

The Novel of Business and the Business of the Novel:
W.D. Howells' Examination of Prosperity Archetypes

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines William Dean 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. Meanwhile, *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.

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