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Aristotle and Howells: Old and New Rules of Storytelling

Keywords

William Dean Howell, Realism, Aristotle

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In *Criticism and Fiction*, William Dean Howells quotes the assertion by Armando Palacio Valdéz that “[i]t is entirely false that the great romantic, symbolic, or classic poets modified nature; such as they expressed her they felt her; and in this view they are as much realists as ourselves” (34).¹ In echoing this statement, Howells expanded the tradition of Realism outside its usual academic chronological constraint. This paper will demonstrate that he was correct in doing so. Realism may have begun as a negative reaction to the preceding Sentimentalist period, but in that reaction there were old ideas rejuvenated as well as new ideologies created. Howells’ polite political and social pragmatism may be unique, but his favorite method of conveying them,

through fiction, hardly strays from a set of guidelines more than two millennia old: Aristotle's *Poetics*. The *Poetics* was also a somewhat reactionary work; it was, in part, a response to those who placed the epic storytelling form above that of the tragedy. The epic was the domain of the great hero, the outlandish adventure, and the episodic plotline. These same characteristics are the hallmark of Sentimental literature. Howells and Aristotle reacted negatively to the same literary characteristics, and in doing so, they created amazingly similar philosophies of storytelling.

To examine the relationship between Howells and Aristotle, the critic is provided some convenient tools. Not only did Howells write fiction but also editorialized at length about the state of the literary community, his thoughts on Realism and Romanticism, and what makes a piece of writing good in general. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *Criticism and Fiction*, his most representative novel and his most comprehensive critical work, will both be used in this study. Taking *Criticism and Fiction* as Howells' Realism Manifesto, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as a demonstration of his principles, and comparing those generally with the *Poetics*, I will demonstrate the similarity between Howells' rules of writing (both explicit and implicit) and Aristotle's ancient rules. Bringing to light the similarities in their philosophies of writing will also lend credence to Edwin Cady's suggestion that, given a definition of Realism based on literary characteristics rather than time period, "we could justify the nineteenth century realists outside and beyond the conventions of their time and thought— forward into the present and backward as

far as we know art" (*The Light* 22)², and also to the broader idea that the development of writing in general is not a direct evolution from Greek stage plays to narrative poetry to novels, but rather a cyclical progression that is based, not on the changes of tekhnê (medium), but on the changing opinion concerning the universal laws of good storytelling.

A Tragic Novel

Before examining the specific ideas concerning storytelling common to both Aristotle and Howells, the more abstract idea of quality must be analyzed. How do Aristotle's ideas of the basic form and usefulness of storytelling compare to those of Howells? Aristotle explains that the tragedy, comedy, epic, and often music are pleasurable because of mimêsis (3). Mimêsis, as translated by Malcolm Heath, is imitation of an object or emotion. It has also been translated as 'representation' (Heath xiii). A prose description of a flower is an imitation/representation of that flower; a painted portrait is an imitation/representation of the subject. Mimêsis is inherently pleasurable, and therefore the creation and recognition of a piece of artwork is pleasurable and an end unto itself. Howells examines mimêsis in *Criticism and Fiction*, in an imagined statement from a layman to a scientist:

I see that you are looking at a grasshopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don't waste your time and sin against culture that way. I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grasshopper in general;

in fact, it's a type. It is made up of wire and card-board, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it's perfectly indestructible. It isn't very much like a real grasshopper, but it's a great deal nicer, and it's served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. (13)

Based on this sardonic passage, we can draw our first connection between Aristotle and Howells. Aristotle calls the pleasure of the creation and recognition of *mimêsis* a trait that is rooted in humanity's basic instincts (Heath xiv). Howells says that it is "illusion in which the truth of art resides" (*Criticism* 39). However, Howells is strict in defining what ought to be imitated. This is a key difference between Aristotle and Howells. Aristotle was open to the idea of outlandish objects in stories as long as they made sense in the context of the fictional world of the narrative:

For example, Aristotle did not believe that the theology built into traditional Greek myths was true; but (unlike some earlier philosophers, including Plato) he had no objection to poetic plots based on them. (Heath xiv-xv)

In contrast, Howells' fictional worlds were always built in such a way that they were directly and literally referential to universal experience. Howells placed great importance on revealing the familiar in his stories, which is a rule that applies to his symbols as well as his plots. This is not to say that none of Howells' symbols was referential

to the narrative, but only that the fictional world revealed in the narrative always imitated the universally experienced real world (Carter 132-6). For example, in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the new house is both a part of Silas' wealth and good standing as well as a symbol for all of it. Its destruction is simultaneously the symbol of and one of the largest causes of his fall to financial ruin.

Then there is the largest symbol of the novel, the paint. Silas establishes early the link between his family and his paint; in the first chapter, he reveals his Persis brand, named after his wife. The paint is described as "his heart's blood" (92) and his god (42). Silas also says:

I never saw anything so very sacred about a big rock, along a river or in a pasture that it wouldn't do to put mineral paint on it in three colors [...] I aint agoing to stand up for every big ugly rock I come across, as if we were all a set of dumn Druids. I say the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape. (13-4)

Sämi Ludwig cites that passage in explaining:

For Lapham, there is no spiritual essence ('dumn Druids') in nature as such that precedes human culture, but the two are functionally intertwined [...]. The paint and its representation are not primarily mimetic, but much rather exteriorized prosthetic devices of human cognition and thus parts of parts of nature. (106)

The idea of painting over the landscape is less of a symbol in the Romantic sense of the word— an object or action that stands for another— than an action that is an obvious manifestation of an otherwise unobservable trait. The trait revealed is Silas’ earthiness and farmer’s sense of naturalistic belonging that excludes him from a society which considers those ideas uncouth and backwards. Because painting over the landscape is a vulgar idea, and Silas is his paint (and his move to upper society is his version of ‘painting over the landscape’), he is rejected by society with the same disgust that they have for his paint-illustrated philosophy.

With the connection between Howells and his paint made explicit (over and over again), it is now part of the universal experience of any reader. A Romantic would have left the connection between the paint and its owner implicit, and Howells would have called any symbolism built on that relationship distasteful. It is only because of that strong, explicit connection that Howells allows himself more latitude in his paint symbolism than with his other symbols. For example, Silas’ comment that he wants to “live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint” (80) implies, according to Jeff Todd, that “he does not think the wealth from his paint will make him better, only that it will appear so” (21). Also, Todd points out, “[a]s paint must be tested by fire to gain strength, Lapham becomes stronger after his financial ruin, culminated by the house fire” (22).

Thus, symbols are either commonly found objects or objects that are self-referential in the novel; in either case, for anyone reading the novel, they are universally

experienced. This *mimêsis* of the universal is another way of defining Edwin Cady’s term “common vision,” which he uses to define Realism. Common vision is based on the following idea:

There is some, presently obscure, relationship between the experience a reader gets (or can make) from “non-art,” what we call “life,” and the experience he derives from art[...]. It might therefore be possible to propose a positive and general definition of realism as representing the art-variety of a “real” order of non-art experience— an order, that is, which even those who held to deeply opposed temperamental and metaphysical notions of ultimate reality might agree to accept as “real” in some useful and common, even though minimal, sense.

(The Light 18-9)

This common vision of shared experience is Aristotle’s concept of *mimêsis* limited to generally experienced objects and emotions.

Mimêsis is a universal concept in art, but the specific storytelling rules of the *Poetics* apply only to tragedy. To continue in comparing the *Poetics* to Howells’ rules, it must first be demonstrated that Howells was a tragic novelist. Aristotle states in the *Poetics* that tragedy is the best form of storytelling and lists as his evidence the fact that tragedy is best-loved by those people with the best taste. However, some of Howells’ readers have used different classifications.

The Rise of Silas Lapham has been called a comedy of manners, a comedy, and a morality play; all of these definitions are, to some extent, mutually contradictory (Manierre 359; Dimock 85; Cox 127; Seelye 55). These categorizations are also based on singular aspects of a complex novel. In fact, the categorizations are all true in part; it is a funny, sad story of harsh realism mixed with romance that is based on both a rise and a fall. In light of these many facets of the novel, it is impossible to categorize it definitively. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary only to answer this question: Does *The Rise of Silas Lapham* meet Aristotle's criteria of tragedy such that his storytelling rules can be applied to the study of this novel? Is it, at least in part, an Aristotelian tragedy? Aristotle wrote:

Tragedy is an imitation [mimêsis] of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions [katharsis].

(10)

The length of the novel and the correct constituent parts of the plot will be examined later. Aristotle's four remaining criteria are that it imitates admirable action; it is written with pleasurable language; it invokes pity and fear, followed by katharsis³; and it is performed by actors rather than through narration.

Before entering into a more detailed examination, Howells' oft-quoted statement that "[o]ur novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life" (*Criticism* 62) must be analyzed. After all, a tragedy certainly cannot be made up entirely of smiling aspects. Cady offers an explanation. He notes that the phrase "the smiling aspects of life" is often taken out of context. Within context, Howells is saying that it is impossible to write a Realist Russian novel in America because the standard of living is so much higher (Cady "A note" 160-1). Howells writes: "Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth [...]" (*Criticism* 62). He continues:

Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests. It is worth while, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities. (*Criticism* 62).

Howells was not claiming that there was no tragedy in America or that American novelists must not portray tragedy but only that Americans must not portray tragedy that they were not actually experiencing. It is also worth noting, as James Woodress did, that Howells wrote the "smiling aspects passage" before the Haymarket affair and before discovering the writings of Tolstoy, which were both likely to affect his outlook greatly (242).

The Rise of Silas Lapham portrays realistic American tragedy. There is no wailing in the streets, but there is emotional damage, disgust, and a broken heart. The moral rise of Silas Lapham is accompanied by a concurrent financial downfall that leaves the Lapham family in bankruptcy and forces them back to the farm that they had left years ago. It ends well enough for the characters, but it would be something of a stretch to say that the novel ends happily. Indeed, the events leading up to the subtle but unsettling denouement certainly invoke fear and pity: pity for Silas at the Corey dinner, fear that Irene will find out what she inevitably must, fear for the marriage of Silas and Persis when suspicions concerning Zerrilla begin to surface, and finally pity for Silas once again when he forces himself to make the ethically correct choice when the only possible result is his and his family's social collapse. Aristotle contends that stories are most tragic when talent is squelched (Heath xxi); in this case, Silas squelches his shrewd business sense and his financial security with his conscience—his Realistic tragic flaw. The actions leading up to the Laphams' final downfall are brought on by the difficult ethical decisions that Silas has to make. Whether or not he makes the right decisions is a question left unanswered, but the fact that Silas' conscience prompts him to choose the difficult solution makes his actions admirable. The ending is kathartic by virtue of the stasis of the Laphams' final situation, and can be described as no more than bittersweet.

It is established that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* meets the criteria of mimêsis of admirable action and the

provocation of fear and pity. The criterion of "language made pleasurable" is too subjective to prove, but it can be argued that the witty repartee of the Coreys combined with the colloquialism of the Laphams provides a rich combination of dialogue. Aristotle expands on his criterion of pleasurable speech with the phrase "each of its species separated in different parts" (10). This is parenthetically clarified as meaning "that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song" (10). It would be easy to ignore this criterion based on the fact that we are examining a medium that would be completely foreign to Aristotle. However, it is simple and appropriate to draw another parallel here and say that the separation of verse and song is like the separation of dialogue and narration. This is accomplished mainly through the form of the novel—there are quotation marks around direct discourse and not around narration. However, other than the use of this convention, this is one aspect of Aristotle's philosophy with which Howells does not completely agree. Janet Holmgren McKay notes that the ownership of opinions in the novel is not always clear:

When the Laphams show up at the Corey dinner party without Penelope, the narrator tells us that "Robert Chase, the painter, had not come, and Mrs. James Bellingham was not there, so that the table really balanced better without Penelope; but Mrs. Lapham could not know this, and did not deserve to know it" [167]. The final critical evaluation

may reflect Mrs. Corey's opinion, but the narrator does not specifically exclude himself from sharing it. (97-8)

But this is a minor infraction of Aristotle's rule, taking into consideration the translation of Aristotle's text, the transposition of the rules between *tekhnê*, and the clear distinction of all direct discourse.

The fourth and last criterion—the performance of the piece by actors rather than through narration—admittedly presents a problem. Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* long before the novel was even in the early stages of evolution, and so it was assumed in his culture that dramatic storytelling was an art of the stage. Rather than ignoring this criterion, however, it can be, without excessive assumption, adapted to apply to modern media. The key to comparing the stage to the page is to note their common methods of communication: physical movement and dialogue. A novel that extensively uses those methods to tell its story can be examined with rules originally meant for the stage. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* applies. McKay notes:

Characters speak for themselves in *Silas Lapham* and express their opinions of one another. The novel contains much less indirectly reported discourse than either *The Bostonians* or *Huck Finn*. The narrator allows himself only limited access to his characters' thoughts and then frequently qualifies this access with a 'perhaps' or a 'probably.' (94-5)

McKay also makes note of the fact that Twain admired this style of writing and, in considering the objective narrator, likened the description to "stage directions" (35). With an objective narrator who provides only "stage directions" and a plot that unfolds almost entirely through directly related discourse, *Silas* is as close to the theater as a novel can be. The reader cannot see Silas pacing the room as one could with a more standard third-person narrator; the only communication comes directly (though inadvertently) from Silas: "[...] by and by his wife heard him begin walking up and down, and the rest of the night she lay awake and listened to him walking up and down" (291). The reader does not know of Tom's love for Penelope until he confesses it. When Irene finds out about the mistake, rather than plunging into a dramatic, introspective fit of anger and sorrow, Howells has her physically respond by dropping her wood shaving in Penelope's lap (215). The effect of this limited narration is a viewpoint so objective, yet so immediate and tactile, that the reader feels as if he is watching the story unfold on a stage. Howells' story may be comic at times, but that does not make it a comedy. Using the criteria of the *Poetics*, it is arguable that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is an Aristotelian tragedy.

Plot

It is now time to return to a previous assumption: the length of the story is correct. Aristotle defines the correct magnitude as being small enough that the audience will remain interested but large enough to demonstrate the causality of a change from good to bad fortune (Heath xxv). Aristotle

said that if a work were to grow too large, it would become episodic. He wrote:

[O]ne should not compose a tragedy out of a body of material which would serve for an epic— by which I mean one that contains a multiplicity of stories (for example, if one were to use the whole plot of *The Iliad*). In epic, because of its length, every part is given the appropriate magnitude; but in plays the result is quite contrary to one's expectation. (30)

Howells also found this to be true, and proposed that plays were not the only potential victims of poorly crafted magnitude:

A big book is necessarily a group of episodes more or less loosely connected by a thread of narrative, and there seems no reason why this thread must always be supplied. Each episode may be quite distinct, or it may be one of a connected group; the final effect will be the truth of each episode, not from the size of the group. (*Criticism* 68)

Aristotle contended that the best form for narrative writing is the three-act structure— beginning, middle, and end:

A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which

does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms. (13-4)

The first chapter of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* depicts, through Silas' own dialogue, his finding the mineral ore on the farm. The act of giving an interview illustrates the beginning of what one would expect to be his social rise; this is an opening chapter that needs no prelude. The end is undeniably the end; the Laphams are back on the farm, and although they are no longer in debt, the reader is quite sure that they will stay where they are. The fact that the middle comes between the beginning and the end does not need to be argued. The placement of the constituent parts is correct. However, the more complex issue of a plot composed of events that follow each other "either necessarily or in general" needs to be studied. This phrase indicates that events need to be linked by causality; either an event usually follows the previous event in the real world or an event must follow the previous event by its very nature. Aristotle expands on this idea later in the *Poetics*:

Just as in other imitative arts the imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, so too the plot, as imitation of an action, should imitate a single unified, action, and one

that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transpositions or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole. It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. (15-6)

The probability of one event following another depends on Cady's concept of literature according to common vision, or the *mimêsis* of universal experience. Aristotle is saying exactly what Howells demonstrates in his novel: art must emulate real life; specifically, the consequences of everyday actions must be mirrored by the same consequences in art when similar actions are performed. The other causal link, necessity, is a one-hundred-percent probability— one event forces another to happen. Howells was explicit about the needs for these causal links between events:

[A]ll I have to say is that the 'power' to dazzle with strange incidents, to entertain with complicated plots and impossible characters, now belongs to some hundreds of writers in Europe; while there are not much above a dozen who know how to interest with the ordinary events of life, and

with the portrayal of characters truly human. If the former is talent, it must be owned that it is much commoner than the latter[...]. If we are to rate novelists according to their fecundity, or the riches of their invention, we must put Alexander Dumas above Cervantes. Cervantes wrote a novel with the simplest plot, without belying much or little the natural and logical course of events. This novel, which was called *Don Quixote*, is perhaps the greatest work of human wit. (*Criticism and Fiction* 35-6)

The belief in preserving "the natural and logical course of events" is demonstrated in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Frances Albert Berces notes that the sequence of events in the novel "achieve[s] a realistic cause and effect continuity [...]" (201). The wide-ranging causal fabric is further examined by Wai-Chee Dimock, who describes Silas as caught in a causal universe that expands and contracts as social problems such as the love triangle become more complicated and then are alleviated. The comprehensive subplots, such as those involving Roger and Zerrilla, serve to further expand the causal universe (Dimock 70-7). William Wasserstrom observes that Silas recognizes this: "For Silas himself says that his first wrong act of business, the Rogers affair, is best conceived as the first brick in a row of bricks which tumble one after another. 'It wasn't in the nature of things that they could be stopped till the last brick went'" (84).

The Rise of Silas Lapham satisfies all of Aristotle's basic rules, as those rules have been translated to apply to the novel. However, there are rules beyond these basic ones. Necessary and probable events, unity, universality, and correct magnitude form only a simple plot. Aristotle contends that a complex plot is preferable and defines a complex plot as one that incorporates reversal, recognition, or suffering.⁴ *The Rise of Silas Lapham* also meets Aristotle's criteria of complex plot structure.

Aristotle defines a reversal as "a change to the opposite in the actions being performed as stated—and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity" (18). Heath explains that this is not just a tragic change in fortune, which is also a characteristic of simple tragedies, but "an astonishing inversion of the expected outcome of some action" (xxx). For example, Tom's love for Penelope and Silas' relationship with Zerrilla are both inversions of expectation. Reversal goes hand in hand with recognition, which is the following:

[a] change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune. Recognition is best when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in *Oedipus*. (18-9)

Aristotle lists several different types of recognition: the least artistic is recognition of objects, the inartistic recognition by unmotivated confession, recognition by memory, recognition by inference, recognition by false inference, and the best sort

of recognition, recognition "which arises out of the actual course of events, where the emotional impact is achieved through events that are probable" (26-7). An example of the best sort of recognition can be found in and after the Corey dinner party. Berces notes:

Lapham's decision to attend the dinner is the logical outgrowth of his mounting aspirations. At the dinner he is challenged time and again by circumstances to realize that his demeanor and dinner habits are inadequate. His ability to be honest with himself thereafter develops out of his recognition that while drunk he was indeed himself, stripped of pretense, his untutored social qualities exaggerated by drink, and he was not valued. (201)

This recognition comes the next day, when Silas can once again control himself. This time, reversal follows recognition; Silas, rather than maintaining his embarrassment-fed bombast, grovels to Tom, which leads to another reversal of expectation: Tom's proposition to Penelope.

The third complex plot trait is suffering, which is "an action that involves destruction or pain" (19). The examples that Aristotle gives are all physical, such as "deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on" (19), so it must be assumed that the obvious emotional pain that the majority of the characters suffer does not apply. However, because only one of the three complex plot traits is needed to classify the work as complex, by virtue of reversal and recognition

The Rise of Silas Lapham can be called the “best” (20) sort of tragedy.

Character

Aristotle defines plot as the most important part of tragedy, and a survey of Howells’ titles shows that he agrees. With the exception of *Mrs. Johnson*, *Annie Kilburn*, and *Mrs. Farrell*, Howells’ fiction eschews the titling convention of naming a work after the main character in favor of something related to plot. Silas Lapham is important to Howells because of his moral rise and the actions that form the plot that constitute that rise— hence, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Barton 163). However, there can be no argument that the vehicle of the actions— the character— is deeply entwined with the plot and the second most important characteristic of storytelling.

Aristotle held that if a character were depicted with an inappropriate morality, the audience would be either bored or disgusted. He describes the ideal protagonist as “the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (21). This error, Heath explains, is called *hamartia* in the original text. “It includes errors made in ignorance or through misjudgment; but it will also include moral errors of a kind which do not imply wickedness” (xxxiii). Silas meets all the criteria: he is morally decent, but with an immoral decision in his past (buying out Rogers) that, by Silas’ own admission, was the first “brick” in a row of thereafter necessary events.

But had Silas really treated Rogers unfairly? A modern reader will ask that question, and Patrick Dooley claims that a nineteenth century reader would have almost certainly asked it as well. Dooley states that ‘business ethics’ was something of a contradictory term in the nineteenth century, and *caveat emptor* was the motto of those involved in speculative enterprise (“Nineteenth Century” 80). So, in making things “right” with Rogers, is Silas doing what is morally required or are his actions supererogatory?

This question is the key to an important concept of Aristotelian character creation. Aristotle presents the reader of the *Poetics* with a conundrum: “Since tragedy is an imitation of people better than we are, one should imitate good portrait-painters. In rendering the individual form, they paint people as they are, but make them better-looking” (25). The character cannot be too good; his fall to ruin would disgust the audience, and yet the audience must look up to him. He must be both aligned with and above regular morality. Howells accomplishes this through two different means: by having Silas travel through different stages of morality and by making the moral questions difficult enough that most readers, even from an objective viewpoint, will second-guess themselves about the correct decision. There is more than the question as to whether or not Silas’ original sin against Rogers was actually wrong; indeed, that single question spurs a multitude of others, involving Silas’ new obligation to Rogers and his duty to his family versus his duty to the business world, and by extension, society at large.

It is important to note Dooley's observation that further calls into question Silas' moral standing. A bit of arithmetic shows that, even if he were to accept the deal offered by Rogers and the English party, it would still not be enough money to settle his debts. It may have been that the decision not to accept was a purely a moral one. Or, if there was temptation to be weathered, it is likely that the fact that the immoral decision would not save Silas gave him an easy way out ("Ethical Exegesis" 382-5). The reader is then left with a qualified admiration for Silas—no doubt the decision was hard, and he did the right thing, but how hard was it for him? Yet, Dooley observes again, Rogers is not the last temptation that Silas has to suffer. He has the chance to make a deal with the West Virginians, but he chases them away by disclosing his financial situation ("Ethical Exegesis" 385-6). Depending on which moralist one asked, this action might have been either necessary or supererogatory.

There is further evidence to dispel the theory that Silas' actions were externally controlled. He has control of Rogers every single time they meet, no matter how much pressure Silas is under and no matter what Rogers says (as evidenced by his contradicting Rogers' wishes at every step). He could easily bail himself out with help from the West Virginians by exercising the morality of the typical nineteenth-century businessman. However, he cannot. Silas reflects Howells' vision of the American hero. Howells wrote of America as a country "which likes a good conscience so much that it prefers unconsciousness to a bad one," and that belief is reflected in his writing (qtd. in Jones 99). Because

"a variety of qualifiers, especially ethical theories, renders the same action moral (and required) or supererogatory (and optional)" (Dooley "Ethical Exegesis" 387), Howells, in creating these complicated ethical questions, found a way to create a character that was, by the end of the novel, both aligned with and above the moral standard.

The question of "goodness" is only one of Aristotle's four aspects of a well-invented character; the other three are appropriateness, likeness, and consistency. The quality of goodness having been previously examined, the last three now demand attention. The second trait is "appropriateness." It was Aristotle's belief that a character should not behave in a way that was out of keeping for the general social group to which he or she belongs. Heath explains that Aristotle applied this rule only to persons of low status (xliv-xlv). During Aristotle's time, this would have meant that a woman or a servant should not be depicted as clever or courageous. In the case of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the Laphams are kept in their place; although they have money, they do not belong in the wealthy caste of society. In social terms, it is known that they belong on a farm. The Laphams combine Aristotle's rules successfully in a way that he probably never imagined: they are a family of low status and, appropriately, they end up where they belong; but they are also the focus and the heroes of the story.

With the aspect of "likeness," we must examine once again the dual nature of character that Aristotle demands. All Aristotle says about likeness is that "this is not the same as making character good and appropriate, as had already been

stated” (24). Heath interprets this rule as a guide to the characteristic duality spoken of earlier— characters should be like the audience, but better. He returns to Aristotle’s portrait analogy:

There is therefore a combination of likeness and idealization in portraiture; a painter might keep Cromwell’s warts, but make them seem less ugly than they really are. In the same way characters can be made better than we are while still retaining some imperfections of character; in this respect they should be like us, despite the element of idealization. This would agree with the requirement in chapter 13 that tragic characters should be virtuous, but not outstandingly so. They are like us, in that they fall short of the moral perfection whose downfall we would find outrageous; but they still tend to the better rather than the worse. (xlv)

Silas makes almost impossibly difficult decisions by the end of the book, but he is forced into that position by his own hamartia involving Rogers and by the character flaw of ostentatiousness. Berces notes the following:

[Silas’] error in judgment is classically Aristotelian. The same common sense that leads him to be secretly charitable to the parasitic Moll Millon drives him also to be openly excessive in his social and material aspirations.

He has not distinguished between genuine and false self-reliant pride. (201)

This is an easy mistake, as “every situation has encouraged him to believe that by climbing the social ladder he is just being his own man” (Berces 201), so although the flaw is obvious, it is also understandable and easily forgivable.

The fourth and last necessary character trait is “consistency.” Aristotle says that “even if the subject of the imitation is inconsistent, and that is the kind of character that is presupposed, it should nevertheless be consistently inconsistent” (24). Heath observes:

This obviously follows from the requirement of necessary or probable connection. If someone in a tragedy acts inconsistently and unpredictably, then one cannot say that what they do follows necessarily or probably on what has gone before. (xlv)

Although Silas’ moral condition improves by the end of the novel, the character was consistent in the way that he responded to plot events. His proud nature propelled him to build a new house, to attend the Corey dinner party, and to react the way he did to the realization that he did not belong where he wanted to be. He may be a changed man by the end of the novel, but not without necessity. Throughout his rise and fall, he is always Silas Lapham.

The *Poetics* was written, in part, as a rebuttal against those who said that the epic was the greatest of storytelling forms (Heath liv-lxi). More than two millennia later, Howells began a career as an author and editor by fighting the trends

of Sentimentalism, which share the epic traits of outlandish heroes, otherworldly romances, and episodic plots containing events that are neither necessary nor probable (Aristotle 17). As Aristotle fought the authors of epics, so Howells fought the Sentimentalists by applying Aristotle's tenets to the novel.⁵ Many of Aristotle's rules sound like the Realist rules which Howells used in his fiction and championed in his editorials: depicting characters whose actions are appropriate to their social position, creating a complicated and almost dualistic morality that is both at and above the level of the audience, maintaining logical consequence in plot events, and maintaining correct magnitude to avoid episodic structure. Howells wrote that "fiction is now a finer art than it has ever been hitherto, and more nearly meets the requirements of the infallible standard. I have hopes of real usefulness in it, because it is at last building on the only sure foundation" (Howells *Criticism* 86). Howells may have changed the face of literature, but his foundation was not wholly new; his criticism and his fiction invoke classical standards. The new rules of writing that Howells championed are, in fact, some of the oldest.

Notes

- 1 Though many would regard Sentimentalism as an aspect of Romanticism, Howells is more forgiving of the Romantic than he is of the Sentimental. This excerpt from his review "A She Hamlet" hints at the distinction he draws: "The Hamlet of Fechter, which rose ghostlike out of the gulf of the past, and cloudily possessed the stage where the Hamlet of Mme. Bernhardt was figuring, was called a romantic Hamlet thirty years ago; and so it was in being a break from the classic Hamlets of the Anglo-American theatre. It was romantic as Shakespeare himself was romantic, in an elder sense of the word, and not romanticistic as Dumas was romanticistic. It was, therefore, the most realistic Hamlet ever yet seen, because the most naturally poetic" (*Literature* 134).
- 2 Specifically, the definition Cady refers to is his own, based on the idea of "common vision."
- 3 Heath explains katharsis as the process that "gets rid of an emotional excess and thus leaves the emotion in a more balanced state, mitigating the tendency to feel it inappropriately." It is pleasurable because "[f]rom an Aristotelian point of view any process that restores one to a natural or healthy state is pleasurable" (Heath xxxix-xl).
- 4 It should be noted that the complex plot is not the same as the complicated plot that Howells derides in *Criticism and Fiction*. The plots he describes as

complicated “dazzle with strangle incidents” (35), which implies that they have no logical causality.

- 5 For another look at how *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was a criticism of the Sentimental mindset, read Brenda Murphy’s essay “Howells and the Popular Story Paradigm: Reading Silas Lapham’s Proairetic Code” in *American Literary Realism* 21.2.

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