articles, however, he admits to his wife he finds himself unable to freely ridicule this decent man. During his interview with Hubbard, Lapham remembers his own first years of marriage. Lapham sends several jars of The Persis Brand of his paint to Hubbard and his wife as a gift.



Objects/Places

The Persis Brand

The Persis Brand is Lapham's finest brand of mineral paint. He names this paint after his wife and puts it on the market as a birthday present for her.

Initials and Figures N.L.f. 1835, S.L.t. 1855

These initials and figures appear on each package of Lapham's mineral paint. They indicate the year in which Lapham's father founded the paint, and the year in which Lapham first tried to paint.

Lapham

Lapham is the city in Vermont where Lapham's paint mines and family homestead are located. This city was called Lumberville prior to its name being changed to Lapham when Lapham donated money to build a new town hall.

Nankeen Square House

This is the house where Lapham lives with his family for 12 years before he is forced to sell the home to help cover debts.

House on the Water Side of Beacon Street

Lapham is in the process of having this extravagant home built when his fortunes collapse.

Middlemarch

Middlemarch is a classic novel by George Elliot. Corey sees this novel in the Lapham's home and asks the Lapham sisters if they are enjoying reading the book.

School at Lumberville

This school is the place where Lapham meets his wife.



Nantasket

Nantasket is the town where the Laphams own a cottage.

Twenty Thousand Dollars

This is the amount of money Lapham loans Rogers.

Ten O'clock Club

The Ten O'clock Club is a club to which Bromfield Corey has Lapham elected.

Taft's

A restaurant to which the Colonel jokes to his wife that he will take Bromfield Corey for a fish dinner.

Baie St. Paul

This vacation spot is where the Coreys and Laphams first meet.

Bellingham Place

Bellingham Place is the street on which the Coreys live

Tears, Idle Tears

This book is a popular fictitious novel that is discussed at the Corey's dinner party.

96th Vermont

The 96th Vermont is the unit with which Lapham served while fighting in the Civil War.

Bolingbroke Street

Bolingbroke Street is the street where Mr. Sewell lives.

Bromide

Bromide is the substance given to Irene by the pharmacist to make her sleep.



Newspaper Account of Stanton Ranch

This clipping is sent to Irene from Texas. She believes it comes from Corey when it is actually sent by Stanton himself.

Pine Shaving

Irene believes this shaving is a token of Corey's affection and keeps it. She drops it in Penelope's lap when she learns Corey's affection is for Penelope and not her.

Lapham Homestead in Vermont

It is to this house that the Lapham family returns once they lose their fortunes.

Mills

Lapham gets these mills, which are not worth what they should be, from Rogers.

The Works

The term The Works refers to the factory or processing facility where Lapham's paint is made.

A Conspiracy

Toward the end of the novel Lapham begins to believe a conspiracy has been founded to guarantee his defeat.

Great Lacustrine Polar Railroad

The Great Lacustrine Polar Railroad is the railroad company that buys Lapham's mills from him at a greatly reduced price.

Themes

The House

The new house that the Laphams are building on the water side of Beacon Street is a interesting feature in the book not only because of what happens to it but also because of what it represents. The Laphams decide to build on their lot on Beacon Street after the Corey ladies make their first visit to the Lapham home on Nankeen Square. The Coreys tell the Laphams they had trouble finding their home because they never visited this unfashionable part of Boston. Therefore, in its beginning, the new house represents the Laphams' desire to move up in society.

As the new house is taking shape, it becomes a symbol of Penelope and Irene's future. The girls' parents hide their ambitions for themselves behind their ambitions for their daughters. Although it is they who wish to move up in society, they claim to themselves and to others to be building their house for their girls. When questioned about their feelings about the new house, however, both sisters do not really seem to care too much about it. They would rather stay in their familiar surroundings.

Finally, the new house becomes a symbol of Lapham's downfall and financial ruin. Lapham pours money into this house just as he pours money into Rogers, the Millions and the stock market. Just as he hopes to get some return for his investments in at least two of these financial ventures, Lapham hopes his new home will be a financial investment. Instead this money literally goes up in smoke when the new house burns on the night Lapham tries out the fireplace in the music room. Since he has no insurance on the home, he can get literally no return on his expensive investment.

Reality Versus Fiction

The idea of the way people act in real life versus the way people are portrayed as acting in novels is another theme that is discussed in this book, especially in regards to Penelope and Corey's relationship. The popular novel of the time *Tears, Idle Tears* is discussed both at the Coreys' dinner party and between Penelope and Corey. The book's main premise is based upon a heroine who gives up her true love for another who loved him first. Although the book has been widely read, most of its readers are highly critical of it. The minister, Mr. Sewell, for instance, says the book represents suicide of the mind and that the ideas it portrays are the reason why the world is becoming morally corrupt. While others are not as critical of the book's material, most agree that the heroine, though self-sacrificing in her actions, does not act as a real person would. They wish for a novel that would portray human actions as they actually are.

However, this idea that novels do not portray humans as they actually act is turned on its head when Penelope learns it is she who Corey loves and not Irene. Instead of



acting "sensibly" as she believes the girl in the novel, who was in basically the same situation, should have done, Penelope almost acts just as the novel's heroine does. Instead of taking the chance to be with the one she loves and who loves her, she at first denies herself, believing that this is somehow better for everyone involved. What the critics of the novel did not take into consideration when reading the book is the morality of the heroine. Acting in a moral fashion often seems foolish at the time. Penelope truly believes that by not accepting Corey's offer, she will make things easier for her sister. Instead, she winds up making all three of them unhappy. At the end of the novel, of course, Penelope does do the right thing and marry Tom.

Social Classes

Social class and the idea that a person's worth is determined by what social class they belong to is another theme discussed in this novel. For instance, when the Corey and Lapham ladies first meet and the Laphams come to the Coreys' aid, they are not aware of social classes. When the two families try to meet later, however, it becomes very obvious that the Coreys believe the Laphams are "beneath" them. In reality, however, the Laphams represent a much better and more moral breed of people in the way they relate to and deal with others. The Laphams have the ability to look beyond a person's name and like them for who they are. However, even they get caught up in the idea of social elevation when they try to join the ranks of the Coreys. Even though this desire causes the family to buy new clothes and build a new house in a more respectable part of town, the family never allows themselves to fall to the moral standards of the Coreys.

This difference in social class versus morality can even be seen within the Corey family. While Bromfield Corey is content to not work and live a life of leisure off his father's money, Tom Corey wants to work and earn his own way in life. Even though his father encourages Corey to marry for money, Corey finds this suggestion distasteful. He is content to marry for love. This is shown by his willingness to marry Penelope even after her father loses all of his wealth.

Style

Point of View

This novel is told from the third person omniscient point of view. Lapham is the main character of this story and the action follows him most closely. Although Howells gives his readers insight into Lapham's thoughts and emotions, he also gives insights into the thoughts and emotions of other characters in the book in addition to those of Lapham.

Although the point of view is third person omniscient, there is not a lot of time spent in the book analyzing the characters' emotions or thoughts. Most information is conveyed through the characters' conversations with each other. While there are some descriptive passages and some sections that explore one particular character's feelings, these sections are minimal.

Setting

The main setting of this novel is the city of Boston which is located in the United States of America. Boston is the home city of both the Lapham and the Corey families. The city of Boston is also the location of Lapham's offices for his mineral paint business. The Lapham's main house, located on Nankeen Square, as well as their cottage in Nantasket are some of the more often seen settings in the book. The new house that Lapham is having built on the water side of Beacon Street is also an important setting in the novel. This structure is important because it symbolizes the rise and fall of Lapham's fortune.

Lapham's homestead in Vermont is another important setting in the novel even though it is not really included in the main action of the novel. It is in the town of Lapham, or Lumberville as it was once called, where Lapham's father discovers the mine that eventually produces the mineral paint. It is in this town's school house where Lapham meets his wife. Irene travels to this homestead in Vermont to sort things out after she learns it is Penelope whom Corey loves and not herself. Finally, after Lapham loses his fortune, the family returns to live in this home at the conclusion of the novel.

The novel is set in the mid to late 1870's. This is significant because it is the time of the Civil War in America. Lapham's paint takes a nose dive because during the time of the war there is no money for people to buy luxury items, such as paint. Soon after the conclusion of the war, however, construction increases sharply as does the demand for paint. The incident of Lapham's friend being killed in the war by a bullet meant for Lapham is also significant to the story line. It is because of this war death that Lapham becomes involved with the Millon family.



Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is very easy to understand and read. The tone of the story is relaxed and events flow very evenly into one another, very smoothly. Since the majority of the story is told as the characters talk to one another, it follows that the language would be relaxed and conversational. Note the author's use of all capitals in some words in the characters' conversations. This use of all capitals indicates a word has been verbally stressed, or perhaps even said in a louder or stronger tone of voice than other words in a particular conversation.

Through his use of language Howells attempts to categorize each social group of people whom he portrays in his book. For example in the passages where the Coreys speak to one another, their speech is almost grammatically perfect. There are also not any indicated mispronunciations of any of the words they use. The Laphams who are portrayed in the novel as being in a slightly lower social class than the Coreys do not have perfect speech. They sometimes mispronounce or misuse words; however, these mistakes are infrequent. The Millon family, however, mispronounces and misuses words often. These frequent grammatical mistakes serve to remind the reader how far down the social class ladder the Millons are located.

Structure

"The Rise of Silas Lapham" is divided into 27 chapters, each about 13 pages long. These chapters are marked only by Roman numerals; there are no chapter headings or descriptions to let the reader know what each section is about.

The plot of this novel is very complex with several intertwining subplots. The main plot is the idea that even though Lapham loses his fortunes, he manages to keep his moral integrity. Adding to this plot is the subplot of the love triangle between Tom, Penelope and Irene. Another subplot in the novel is the construction and destruction of the house on Beacon Street. A third subplot is Lapham's relationship with Miss Dewey and her family. A final subplot is Lapham's relationship with Rogers and the resolve Lapham shows when refusing to become involved with Rogers' business dealings a second time.



Quotes

"Deep in the heart of the virgin forests of Vermont, far up toward the line of the Canadian snows, on a desolate mountain-side, where an autumnal storm had done its wild work, and the great trees, strewn hither and thither, bore witness to its violence, Nehemiah Lapham discovered, just forty years ago, the mineral which the alchemy of his son's enterprise and energy has transmuted into solid ingots of the most precious of metals." Chapter 1, pg. 20.

"Lapham was proud of his wife, and when he married her it had been a rise in life for him." Chapter IV, pg. 49.

"I will tell you plainly that I don't like the notion of a man who has rivaled the hues of nature in her wildest haunts with the tints of his mineral paint; but I don't say there are not worse men." Chapter V, pg. 67.

"She did not deny that there was something in it, but she could not think of any young man who had gone into such a business as that, and it appeared to her that he might as well go into a patent medicine or a stove-polish." Chapter VI, pg. 72.

"And now he's got an idea that he can take hold of the paint and push it in other countries—push it in Mexico and push it in South America." Chapter VII, pg. 89.

"He had always said that he did not care what a man's family was, but the presence of young Corey as an applicant to him for employment, as his guest, as the possible suitor of his daughter, was on of the sweetest flavors that he had yet tasted in his success." Chapter VII, pg. 92.

"Thirty years before, she had married the rich young painter in Rome, who said so much better things than he painted—charming things, just the things to please the fancy of a girl who was disposed to take life a little too seriously and practically. She saw him in a different light when she got him home to Boston; but he kept on saying the charming things, and he had not done much else. In fact, he had fulfilled the promise of his youth." Chapter VIII, pg. 96.

"I think about the only difference between people in this world is that some know what they want, and some don't." Chapter VIII, pg. 105.

"Lapham had the pride which comes of self-making, and he would not openly lower his crest to the young fellow he had taken into his business." Chapter IX, pg. 108.

"If Corey could hardly have helped feeling the social difference between Lapham and himself, in his presence he silenced his traditions, and showed him all the respect that he could have exacted from any of his clerks." Chapter IX, pg. 110.



"But I want you should promise me this: that you won't let anything tempt you—anything!—to ever trouble Rogers for that money you lent him. No matter what happens—no matter if you lose it all. Do you promise?" Chapter X, pg. 132.

"I don't know what to do with the man any more! Seems as if the more money he got, the more he wanted to get. It scares me to think what would happen to him if he lost it." Chapter XI, pg. 149.

"They are very simple, unfashionable people, and unworldly; but I can't say that they are offensive, unless—unless, she added, in propitiation of her husband's smile, unless the father—how did you find the father? She implored." Chapter XII, pg. 170.

"I'm not saying anything against HIM. Irene'll be a lucky girl to get him, if she wants him. But there! I'd ten times rather she was going to marry such a fellow as you were, Si, that had to make every inch of his own way, and she had to help him. It's in her!" Chapter XIII, pg. 181.

"The whole business of love, and love-making and marrying, is painted by the novelists in a monstrous disproportion to the other relations of life. Love is very sweet, very pretty——" Chapter XIV, pg. 198.

"But it's the affair, commonly, of very young people, who have not yet character and experience enough to make them interesting. In novels it's treated, not only as if it were the chief interest of life, but the sole interest of the lives of two ridiculous young persons; and it is taught that love is perpetual, that the glow of a true passion lasts for ever; and that it is a sacrilege to think or act otherwise." Chapter XIV, pg. 198.

"You never thought of me! cried the girl, with a bitterness that reached her mother's heart. I was nobody! I couldn't feel! No one could care for me! The turmoil of despair, of triumph, of remorse and resentment, which filled her soul, tried to express itself in words." Chapter XVII, pg. 226.

"But he's worse than dead to her; and so am I. I've turned it over a million ways mother; I've looked at it in every light you can put it in, and I can't make anything but misery out of it." Chapter XVII, pg. 229.

"The windows looked like the eye-sockets of a skull down upon the blackened and trampled snow of the street; the pavement was a sheet of ice, and the water from the engines had frozen, like streams of tears, down the face of the house, and hung in icy tags from the window-sills and copings." Chapter XXV, pg. 315.

"The chance of retrieval that had flashed upon him, as he sat smoking by the ruined hearth the evening before, stood him in such stead now as a sole hope may; and he said to himself that, having resolved not to sell his house, he was no more crippled by its loss that he would have been by letting his money lie idle in it; what he might have raised by mortgage on it could be made up in some other way; and if they would sell he could still buy out the whole business of the West Virginia company, mines, plant, stock on hand, good-will, and everything, and unite it with his own." Chapter XXV, pg. 316.



"This was his reward for standing firm for right and justice to his own destruction: to feel like a thief and a murderer." Chapter XXV, pg. 332.

"One of the things she had always had to fight him about was that idea of his that he was bound to take care of Jim Millon's worthless wife and her child because Millon had got the bullet that was meant for him." Chapter XXVI, pg. 340.

"For himself, he owned that he had made mistakes; he could see just where the mistakes were—put his finger right on them. But one thing he could say: he had been no man's enemy but his own; every dollar, every cent had gone to pay his debts; he had come out with clean hands." Chapter XXVII, pg. 362.



Topics for Discussion

In your opinion is the title "The Rise of Silas Lapham" appropriate for this book? If yes, explain why. If no, suggest a more appropriate title. Defend your choice of title.

Discuss the significance of the fictional novel "Tears, Idle Tears" as it relates to the relationship between Tom, Penelope and Irene. In what ways does Howells use this novel to strengthen and to direct this relationship?

Do you believe Lapham's financial dealings would have turned out better had he not partnered with Rogers? Explain your answer.

Consider the significance of the side plot concerning the Millons. How do Lapham's actions toward this family strengthen the reader's comprehension of Lapham's exceptional moral character and devotion?

Consider the public opinion of Penelope after Tom discloses that it was she he loved and not Irene. Do you believe this opinion is warranted? Why or why not?

Discuss the importance of the house on the water side of Beacon Street. Explore its symbolism, its significance to the story, and the changing opinion of this structure as the story progresses.

Compare and contrast Silas Lapham and Bromfield Corey. Include aspects such as their attitude toward life and their attitude toward each other. Consider also the way in which each got their wealth and what their attitude is concerning their prosperity.

At what point in the novel do you realize that Corey is interested in Penelope and not Irene? What hints does the author give that this is the case? Although Penelope and Corey's mother both recognize the fact Corey is in love with Penelope, why do Penelope's mother and Irene not see it?