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Graham Thompson

“And that paint is a thing that will bear looking into”: The  
Business of Sexuality in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

## I

Although the theme of sexuality in the work of William Dean Howells has attracted critical attention before, much of the work done in this area remains dominated by a psychoanalytic approach that, while it pleads the case for the importance of the sexual domain, only manages to look “straight” past certain material male and female sexualities. Almost in ratification of Foucault’s contention that “Choosing not to recognize [is] yet another vagary of the will to truth”,<sup>1</sup> the ways in which these sexualities are being produced, represented, and reproduced in the figurative realm of Howells’s narratives remains unconsidered; Howells’s major protagonists have been forced to lie back on the couch and offer themselves up to a kind of universalist analysis.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of approach has been the focus for arguments which have attempted to deconstruct psychoanalytic narrative discourse—both that of the professional analyst and the professional literary critic—to show how, at the most basic level, explanatory concepts such as the primal scene and the Oedipus complex<sup>3</sup> only serve to reify the centrality of heterosexuality, of the gender constructions male/female, and of the reproductive dyad mother/father. Furthermore, the rhetoric of psychoanalytic enquiry has itself been shown to be bound up within various logics that, whilst trying to figure and fix the sexual in relation to the heterosexual, can never rid themselves of the role of producing the epistemological frameworks by which those sexual behaviours and identities heterosexuality seeks to disavow, marginalize or discredit, come to be known.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, despite these attacks, even such a committed critic of traditional psychoanalysis as Eve Sedgwick has conceded that psychoanalytic thought “remains virtually the only heuristic available to Western interpreters for unfolding sexual meanings”.<sup>5</sup> What seems to be needed is a way of managing the double bind of a psychoanalytic approach; a way of managing the collaboration with what has been an oppressive hermeneutic regime, whilst at the same time trying to use that regime for the purpose of re-directing attention at the potentially unstable boundaries between the clear

identities and fixed positions produced by a traditional psychoanalytic approach. In an important way, then, what is needed is the reclamation of the symbolic and imaginative domains of people's lives from traditional psychoanalysis. It is not to say that just because psychoanalysis is "damaged from its very origins"<sup>6</sup> that the realm of the psyche should be ignored. If anything quite the contrary: because psychoanalysis is flawed it must not be left to determine the production of discourses about sexuality.

This preamble is by way of an introduction to my thinking about *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in relation to business and male sexuality and the previous psychoanalytic attention that has been paid to the novel by Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau. She has taken the bold step of identifying a combination of phallic, anal, and spermatic economies operating within the text, most particularly through the symbolism of the paint that is the source or origin of Silas Lapham's fortune, the paint that his father discovered "in a hole made by a tree blowing down".<sup>7</sup> For Prioleau the whole novel is structured in terms of phallic condition:

The dinner party [where Lapham's family dines with the Corey's] marks a turning point in Silas's affairs. The phallic swelling, pounding, seizing, and spending cease and reverse. He begins a descent back into the hole from which the paint sprang—the disorganized irrational subconscious—and predominant imagery changes to deflation, flaccidity, slippage, and contradiction.<sup>8</sup>

She goes on to suggest that "Silas's use of wealth—his irrational splurging, paint smearing, and sublimation of enjoyment into moneymaking, is a classic case of anality".<sup>9</sup> Finally, in the light of the spermatic economy doctrine of the nineteenth century—where "sperm and money were synonymous; wealth accu[ing] through mature, stringent repression; bankruptcy, through immature, undisciplined indulgence"—Silas's house-building enterprise becomes an example of overextension and sexual incontinence.<sup>10</sup>

This spermatic economy, combined with a thematics of anality—a thematics of tightening and squeezing—leads Prioleau to declare that for Howells “the sexual theme had unexpectedly taken over his business novel”.<sup>11</sup> This entanglement or incongruity of love (sexual) plot and business plot in the novel has been a problem for critics of the book since its publication,<sup>12</sup> and yet what Prioleau is making clear, is that sex and business are intimately bound together at the level of the rhetoric of the novel. Unfortunately, Prioleau can only then go on to write that what Howells gives us is “an affirmation of sexuality that harmonizes the sexes and echoes the great erotic solutions of history.”<sup>13</sup>

My misgivings about this kind of conclusion should be clear enough from the comments I made earlier, but I don’t want to abandon Prioleau’s valuable reading of *Silas Lapham* entirely. It is rather the logic of Prioleau’s reasoning that drives her towards her conclusion that I want to challenge. What I want to develop are the ways in which the binding of the themes of sex and business cannot be considered outside of men’s relations with other men; material relations which are integral to the novel in a way that informs and indeed constitutes the basis of the foregrounding of the various phallic, anal, and spermic thematics Prioleau identifies. What I want to do, in a way which “risk[s] the encounter with psychoanalysis”,<sup>14</sup> is to take the issue of sexuality in the novel in a direction other than harmonized heterosexuality.

The historical dimension of the novel is important here. Wai Chee Dimock has written about the grounds and boundaries of capitalism in relation to *Silas Lapham*.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on, and re-reading, the controversial work of the historian Thomas Haskell, Dimock has argued that capitalism—a system that brings members of a population into closer obligatory contact with one another—simultaneously develops not only institutional but cognitive provisions which prevent these obligations becoming liabilities.<sup>16</sup> Reverend Sewell’s “economy of pain” is just such a cognitive response, and

Dimock even reads the realist novel—which, of course, Howells was responsible for developing and advocating in the United States—as part of this cognitive response.

Although she never mentions how this cognitive response to capitalism may impact upon sexuality,<sup>17</sup> I think there are clearly consequences in the realm of the relations men form with other men, especially in light of the continuum of male homosocial desire as hypothesized by Sedgwick.<sup>18</sup> The historical shift into capitalism is likely to demand a restructuring of this continuum, and if capitalism is marked by a keener sensitivity to questions of connectedness and obligation, then the increasing importance of the categorization of male-male relationships into homo and hetero in the nineteenth century<sup>19</sup> would provide a backdrop against which it was possible to organize one's conception of the status of a relationship, most particularly what was acceptable in the relationship and what was not when certain behaviour, actions, and attributes become marked in relation to a class of sexuality. These features of male-male relations—their changing nature, the changing regulation of them, the changing structure of monitoring one's behaviour in relation to other men—are particularly crucial in business when it is in the business world where men approach other men.

Recognition of this kind of historical and economic shift makes the point that is the source of Lapham's fortune, and the hole from which it appeared, intelligible in a way completely at odds with Prioleau's interpretation. Going back to the first figurative representation of this scene again—"a hole made by a tree blowing down"—it is possible to see the interesting conjunction of Lapham's father, a symbolic phallus and a symbolic anus. Prioleau is reticent about figuring the hole as anus—preferring to figure it as Lapham's "irrational subconscious"—and yet her emphasis upon anality in the rest of her argument makes the link much more tenable than she herself allows. While Prioleau never directly says what she means by anality, in Freudian terms the repression of desires and pleasures connected with the anus are what helps turn faeces into gold, and, as Sedgwick has pointed out in relation to another novel that is all about money and

anality—*Our Mutual Friend*—these desires and pleasures are erotic desires and pleasures that should not be considered in isolation from questions of love between men, economic status, adult genital desire and repression connected to the anus, and the particular historical condition of gender relations.<sup>20</sup>

There is a moment in Howells's text which draws attention to just these issues. It is the description of how Lapham's father originally found the paint "sticking to the roots [of the tree] that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with 'em" (7). Prioleau, despite her emphasis upon a spermatic economy, refuses to figure the paint as sperm in this instance because she is too concerned to figure it as a "procreative essence". And everybody knows that whatever else the phallus, the anus, and male sperm can do together, they cannot procreate. And yet this description is a rich motif for the anxieties surrounding anal penetration, ejaculation, and withdrawal.

Taking this figurative representation of the paint and the hole as my starting point, I want to constitute one relationship in *Silas Lapham* as a love story which has never been identified as a love story before: the relationship between Silas and Tom Corey. By doing this I hope to generate a reading of sexuality that does not look "straight" past the material relations men were forming with one another in the social and economic world of late nineteenth century America.

## II

One way to approach the relationship between Silas and Tom Corey psychoanalytically would be to configure them as father and son. Tom might be the reincarnation of the son that Silas and his wife, Persis, had but who died when he was still a child (16). However, this configuration would also at the most basic level retain the primacy of some familial relationship in structuring men's relations with other men. But familial relations are not exclusively determining of men's affective development. Tom Corey has a father in the novel, and one of the more interesting aspects of the story is

the way that Lapham, as someone outside the family, outside of a father-son relationship, is so important in influencing Tom's career and emotional life. Setting up Lapham and Tom as father and son would result in the erasure of the important facts that Lapham is *not* Tom's father, that he is influential because he is *not* Tom's father, and that he is influential because he is *different* from Tom's father.<sup>21</sup> By discussing *paternalty* as opposed to *paternity*, the relationship between Lapham and Tom is also shifted into the sphere of the economic that, as I noted above, is so entangled with the sexual.

What is striking about Lapham and Tom Corey is precisely their difference from one another. The age difference is self-evident. In addition, of course, there is the social gulf which so famously—even as it was breaking down—structured Boston society at the end of the nineteenth century; the gulf, that is, between the emerging middle-class<sup>22</sup> on the one hand and a merchant aristocracy on the other. This division structures the relations between the Lapham family and the Corey family in Howells's novel. Lapham is the farm boy born “pretty well up under the Canada line” but who “was bound to be an American of *some* sort, from the word Go!” (4). The American sort he becomes is the wealthy, self-made businessmen who moves to Boston because of the demands of expansion and organization in the rapidly growing post-Civil War industrial economy when his paint business takes off. With this social background there goes a concept of masculinity and manliness which Lapham both represents and supports. His physical size—the “square, bold chin ... solid bulk” and the “pair of massive shoulders” (4) of the journalist Bartley Hubbard's description—is emphasized right from the start. A Civil War veteran, with a constant reminder of Gettysburg buried in his leg (16-17) and with his non-standard accent, Lapham is the kind of man who thinks “the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape” (15) and likes his women to be women from the same mould; “not silly little girls grown up to *look* like women” (14) but women who can share a joke and who are capable of looking after their husbands' businesses while they are away fighting (17). Lapham describes his marriage to Persis, at least in its



early stages, as an almost muscular partnership: “I used to tell her it wa’n’t the seventy-five per cent. of purr-ox-eyed of iron in the *ore* that made that paint go; it was the seventy-five per cent. of purr-ox-eyed of iron in *her*” (15). Persis would seem to be the perfect subject for a “Solid Women of Boston” series, if ever such a series could have been conceived of in the aristocratic eastern city.

And if these muscular qualities even apply to women, then for Lapham they should certainly apply to men. Wondering why Bromfield Corey supports his son Tom so beneficently, Lapham argues that he likes “to see a man act like a man. I don’t like to see him taken care of like a young lady” (59). Lapham is well-acquainted with the Corey family history “and, in his simple, brutal way, he had long hated their name as a symbol of splendor”. Bromfield Corey was to Lapham “everything that was offensively aristocratic” (93), not least because instead of going into his father’s business Bromfield travelled in Europe and became a painter. Lapham’s animosity towards Bromfield Corey is, of course, entirely mutual. At the dinner party which forms the centrepiece of the novel, Corey remarks “that nothing but the surveillance of the local policeman prevents me from applying dynamite to those long rows of close-shuttered, handsome, brutally insensible houses” (200) owned by Boston’s new rich: men like Lapham.

Yet despite these differences Silas and Tom Corey manage to form a remarkable closeness and ‘friendship’, the sort of friendship which Lapham manifestly fails to propagate with other men who exist across the social and status divide in Boston. There are two key links here by which this friendship is formed and fostered: Lapham’s business and Lapham’s daughters. Both, I want to argue, are the means by which Lapham and Corey can become and remain close to one another, but I think it is also important that Tom’s reasons for wanting to get involved with Lapham’s paint business are explored first of all.

It is Mrs Lapham who understands men’s, and Silas’s, relationship to business: “his paint was something more than business to him; it was a sentiment, almost a passion. He

could not share its management and its profit with another without a measure of self-sacrifice far beyond that which he must make with something less personal to him” (51). And it is this attachment of Lapham to his “passion” which Tom Corey recognizes as well, especially after his spending time away from Boston with “the cowboys of Texas” (67). This has changed his attitude to men like Lapham. Whilst *Silas Lapham* is a novel in which the failure of Silas to integrate into the upper echelons of Boston society has always been emphasized, as can be seen in the case of Tom it is just as clearly about movement in the opposite direction. Tom admires Lapham for his attachment to his “passion”. “Perhaps his successful strokes of business were the romance of his life”, he suggests to his father (67). And from there it is the shortest of steps to Tom saying that he wants to go into business with Lapham, to share his “passion” and “romance”.

Clearly financial and career considerations are important here, but it is the nature of Lapham’s business, the nature of his character, “simple-hearted and rather wholesome” as Tom describes it (68), which attracts him to Lapham. There is just as clearly a discourse about masculinity operating in Tom’s arguments. It is the cowboys of Texas that Tom recognizes in Lapham, a muscular masculinity that he associates with business and the attachment of men to business. Far from being drawn to Lapham’s daughters—Penelope and Irene—it is Lapham who attracts Tom, and this is evident in the way the romantic plot between Tom and Penelope develops.

As a plot it works in a conventionally romantic way. A chance meeting between Tom and Mrs Lapham and Irene whilst they are on holiday is the first point of contact, one which doesn’t involve Penelope. The next point of contact is also by chance (65). Tom just happens to be walking down the street where the new lots of houses—including the Lapham’s—are being built. From these chance encounters the narrative—after misreadings and intrigue—eventually marries off Tom and Penelope. But heterosexual romance plots need to be considered in the context of wider social relationships. Why does Tom make the effort to wander around a new housing

development on his first day back in Boston after his return from Texas? Why when the Back Bay area, the water side of Beacon Street, was known in Boston as “the Diphtheria District” (382)? Perhaps the effects of Texas can be seen here. Tom is a young man determined to make his future not in the old world of his father but in the new world of business, the fruits of which can be seen in the new houses. Tom is placed metonymically by the narrative in relation to this environment and it is surely no coincidence that it is here where he meets Lapham for the first time; in that part of the city which witnesses what Tom’s father tells him when he arrives home later, that “money ... is the romance, the poetry of our age” (65).

So, money as “romance”, business as “romance”, and paint as “passion”. In relation to the kind of rhetorical construction of money and business in *Silas Lapham*, heterosexual romance quickly begins to lose the sort of transcendental qualities Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau wants to give it when talking about the “harmony of the sexes.” What I am suggesting is that there is no romantic intent on Tom’s part towards Penelope until well after he has met Silas and decided he wants to share Lapham’s “passion” and “romance”, and that his affection for Penelope cannot be considered in isolation from his desire to join Lapham’s business. It is Silas who gives Tom a guided tour of the house, in the process of which, as well as bragging, he “swelled out” (55). This phallic symbolism clearly has nothing to do with the “harmony of the sexes” since it is all for Tom Corey’s benefit; it is a phallic symbolism which stands at the heart of the relationship between Silas and Tom. Lapham is swelling metaphorically with the pride which comes as a result of having made money from his “romance” and “passion” and wanting to show that it makes him as good as anybody that Tom Corey might know. Yet again, sexuality—this time in the form of a phallic thematics—and business are intimate partners. From this tour of Lapham’s house, Tom goes home and suggests to his father that he should share Lapham’s “passion” and “romance”. Tom doesn’t want to be “taken care of like a lady” either. Lapham, meanwhile, lies in bed that night telling his

wife that “I could make a man of that fellow, if I had him in the business with me. There’s stuff in him” (60). The same “stuff” perhaps which—the symbol of biological maleness, the guarantee of manly succession in a patriarchal society (as long as it is ‘spent’ properly of course)—Lapham’s father found “sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with ‘em” when the tree blew down and the paint first appeared. Perhaps it is Lapham’s hope that by “having” Tom in the business with him he can “squeeze” this “stuff” out of him.<sup>23</sup>

What I have described so far is the way in which the discourses of business, gender, and geography can be seen to be coalescing in *Silas Lapham*. Simply, it is possible to see the traditional binaries of American culture stacking up as a kind of palimpsest of connection:

new money	old money
physical	rational
body	mind
active	passive
masculine	feminine
west	east
frontier	city

These oppositions clearly begin to affect the discursive constitution of male sexuality in the second half of the nineteenth century. But what makes *Silas Lapham* intriguing from the viewpoint of thinking about male sexuality is precisely the movement between these oppositions that takes place through Silas and Tom. In effect, each is trying to move from one column to the another, although exactly how much varies depending on the category. Silas does not want to move towards the feminine—although he actually does at one point in the novel and I will come back to this because it clearly shapes his

relationship with Tom—but he does want to become part of the city, part of the east where the established money resides. Where Silas and Tom actually meet is somewhere in between. The fact that these oppositions can be traversed suggests that in terms of male sexuality the hetero and homo distinctions, which might form the next row in the table above, cannot be as secure in the text as they would be if this movement between categories was not taking place. In general literary terms, the tension of discursive or rhetorical category divisions like those set out above must impact in some way upon those other category divisions which, discursively or rhetorically, are supposed—or *made*—to go hand in hand with them.<sup>24</sup> In *Silas Lapham* there is a tension between business and Boston society that figures the tension between the developing categories of hetero and homo.

I want to concentrate on the way that this tension is figured in the narrative, first of all by thinking about Silas's office and his past, and then by considering this in relation to the development of the plot of the novel. I want to show that in the construction of Lapham's muscular homosocial masculinity the traces remain of what it excludes, and what a psychoanalytic approach might help to re-include. Key to my thinking here will be one particular scene in the novel. This is the confrontation between Silas and Tom in Silas's office which takes place the day after Lapham has made a fool of himself at the Corey's dinner party; when Silas breaks down, when Tom is disgusted with him, and immediately after which Tom asks for Penelope's hand in marriage. It is the traces that remain but which are excluded that Tom discovers in this office scene. As I hope to show, they have also—significantly—been signposted long before in the character and past of Lapham himself.

### III

It is in the opening chapter, during the course of the interview with Bartley Hubbard for the “Solid Men of Boston Series”, that Lapham fails to speak the name of his first and only male partner in business, William Rogers. When this point in his history comes up “Lapham dropped the bold blue eyes with which he had been till now staring into Bartley’s face, and the reporter knew that here was a place for asterisks in his interview, if interviews were faithful” (17). Only three pages before this, Lapham has pulled his gaze away from Bartley in a similar fashion. In the course of the “long stare” he had been directing at Bartley, “Lapham ... had been seeing himself a young man again, in the first days of his married life” (14). There is a telling discrepancy between these two incidents: in the latter, Lapham’s gaze is filled with memories of him and Persis, memories which the narrative reveals; in the first, Lapham’s gaze is unexplained, left silent, left to be covered by “asterisks” in Bartley’s article. If by looking at Bartley, it is possible for Lapham to read himself as a young married man, what else is it that by looking at Bartley he *also* reads about himself as a young man? Whatever it is, “Bartley divined, through the freemasonry of all who have sore places in their memories, that this was a point which he must not touch again” (17). This “point” seems to be completely overdetermined in relation to the discursive production of male sexuality that was developing in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a point that conjoins silence, close male-male relations (through the rhetoric of freemasonry), the psyche (through memories), and the body—or at least that one sore place upon it. The consideration of one further piece of evidence might help in making even more sense of this textual moment and the reason Bartley is in Lapham’s office to begin with.

It is the point that turned a hole in the ground into a “*gold-mine*” (10). It is here that the incident with Rogers, named but unnamed, is labelled in the language of business. More than any familial primal scene, the point and the hole from which it emerges is the primal scene for Lapham: the origin of his wealth and the origin of his status (or lack of it) in Boston society, and the focal point around which his relationship

with Rogers revolved and continues to revolve. The anal and the spermatic economies of hole and paint suggest that however much critics from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day have constituted *Silas Lapham* as a novel about one man's morality, what grounds this morality is the symbolic regime of male sexuality. Rogers wants to get his hands on Lapham's paint, the thing which is so precious to Lapham that, as Persis notes, "he could not share its management and its profit with another" (51); where "management" and "profit" can again be seen to be linked to the anal and the spermatic. The control of the sphincter, the "management" of bodily regularity are—in psychoanalytic terms at least—the very things which result in the "profit" that one can then "spend". But there is in *Silas Lapham* a wonderfully contradictory and confused relation between the anal and spermatic economies. If Prioleau is right, and the spermatic economy is one closely connected to the production of money and its disposal, then what exists in *Silas Lapham* is a system unlike that of *Our Mutual Friend* where the repression of anal desires results in the turning of faeces into gold. Instead, repression of anal desires somehow produces not dust heaps but paint, the manly "stuff" which to be truly manly has to be conserved, and if "spent" at all then "spent" for the purposes of the heterosexual family—Lapham's house. So *Silas Lapham* actually manages to displace anal anxiety into a productive spermatic masculinity.

In the light of this, the moment when Lapham refuses to speak Rogers's name—when he dips his eyes from Bartley, and Bartley understands that this is a moment for asterisks—is a moment in which the whole knotted logic of an emerging male sexuality can be seen to be operating.<sup>25</sup> Whilst in Lapham's muscularly heterosexual relations with Persis the discourses of romance and marriage provide an avenue for discussion with Bartley, in Lapham's muscularly homosocial relations with Rogers the discourses are split into two: business and silence, the latter signalling what the former manifests by other means. Romance and desire between men in the homosocial world of Silas Lapham is

sublimated into the rhetoric of business, that area which men define as a man's domain.<sup>26</sup>

This is where the capitalist rhetoric of “approaching”, obligation, responsibility, and liability identified by Dimock can be seen to be operating; it is in this business domain that Lapham's relationship with Tom Corey is forged. And it is from here that these obligations and responsibilities are then vectored down the avenues of family, and marriage.

During Tom's visit to Lapham's office to ask for a job, it is at the point where Tom declares that he believes in his paint that Lapham “lifted his head and looked at the young man, deeply moved” and “warmed and softened to the young man in *every way*” (my emphasis, 77-8). Such a welcoming response from Lapham would surely be disproportionate to Tom's comment were it not for the fact that the language of business is a coded language in which men can talk to one another about their most intimate feelings. To declare that you believe in another man's “passion” is to declare something about that man. It is here that the relationship between Lapham and Tom Corey begins to move into the realm of affection. After telling him that he is short of time at the beginning of the interview, Lapham now makes time for Tom. “Don't hurry ... Sit still! I want to tell you about this paint ... I want to tell you *all* about it” (78). Of course, in the light of my comments about paint and anal and spermatic economies it becomes difficult to read even short sentences like this outside of a sexual thematics.<sup>27</sup> What follows is Lapham missing his boat home to remain in the office and tell Tom all about his paint. He shows Tom a photograph of the mine and tells Tom the story in “unsparing detail”, and then invites him home for the evening.

It is during this evening visit that Irene and Penelope and Mrs Lapham begin to discern the possibility that Tom is interested romantically in Irene. Acutely, but wrongly as it turns out, Penelope suggests that “this talk about business is nothing but a blind” (88). She thinks Tom is there because of Irene. He isn't. And he isn't there because of



Penelope either. He's at the house because of Lapham. And with a "guiltless laugh" Tom goes home the next day to tell his mother that he has "made an engagement with Mr. Lapham" and stayed up pretty much the whole night talking about business (100-1). Tom offers not the slightest intimation that any of his excitement at being accepted by Lapham is connected to the opportunities it will give him to be close to either of Lapham's daughters. It is through Tom's mother that this possibility is planted by Howells. She probes Tom, who barely admits to noticing either Irene or Penelope. "Is Mrs Lapham well? And her daughter?" she asks. "Yes, *I think so,*" is all Tom can find to say (my emphasis, 101). "I suppose it's the plain sister who's reading "Middlemarch"" she carries on. "Plain? Is she plain?" asks Tom, "as if searching his consciousness" (101). In addition, consider this passage which immediately follows:

"Tom!" cried his mother, "why do you think Mr. Lapham has taken you into business so readily? I've always heard that it was so hard for young men to get in."

"And do you think I found it easy with him? We had about twelve hours' solid talk."

"And you don't suppose it was any sort of—personal consideration?"

"Why, I don't know exactly what you mean, mother. I suppose he likes me."

Mrs Corey could not say just what she meant. She answered, ineffectually enough:

"Yes. You wouldn't like it to be a favor, would you?"

"I think he's a man who may be trusted to look after his own interest. But I don't mind his beginning by liking me. It'll be my own fault if I don't make myself essential to him." (103)

One could interpret this as Mrs Corey trying to get her son to consider the possibility that Lapham is luring him into his business in order to marry one of his daughters off to

him. Of course, as far as heterosexual romance is concerned, Tom's casual, disinterested responses and his refusal to get his mother's point might be seen as little disavowals to keep her off the scent, so antagonistic would she be to such an outcome. My argument is that only in retrospect can these moments be interpreted in this way; only with the (be)hindsight which would structure all moments and relationships as being connected to a heterosexual outcome. But if one refuses this logic then these moments add up to nothing of the sort. They are the remarks of an intelligent young man who, whilst he can remember the details of his hours of conversation with Lapham, can barely remember how Irene is, what Penelope looks like, or understand what his mother is driving at. Indeed, he is too excited by becoming "essential" to Lapham to recognize any of these things. And this excitement is fulfilled on his first day. "He was in love with his work ... He believed he had found his place in the world, after a good deal of looking, and he had the relief, the repose, of fitting into it" (105-6).

Lapham is equally unaware of any potential love interest that his employing Tom might initiate. Lapham sees Tom as a mark of the respectability of his business. Taking on someone with Tom's established Boston background helps Lapham navigate the transition of those cultural binaries mentioned earlier. It is Lapham's wife who plays a role similar to Tom's mother. Both, seemingly, have marriage at the front of their thoughts. Persis refuses to let Lapham bring Tom to Nantasket.

"If he wants to see Irene, he can find out ways of doing it himself," she tells him.

"Who wants him to see Irene?" retorted the Colonel angrily.

"I do," said Mrs. Lapham. "And I want him to see her without any of your connivance, Silas ... I understand what *you* want. You want to get this fellow, who is neither partner nor clerk, down here to talk business with him. Well, now, you just talk business with him at the office" (112-13).

Far from wanting him for his daughters, Lapham wants Tom for himself. He takes him for rides in his buggy, and for Tom these were times when, though he “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 extracted from any of his clerks” (113). Again, the dynamic that produces desire between Lapham and Tom is their social difference and the negotiation that takes place where social status and economic status cross.

And yet it is this same difference which can never be erased, no matter the desire Lapham displays by wanting Tom close to him in the business and by extension in his home, or Tom displays for Lapham by wanting to be close to him through his business career. Just how far the belief that Silas and Tom share about one another can be sustained, though, is shown when the social difference between the two men is brought into stark contrast, and this is also the moment when the heterosexual love plot—Tom’s love for Penelope—takes off. The juxtaposition of these two events is crucial to my thinking about the romantic attachment of Silas and Tom.

Social difference erupts during the course of the dinner party which Lapham and his family are invited to. Penelope is the key absentee here. Although connected to Lapham by being his daughter, the narrative places her so that she is not connected so closely that she becomes part of Lapham’s performance at the dinner party. The performance itself is a drunken one, where Lapham holds forth on his army life, and on everything else, and he leaves the party believing that by talking so copiously he has triumphed. It is only the next day that “the glories of the night before showed poorer. Here and there a painful doubt obtruded itself and marred them with its awkward shadow” (214). Next day at the office he finally calls Corey in to see him and to ask him what the other guests had said about him.

Corey tries to pass off Lapham’s behaviour—“There was nothing—really nothing” (216)—but Lapham persists and links his behaviour with Corey’s position in

his business. Having shown himself not to be a gentleman, that thing he prizes above all else, Lapham says “I will give you up if you want to go before anything worse happens ... I know I’m not fit to associate with gentlemen in anything but a business way”. Tom’s reaction is itself bizarre. “I can’t listen to you any longer. What you say is shocking to me—shocking in a way you can’t think ... I have my reasons for refusing to hear you—my reasons why I *can’t* hear you ... Oh, there’s nothing to take back,” he says, “with a repressed shudder for the abasement which he had seen” (217-8).

What follows is a scene of revelation for Tom.

[Tom] thought of him the night before in the company of those ladies and gentlemen, and he quivered in resentment of his vulgar, braggart, uncouth nature. ... Amidst the stings and flashes of his wounded pride, all the social traditions, all the habits of feeling, which he had silenced more and more by force of will during the past months, asserted their natural sway, and he rioted in his contempt of the offensive boor, *who was even more offensive in his shame than in his trespass*. ... He shut his desk and hurried out into the early night ... to try and find his way out of the chaos, which now seemed ruin, and now the materials out of which fine actions and a happy life might be shaped (my emphasis, 218-9).

So Tom is repelled by those qualities in Lapham different from those qualities in himself, the same qualities which attracted him to Lapham in the first place after his trip to Texas. But in many ways what triggers this moment when attraction turns into repulsion is Lapham’s behaviour, the way that he becomes “more offensive in his shame than in his trespass”. What Tom sees in Lapham is exactly what Lapham has excluded from his character in order that he can appear the self-made, primitive, frontier businessman, “the drunken blackguard” (217)—the soft, weak, and feminized qualities that resurface in his self-surveilling pity and shame and sentimentality. It is precisely this self-pity and its

relation to the binary of masculine/feminine that is exposed to Tom at this point in the narrative. What is also exposed is the open secret of sexuality that links masculine and feminine to the establishing of the boundaries of hetero and homo.

What Tom also confronts by seeing this in Lapham is the status of his own desire, his desire for Lapham through his “passion”—the paint, the economic as well as symbolic currency of masculinity and male sexuality. Tom is shocked, disgusted, and conscious of the “ruin” which might follow were this desire to play itself out bodily because of course he sees how his own desire stands to the feminine and the homosexual. It is from this position that he must forge a “happy life”.

But I would argue that after this initial shock and disgust, Tom actually attempts to commit himself to Lapham. After three hours of walking he ends up on Lapham’s doorstep. The following passage is worth quoting at length, and it is worth noticing—in the context of the chapter which succeeds it when Tom declares his love to Penelope—just how absent Penelope is from his thoughts:

He had often taken it very seriously, and sometimes he said that he must forego the hope on which his heart was set. There had been many times in the past months when he had said he *must go no farther*, and as often as he had taken this stand *he had yielded* it, upon this or that excuse, which he was aware of trumping up. It was part of the complication that he should be unconscious of the injury he might be doing to some one besides his family and himself; *this was the defect of his diffidence*; and it had come to him in a pang for the first time when his mother said that she would not have the Laphams think she wished to make more of the acquaintance than he did; and then it had come too late. Since that he had suffered quite as much from the fear that it might not be as that it might be so; and now, in the mood, *romantic and exalted, in which he found himself concerning Lapham*, he was as far as might be from vain confidence. He ended the question in his own mind by *affirming to himself* that he was

there, [at Lapham's house] *first of all, to see Lapham* and give him *an ultimate proof* of his own perfect faith and unabated respect, and to offer him *what reparation this involved* for that want of sympathy—of humanity—which he had shown (my emphasis, 220).

Once again, he is not visiting the Lapham house to see either of the two daughters but to see Lapham, and the phrases I have italicized in this passage suggest—however obliquely and euphemistically—that he has determined to express his desire. When Lapham doesn't open the door Tom is genuinely surprised and disappointed. The only member of the family in the house is Penelope. After talking for a while Tom utters his commitment of desire to her: "I—I didn't expect—I hoped to have seen your father—but I must speak now, whatever—I love you!" (227)

What are we to make of this about-turn in Tom's behaviour? John Seelye has asked this question in relation to Howells's realism: "Would a sensitive young man, most particularly of Corey's social background, make such a dramatic turnabout, from reviling Lapham for his boorish insensitivity, to rushing to his home in order to make known his feelings for Penelope?"<sup>28</sup> According to Seelye, the marriage of Tom and Penelope is fundamental to "the working out of the novel within the framework of Howells's sub-textual argument about literary realism." Penelope's decision to marry Tom and not suffer in a romantic fashion allows the novel to assert realistic over romantic fictional values. Tom's about-turn is the "hole" in the text which opens the way to an examination of the novel's "infrastructure".

Seelye's argument stands as insufficient because it takes for granted a heterosexually-oriented outcome, refusing to configure holes in *Silas Lapham* in relation to any homosexual thematics once again. From the retrospective position of seeing the heterosexual romantic outcome as somehow expected, or obvious, or natural, Tom's declaration of love suddenly makes sense—in Seelye's reading—of all that has happened previously in the novel; every incident can be re-examined and found to have been leading up to this moment when Tom declares his love for Penelope. It is clear that Tom

desired Penelope from the beginning; only the skill of the narrative prevented the reader from seeing what was obvious all along. Here we have the realistic novel as open secret in its very formal construction. But take away the positional logic of a heterosexual outcome, replace it instead with a logic which admits desire between men, and Tom's utterance is far less clear-cut. Yes, it is plausible that Tom has come to see Lapham to ask him for Penelope's hand in marriage or to tell him that he loves his daughter. But, in the context of what has happened at the office earlier it is just as plausible that Tom has come to the house determined to make amends for his earlier treatment of Lapham by telling Lapham it is him he loves. The very tenor of the sentence suggests this: "*I hoped to have seen your father—but I must speak now, whatever—I love you!*"<sup>29</sup>

Until this moment when he declares his love for Penelope there is nothing in the text which in any way positions Tom's desire in relation to her. It is only in retrospect that incidents can be read to produce this positioning of desire. This retrospective reading is one which not only assumes but actually produces *as it assumes* the naturalness and predictability of the heterosexual romance. What is lost—or turned into an open secret—in this process is the struggle by which heterosexual romance has to erase all knowledge of same-sex desires from its field of vision. What in Seelye's "realistic" account is a plot device to open up the text so it can deal with questions of realism, in my account becomes a moment which encapsulates the displacement of what is classed as unacceptable desire. Loving and marrying Penelope (and Penelope instead of Irene because Irene is too sentimental and too closely linked to Lapham's sentimental outburst at the dinner party, from which Penelope was absent) allows Tom to remain close to Lapham—in business, through family—whilst preserving his dissociation from that which might otherwise "ruin" him: homosexual desire. There is no way, then, that one can see the marriage of Tom and Penelope outside of the patriarchal system of the transfer of women. Lapham, Tom, and Penelope form an intensely powerful erotic

triangle, one that figures issues not only of desire and sexuality, but also of social class, aesthetics, and American identity.

As Seelye notes, this incident in the office between Lapham and Tom, and Tom's subsequent declaration of love to Penelope, constitute what amounts to the climax of the novel.<sup>30</sup> What happens subsequently is nothing less than a justification of the kind of realistic enterprise which, while so denigrating sentimental or romantic fiction, is rearranging the epistemological aesthetics of late nineteenth century American culture in ways which directly impact upon the discursive production of sexual categorization. Reverend Sewell's rhetoric of the "economy of pain" (249) and Lapham's adherence to the logic of it, together with the fact that Lapham is made a victim of one moment of sentimental self-pity suggests something of Howells's conceptualization of such 'weakness'. Lapham's supposed moral rise in the final part of the novel is based upon the recognition of weakness in oneself and this allows Lapham to achieve something more important than wealth: the articulation of a code of suffering—pragmatic, masculine, righteous—which will help to structure the social oppression of homosexual men and women, by making them the main targets of scapegoating projections—through "viciously sentimental attributions of a vitiated sentimentality."<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1978]), 55.
2. See George Spangler, 'The Shadow of a Dream: Howells' Homosexual Tragedy', *American Quarterly*, 23 (1971): 110-19; Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau, *The Circle of Eros: Sexuality in the Work of William Dean*



*Howells* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983); Sam B. Girgus, *Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), chapter 5.

3. And indeed it is with this formulation that Freud reached that point where the distinction between the professional analyst and the literary critic threatens to disappear almost entirely.
4. Here I am thinking particularly of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 73-103 and her critique of Kaja Silverman's treatment of Henry James in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. Also of note is Lee Edelman's deconstruction of the spectatorial Freudian analytic scene via his conception of "(be)hindsight". See Edelman, *Homographesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 173-91. Much of the work which has attacked the conceptual status of psychoanalysis as a methodology for interpretation has followed from the earlier analyses of feminist writers and from Foucault. See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982); Jacqueline Rose, 'Femininity and Its Discontents', *Feminist Review*, 1982, Vol. 14: 5-21; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [1974]); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1974]) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).
5. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 74
6. *Ibid.*, 74
7. William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1885]), 7. All further references appear in parentheses.
8. Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau, *The Circle of Eros: Sexuality in the Work of William Dean Howells* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 74. This remains the most substantive and the most suggestive treatment of sexuality in *Lapham* to date and hence my concentration on it here. For a biographical treatment of the issues of male sexuality in relation to Howells's life see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 186-7, and John W. Crowley, 'Howells, Stoddard, and Male Homosocial Attachment in Victorian America', in Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*. This

article is revised and updated with an appendix about the illustrations to Stoddard's *Summer Cruising in the South Seas*, in Crowley's *The Mask of Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989). Robert K. Martin's 'Hercules in Knickerbockers', *American Literary Realism* 20:1 (1988), provides a reading of Howells's *The Landlord at Lion's Head* that deals with the relationship between an older and younger man, similar to that found in *Lapham*.

9. Ibid., 73.
10. Ibid., 73.
11. Ibid., 84.
12. For more on this see Patrick Dooley, 'Nineteenth Century Business Ethics and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*', *American Studies*, 21 (1980): 79-93. The fullest survey of critical approaches, especially the issue of Howells's realism, is provided in the introduction of Donald E. Pease, ed., *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-28.
13. Prioleau, *The Circle of Eros*, xvi.
14. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 228. By taking this risk Dollimore offers one of the most insightful and useful readings of Freudian psychoanalysis. By recovering the idea of perversity from and through Freud, Dollimore uses a procedure he identifies as follows: "(1) attention to formal definitions, provoking (2) a historical enquiry which in turn leads to (3) a conceptual development facilitating (4) a further historical recovery". Whilst my own procedure in this chapter cannot be so clearly defined, I hope that in some small way this checklist has remained in tact at the peripheries of my critical focus.
15. Dimock, 'The Economy of Pain' in Donald E. Pease ed., *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 67-90.
16. In economic terms an instance of this would be the limited liability companies which in the both the United States and Britain developed first of all in the railway building sector.
17. She is more concerned with the subplots of Miss Dewey and Rogers as "structural complement" to the main plot. I, of course, do not consider Rogers to be a subplot at all. But Dimock makes the point that in these subplots "tenuous ties" of connection to Lapham are precisely what is important about them. They offer a way for negotiating the limits of responsibility. Should Lapham remain

responsible for Rogers after so many years; should he continue to support Jim Millon's wife and daughter?

18. It should be remembered that for Sedgwick the suggestion of the potential unbrokenness of this continuum, the continuum between homosocial and homosexual, is intended as "a strategy for making generalizations about, and marking historical differences in the *structure* of men's relations with other men." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2.
19. This is the argument Foucault makes in *History of Sexuality Volume 1* and which has subsequently come to underpin much of the thinking about modern homosexuality. See Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994 [1990]); Ed Cohen, *A Talk on the Wilde Side* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Cassell, 1997) has made the most vigorous attack on this idea and the idea of social constructionism in the realm of sexuality.
20. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 164.
21. There is clearly some age-related logic at work in this demand to set up father-son relationships wherever an older man and a younger man come into contact; but an age-related logic which once more can only position itself in the first instance in relation to the family where, by necessity, a father is at least a generation older than his son. Of course, the compulsion to turn sexual or desirous relations between older and younger men into father-son relations might have not a little to do with a twisted homophobic logic which has developed in tandem with the strictly policed separation of homo- and hetero-sexualities and which somehow assumes that male-male passion is a desire for the 'same', rather than a desire for the 'different' which is supposed to characterize male-female passion. (For more on this in relation to Oscar Wilde, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 157-63; Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 52-72.) So, two men who may be marked by all manner of differences—age, class, race—cannot be perceived in twentieth century heterosexist culture to be participating in a relationship of desire because desire is not directed towards an object

recognizably the 'same'. Instead, any possible relationship of desire is passed over as the relationship is translated so that the two men become father and son; sexual desire between men is safely covered up by the family. That this is a bizarrely disavowing manoeuvre can be seen in the fact that the two men's differences have been reduced to sameness—of gender and biology; the kind of sameness which should—in heteronormative logic—actually precipitate a relationship of desire. It is the structural, familial relationship posited between these two hypothetical men which—by way of the incest taboo—prevents this sameness leading to, or being conceived of as, desire. Even when these two men might not be biologically related. For more on this see Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 249-75, but also Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995) which takes a somewhat different approach from a gay-centred point of view and tries to reconstruct the validity of a same-desiring logic in understanding homosexuality.

22. See Stuart M. Blumin, 'The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals', *The American Historical Review* 90:2,1985, 299-338.
23. For more on squeezing and masturbation in this period see Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 163-4. It is also worth pointing out at this point, I think, the intimate connection between male sexuality and the language of money and business. As I have just mentioned, spending and sperm is one of the most obvious. (And one that is continued in the language of the "money shot" of hardcore pornography.) In addition, there are phrases like "doing business", "doing *the* business", "on the job", "rough trade", and, of course, the whole rhetoric of "partnership" which is clearly important in the plot development of *Silas Lapham*.
24. In many ways, one of the keys tasks of queer theory in its deconstructive manifestation is to think about how categories add up in the logic of heteronormativity and how they might add up differently. This is certainly the attitude of Eve Sedgwick in *Tendencies*, 1-20. "What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other?" she argues. "What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where *everything means the same thing?* ... That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps,

overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically."

25. Another incident which might help place these asterisks in some relation to male sexuality is the reporting of the Oscar Wilde trials ten years after *Silas Lapham* was published, when of course the acts of which Wilde was accused were left blank in the newspaper reports. For more on this see Ed Cohen, *A Talk on the Wilde Side* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994), 1-10.
26. Persis's role in her husband's business is important here. Whilst Silas relied on her at the beginning, it is remarked on in the text that her role has gradually reduced to the point where she has no input whatsoever (48).
27. I don't want to suggest that these sentences are simply casual innuendo, or that really they are *about* sex. What I want to suggest is that the rhetoric of fiction is one of those places where the cognitive regimes of capitalist sexuality formation cannot help but exist.
28. John Seelye, 'The Hole in Howells/ The Lapse in *Silas Lapham*', in Donald E. Pease ed., *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 47-65, 52.
29. This argument becomes even more substantive when viewed in the light of Eve Sedgwick's discussion of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Here she utilizes Freud's list of erotogrammatical slippages that are generated in a homophobic culture where it is impossible for a man to utter "I love him" about another man. She argues that Wilde develops the slippage "I do not love *him*, I *am* him" in *Dorian Gray*. More interestingly for my purposes, is the second of Freud's disavowing utterances: "I do not love *him*, I love *her*". *Epistemology*, 157-63.
30. Seelye, 'The Hole in Howells', 52.
31. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 145.