

## **The Shaping of the New Woman in *The Rise of Silas Lapham***

*By Andrea Powell*

A portion of William J. Glacken's painting *Chez Mouquin* appears on the book cover of the most recent Penguin edition of William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The image on the cover is presumably set around the turn of the nineteenth century and consists of two distinct figures: a man and a woman. They are expensively dressed, seated at a dinner table covered in white linen, and politely sipping glasses of wine. Like most cover art, this painting conveys a sense of the contents within the book itself. It is interesting, then, because Howells's novel is titled after a male character, that the likeness of the female in the painting occupies more space on the cover than that of the male. While nearly the woman's entire body is displayed in this picture, we are only able to view a slight portion of the man's torso. If we assume the two figures to represent Silas Lapham and his wife, Persis, the latter character is conveyed, on this particular cover at least, as the focal point of our attention rather than the title character himself.

The woman in Glacken's painting is adorned in the stylish dress of the time period. A large hat rests with a noticeable tilt on the side of her head, and a brooch lies near her collarbone, pinned to the high neck of her bodice. Three-quarter-length sleeves tighten over her elbows and flare around her forearms. The upper part of her dress fits snugly over her breasts and tapers in tightly at her waist. The massive folds of her skirt are draped loosely over her lap and knees. The physical outline of this woman in the painting produces a striking image. Her costume shapes her body in ways that makes it appear to conform to the idealized image of femininity during this time period. She appears to be quite buxom and to have rounded hips, and her waist is disproportionately small in circumference. Certainly, this woman, and other women of her era, cannot attain the body shape portrayed in this painting without the aid of another important item of clothing, one hidden beneath her dress but indeed crucial to her appearance: the corset.

Today the corset is largely "condemned as having been an instrument of women's oppression," as Valerie Steele points out in her recent historical study of this controversial garment (1). In fact, especially during the later half of the nineteenth century, the time represented in Howells's novel, Victorian women use corsets to enhance their breasts and to significantly reduce their waistlines. They use these undergarments to force their bodies to conform to an idealized vision of womanhood; thus, most historians now believe that during this time the corset plays a "role in creating and policing middle-class femininity" (Steele 35). In this way, then, corsets not only shape the bodies of women like the one portrayed in Glacken's painting, Persis Lapham, or any of the other female characters in *Silas Lapham*, but the ideology represented by these items of clothing quite literally fashions the lives of women during this era.

In our condemnation of the corset, however, we must not forget that, as Steele argues convincingly, "within the world of fashion, cultural signs, like the corset, have no fixed meaning" (176). In other words, the corset is more than simply a method through which the patriarchy has controlled women throughout history. One way that we can demonstrate this fact is by examining the intersections between the corset and an emergent ideology of the late nineteenth century—that of the New Woman.

According to historian Ellen Jordan's "The Christening of the New Woman: May 1894," the term "New Woman" is not actually used until 1894, when British popular novelist Ouida publishes an article in *The North American Review* appropriately entitled "The New Woman" (20). However, the ideology surrounding the New Woman begins to emerge and become influential for American women beginning over a decade earlier (Jordan 19), around the same time that Howells composes *Silas Lapham*. Many women during this time period begin to question the positions reserved for them in the traditional Victorian culture of the previous several decades. They begin to rebel against the role of the "Angel in the House" and to resent the residual Victorian ideologies that claim, according to Patricia Marks's historical study *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*, that a woman is "naturally fitted to the common round of household duties . . . [and] achieve[s] greatness not in her own right but in her relatedness as daughter and wife and, if she survive[s] the rigors of childbirth, as mother and grandmother" (1). New Women, on the other hand, "[ask] for education, suffrage, and careers; they cut their hair, [adopt] 'rational' dress, and [freewheel] along a path that [leads] to the twentieth century" (Marks 2). In short, the feminists, or the New Women, of the 1880s and 1890s create a new, emergent ideology that emphasizes a woman's need to break free of her household and familial duties and to pursue personal fulfillment through a variety of venues, including charity work and physical activity.

The media during the turn of the nineteenth century, an era commonly known as the *fin-de-siecle*, contributes largely to the emerging ideology of the New Woman. News periodicals like *The Fortnightly Review*, *The North American Review*, and *The Pall Mall Gazette* publish articles that further the rhetoric of the New Woman. These articles are written by popular female novelists and journalists, such as Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Sarah Grand, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frances Fuller Victor, and they address women's needs and rights and debate women's issues such as marriage, motherhood, and careers. Furthermore, magazines like *Life*, *Puck*, *Punch*, and *Truth* publish hoards of drawings and cartoons that popularize the visual image of the New Woman. Many of these cartoons poke fun at the New Woman, suggesting her "mannish" qualities and masculine manner. Even in ridiculing her, however, the media ensures that the New Woman rises steadily in popularity throughout the last few decades of the nineteenth century.

Since the New Woman is largely a creation of the popular press, perhaps the best way to understand her is to review the popular periodical literature of middle- to upper-class American women during the 1880s and 1890s, the time when she first emerges in print. As historian R.F. Bogardus suggests in "The Reorientation of Paradise: Modern Mass Media and Narratives of Desire in the Making of American Consumer Culture," many popular magazines begin to cater to women during this time period (512). *McClure's* and *Munsey's* begin to include articles targeted toward women, and *Cosmopolitan* incorporates a section entitled "The Household" into each issue. *Ladies Home Journal*, a periodical aimed exclusively toward women, is first published in 1884. As a quick glance at these initial periodicals intended for women reveals, the turn of the century is indeed an era of change for middle- to upper-class ladies. Clearly, magazine publishers begin to recognize a market for literature intended for women. Women begin to want to read about world events and celebrities all while measuring themselves and their lives against the other women depicted in periodicals.

Most of the articles directed toward women at this time concern the best methods of household cleaning and management, childrearing, and female fashion. A few titles of such articles from *Ladies Home Journal* and *Cosmopolitan* are "The Art of Sweeping" (Hungerford 55), "What Shall My Children Play?" (Hewitt 3), and "The Decrees of Fashion" (Hooker 54). Although these articles appear to encourage women in their traditional roles as wives and mothers, the articles are significant in that they represent a new forum in which women can connect with others and discuss the events going on in their lives. These new periodicals are also important because they show that as women toward the turn of the century find themselves suddenly idle and having less to do in the home, largely because of new technologies and the rise of the middle-class, they turn to outside activities, such as reading.

The New Woman gains in popularity so quickly during these last decades of the nineteenth century that even advertisers seem to understand her influence and use her to sell their products. Many advertisers cleverly utilize the ideology of the New Woman to promote female consumerism. They recognize women as both consumers and consumable. Advertisers begin to use images of women to sell their goods while simultaneously encouraging women to take charge of their destinies by buying specific products. For example, let us examine a series of advertisements for corsets from early issues of *Ladies Home Journal*. These advertisements exemplify the ways that the New Woman develops in the media and inadvertently influence the ideologies of the American masses.

In the very first issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, for instance, Madame McGee advertises her Coronet Corsets. This January 1884 advertisement consists of a small picture of a corset standing alone and a brief description that reads, "Perfect fitting, easy, durable. Three laces and spoon clasps. No bones under the arms. No seams over the hips." Nowhere does the advertisement picture an actual woman, and in no way does the written text even refer directly to one.

Clearly, the advertisers of Madame McGee's corsets do not consider it polite or proper to show a woman in her undergarments or to speak too explicitly about a woman's underwear.

Although many other corset advertisements appear throughout the next several issues of *Ladies Home Journal*, it is not until over a year later that the likeness of an actual woman appears in such an advertisement. In the February 1885 advertisement for Ferris Brothers Corsets, a woman and her child are pictured, and both are wearing corsets. The printing reads, "Why do mothers put stiff corsets on their growing children! We beg of you don't do it but buy Ferris Patent Corset Waists." Although a woman appears in this advertisement, her corset needs are not directly addressed; instead, the advertisers focus on her duties as a mother and the corsets that her young children might wear. Judging from the picture of a corset-clad woman, they hope that women will choose to buy Ferris Brothers products for themselves, but they do not feel comfortable saying so directly.

Over a year later, another Ferris Brothers advertisement finally pictures a woman and also addresses her directly as a wearer of corsets. In this advertisement from the March 1886 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, the image of an attractive woman in a corset appears. The woman is pictured in a modest stance, with her face turned from the viewer and her arm passively held behind her back. The advertisement reads, "Beautiful women in the United States, Canada, and England wear 'Good Sense' corset waists. Thousands now in use. Best for health, economy, and beauty. Buttons at front instead of clasps." This advertisement shows that advertisers of women's underwear are now not only willing to show pictures of ladies in their corsets, but are also becoming more and more explicit in their wording. They are finally comfortable using the word "women." Moreover, this advertisement uses the concept of physical wellness to promote the corset. In this way, the advertisers are beginning to cater to the active New Woman and utilize her ideology in order to sell a product.

The next interesting corset advertisement appears a few months later in the June 1886 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. This advertisement for Dr. Scott's Electric Corsets and Belts takes up nearly half of a page. Along with a long list of testimonies from women about this particular corset, the advertisement shows a large picture of a woman in a corset. The woman holds her hand on her hip and looks almost directly at the viewer. She is also holding a poster that reads, "Life. Health. Elegance. Durability." This advertisement is remarkable in that the woman pictured appears simultaneously bold, intelligent, independent, and sexual. Furthermore, by holding a poster in her hand, she seems to be actively campaigning for her right to wear Dr. Scott's corset. It is also telling that this advertisement uses testimonies from real women and actually prints their names in the magazine. Women's underwear is no longer relegated to a tiny, inconspicuous corner of the advertisement page. Dr. Scott's advertisement seems to announce that, at least in the *Ladies Home Journal*, the New Woman

has arrived. She is not afraid of her body or her sexuality or too timid to stand up for her rights.

Similar advertisements, using the figure of the new woman, follow Dr. Scott's. In the June 1887 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, Ferris Brothers runs an advertisement with the figure of a woman in her corset and printing that reads, "Think for yourself. If you are a sensible woman and believe that health, comfort, and beauty are desirable things, buy Good Sense corded corset waists." Ferris Brothers puts out another advertisement in the December 1887 issue that shows two women playing a game of tennis. The printing on this one claims, "Tennis. Boating. Riding. Young ladies should wear Good Sense corset waists. Permit full expansion of lungs. Perfect freedom of motion." By the end of 1887, then, women in corset advertisements are not only beautiful and sexual, but are also sensible and active. Certainly not coincidentally, the figure of the New Woman embodies all of these qualities and more.

We can begin to understand the degree and the speed with which the ideologies of the New Woman influence women of the *fin-de-siecle* by analyzing later *Ladies Home Journal* corset advertisements. In fact, corset advertisements from the late 1890s, compared with those from the decade before, show that many of the emergent ideologies of the New Woman during the 1880s quickly become dominant ones by the 1890s. A May 1896 advertisement for Gage-Downs corsets in *Ladies Home Journal*, for example, portrays a picture of a woman with her arm held seductively above her head and reads, "Graceful as the New Woman all the time-at work, a-wheel, in negligee-is she who wears a G-D Bicycle Waist." Not only does this advertisement deal openly with female sexuality by naming the specific attire that a woman would wear in a sexual situation, but it also pointedly labels the New Woman as a figure after which women should model themselves.

Another advertisement from a July 1896 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* displays an actual photograph of a real woman. This advertisement, for Ferris' Bicycle Corset Waist appeals to active women by stating, "Don't Wear a Corset when you ride, play tennis, or attend gymnasium. Be sure to wear style No. 296 Ferris Bicycle Corset Waist." By picturing an actual woman, this advertisement takes the business of corset advertising to a whole new level. The progression from the small, stiff corset standing alone to a photograph of a real woman proudly displaying her corset designed specifically for activity shows the successful infiltration of emergent New Woman ideology into dominant American modes of thinking.

Therefore, it is fitting after all that the painting on the cover of Howells's *Silas Lapham* emphasizes the female form rather than the male. Besides being a novel about an American businessman, this text conveys much about the ways in which women around the turn of the century were forced to contend with the emergent ideology of the New Woman. Throughout this novel, both residual

Victorian ideologies and emergent New Woman ideologies play important roles in the shaping of the lives of the three primary female characters.

The renowned cultural studies critic Catherine Belsey states in "Reading Cultural Studies," "The materials of cultural history reside in the signifying practices of a society, and these include its fictions" (109). In this way, then, we can certainly read Howells's novel as indicative of the ideological transitions of the time period in and about which it was written. In fact, Howells's own literary philosophy encourages this sort of cultural analysis. As the aptly dubbed father of the American Realism movement, Howells believes that writers must ask themselves "before we ask anything else, Is it true?-true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?" ("Editor's," Howells 824). In his fictional works, Howells attempts to capture the true impulses of the people that he observes in his everyday life. Thus, his female characters are meant to represent actual women who could exist in Howells's society.

The three main female characters in the Howells's novel, Persis Lapham and her two daughters Penelope and Irene, each change significantly throughout the course of the text. I argue that they construct their changing identities by weighing themselves against a new and hugely influential figure in American culture, the New Woman. I claim that it is the New Woman, as an emergent ideological framework in the United States during this time, who ties together many of the transitions that the three primary female characters in Howells's novel experience. Much like a corset shapes the female body, the ideology of the New Woman shapes the three women characters in ways that force them to make changes in their lifestyles. In fact, because Howells's novel *Silas Lapham* is published and takes place on the cusp of a huge cultural transition in the United States-upon the beginning of a very different rise than the one indicated in his title, that of the New Woman-many of the changes that Persis, Penelope, and Irene undergo throughout the novel are representative of changes that many women around the turn of the nineteenth century make in their own lives.

In *Silas Lapham*, we witness the beginnings of these changes in dominant ideology. As they embark on huge lifestyle transitions throughout the novel, Persis, Penelope, and Irene Lapham show that they are contending, although unconsciously perhaps, with the figure of the New Woman. Each of the three women emerges from her series of transformations a completely different character than she was at the beginning of the text, and, to some degree, each of them owes her changes to the emergent ideology of the New Woman.

Of the three main female characters in *Silas Lapham*, we are first introduced to Persis. In fact, we meet Persis through the eyes of Silas himself during the opening interview with Bartley Hubbard. Curiously, though, even before Silas mentions his wife, he spends a good deal of time describing his own mother. He describes her as the traditional "Angel in the House" type of woman: "She was a little, frail thing, not bigger than a good-sized intermediate schoolgirl; but she did

the whole work of a family of boys, and boarded the hired men besides. She cooked, swept, washed, ironed, made and mended from daylight to dark . . . ." (*Rise*, Howells 8). From this description, we are given to understand that Silas's mother lived to care for her family. Not only did she work hard, but she also "got time to go to church, and to teach us to read the Bible," he says (*Rise*, Howells 8). Literary critic Irene C. Goldman points out in "Business Made Her Nervous: The Fall of Persis Lapham," that "Persis, at this point, he admires as being the same kind of hardworking, morally firm helpmate" (423). Silas's mother is never referred to again throughout the course of the novel; clearly her description is meant to set the stage for Persis's own strong work ethic and moral standing.

Silas goes on to relate to Bartley that Persis is "supernal in intelligence and capability" (*Rise*, Howells 15) and that she ran his paint business for him while he was away fighting in the Civil War. He even goes so far as to name his best brand of paint after his wife and to give Persis's hard work the credit for his success in business, stating, "I used to tell her it wasn't the seventy-five percent of purr-ox-eyed of iron in the ore that made the paint go; it was the seventy-five percent of purr-ox-eyed of iron in her" (*Rise*, Howells 16). Clearly, Silas considers Persis a hard-working woman.

He also sees her as morally upright. In fact, the first time that Silas mentions Persis directly, he states, "If my wife wasn't good enough to keep both of us straight, I don't know what would become of me" (*Rise*, Howells 10). As many critics have pointed out, Silas views Persis as the conscience of the family. She is the one who is concerned for Silas's morality when he buys out his partner, Rogers, right before his business booms. Even though Silas insists that he conducted his business ethically in this instance, Persis exclaims, "No; you had better face the truth, Silas . . . You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! No, you had got greedy, Silas" (*Rise*, Howells 45). Silas disagrees with this assessment of the deal with Rogers throughout the text, but he defers his own moral inclination to Persis's, and eventually he tries to appease her by helping Rogers in a new business venture.

It is this action, meant to appeal to Persis's outstanding moral sensibility, that leads Silas into financial ruin. As Silas explains it to his wife, "I was glad to make it up with him-I jumped at the chance. I guess Rogers saw that he had a soft thing in me, and he's worked it for all it was worth" (*Rise*, Howells 239). In the situation with Rogers, for perhaps the first time in their marriage, Persis proves incompetent as a moral guide. This is a sign that Persis is no longer entirely successful in her role as a Victorian wife and mother and indicative of her move towards the New Woman.

Persis also displays her loss of moral grounding in the way that she handles the series of events with which Silas is faced after he realizes that he stands to lose his fortune. First of all, Silas is given the opportunity to sell a plot of worthless property to a group of businessmen who do not realize its worthlessness. Just as

Silas is forced with making the decision of whether or not to sell the property, Persis abandons him as a moral guide: "Lapham glanced again at his wife; her head had fallen; he could see that she . . . was helpless, now, in the crucial moment, when he had the utmost need of her insight" (*Rise*, Howells 303). Furthermore, Persis doubts Silas's loyalty to her when she discovers that a beautiful woman works in his office. She demands Silas explain her presence, and when he refuses, because he is hurt that Persis would doubt his faithfulness, she screams, "'I'll find out, and I'll disgrace you. I'll teach you how to treat me-'" (*Rise*, Howells 311). At this moment, Persis fails to trust her husband. In both of these instances, she shows that she is no longer capable of playing the role of the "Angel in the House." She violates the code of this role by losing her assurance as a moral guide and by failing to entirely trust her husband.

Persis acts in other ways that show the influence of the ideology of the New Woman as well. As she and Silas become more and more financially established, she performs fewer and fewer responsibilities in the household and as a business helpmate for Silas. Perhaps due to her newly developed freedom from household responsibilities, Persis becomes more interested in pursuing prominent social connections. She is so excited by the prospect of having the socially respected Tom Corey as a son-in-law that she jumps to conclusions about his intentions regarding her younger daughter, Irene, an action that causes disastrous effects for her entire family later in the novel. When a newspaper clipping addressed to Irene arrives from Texas, where Tom is temporarily living, Persis automatically assumes that it proves Tom's affection for the girl: "Mrs. Lapham told her husband of the arrival of the paper, treating the fact with an importance that he refused to see in it" (*Rise*, Howells 38). Later, Persis again reveals her social ambitions by the anxiety that she experiences when Mrs. Corey, Tom's mother, comes to call: "Mrs. Lapham cringed inwardly, and tremulously wondered what her visitor had come for. She turned from pale to red, and was hardly coherent in her greetings" (*Rise*, Howells 152). Persis behaves in a similar manner when she and her family are invited to a dinner at the Corey's home. She experiences a "pleased flutter" after she opens the invitation and hurriedly sets about making arrangements and plans for the family's first real appearance in society (*Rise*, Howells 165).

Ultimately, however, although Persis begins to conform to the shaping of elements of the New Woman emergent ideology throughout the novel, she almost entirely rejects it by the end. She finds peace with Silas's financial fall as "a lesson for me" (*Rise*, Howells 323). She returns to a life of near poverty in Vermont, presumably taking up the household duties as she had before Silas earned his fortune. She also returns to her role as the moral guide for her family. She is proud of Silas when he resists the temptation to sell his property. Moreover, she feels about Penelope's engagement to Tom, the man the entire family had originally thought intended to marry Irene, similarly to the way in which she had felt about Silas's treatment of Rogers near the beginning of the text. Even after much reassurance from Silas that it is an ethical move for Penelope to

marry Tom, Persis persists in repeating, "I can't make it seem right" (*Rise*, Howells 331). A final sign that Persis has rejected the New Woman and returned to her Victorian "Angel in the House" role is that at the end of the novel, the only brand of paint that Silas intends to keep producing is the Persis brand, the brand that he originally named after his wife in a gesture of gratitude for her faithfulness, hard work, and morality. By continuing to produce this product, Silas indicates that Persis has fully recovered the qualities that he valued in her before she began to dabble in the ideology of the New Woman.

The Laphams' eldest daughter, Penelope, is also forced to contend with the ideology of the New Woman throughout the course of the novel. In the beginning, in fact, it is Penelope who appears to be the female character in the text who most closely fits the mold of the New Woman. First of all, Penelope's name in itself elicits images of the New Woman for Howells's audience. According to literary critic June Johnson Bube's "Prefiguring the New Woman: Frances Fuller Victor's Refashioning of Women and Marriage in 'The New Penelope,'" in 1877, nearly 10 years before Howells publishes *Silas Lapham*, Frances Fuller Victor publishes "The New Penelope," a novella in which a character named Penelope "struggles against the marital bonds that circumscribe her social identity" (40). Thus, due to this literary precedent (one of which Howells, being an important literary critic, must have been aware) the very name of Penelope implies a resistance to traditional gender roles and assumptions about female identity.

Certainly, Penelope Lapham fits the model of her namesake in that she is not a typical heroine. She is not defined by her beauty; on the contrary, upon first meeting her, Tom remarks to his father that Penelope is "not pretty, but rather interesting" (*Rise*, Howells 63). Also, instead of engaging in the type of flirtatious behavior in which other women do, Penelope amuses her guests with stories and a dry sense of humor. Silas comments proudly on Penelope's personality as she and Irene entertain Tom, saying, "That girl can talk for twenty, right straight along. She's better than a circus any day" (*Rise*, Howells 125). Penelope is also figured as the more active and healthy of the two daughters. When she and Irene walk on the beach on a hot day, it is Irene who falls ill with a headache (*Rise*, Howells 77).

Furthermore, we are made to understand right from the beginning that Penelope likes to read and that she has her own opinions about important issues. She is the one in the Lapham family with whom Tom can discuss literature. Persis even admits, "I guess Penelope does most of our reading" (*Rise*, Howells 82). Also, she is not afraid to voice her opinions. For instance, when asked about the prospect of a new house on Beacon Hill, she states confidently, "I go in for it. I don't see any use in not enjoying money, if you've got it to enjoy. That's what it's for, I suppose" (*Rise*, Howells 37). Even Irene seems to defer her own ideas to her sister's opinions. When discussing the new library with Tom, Irene mentions, "Pen says it's perfectly ridiculous having one" (*Rise*, Howells 106)

Perhaps most importantly, Penelope seems uninterested in procuring a man for marriage. Like the new woman, she seems to content herself with a single existence. Hsin-Ying Li asserts in his article on the novel that "Penelope enjoys her maidenhood with a naughtiness akin to outlawry" (112). She encourages her sister, Irene, in her pursuit of Tom but makes no move to pursue a relationship herself. Even the other characters in the novel seem to assume that while Irene will inevitably marry, Penelope will probably remain single. As we have already discussed, Persis assumes that Tom could not possibly be interested in Penelope, and all the other characters follow her lead. In all, Penelope's forthrightness, her sense of humor, and her overall attitude toward life liken her to the emergent New Woman.

As we read further in the novel, however, we find clues that Penelope is not as much like the New Woman as she originally appears to be. Despite the popular connotations of her name, we are told that Penelope "was named after her grandmother" (*Rise*, Howells 36) and that her name is "old-fashioned" (*Rise*, Howells 234). We never find out if her name originates from her maternal grandmother, of whom we know nothing, or her paternal grandmother, whom Silas describes as a traditional "Angel in the House," but just the fact that Penelope was named for a woman from a couple of generations past seems to imply her grounding in the Victorian ideas and ways of life. Tom Corey seems to perceive Penelope as a more traditional type of girl as well. In his first description of her, he claims that "'she is like her mother'" (*Rise*, Howells 63) about whom Bromfield Corey, Tom's father, later states, "'Mrs. Lapham's range was strictly domestic'" (*Rise*, Howells 249). Thus, it seems natural that, after Penelope has realized that Tom loves her and that she is indeed marriageable, she "[comes] down to supper and [takes] her mother's place at the head of the table" (*Rise*, Howells 232). She finally realizes that her true character is that of a traditional Victorian woman.

Also, quite unlike the New Woman, Penelope is clearly given to romantic ideas. Even her mother worries about her tendency to read romantic novels, saying, "'I don't want she should get notions'" (*Rise*, Howells 126). In "Complications of Heroism: Gender, Power, and the Romance of Self-Sacrifice in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*," literary critic Dawn Henwood explains Penelope's attraction to these novels: "they offer Penelope a vision of self-fulfillment and empowerment that she, the often overlooked plain sister, does not find available in her everyday social reality" (16). Furthermore, Persis comments that Penelope "'ain't so practical as Irene. She's more up in the clouds-more of what you may call a dreamer'" (*Rise*, Howells 126).

Soon enough, we find this assessment to be true. After Tom confesses his love for Penelope, she behaves in the exact same way that the heroine of a popular romantic novel, *Tears, Idle Tears*, behaves. This novel is discussed at the Corey dinner party as representative of all that is wrong with sentimental fiction. Like the heroine in the novel, Penelope believes that it is her duty to suffer and sacrifice

for love. Although she loves Tom and wants to marry him, she refuses to accept his proposal or even to see him because she knows that Irene intended to marry him first. Penelope also displays a tendency toward melodrama. For instance, when she has to admit the truth to Irene, she exclaims, "Life has got to go on. It does when there is a death in the house, and this is only a little worse" (*Rise*, Howells 212).

By embracing romance and melodrama and by joining with Tom in the traditional union of marriage, Penelope accepts traditional Victorian residual ideology. Despite her initial attraction to the lifestyle and attitude of the New Woman, Penelope cannot escape the fact that she is almost entirely a traditional woman. Ultimately, Bromfield is correct in his assessment of Penelope; like her mother, she finally rejects the emergent ideology of the New Woman.

Surprisingly then, since for the most part both Persis and Penelope choose traditional female roles and lifestyles, it is the younger Lapham daughter, Irene, who most fully embraces the ideology of the New Woman at the end of the novel. At the beginning of *Silas Lapham*, however, it is quite a different story. Irene initially appears to fit the mold of a traditional Victorian woman. Although she is still young (she is referred to as a child repeatedly throughout the text), Irene seems to desire a traditional lifestyle as the wife of Tom Corey. She focuses all of her attention on securing this marriage. She even goes so far as to buy a pin for her hair because it is like the one she saw his sister wearing.

Irene also engages in flirtatious behavior and draws romantic conclusions about even the most innocuous of Tom's actions. For example, when she and Tom first find themselves alone in the unfinished new house, she is thrilled that Tom offers to recommend books for the Laphams' new library. She gazes at the card on which Tom writes "wistfully" and then "[beams] with the triumph a woman feels in any bit of successful maneuvering" (*Rise*, Howells 107). Her maneuvering, in this instance, is the way in which she uses the premise of not knowing which books to buy as a way to ask advice from and, thus, become closer to Tom. In this same scene, Irene and Tom play coyly with a wood shaving on the floor. Tom notices that Irene has been poking at shavings on the floor with her parasol and offers to hold one down for her so she can poke at it more easily. Then, he presents the shaving to the girl as one would a flower. Based on these occurrences, Irene concludes that Tom is interested in courting her.

Irene is initially figured like a traditional woman in ways other than simply by having marriage ambitions. Most obviously, she is often described in terms of her extraordinary beauty. Only a few pages into the novel, in fact, when Silas points her out in a photograph during his interview with Bartley, the newspaperman exclaims, "What a beautiful creature she is! What a lovely, refined, sensitive face!" (*Rise*, Howells 10). All of the other characters in *Silas Lapham* perceive Irene as beautiful as well: "Despite their differences in tastes, the refined Coreys and the crude Laphams all admire Irene's good looks" (Li 104). As a matter of

fact, other characters do not say much about Irene throughout the novel *except* that she is pretty. Furthermore, in our earlier analysis of Penelope, we have already established that Irene does not read much and that she is the more physically frail of the two sisters.

In the face of adversity, Irene proves that she is not emotionally frail, however. Even though she has placed all of her hopes on the prospect of marrying Tom, she handles the announcement that he desires Penelope instead of her with great strength. Rather than sobbing and pouting as her sister does, Irene calmly gathers all of the items that she has collected as mementos of that which she thought was a relationship with Tom, such as the hair pin like his sister's and the newspaper article from Texas, and turns them over to Penelope. With this gesture, Irene leaves romance behind and embarks on a new existence much in the vein of the New Woman.

Irene goes on to prove her level-headedness and strength throughout the remainder of the story. She goes away from Boston, first to the farm in Vermont and then to her uncle's home out west. Even as she is leaving, she shows her resolve to survive on her own, instructing Silas unemotionally, "'Don't you stay till the train starts, Papa'" (*Rise*, Howells 230). When she returns home, she is no longer the silly little girl who believed Tom Corey to be in love with her. Instead, her "girlish dependence grows into an iron will" (Li 113). She calmly kisses Penelope and greets Tom, who happens to be visiting, "with a courage that sent a thrill of admiring gratitude through him" (*Rise*, Howells 317). She goes on to call her sister's sacrificial attitude "silly" (*Rise*, Howells 317) and command her in no uncertain terms to marry Tom. Persis notices that not only has Irene "toughened and hardened" (*Rise*, Howells 319), but that she also shows "a businesslike quickness in comprehending [Silas's business affairs] that Penelope had never pretended to" (*Rise*, Howells 320). Since she no longer views herself as merely a future wife and mother, Irene is able to admit to her business skills.

Furthermore, Howells's narrator comments that Irene speaks with "an accent prophetic of the sort of old maid she would become" (*Rise*, Howells 317). With this line, we see that Irene will probably never marry, that she has embraced the single lifestyle of a New Woman. Indeed, at the end of the text, five years after the incident with Tom Corey, "which she met so bravely," Irene is still unmarried (*Rise*, Howells 335). Unlike her mother and sister, Irene ultimately finds herself drawn to the ideology of the New Woman.

William Dean Howells prides himself on his attempts to accurately depict reality in his literature. He believes his characters representative of real-life people during his time period. Thus, his *The Rise of Silas Lapham* can be read as a mimetic work-the characters in this text are much like the people whom Howells knows in Boston during the 1880s. Clearly, then, the emergent ideology of the New Woman affects the women during this historical era. Literary critic John Cyril Barton argues that "*Silas Lapham* dialogizes disparate voices and visions of

reality, thereby constituting a collective but unincorporated social reality" (160). In this way, Persis, Penelope, and Irene, the three main female characters in the novel, are each forced to re-construct their identities based on the New Woman ideology that is so quickly and powerfully infiltrating their culture as middle- to upper-class American women. Each of these characters deals with this new ideology in a different way, and because they do, the novel presents us with a complex understanding of the rise of the New Woman movement.

The female figure depicted in Glacken's *Chez Mouquin* serves as an appropriate representation of the women's issues portrayed in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The woman in this painting appears to achieve the ideal of *fin-de-siecle* feminine beauty effortlessly, but we know that in order to maintain this illusion, she has probably squeezed her body into a tightly fitting corset. She uses the corset to emphasize aspects of her body and to deemphasize other aspects. In short, the corset contributes to the shaping of the female body just as the competing attitudes toward womanhood during this time contribute to the shaping of female lives.

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