

## I. Howells in the 1880s

Social critics of America's tumultuous post-Civil War industrial era often look to novels of business as a means of exploring the nation's burgeoning capitalist ethos. Documenting the behaviors of a business culture through the medium of literature is a valid example of social activism. But such activism risks seeing industrial strife as separate from the media that present it. Indeed, in order to sufficiently study an economic era's struggles through the literature of business, one also must consider the business of literature—that is, the writing and selling of stories.

One of the most prominent writers of business-themed literature during this time was William Dean Howells, prolific novelist, editor, and critic. Through his writing, we see that Howells thought a great deal about the business of literature—not only about thematic content that would sell to readers, but also about the role of capitalist influences in the publication and marketing of stories. Howells, an early realist, worried that business stories appealing to popular readers were largely romantic tales lacking in verisimilitude—rags-to-riches narratives that, like the Cinderella courtship plot, preached that economic success was within the grasp of even the lowliest laborer. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Howells' suggests another major concern: that the publishing industry itself began to operate according to the same ready-made success stories it produced for readers.

This thesis examines Howells' two most notable novels of business, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), suggesting that the business of literature, in its dissemination of success myths and its ultimate internalization of these myths, was complicit in America's industrial strife during the 1880s. Both novels operate

meta-critically. In *Silas Lapham*, for instance, Howells dramatizes several unhealthy business behaviors that derive from prosperity tropes found in newspapers and other popular writings. In this novel, the focus is on the ways these tropes affect the individual—both the reader who consumes them and the writer who must produce them. Next, *Hazard* explores the effects of these myths within the industry of literary production, showing how the publishers themselves are susceptible to the same romanticized economic ideals they disseminate. These novels do not correct the problematic behaviors that popular writing likely had a role in inspiring. They certainly do not resolve the seemingly contradictory values within the publishing industry. But *Silas Lapham* and *Hazard* generate a clearer picture of the complex relationship between literature and business, in a time punctuated by literary disputes between realists and romantics, and violent strikes between the labor class and the capital class.

Discussing the literary and social context of the 1880s, along with Howells' involvement with it, will accentuate the subject matter analyzed in *Silas Lapham* and *Hazard*. Richard Hofstadter's exploration of the tension between business and intellect underscores a chief concern of Howells' as a professional writer: "no doubt there is a certain measure of inherent dissonance between business enterprise and intellectual enterprise: being dedicated to different sets of values, they are bound to conflict; and intellect is always potentially threatening to any institutional apparatus or to fixed centers of power" (233). More specifically, capitalist markets threatened aesthetic vision, and writers responded differently to market demands. Some used literature as a tool for criticizing business culture as unethical, while others posited a connection between morality and economic success. This latter group attracted a popular readership and

reaped hefty profits, especially because of their didactic appeals, instantiating cause-effect value systems where upright behavior predicated rewards. Put briefly, an ideological split within the writing community resulted in various portrayals of American industrial culture.

Moreover, rather than treating wealth pejoratively as a signifier of evil living, this second group of mainstream writers posited financial wealth as the inevitable result of hard work and providential favor, i.e., upright living. Paulette Kilmer calls this pattern the “success archetype” in *The Fear of Sinking: The American Success Formula in the Gilded Age* (23). Success archetypes, Kilmer argues, were popular because they allowed people to create meaning out of their own lives (4). One such archetype is the Cinderella tale, which shows how moral living, good luck and hard work increase one’s socioeconomic status. The tale allows people to cope with rapid social change without compromising traditional value systems, instilling “a sense of control over the random forces of evil” (16). While the late-nineteenth century incarnations of the Cinderella tale provided hope, security, and rewards for morality among the lower classes, popular narratives of the time also prescribed social and moral roles for the rich. For instance, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, a stalwart proponent of the humanities and clearly a self-made man, “suggested prosperous individuals might attain salvation by serving as exemplars of success. Such individuals, by sagely investing the fortunes entrusted to them by God, could help the poor lift themselves up by their bootstraps” (5).

Success narratives permeated American reading culture in the later nineteenth century. Among others, Carnegie’s *The Gospel of Wealth*, P.T. Barnum’s *The Art of Money-Getting*, and the works of Horatio Alger underscored the pervasive cultural

influence of self-made individuals.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Postal Act of 1879, which increased the affordability and accessibility of magazines, was followed by an increase in evening newspaper circulation by 112 percent, and readers by 1895 “could select from ten times as many periodicals and newspapers as their counterparts had had to choose from in the 1850s” (16). The publishing industry was able to disseminate popular success tales more widely than ever before, and the reading public rapidly consumed these stories of self-improvement.

Interestingly enough, Howells’ work, philosophy, and social status seemed to straddle the divide between these two groups of writers—the esoteric “economic dropouts,” as Laurence Stessin would say (281), and the successful “popular bards,” according to Paulette Kilmer’s terminology (48).<sup>2</sup> A literary hybrid, Howells certainly had his place among the *literati*, traveling to Italy, and corresponding with Ivan Turgenev and Henry James. Between 1901 and 1905, Howells received honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Yale, Oxford, and Columbia, and in 1915 was awarded the gold medal for fiction by the Academy of Arts and Letters (Kirk 15). But there also was a commercial

<sup>1</sup> Alger, most notably a didactic writer for juvenile males, earned critical attention from the literary community. For instance, as biographers Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales have pointed out, Howells satirized some of Alger’s work in *The Minister’s Charge* (106). But as Alger’s sales “plummeted” by the 1920s, mid- to late-twentieth century readers more easily typified the author’s work in an effort to stabilize Depression-era concerns, sometimes misrepresenting the actual content of his work (149, 151-3). However, by studying *Silas Lapham*, a novel published during “the heyday of [Alger’s] popularity” (150), we might facilitate a more accurate diagnosis of the cultural ideologies fomented through Alger’s work.

<sup>2</sup> Critics agree that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists, Howells included, scrutinized various forms of competitive capitalism. Lawrence Stessin, in “The Businessman in Fiction,” opines that “imaginative literature has been harsh on the businessman,” primarily because its authors have been “economic dropouts” unaccustomed to the functional benefits of capitalism in society: “their research into the ways—and wiles—of the captains of finance was confined to lurid newspaper reports at a time when the high priest of journalism in America was William Randolph Hearst” (281, 284). Even Howells, Stessin writes, “did not understand that the booms in financial markets are a response to a cry for capital to build, develop and expand new products and services” (284). In his well-noted essay in *Fortune*, John Chamberlain also criticizes Howells, chiefly for socialist thinking in his later years, but still appreciates *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as a “heartening book” that differs from the typical portrayal of capitalist leaders as villainous hucksters (134-48).

element to Howells. The author produced half a dozen novels between 1871 and 1881, and, by the 1890s, Howells had accumulated thousands of dollars in royalties from his various book contracts (Kirk 72; Crowley 33). His audience was similar to that of the popular voices, as well. In no way did Howells praise romanticized works of pulp fiction that promised economic success to moral blue-collar workers, but he did aim to narrate the concerns of working-class individuals, emphasizing the commonplace. His editorship at *The Atlantic* and seat in *Harper's* "Easy Chair," moreover, carried a mainstream appeal that periodicals, at times, exploited:

Not only had [Howells] been heard every month for a decade in the Harper publications—*The Weekly* and *Literature*—as well as in many other magazines, but he was “good copy” any Sunday morning for the New York *Herald*, the *Sun*, or the *World*. Young Theodore Dreiser’s interview for *Success* of April, 1898, bore the title, “How He Climbed Fame’s Ladder”; the subtitle was “William Dean Howells Tells the Story of His Long Struggle for Success and his Ultimate Triumph.” (Kirk 161)

As this description suggests, Howells himself was packaged in a way not unlike the material produced by popular bards. Heralded as a paragon of cultural success, Howells struggled to find a sound position amid the literate community’s ideological divisions. Was he a litterateur, forever detached and ever critical of economic realities, or a capitalist competitor in the literary marketplace?

Meanwhile, the 1880s also marked an unusually high level of conflict between labor and capital. Fifteen thousand strikes were reported by the U.S. Commissioner of Labor from 1880 to 1887, notes Fay M. Blake (18). In *The Strike in the American Novel*,

Blake studies the “fumbling attempts to introduce the strike into the novel” during the late nineteenth century, noting how authors treated labor strikes as “climactic devices,” or natural disasters, devoid of human suffering, complexity, or agency (52). Part of this writerly behavior, argues Blake, is symptomatic of a largely middle-class authorial demographic, wherein the “grinding away at a factory job” is a foreign experience to many novelists (33). Although writers did “plea[d] for humane factory management,” they resisted “collective organized action” because any hint of aggressive working-class collaboration too often signaled socialist, even anarchistic, values (34). After all, the Civil War had wrought enough destruction, and additional civic violence was the last thing many Americans sought. Not all nineteenth-century writers shunned labor outcries—consider Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1887), for example—but authors did affirm individualistic self-reliance as a corollary to westward expansion and Social Darwinism (21-3). In short, laborers were misrepresented for a number of social and political reasons.

Most noteworthy of social outbreaks is the Haymarket Riot of Chicago in May 1886, a strike that John Crowley, in *The Dean of American Letters*, explains as one of Howells’ pivotal moments as a professional writer. Workers of McCormick Reaper Works picketed outside the premises to protest their replacement laborers. This rally resulted in a “clash between strikers and their scab replacements”; police intervened, and “several workers were beaten and shot” (6). The next evening, labor organizers rallied at Haymarket Square and, as police were attempting to disperse the crowd, a bomb detonated and killed one policeman and six civilians (*Ibid.*). Bombers were unidentified, but police charged eight anarchists with the murder: the conviction occurred 20 August

1886. “The executions were stayed, however, while lawyers appealed to higher courts. Meanwhile, a vindictive national mood, fomented by the press, magnified the anarchists’ case into a *symbol*, not of any ‘wrong from class to class,’ but rather of the perceived peril to basic American values” (7, italics supplied). The American populace associated the rioters with immoral behavior that was not conducive to economic success, as purported by the popular publications previously discussed. In fact, they even saw this immoral behavior as punishable by death. Reports of this event, it could be argued, were loaded with the ideological language that Kilmer examines in *The Fear of Sinking*. Kilmer does not at all discuss the Haymarket affair, yet she strongly asserts that “before journalists were expected to be objective, reporters as well as fiction artisans exposed the sins of Demon Rum and invoked the magical power of words to redress social injustices” (4). James Green’s *Death in the Haymarket* draws upon numerous reports from Chicago publications that decry the strikers’ violence, understandably, without hesitation. It is interesting, though, how journalists resorted to dramatic language, setting up binary oppositions between “heroic” patrolmen and “serpent” anarchists. Appealing to religious sensibilities, commentators in the *Albany Law Journal* described the strikers as “long-haired, wild-eyed, bad smelling, *atheistic* reckless foreign wretches” (qtd. in Green 208, italics supplied). The anarchists’ trial and execution symbolized a literate public’s tendency to appropriate unconventional forms of social activism as moral and narrative heresies. In other words, the anarchist revolts of 1886 did not align with the American success tale prescribed by publications consumed during the Gilded Age.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reading scores of fairy tales and didactic tracts can be edifying for the person seeking escape or solace from everyday life, especially when those writings are infused with universally shared values, as Kilmer points out. But conflating potboilers and cliff-hangers with works of poorly wrought journalism is

Howells was well attuned to America's consciousness during the 1880s. He examined heavily the Haymarket trials and positioned himself contrary to the majority of public opinion. Consider his words in a letter to George W. Curtis:

Look how the case was worked up beforehand by the press and the police; how the jury was empanelled regardless of the acknowledged prejudices of eight or nine of the jurors; how partial the court's rulings seem to be; how inflammatory the prosecuting attorney's appeals; how purely circumstantial and conjectural the evidence, and how distinctly and squarely met; how that "reasonable doubt" which should have been made to favor the accused was tormented throughout into proof against them.

I feel that these men are doomed to suffer for their opinion's sake.

*(Selected Letters, 18 Aug. 1887, p. 193)*

In his assessment of the case, Howells' comments suggest two things: 1) that officers, litigators, and the press have essentially "authored" this case; and 2) that citizens have misread the actual course of events. Following the Haymarket affair, Howells' "sense of injustice came to bear almost immediately" in his fiction, *Annie Kilburn* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* being his next novels (Crowley 9). In 1887 and 1888, he read Leo Tolstoy's *What to Do?* and Laurence Gronlund's *Co-operative Commonwealth*, socialist texts that, among others, influenced Howells' thinking as a novelist-citizen (10, 11). An intense period of resistance within literary and industrial institutions marked the latter half of the 1880s, and Howells found himself right in the middle of it all, using each institution in question to interrogate the other.

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potentially dangerous. Doing so risks confusing fact with fiction, a chief concern for Howells, who read the Haymarket affair quite differently than the majority of Americans (Green 257).

Years after Haymarket, Howells published “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” in *Scribner’s* (1893). This essay, while crucial for a discussion about the business of writing, also addresses the concept of labor. “[A]llied to the great mass of wage-workers,” artists “live by doing or making a thing, and not by marketing a thing after some other man has done it or made it” (33). A laborer, like a writer, should not operate “upon fashion,” lest “he deform his art” (34-5). In other words, a higher form of production, as Howells’ essay suggests, should not be constituted by normalized patterns. Normalized patterns resist change, consume their followers, and solidify hierarchies of separation. The laborer and writer should take pride in the intrinsic uniqueness of their own work, not conceding wholly to the “purveyors” of their livelihood, and hope that an honest treatment of their craft might yield something good. Howells did not advocate public violence or anarchy, but he did sympathize with disenfranchised laborers, hoping that they, too, could challenge *laissez-faire* corruptions similarly to the way aspiring writers might combat the “barons” of Romance.

Stephen Crane’s October 1894 interview with Howells addressed the role of writing, specifically novel-writing, in society. A novel “should never preach and berate and storm,” said Howells. “It does no good. As a matter of fact a book of that kind is ineffably tiresome. People don’t like to have their lives half cudgeled out in that manner, especially in these days, when a man, likely enough, only reaches for a book when he wishes to be fanned, so to speak, after the heat of the daily struggle” (615-18). People read material that allows them to escape from the reality of their daily lives—material that “cools them off,” so to speak, and essentially redirects their vision to more amusing topics. Although there is a place for this type of writing, Howells viewed it as somewhat

injurious to the mind; the true “business of the novel,” he said, is “to picture the daily life in the most exact terms possible with an absolute and clear sense of proportion” (616). Furthermore, the novel “is a perspective made for the benefit of people who have no true use of their eyes. . . . It is in this way that lessons are to be taught and reforms to be won” (*Ibid.*). In response, Crane recognizes this philosophy as “unpopular,” and wonders how one can profit from such an approach, especially since, in late 1894, the “literary pulse of the country within the last four months” had shifted from realistic to romanticistic<sup>4</sup> (617). Howells, however, maintains that “a writer of skill cannot be defeated because he remains true to his conscience” (*Ibid.*). This discussion underscores Howells’ resistance to romantic literature for amusement’s sake; furthermore, it demonstrates his advocacy for socially performative writing—that is, writing that challenges stagnant cultural formulae that work in the name of popularity.

The following chapters examine *Silas Lapham* and *Hazard*, considering Howells’ own struggles with understanding the roles of business and literature in society. Autobiographical imprints and meta-critical techniques show up in both novels, and though the link between literature and business does not present itself as demonstrably in *Silas Lapham* as it does in *Hazard*, Howells still makes the connection clear enough. The Rev. Sewell’s reflections best capture the less marketable literary principle that Howells believes should be most prevalent: “The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious” (175). Sewell’s defense of

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<sup>4</sup> A term coined by Howells to differentiate between romance and romanticism, a “romanticistic” novel claims “to portray actual life, but it does this with an excess of drawing and coloring which are false to nature . . . and endeavors to hide in a cloud of incident the deformity and artificiality of its creations” (qtd. in Sorrentino 266). For more on Howells’ conception of this term, also see Louis J. Budd’s “W.D. Howells’ Defense of the Romance” (*PMLA*, 67.2 [March 1952]), 41-2.

the realistic novel is a response to highly romanticized works of fiction. His assumption—that novelists are supposed to *help* their readers rather than simply entertain them—introduces a key tension between what writers thought was useful and what readers thought was enjoyable (and therefore, what publishers perceived as marketable).

In *Silas Lapham*, Howells critiques the way individuals consume popular business mythologies and the way artists create them, but in *Hazard* he also investigates the perspectives of mythology disseminators, specifically those involved with the publishing business. My final chapter considers what follows when romanticized success narratives pervade the publishing industry's consciousness. When editor Basil March moves to New York to launch *Every Other Week*, it is not long before Fulkerson, the magazine's public-relations agent, wants to celebrate the publication's prematurely understood success, putting angel investor Jacob Dryfoos at the forefront of the ceremony. As Fulkerson says:

“We are going to strike everything that is imaginative and romantic in the newspaper soul with you and your history and your fancy for going in for this thing. . . . We have had all sorts of rich men backing up literary enterprises, but the natural-gas man in literature is a new thing, and the combination of your picturesque past and your aesthetic present is something that will knock out the sympathies of the American public the first round . . .” (283).

Fulkerson exploits Dryfoos in order to boost sales of *Every Other Week*, assuming that readers will buy from someone “new,” a “natural-gas man” instead of a traditionally rich man—that they will respond to someone uniquely bootstraps oriented with a picturesque history. In other words, readers want Paulette Kilmer’s “success archetype.” Likewise,

Fulkerson's excitement over "the natural-gas man in literature" demonstrates the literary community's misguided beliefs in the very self-made-man myth that the community had helped create—myths that will be confronted in a violent traction strike that punctuates the novel.

That Howells may have considered the Gilded Age's strikes and labor strife while examining literature's role in an industrialized society is worthy of consideration. Furthermore, evidence in Howells' work suggests that he criticizes literature for bowing to the influences of competitive capitalism and therefore contributing to some of the unsettling and sometimes violent struggles of America's industrial economic era. The "business" of the novel—concerning thematic content (as noted in Howells' interview with Crane) and market-driven production (as explained in Howells' "Man of Letters" essay)—must undergo a crucial self-examination if it endeavors to reform the culture about which it writes.

## II. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

In *Silas Lapham*, Howells' work illustrates the difficulties success narratives create for readers and writers, positing Silas Lapham as a “reader” and the architect Seymour as a “writer.” Silas represents the American businessman whose self-understanding is formed by popular success narratives. Through Silas, Howells demonstrates several flawed perceptions about self-made men: the conflation of fiscal success and social class, the image of every hero’s wife as an unflinching moral center, and the need for a single hero. Meanwhile, it seems that Howells furthers his critique of narrative concepts of “success” by inscribing his own professional struggles as an author-businessman—one whose artistic values are often challenged and sometimes redirected by the popular tastes of the times. Seymour the architect’s relationship with Silas could easily symbolize a writer’s relationship to his audience and work. Seymour’s need to balance market demands with vocational principles resonates with Howells’ own concerns about authorship. A look at these details within *Silas Lapham* could very well highlight Howells’ awareness of (and involvement with) popular literature’s influences as America headed into a state of industrial upheaval and social strife.<sup>5</sup>

Our discussion begins by examining the myths that shape Silas Lapham’s self-perception. His reading diet, for instance, does little to encourage a sense of reality. When Tom Corey begins talking about *Middlemarch* with Penelope and Irene Lapham, Silas

<sup>5</sup> *Silas Lapham* follows two main storylines—the title character’s financial fall and moral rise, and the Penelope-Tom-Irene love triangle. Brenda Murphy has pointed out that both plots contribute to Howells’ critique of dominant narrative patterns in America. The fundamental structure of the novel corrects “two popular nineteenth-century story paradigms, the rags-to-riches ‘success myth’ and the sentimental novel of self-sacrifice” in romance (22). By subverting familiar narrative forms to show what reality was *not*, Howells provided readers a glimpse of his literary vision. The opening sequences of the novel are thoroughly investigated by Murphy, yet we are left with little analysis of how this theme unfolds throughout the rest of Howells’ novel. For our purposes, therefore, a concentrated focus on the success paradigm will illustrate even further the consequences of a culture’s habitual obeisance toward formulaic narratives.

disrupts the conversation to share his own reading habits: “I can’t get the time for books. It’s as much as I can do to keep up with the newspapers . . . But I guess we all like a play better than ’most anything else. I want something that’ll make me laugh. I don’t believe in tragedy. I think there’s enough of that in real life without putting it on the stage” (77). Silas seeks art—in particular theater and journalistic writing—that provides escape from the tragic realities of everyday life. In fact, the only example of a newspaper that Silas reads is the *Events*, which romanticizes the trials and successes of executives in a miniseries called the “Solid Men of Boston” that, ironically, Silas himself is featured in.<sup>6</sup>

Howells reinstates Bartley Hubbard, the paper’s snide reporter from *A Modern Instance*, to paint Silas’ profile. “What is most important in this exchange,” notes James M. Cox, “is that Bartley’s finished story will in effect cover up Lapham’s crude vernacular just as effectively as Lapham’s refined mineral paint covers up natural defects and even nature itself” (115). This “cover up,” to clarify further, employs a number of themes similar to the Horatio Alger archetype, specifically “[t]hrift, hard work, respect for elders, self-education, pride . . .” (Falk 363). It would not be fair, however, to say that Silas Lapham represents the Alger myth *in toto*. After all, he regards Bartley’s story “with very mixed feelings” (65). Could Silas be disturbed by his portrayal in the piece because he realizes that the success stories he emulates might be just as manipulated as his own?

Perhaps one fabrication Silas gleans from writing like Bartley’s is the belief that his business and the financial success that comes with it are the tangible gateway to

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<sup>6</sup> On two occasions, Silas mentions the *Events* in reference to his interview with Bartley Hubbard—first to Tom Corey, then to his father Bromfield (65-6, 125). But Tom and his father are unfamiliar with the *Events*, instead reading papers of “conservative respectability” like *The Daily Advertiser* and *The Boston Evening Transcript* (Cook 125, 171). These other publications provide contrast to the mainstream material Silas enjoys.

societal respectability. When Mrs. Lapham suggests the daughters should find a place in Boston “society,” Silas demands, “Don’t they have everything they want? Don’t they dress just as you say? Don’t you go everywhere with ‘em? Is there ever anything going on that’s worth while that they don’t see it or hear it? *I* don’t know what you mean. Why don’t you get them into society? There’s money enough!” (26-7). Silas does not understand that upper-class status, later exemplified to him through the Coreys, simply cannot be bought. A house, for instance, located in the “right” area does not guarantee access to “society,” a concept itself that Howells critiques later in the novel. Howells’ portrayal of his hero’s innocence of class markers is a response to other literatures of upward mobility that neglect the unfortunate reality of class prejudice in the late nineteenth century. In *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, John Cawelti observes:

[Howells’] attitude toward class is strikingly different from that of the earlier sentimental novelists of self-improvement. These writers, although conscious of class distinctions, attributed to their heroes an innate knowledge of the tastes, manners, and attitudes they would need to occupy a higher social position. (155)

Howells did not approve of classist disparities, as will be explored later, but he did not deny class division as a reality of American life. For example, neglecting even minor social behaviors, such as dinner etiquette within circles of respectability, can harm an individual. As Howells demonstrates later in the novel, Silas’ ignorance of genteel manners reaches a boiling point in Chapter XIV, with the hero’s tacky white gloves and drunken banter that, at the time, instills in him a “successful mood” (166, 183). When

seated at the dinner table, furthermore, Silas, a “prohibitionist” by principle, does not know what to do with the wine glasses at his plate:

He had a notion to turn them all down, as he had *read* of a well-known politician’s doing at a public dinner, to show that he did not take wine; but, after twiddling with one of them a moment, he let them be, for it seemed to him that would be a little too conspicuous, and he felt that everyone was looking. He let the servant fill them all, and he drank out of each, not to appear odd. (168, italics supplied)

His lack of knowledge of these upper-class manners, which romantic publications assume self-made men automatically obtain, ultimately contributes to Silas feeling as if he has been humiliated by his drunken behavior. His shame is so great that he remarks to Tom the next day, “Will you tell your father that I had a notion all the time that I was acting the drunken blackguard, and that . . . I don’t want him to notice me if we ever meet, and that I know I’m not fit to associate with gentlemen in anything but a business way, if I am that?” (186). Clearly, Howells recognizes that conventions of a class are real and can be damaging if only in the self-made man’s mind. Thus, their effects should not be dismissed by producers of popular literature.

Ultimately, Clare Virginia Eby has suggested that Silas’ faith in rugged individualism, encouraged by Bartley Hubbard’s profile piece in the *Events*, causes Silas to believe that “money can buy happiness . . . that money *is* happiness: Thus Howells makes clear that the businessman’s identity has been shaped by the very network of myths, hopes, and fears that the journalist cashes in on” (43). Howells provides Silas with a popular chant resonant with self-help literature—“there’s money enough!”—to suggest

the harmful effects of narrative motifs characterized by an absence of class consciousness which is replaced by a fixation on pleasurable consumption.

Another mythology in popular success narratives is that the hero's wife represents the steadfast moral character, serving as an extended consciousness for the hero himself. In *The Self-Made Man in America*, Irvin Wyllie discusses the expectations for young boys to preserve, through marriage, the nineteenth-century notion of the traditional family as a precursor and causative agent to success. In the nineteenth century almost 97 percent of millionaires were married, Wyllie notes (31). Self-help writers and publishers like Edward Bok, Louisa Tuthill, Wilbur Crafts, and George Eggleston believed a businessman's spouse provided worldly stability more than anything else:

The young businessman who desired a good name, they cautioned, would do well to marry, because a good wife would be the means of saving him from loose women, gambling, drink, and other vices which damaged reputation. In addition, they argued, the married man was morally superior to the bachelor, and therefore preferred by both creditors and employers.

. . . The good wife enriched her husband by bringing profitable qualities of character, not money, into the home. She was economical, hard-working, orderly, neat, steady, and firm in disposition. (Wyllie, 30-1, 179)

Mrs. Persis Lapham embodies many of these characteristics. She had been with Silas since the early days of the business, before the "great success" (29). "No hang back about *her*," says Silas, "I tell you she was a *woman!* . . . If it hadn't been for her, the paint wouldn't have come to anything" (13). When Silas talks about his first look at a coat of paint with Persis, Penelope interrupts, "Yes; we've heard that story. . . . We were brought

up on that story" (45), clearly suggesting that the narrative of the self-made man's ideal wife is perpetuated by Silas himself. Although Howells did not take issue with the marital institution as a whole, he challenged the popular expectation that a wife should provide continuous moral clarity for her husband. In such works like *A Modern Instance*, *Their Wedding Journey*, *The Day of Their Wedding*, and *Indian Summer*, Howells interrogates social and cultural definitions of love and marriage. Here, however, Howells shows that even a wife as picturesque as the industrious Mrs. Lapham does not guarantee the type of worldly salvation that self-help ideologies promulgated.

Mrs. Lapham's interaction with Milton Rogers, for instance, underscores the disparity between realistic spousal relations and romanticized ones. Mrs. Lapham had chided Silas for selfishly kicking his partner, Rogers, out of business, a position that seems to put her in the company of ideal wives to self-made men. In response, Silas finds ways of compensating Rogers for potential losses and continues looking to his wife, sometimes stubbornly but nonetheless wholeheartedly, for moral affirmation. This ethical consciousness, despite its inherent virtue, meets complex challenges when Rogers attempts to coerce Silas to sell depreciated mills to interested English speculators. Rogers exploits the Laphams' sensibilities to achieve his own end: "I can't understand why you should be so mindful of others now, when you showed so little regard for me then. I had come to your aid at a time when you needed help, and when you got on your feet you kicked me out of the business" (289). It is easy to imagine that Rogers makes this comment to play on Persis' sense of guilt and thus convince her to support the sale of the mills. Rogers' urging, combined with the knowledge that the Englishmen are prepared to absorb potential losses in the purchase, blurs Mrs. Lapham's moral vision and puts Silas

in a position uncommon to self-help heroes. Ironically, Silas is forced to help himself out of his own “self-pity”:

Lapham glanced again at his wife; her head had fallen; he could see that she was so rooted in her old remorse for that questionable act of his, amply and more than fully atoned for since, that she was helpless, now in the crucial moment, when he had the utmost need of her insight. . . . He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat, the self-pity . . . (289)

The rising lump in his throat—perhaps an authentic moment of the “rise” of Silas Lapham—could be Howells’ way of showing that “self-made men,” however virtuous their spouses may be, cannot always expect seamless moments of moral clarity from those spouses.

Mrs. Lapham’s earlier comments about Silas’ treatment of Rogers underscore another pervasive mythology in the culture of the self-made man: the strict focus on one character, or hero, who attained greatness through his own perseverance. Some critics have associated this idea with the many incarnations of the Alger archetype. John Cawelti, however, critiquing Kenneth Lynn’s assessment of the Alger hero, asserts that these characters “are rarely ‘alone and unaided,’ and do not win their success entirely through individual effort and accomplishment. . . . [T]he Alger boy demonstrates an astounding propensity for chance encounters with benevolent and useful friends . . .” (109, 253). But Silas was just as likely as Lynn to misread the success narrative, looking to aggressive self-reliance to direct his career. Silas’ individualism represents a forced effort to push other potential “heroes” out of the picture: “I gave him a choice: buy out or go out. . . . It was a business chance” (41). Rags-to-riches stories typically centered on

one hero whose success, however interdependently defined it may have been, was a consequence of individual perseverance and at least some good fortune from others.<sup>7</sup> Silas, reflecting on his early termination of Rogers, views his success as a product entirely of his own making and believes his adherence to the one-hero story is justified in the acknowledgement of its common occurrence: “It’s a thing that’s done every day. I was loaded up with a partner that didn’t know anything, and couldn’t do anything, and I unloaded; that’s all. . . . I had a right to it. I made the success” (42).

Mrs. Lapham produces a retort that Howells, in his own way, likely would have agreed with: “It was no chance at all. You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! No, you had got greedy, Silas. You had made your paint your god, and you couldn’t bear to let anybody else share in its blessings” (42). Silas’ paint “was something more than business to him; it was a sentiment, almost a passion. He could not share its management . . . without a measure of self-sacrifice far beyond that which he must make with something less personal to him” (44). Silas’ treatment of Rogers demonstrates a rigid commitment to the one-man show that Alger archetypes—characterized either by critics John Cawelti or Kenneth Lynn—perpetuated. Although Rogers ultimately shows himself to be an exploitative business partner (and thus subject to the termination he initially received), Silas’ motivations for the decision may have been directed more by popular myths than by good business instincts. As a result, both Silas and his wife were subjected to years of confusion and angst over the firing.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, Silas recognizes the paternalistic origins of his newfound wealth during his interview with Bartley Hubbard, saying, “My father found [the mineral paint] one day, in a hole made by a tree blowing down. There it was, laying loose in the pit, and sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with ‘em” (6). This detail to Silas’ history reinforces John Cawelti’s reading of an Alger hero who experiences some auspicious moment that contributes to his rise.

Meanwhile, as Howells illustrates the ways in which commercial narratives infect the psyche of the reading public, he also acknowledges that authors like himself can be influenced by these mythologies. Sympathetic to working Americans, Howells compared his craft to daily toil. One form of toil that creates meaning and provides structure to a society is architecture, an industry that Howells focuses on in *Silas Lapham*.<sup>8</sup> About six years after publishing *Silas Lapham* in *Century Illustrated Magazine*, Howells wrote to Richard W. Gilder, editor of *Century*, about a book he had in mind. The book would be called *Business is Business*, a “symphony of many voices concerning Business, business methods, business morals, business aims, business men. It *ought* to interest Americans more than any other novel of American life” (*Selected Letters*, 3:315).<sup>9</sup> When Howells shared his ideas for *Business is Business*, he likened the writing process to architecture: “I shall build [the story] very solidly up from the ground; but I hope to have some skylights in. It is a great subject; it has been a good while in my mind” (*SL*, 3:315). Howells’ intimate knowledge of the world of publishing, along with his “architectural” attempt to dramatize it through writing, had shown up well before his letter to Gilder. In fact he wrote about it in *Silas Lapham* by appealing to an architect’s dilemma. Howells explores

<sup>8</sup> The architecture trope reappears in Howells’ later work, but in a different sense than our consideration with *Silas Lapham*. Mario Maffi posits *Hazard* as an “extensive use of an urban architectural imagery” (35). Maffi describes the novel as a sort of literary mapmaking, Howells’ attempt to explore the realm of narrativity similarly to the way urbanites “reshaped their culture” in response to the Gilded Age’s metropolitan scene (36). But Howells is unable to “map” the city, argues Maffi: “[w]hat had started as a novel of city discovery through the physical plunging into the streets slowly becomes a novel of interiors” (41). The rapid pace of the urban scene—more inclined to kaleidoscopic, cinematic treatment—did not coincide well with Howells’ more “photographic” narrative technique (42-3). What Maffi suggests is an “architectural” disjuncture between reality (the city) and art (the novel). This argument implies that Howells, like many authors he had been critiquing, is complicit in depicting surface-level elements, *façades*, of New York City life.

<sup>9</sup> This novel never came about. At the time Howells was writing under contract with Harper & Brothers to write *The World of Chance*, a novel that dramatizes an aspiring writer’s attempt to succeed in the world of publishing—the only business, John Crowley suggests, that Howells “really knew well enough to write about” (20).

the difficulties of a professional author who is caught between what “*ought* to interest Americans,” as he put it for Gilder, and what actually interests Americans.

Soon after Mrs. Lapham suggests that, if the family continues living in Boston, the daughters ought to enter “society” and marry (26), Silas suggests moving to another neighborhood, on Beacon Street, where he has purchased a lot on the Back Bay (27). A home symbolizes the solidification of an individual’s tastes, yet this symbol of taste relies on a creative mind, a builder, to materialize the home. The interdependence between Silas and the architect resembles a type of interdependence between a reader and an author to negotiate a text palatable for consumption. In his thorough defense of the novel’s artistic symmetry, G. Thomas Tanselle likens Howells to an architect in “The Architecture in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. ” Similarly, one could liken Seymour the architect to an author. Meanwhile, the “master-builder,” whom Silas initially consults, puts “ideas” into the minds of others by mass producing a “new” style of building. Silas, the “reader” in our analogy, has dreams of a high-studded house with “elaborate center-pieces” and black walnut all throughout:

These ideas he had formed from the inspection of many new buildings which he had seen going up, and which he had a passion for looking into.

He was confirmed in his ideas by a master-builder who had put up a great many houses on the Back Bay as a speculation, and who told him that if he wanted to have a house in the style, that was the way to have it. (35)

Silas’ conceptions of what a home should look like stem from the appearances of other popular constructions. The master-builder, who had his own financial interests in mind, recommended the newer styles Silas was eyeing. One could argue that the master-builder

in this context resembles a publisher of pulp fiction, mass-producing similar but popular styles of books.

Howells differentiates between the master-builder and Seymour, the architect, who had to “conceal the shudder which” Silas’ ideas “must have sent through him” (36). Attentive to the whims of others but politely corrective in sharing his artistic insights, Seymour “was skillful . . . in playing upon that simple instrument Man” (36). Seymour’s ability to modify Silas’ ideas suggests that an author, too, can influence his readers heavily. Certain buildings, like certain books, have a unique ability to connect with their subjects intimately without losing a universal appeal:

It seemed to [Lapham] that he had discovered the fellow . . . and owned him now, and the fellow did nothing to disturb this impression. He entered into that brief but intense intimacy with the Laphams which the sympathetic architect holds with his clients. He was privy to all their differences of opinion and all their disputes about the house. He knew just where to insist upon his own ideas, and where to yield. He was really building several other houses, but he gave the Laphams the impression that he was doing none but theirs. (38)

The implied theme of this commentary is the balancing act artists must have between readerly tastes and writerly ideals. It would appear that Seymour represents the higher ideal of architectural talent, being close and intimate and honest with his subjects more than the speculative master-builder (or pulp-fiction publisher) from before; perhaps Seymour is Howells’ effort to characterize himself within the novel. If this is accurate, then it also would be accurate to point out Seymour’s (and Howells’) limitations.

In essence, author and architect are in service to the public, a situation which allows the public to have some degree of “ownership” over them, as Silas recognizes in the excerpt above. Seymour and Howells, however, cannot prevent their public from commodifying the artist. For instance, Silas co-opts Seymour’s expertise as a status symbol to elevate himself over others. Meeting Tom Corey for the first time, Silas brags about his new home: “I’ve got the best architect in Boston, and I’m building a house to suit myself. And if money can do it, I guess I’m going to be suited” (48). That Seymour’s talents rank high in Boston is agreed upon. (Tom’s father describes Seymour and his fellow architects as the “only artistic creators” among a variety of other trades [170].) But here, Silas insists, by virtue of his buying power, that Seymour’s talents be used to suit himself, the hero of the story. Tom humors the Colonel’s hubris by referring to his building plan as “very original” (48). Silas boasts the waterside view of his Beacon Street lot, and Tom subversively remarks, “Oh I think you’re quite right. . . . The view here is everything” (49), underscoring the superficiality of appearances that Silas values. Silas exploits Seymour’s creative talents in the effort to imitate an upper-class lifestyle, much as readers demanded self-affirming narratives from their storytellers.

Although Silas’ comments distract from the classic appeal of Seymour’s architecture, they uncover a raw reality to the profession of authorship that Howells himself coped with: the need to make a living under strict timetables. Consider Silas’ perspective:

You can’t have a nice house for nothing. It’s just like ordering a picture of a painter. You pay him enough, and he can afford to paint you a first-class

picture; and if you don't, he can't. . . . Yes, sir, give an architect money enough and he'll give you a nice house, every time. (48)

Silas likens an architect to an artist. That money can determine the quality of a painter's work seems ridiculous (Penelope, in fact, mocks her father for this notion later [53]), but some truth to the Colonel's remark goes unnoticed. Architects and authors are governed by the same things: contracts, timetables and deadlines. Unseemly deadlines can affect one's creativity significantly. Similarly, a sparse income can choke creativity out of someone who does not have the time to produce uniquely original work. Even Howells, early in his career, sought "a basis" to live on, as Kenneth Eble explains in his connection of the author's life to Bartley Hubbard's in *A Modern Instance* (41). Howells' interest in "commencing a romance," as he wrote to his sister a few months after starting work at the *Atlantic*, was predicated by a strict schedule that expected him to "sift manuscripts, correspond with contributors, oversee proofreading, verify facts, and write regular book reviews" (43, 46-7). Howells, wanting to paint what Silas calls a "first-class picture," needed to negotiate his literary aspirations in the effort to make a living. Writing *Silas Lapham*, Howells inscribed the limitations of a self-reliant author: finances and deadlines.

Oddly enough, the Laphams' home, after all the deliberation and anticipation, burns down. The fire occurs moments after a scene in which Silas, smoking a cigar in isolation, broods over having to sell his home because of a lull in the paint market. Given our current understanding of building as book, what does this suggest? Is Howells, perhaps out of authorial anxiety that he has compromised realistic writing for popular tastes, destroying his creative artifice like authors who literally have been known to set

fire to their own work? This explanation certainly is possible, though Howells suggests something else as well. Consider his description of the news reports the following day:

The reporters somehow had found out the fact that the loss fell entirely upon Lapham; they lighted up the hackneyed character of their statements with the picturesque interest of the coincidence that the policy had expired only the week before; heaven knows how they knew it. (277)

Following the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871, Americans yearned for explanations for such disasters. As Paulette Kilmer notes, “[e]xperts explained how the droughts and atmospheric conditions of autumn of 1871 turned expanses of the Midwest into a tinderbox. However, the factual details of the great fires . . . did not satisfy the human need to place such events in perspective by connecting present tragedies to past narratives concerning calamities” (131). The rags-to-riches storyline did one of two things with calamities: it either omitted them altogether, or included them as moments of judgment upon the wicked. In the case of *Silas Lapham*, the conflagration does not necessarily function in either way. Rather, it provides visibility to the self-deconstructive formulations of the protagonist’s success. Howells subverts mainstream treatments of calamity by using this sudden fire of the Beacon Street home (and the coincidental expiration of Silas’ insurance policy) as a demonstration of the degree to which random chance can sometimes affect real life and realistic narratives. In so doing, he complicates the absolutist ideologies of moral cause and effect (or, hard work = monetary reward) that pervaded business self-help literature of the times.

In *Silas Lapham*, Howells dramatizes the way influential success paradigms can be harmful to readers and writers. Silas struggles to separate the Alger myth from reality,

misunderstanding the differences between monetary wealth and cultural wealth, expecting unparalleled moral acuity from his bride, and trying to be the sole “hero” in his own success narrative. Throughout these moments, Silas builds a house on a speculative foundation. Threatened by failing markets, he acknowledges that the house, a physical manifestation of popular tastes and *nouveau riche* classist confusion, must go: “Now that it had come to the point, it did not seem to him that he could part with the house. So much of his hope for himself and his children had gone into it that the thought of selling it made him tremulous and sick” (272). The burning of the Beacon Street home—a place that for Silas represents the long hoped-for reward of adhering to rags-to-riches mythologies—purges his reliance on these ideological constructions.

*Silas Lapham* carefully delineates the effects of various success myths on the individual. When writing *Hazard* several years later, Howells focuses less on the *content* of prosperity narratives and more on the *context* of their production, which we will examine in the next chapter. In other words, he offers a more sympathetic reading of publishers who, much like readers, proceed with cultural assumptions in need of examination.

### III. A Hazard of New Fortunes

In *Hazard*, Howells examines how myths are disseminated and internalized by the publishing industry. Here, we will show how the magazine *Every Other Week* is founded upon reliance on self-made-man myths rather than on an understanding of the effects of random chance within business speculations. Secondly, we will examine some of the tensions between aesthetics and economics, as the magazine staff confronts the possibilities of romanticizing poor individuals and labor strikes to appeal to the public taste. Ultimately, Howells will allow these characters to become so intimately involved in the violence of the strike that they can no longer see it as merely fodder for artistic work, but as a realistic hazard to the artists themselves.

In a sense *Every Other Week* is founded on the self-made-man myth, as embodied by the magazine's publisher and angel investor Jacob Dryfoos. Fulkerson, the advertising executive, feels Dryfoos will attract new readers to the publication because of his romantic rise from humble origins, or his "picturesque past" (283). After much resistance, Dryfoos sells his Midwestern property, a rich repository of natural-gas, to the Standard Oil Company for one-hundred thousand dollars. Dryfoos' eventual boredom from what seems like early retirement leads him to speculation, and finally to New York, Fulkerson says, "[t]o spend his money, and get his daughters into the old Knickerbocker society" (89). Fulkerson combines Dryfoos' ambitions with those of the magazine: the Dryfooses are "not social leaders yet. But it's only a question of time—generation or two—especially if time's money, and if *Every Other Week* is the success it's bound to be" (*Ibid.*). The logic is simple: invest in the magazine, and climb the social ladder. Furthermore, long-term association with an artistic magazine grants an individual cultural

capital.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, Fulkerson expects the magazine to ride on the coattails of Dryfoos, a self-made man. In both cases, however, these axioms dissipate in the novel. In spite of some individuals' efforts to impose a narrative sense of cause-and-effect on the magazine's financial struggles, the magazine is actually subjected to chance-based realities that govern the world of business.

The faulty logic of relying on romanticized narratives—that is, habits of thinking whereby association with rags-to-riches heroes will predict literary success—reveals itself toward the novel's conclusion. Dryfoos denounces Fulkerson's projected earnings as minuscule and asks literary editor Basil March "to take this thing off my hands" after Dryfoos' son Conrad's death (221-2, 481). The magazine quickly loses its appeal to Dryfoos, whose offer to Basil carries notable liberality: "The terms are whatever you want 'em. . . . I woon't [sic] put any more money in it; but what I've put in a'ready, can stay; and you can pay me four per cent" (483). Mrs. March, a firm believer in cause-and-effect storylines, suggests Conrad's death "softened" Dryfoos into making such an attractive offer for the magazine: "He's had enough to change him, poor old man!" (485). By contrast, Basil argues that offering to sell the magazine for cheap is not a result of internal change but natural consequences:

"We're brought up to think so by the novelists, who really have the charge  
of people's thinking, nowadays. . . . But why do you think he's changed at  
all? Because he offers to sell me *Every Other Week* on easy terms? He

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<sup>10</sup> Even the architectural style of the magazine's office reflects a conflation of working-class values and historically distinctive tastes—two disjunctive elements. Fulkerson's and the book-keeper's offices "had been respectively the reception-room and dining-room of the little place in its dwelling-house days, and they had been simply and tastefully treated in their transformation into business purposes. The narrow old trim of the doors and windows had been kept, and the quaintly ugly marble mantels. The architect had said, Better let them stay: they express epoch, if not character" (136). The "epochal" nature of the building unsettles Basil, who, when prompted by Dryfoos to speak of his comfort in the building, responds, "Too comfortable for a working-man" (217).

says himself that he has no further use for the thing; and he knows perfectly well that he couldn't get his money out of it now, without an enormous shrinkage. He couldn't appear at this late day as the owner, and sell it to anybody but Fulkerson and me for a fifth of what it's cost him . . . . It's a good thing for us; but we have to ask whether Dryfoos has done us the good . . ." (485-6).

Basil, though "humbly and truly grateful" for the opportunity (487), does not label Dryfoos' offer as an act of sacrificial kindness or a demonstration of a profound change in character. The ideology that "some great event, something cataclysmal," changes people stems from novelists, who train readers to find closure. This readerly yearning for final meaning is what Roland Barthes calls the "hermeneutic code" ("Modules on Barthes"), something Realist authors resist inserting into their narratives because it compromises the nature of life's indeterminacy. Basil labels the offer "a great *chance*" (483, italics supplied). And the "literary finish of his cynicism" encapsulates the nature of *Every Other Week*'s dealings: "It's business. Business is business; but I don't say it isn't disgusting . . ." (487). By acknowledging "business" as a chance-based enterprise, where probity and hard work are not the only factors at play for attaining financial prosperity, Howells sheds light on the unsettling, illusory principles that initially launched *Every Other Week*.

After Dryfoos relinquishes control, Fulkerson and Basil enter a joint ownership, where business and literature cooperate on level ground.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the interplay

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<sup>11</sup> Drawing connections between *Every Other Week* and *Harper's Weekly*, the medium actually publishing Howells' installments of the novel, Gib Prettyman explains, "The collaboration of Fulkerson the pragmatic businessman and March the principled aesthetic observer is a compromise, and perhaps even a

between aesthetics and economics is a key tension that infiltrates many aspects of the plot. For example, the advertising and public relations department, headed by Fulkerson, is concerned primarily with appealing to the populace and generating revenue. While this component is necessary, it occasionally conflicts with the art and literature department, overseen by Basil, who prioritizes aesthetic values.<sup>12</sup> These conflicting ideals tempt Basil to romanticize individuals for the purpose of marketability and cause him to question the purposes of the magazine in the first place.

A telling exchange between Basil and Conrad underscores this struggle and resonates with some of Howells' later work. Basil questions Conrad's vague remark that "we can do some good" with *Every Other Week*:

"What do you mean by good? Improve the public taste? Elevate the standard of literature? Give young authors and artists a chance?"

This was the only good that had ever been in March's mind, except the good that was to come in a material way from his success, to himself and to his family. (146-7)

Howells undercuts Basil's artistic conception of "good" with an unspoken contingency—that the pay be "good" too.

paradoxical combination, but it is also a modern hybrid form like the combination of art and technology on the cover of *Harper's Weekly*" (111).

<sup>12</sup> Fulkerson facetiously refers to Dryfoos as "the counting-room incarnate, the source of power, the fountain of corruption, the element that prevents journalism being the high and holy thing that it would be if there were no money in it" (137). Howells explores tensions between news and advertising in *A Modern Instance* as well (*Novels 1875-1886*, New York: Library of America, 1982). Witherby, the editor of *Events*, believes if a story potentially jeopardizes an advertiser's contributions, that story should be halted (351-2). Bartley's friend Ricker offers an alternative perspective: a newspaper is "sacredly bound not to do anything to deprave or debauch its readers; and it's sacredly bound not to mislead or betray them, not merely as to questions of morals and politics, but as to questions of what we may lump as 'advertising'" (414). Ricker resists the casuistic machinations that come from Witherby's counting-room.

The confusion of aesthetic and financial motivations occurs throughout *Hazard*. For instance, Basil confronts the dilemma of producing a popular storyline that likely involves romanticizing the poor—yet another economic myth of the times. Suggesting that Basil write sketches about life in New York, Conrad says: “If you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live, it will be a very good thing, Mr. March. Sometimes it seems to me that the only trouble is that we don’t know one another well enough; and that the first thing is to do this” (147).<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, to “do some good” in something encompasses a wide range of intentions (financial), values (artistic), and results (societal). Basil agrees with Conrad’s suggestion, noting, however, that an aesthetic contrast must be achieved through depiction of the rich as well as the poor:

“[T]hose phases of low life are immensely picturesque. Of course we must try to get the contrasts of luxury for the sake of the full effect. That won’t be so easy. You can’t penetrate to the dinner party of a millionaire under the wing of a detective as you could to a carouse in Mulberry Street, or to his children’s nursery with a philanthropist as you can to a street boys’ lodging-house.” (147-8)

Showing “how the other half lives,” to borrow the titular phrase from Jacob Riis’s epochal study, requires a perspective of both halves. To Basil, the privileged half is more difficult to study because it lacks accessibility that the lowly half offers. This hurdle is

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<sup>13</sup> Conrad’s comments resonate strongly with Howells’ ideas about point of view. Speaking on “the business of the novel” in his interview with Stephen Crane in 1894, Howells explains, “The novel, in its real meaning, adjusts the proportions. It preserves the balances. It is in this way that lessons are to be taught and reforms to be won. When people are introduced to each other, they will see the resemblances, and won’t want to fight so badly” (616).

one that journalists do confront.<sup>14</sup> Achieving perspective through contrast and gathering subject matter through first-hand experience are Basil's two chief concerns. After talking with Conrad, however, Basil admits his guilt to his wife for "having looked at the matter so entirely from the aesthetic point of view" (149).

Interestingly enough, Basil's conversation with Conrad—and his later discomfort at looking at poorer humans as mere subjects for artistic study—could very well provide a snapshot into Howells' own life and later work. While writing *Hazard*, Howells was urged by Henry Mills Alden and Joseph Harper to write a series of sketches not unlike the ones Basil had in mind about New York City life (Crowley 104). Howells eventually wrote those sketches in the 1890s, the bulk of them collected in *Impressions and Experiences*. In one piece, "Glimpses of Central Park," Howells acknowledges poor social conditions partly as an effect of the way people perceive one another through art. "Sometimes I think that as Shakespeare says of the living and the dead, the rich and the poor are 'but as pictures' to one another without vital reality" (167). Pictures, two-dimensional fabrications of an individual's imagination, lack the holistic clarity that might impel reform. Therefore, "we must not romance the poor," Howells asserts, "or imagine that they are morally better than the rich" (173). "Our inequality is without picturesqueness," he notes (174).<sup>15</sup> Disavowing the picturesque qualities of poverty

<sup>14</sup> In Stephen Crane's "An Experiment in Luxury," for example, an old friend, purportedly Howells, encourages the youth to make a "social study" of his invitation to a wealthy home and dispel the myth that affirms to the poor a "millionaire is a very unhappy person" (*Prose & Poetry*, 549). The youth's objection testifies to accessibility concerns that Basil identifies with: "If they caught me making a study of them they'd attempt a murder" (549). The youth's anxiety of accessibility, moreover, coincides with Howells' assessment of the "man of letters" in his seminal essay: "Perhaps he will never be at home anywhere in the world as long as there are masses whom he ought to consort with, and classes whom he cannot consort with" (35).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Howells' criticism of misrepresenting poverty, see "The Midnight Platoon" (*Literature and Life*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902, 154-60). This piece satirizes a man who disingenuously seeks first-hand observation of a breadline of derelicts: "[Y]oung newspaper men trying to

resonates with Basil's guilt for fixating on aesthetics in regard to his city sketches. Of course deviating too far from aesthetic concerns, as Basil points out, can cheapen the effect (and *affect*) of a piece: “[I]f I went to work at those things with an ethical intention explicitly in mind, I should spoil them” (149).<sup>16</sup>

City poverty is not the only social concern that Basil and his colleagues are tempted to romanticize to boost sales. They also consider dramatizing a local labor strike. Howells is clearly inserting a real-life labor struggle into the text of *Hazard* when his characters witness a violent outbreak, based explicitly on New York’s streetcar strike of the winter of 1889. The author himself witnessed this strike three months into writing the novel, and he uses the event to close the distance between romanticized narratives and actual realities. Howells confessed that “the [strike] began to find its way to issues nobler and larger than those of the love-affairs common to fiction” (“Bibliographical,” 4).

In his critical introduction to *Hazard*, Everett Carter pinpoints several accounts from the New York *Times* reporting deaths during the strike, “the arrogance of the utility companies, [and] the weakness of the state and its failure to intervene . . .” (xxx). From these stories, notes Carter, Howells “built the climax of his novel” (*Ibid.*). Although Howells deferred to these reports as stimuli for his writing, he did not vet them as wholly accurate. In fact, throughout *Hazard*, Howells parodies the media’s predatory engagement with labor issues, suggesting that a community’s perception of these

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make literature out of life and smuggle it into print under the guard of unwary editors, and young authors eager to get life into their literature, had recommended it to him as one of the most impressive sights of the city . . . He imagined it very dramatic . . .” (154).

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Howells wrote *Hazard* with clear ethical values in mind, he became anxious over how readers would receive his book. And although critical reception has varied over the years, contemporaries like James Russell Lowell and Mark Twain felt the novel relayed moral imperatives without force-feeding or preaching to the reader (Crowley 105).

industrial struggles is formulated by an institution's treatment of them. In a way, news accounts breed the tensions they report. As Cynthia Stretch asserts:

[T]he actions of the strike are subsumed by headlines composed to sell papers, not mark the space of rational deliberation. . . . This marks the limit of the mass-market press for Howells: the papers manufacture public opinion fit only for passive consumption and endless recirculation. (239)

The characters in Howells' novel, though easily perceived as jaded journalists themselves, seem to become intoxicated by the exaggerated treatment of the strike in public writing. Fulkerson, enjoying the "excitement" of the strike, buys the "extras which the newsmen came crying through the street almost every hour with a lamentable, unintelligible noise" and, consequently, buys in to the sensational narratives the extras contain (406). And Jacob Dryfoos, interested in stock-market news, buys a paper "full of noisy typography about yesterday's troubles on the surface lines" (415). Conrad, who has known no other intense conflict than the personal one with his father, re-circulates a perspective on the outbreak taught to him by "headlines composed to sell papers, not mark the space of rational deliberation" (Stretch 239): "[A] strike is always bad business. It's war; but sometimes there don't seem any other way for the working-men to get justice" (417).

The literary marketplace, as represented by Fulkerson, also leans toward exploiting labor-capital struggles to sell magazines. Fulkerson seeks to glamorize the city's upheaval, urging Basil to "get us up a paper on the strike":

"There'll be plenty of newspaper accounts. But you could treat it in the historical spirit—like something that happened several centuries ago; De

Foe's Plague of London style. . . . If I could get a hold of [Beaton], you two could go round together and take down its aesthetic aspects. . . . With your descriptions and Beaton's sketches—well, it would just be the greatest card!" (409).

To argue that Fulkerson does not care about the strike itself would be inaccurate. Perhaps his enthusiasm is the result of a genuine concern to document an important moment in social history. But the desire to *market* the strike by giving it a literary or romantic patina is clearly evident. Fulkerson attempts to join these worlds, economic and artistic, by citing Defoe, arguably just as much if not more a business man than Howells himself.<sup>17</sup>

Howells illustrates some of the chief problems behind the way strikes had been represented in American writing. In "Illusions of a Public, Locations of Conflict: Feeling Like Populace in William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*," Cynthia Stretch argues that, following the depression of 1873, laborers resisted wage cuts and unemployment (235). American literature followed these concerns, but because the country had just undergone a massive civil war, "organized labor was most often represented in fiction as a threat to national stability" (*Ibid.*). Novelists concerned with these issues "[resorted] to the myth of upward mobility or the balm of Christian brotherhood to heal potential social rifts. When strikes appear in these early novels, they function either as menacing backdrops against which the action takes place or as violent

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<sup>17</sup> Although Defoe was considered a litterateur like Howells, much of his work was submitted to turn a profit quickly. In many cases he worked anonymously to protect his reputation. Readers consider Defoe's final work, *Roxana, or, the Fortunate Mistress* (1724) his most licentious piece; it, too, was published anonymously and was a top seller among various book dealers (for more on the history of the book, see John Mullan's introduction to *Roxana* [New York: Oxford UP, 1996], vii-xxvii). In 1883, Howells recommended the novel to Mark Twain, praising it for "some of the deepest insights into the lying, suffering, sinning, [and] well-meaning human soul . . ." (*Selected Letters*, 3:127). In *Roxana*, the title character is a sharp businesswoman who struggles with a multitude of moral dilemmas. That Howells read this book while working on *Silas Lapham* is no coincidence.

punctuation in an otherwise unaffected narrative line" (*Ibid.*). As a way of combating this mythology, Howells pushes his characters even further into the entanglements of the strike. Conrad gets shot, Lindau is mortally wounded, and Basil, the authorial conscience of the novel, loses grasp of the strike's "realities." These plot details integrate labor strife as a reality of metropolitan life. On a figurative level, the novel's mortalities illustrate that even members of the press—people in service to the institution of public discourse—are susceptible to misreading the dangerous contexts about which they report.

Regarding the business of writing, Howells develops a two-part thesis in *Hazard*. First, he posits the publishing industry, specifically *Every Other Week*, as an unstable, chance-based enterprise that inherits the same risks as any one individual's ambitions. It just so happens, secondly, that the magazine's origins—grounded in Dryfoos' speculative investments and Fulkerson's eye for popular appeal—foment skewed reflections of reality for its readers. In turn, readers misunderstand their surroundings, get caught in the "excitement" of labor concerns (406), and breed a tumultuous living climate that, yet again, must be filtered and re-circulated by publishers. The publishers in Howells' novel do not intend to mislead the public. After all, Basil endeavors to *clarify* traction-strike details that other news sources had failed to include (411). But sometimes, as we have seen from Basil and Conrad's discussions and some of Howells' New York sketches, a desire to do "good" can only be accomplished if there is a market to support a writer's work. That is why Fulkerson insists on weighing artistic convictions with economic concerns. Ultimately, an inside look at the magazine business indicates that its purveyors are not merely culprits of business mythologies, but victims of them.

#### IV. The Business of Literature

Several factors indicate that Howells used business to criticize literature similarly to the way many writers of the late nineteenth century used literature to criticize business. In the 1880s Howells' literary and social beliefs carried unique similarities to each other. While the "Realism War" differed greatly from the Labor-Capital war, both occurred with relative simultaneity and encapsulated a movement toward the betterment of the individual. Industrial titans, just like producers of romance, typically acted with a sense of detachment from the common individual. They appealed to citizens, providing work opportunities *en masse*. Yet they upheld labor conditions not suitable for a diverse workforce, sometimes denying eight-hour shifts to employees, as was the case in the McCormick factories. In a way, business owners clung to a "formula" that did not consider the needs of their individual workers; because of this, they resisted reality and pinioned their workers to unhealthy labor structures. Consequently, workers revolted, often in ways that blemished America's industrial era with marks of violence, anarchy, or even terrorism. And although Howells did not condone those forms of resistance, he nonetheless revolted in writerly ways of his own. Sympathetic to the worker's plight, Howells understood that low wages, distributed as common fodder for daily sustenance, compensated little for laborers' long-term needs. In the same way, he believed that mass-produced romance stories satisfied daily demands for imaginative escapism, but ultimately hindered readers from self-realization and transformation. Writers, moreover, suffered artistically for resorting to romance-writing in order to make a living. The nexus of these concerns, regarding both labor and literature, amplifies when Howells writes

*Silas Lapham* and *Hazard*, two narratives of business that, in unique ways, analyze the business of narratives.

Published one year before the Haymarket affair, *Silas Lapham* pays little attention to overarching social concerns. Howells wrote the novel at a time when literary discussions predominantly revolved around the cultural efficacy of romance, specifically plots regarding love and marriage. Critics agree that this novel focuses on the American businessman's rise to wealth and subsequent moral fall, but when scholars address Howells' *literary* concerns within the novel, discussion typically rests upon love or romance—Penelope's reluctance to marry Tom as a sympathetic act of self-sacrifice for her sister, and the Rev. Sewell's notable discourse on the “economy of pain.” This study, however, has attempted to show Howells' problems with a different type of romance: a business-romance. Encoded within the narrative is a subversive interrogation of self-help narratives that romanticize an individual's success in the business world. Silas' misunderstandings of reality—overlooking the nuances of upper-class living, elevating his spouse to the status of an unflinching heroine, and aggressively protecting the image of a single, self-made individual—are shaped by success archetypes commonly disseminated by Horatio Alger tales and the penny press. Howells more pointedly targets professional writers and publishers (himself not excluded) through the architecture trope. The architect's artistic ambitions are unavoidably managed by buyers' preferences—a system that compromises and sustains his livelihood, and one that erects the Laphams' Beacon Street home. The home's combustion in the novel serves two functions for Howells: the purging of an establishment founded upon principles of archetypal misrecognition of success, and the deliberate imposition of calamity that self-help myths

so often omitted in their tales. By burning the Beacon Street home, Howells shifts from an individual criticism to an institutional one, and, in so doing, provides a backdrop for his examination of the publishing industry in *Hazard*, which arrives five years later.

In addition to Howells' attention to the Haymarket Square bombing, he had witnessed New York's streetcar strike during the beginning stages of writing *Hazard*. Certainly these historical markers of economic upheaval, as readers have explained, influenced Howells' subject matter toward socialist ideals.<sup>18</sup> But they also serve as instruments for the novelist's scrutiny of the publishing industry's adherence to the very myths it creates, by seeking "self-made" individuals to glamorize journals, by attempting to explain business happenings as results of narrative cause/effect structures, and by attempting to mingle the world of economic struggle with romantic, literary treatments to produce market results.

Whereas in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* Howells examines the way prosperity myths steer an individual afoul, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* the author considers how the institutional machinery of public-narrative dissemination falls prey to romanticized economics. By involving his publishing-industry characters intimately in labor-capital contexts—so much so that coming into contact with a traction strike kills two of them—Howells reminds writers and publishers that the real world they rewrite and romanticize still affects them too, even possibly to the point of destruction.

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<sup>18</sup> See Walter Fuller Taylor's "William Dean Howells and the Economic Novel," in *Howells: A Century of Criticism* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1962), 191-2.

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