Fractured Identities, Moral Mediations, and Cancerous Aspirations of Madeleine Lee and Silas Lapham: The Allure of Power, the New Woman and the Nouveau Riche Man

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This essay will complement many of the critical analyses of both William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and Henry Adams' *Democracy.* Since superficially these two texts seem unrelated, I provide a thoughtful comparison of these texts to demonstrate how the New Woman and the Nouveau Riche Man are indeed linked. Each of the protagonists of these works suffers from what Trinh Minh-ha calls a "fractured identity" as well as from Gillian Rose's notion of locational vulnerability—due to their inability to meld into or change society as their ambitious drives would have them do. The American Realism literary movement has an underpinning of inner conflict with social morality and a quest for freedom and power. There is an anxiety inherent in this movement about the confinement of space and the vulnerability of a social class, and this anxiety applies to both the New Woman and the Nouveau Riche Man. That Madeleine Lee and Silas Lapham suffer fractured identities and wavering moralities follows from theories of both Gillian Rose and Trinh Minh-ha. Rose argues,

> Confinement is a recurring image in women's accounts of their lives… part of women's sense of oppression, of confinement, is their awareness of that process… women's experience of space is part of a self-consciousness about being noticed; women watching themselves being watched and judged (144-145).

Regarding such judgment, Rose suggests, "Location is about vulnerability" because "women are embodied objects to be looked at" (146). I intend here to bridge Rose's view regarding women to an analysis of Silas— who is culpable as a member of the nouveau riche. Although Silas and Madeleine each suffer from a position of vulnerability and both "experience being caged in," neither protagonist takes the easy way out (Rose 148). Moreover, these characters employ their moral beliefs to resist being driven by their environments toward a marriage or a dishonest business transaction. While both characters reflectively retreat into themselves to rebel against the norms of societal tradition, they realize that life holds more than the pursuit of ambitious goals. This awareness commands them to rebel against the oppression engendered by each of their blind ambitions. Inevitably, both obey the dictates of their moral agencies, averting subsequent amoral responses.

I attempt to advance an original view of why the American Realism literary movement should include tropes not only of the figure of the New Woman, but also those of the figure of the Nouveau Riche man. It will further illustrate how their morals drive them to rebel against their personal ambitions, their oppressive environments, and their behavioral conditioning — thus provoking them to act other than as society would dictate.

Locational Vulnerability and Fractured Identities

The 1988 marketing study of Priscilla LaBarbera of the "nouveaux-riche" class will serve as the foundation of my analysis; this work expounds upon her research into "consumer behavior" and the defining traits of class buyers. It notes that these traits are merely products of "conspicuous consumption" and the attendant "issue of self- fulfillment" (LaBarbera 179), because this group's "financial means exceed their ability to make discerning choices" in terms of proper behavior and an appropriate sense of class and, as well, properly engage "choices in the marketplace" (LaBarbera 179). LaBarbera's study anchors my argument about Silas Lapham's transitory status as a member of the Nouveau Riche and then as a failure of society, albeit a moral hero of the text. LaBarbera extends Thorstein Veblen's notions about the leisure class to the newly defined class of the Nouveau Riche.

In this paper, I examine both texts from the perspective of Gillian Rose and her notion of environmental confinement. In "A Politics of Paradoxical Space," Rose examines the notion of environmental confinement and perpetual class judgments (144-145). Such a judgment is particularly applicable for the character Madeleine, who feels she is being judged by society for her friendship with Ratcliffe. She certainly does find herself judged by other women within a society that advocates women's suffrage, and is tainted by her association with a man who has no belief in Darwinism or sincere governmental reforms. Rose suggests women are objectified and made vulnerable by how other members of society perceive their behavior (146). I extend Rose's view of women to the notions of Silas, who is himself culpable as a member of the nouveau riche. I apply Rose's theory to the work of Mary Marchand. She analyzed Howell's discourse on social mobility within the "gilded Age of society" to portray Silas as a conduit of the rising middle class (284).

Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of split and fractured social and individual identities can help literary scholars understand these two protagonists more clearly. Minh-ha extends W. E. B. DuBois' concept of "double-consciousness" to female subjects because identities of women are both "fragmented and dispersed" (119). I aim here to establish that both Madeleine and Silas exhibit modes of "double consciousness" because both have what Minh-ha refers to as "fractured identities" that thrust them in different directions. Minh-ha argues that identity "relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, the non-I, other" (371). Both Madeleine and Silas subsume identities of raw ambition and power. However, both protagonists ultimately fail because their true identities and "authentic core[s]" prohibit them from making amoral decisions. Silas refuses to allow the British investors to buy his business. Comparably, Madeleine refuses to marry Ratcliffe. These actions lend credence to Minh-ha's argument that everyone is "capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self" (371). Both characters undergo a search for identity, and a "search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized" (371). I purport that both Madeleine and Silas are able to reconcile their fractured identities because they are true moral agents. They each elevate their moral agency above their personal ambitions for power and therefore reject everything that is considered "corrupted" (Minh-ha 371). Both Silas and Madeleine must slough their personal ambitions to be reconciled with their "real selves" (Minh-ha 371). However, before either can reconcile with their morals, they must first identify themselves as transitory figures whence each is able to reside within a social limbo.

Minh-ha writes that individuals become subjects when they exhibit fractured identities, those who "look in from the outside while also looking out from the inside" (371). To corroborate Minh-ha's assertion, the protagonists are each "not quite the same, not quite the other" because they stand "at that undetermined threshold where one constantly drifts in and out" of these states. They here have the opportunity to either affirm, "'I am like you' while persisting in their differences and that yet say 'I am different,' which obviates all definitions of otherness" (Minh-ha 418). I intend to show how Madeleine and Silas each fit into this "threshold place" through the use of the critical approaches of Richard Adams and Michael Colacurcio, and of C. Guldager and Geordie Hamilton, respectively.

Self-Determinism versus Personal Oppression

To begin, both Silas and Madeleine fit Rose's notions of confinement, ostracized location, and social vulnerability. Although Silas has earned all his money, he remains a societal outcast because he is utterly unable to adopt the mannerisms of a wealthy and inborn aristocrat. He does not know how to dress or act socially, or how to design and style the home he is building. He is thus forced to find an architect who can explain simply what should be included in a traditional mansion. He is a self-made but vulgar man, and thereby viewed as a threat by many of his Bostonian peers. Silas lives his moral code and understands that he cannot with good conscience harm his British investors. He thus refuses the deals that are offered by both Rogers and the British, even though this refusal will clearly lead to his financial ruin.

Silas is emblematic of the Nouveau Riche because of his desire for self-aggrandizement and his ability to attain social mobility due to his wealth. Even though he is a Nouveau Riche man, he would never be considered a member of "restraint or gentility," rather he is a non-conformist because his greed is "monotonous," and, since the trope of Nouveau Riche reflects the "darker side of society," his desires are "superficial and trivial" (Hamilton 244). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines nouveau riche as "a person who has recently acquired wealth, especially one who displays this in an ostentatious or vulgar fashion." The French term originated in 1796; however it did not attain common usage until after the 1850s. Silas Lapham represents the Nouveau Riche Man because of his economic success as an adventurous businessman. Silas additionally demonstrates the "uncultured" behavior of the rising middle class. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* Thorstein Veblen reasons, "The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation" and the "possession of wealth confers honour" since it is an "invidious distinction" (25-26). Silas Lapham epitomizes the motivations of the leisure class when he tries to build the perfect mansion to mirror his newfound fortune. Likewise, LaBarbera argues that "the appearance of exclusivity" is one categorical definer of this powerful group; however, LaBarbera reasons "those who aspire to good taste but don't quite reach it are sanctioned" and "condemned" to be labeled as a part of this "nouveau riche" class (Carruthers 33). There is a clear distinction between Silas and the members of the aristocracy.

Both characters also suffer from one facet of a fractured identity, that which Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as a “fractured I” (Minh-ha 22). Both occupy the singular and the collective identities of their respective classes, either the Nouveau Riche Man or the New Woman. Silas embodies the “fractured I” because his identity is both individualized and singular, being tethered to the identity conferred by his business, his family, and the macrocosm of the newly emerging class of the self-made man. Likewise, Mrs. Lee embodies the fractured I because her identity allows her to exist as a woman, a supporter of Ratcliffe, and a sister while also tethered to the views of her political party. She is thus bound to the macrocosm of the American government despite her belief that the writers of the American Constitution had left it open for reform and change. Although Ratcliffe does not believe that her notion of reform is even remotely possible, she is nevertheless associated with Ratcliffe’s personal corruption and lack of morals and thus his potential ascent to the U.S. presidency.

Likewise, Madeleine is vulnerable because she is a widow living in public society. She further isolates herself by proclaiming to have no desire to be just another housewife. She has a mind of her own and is very intelligent and brutally honest; she does not shy from expressing opinions to male politicians. Residing within the realm of male domination, she asserts her role as a woman and even refuses the love of her loyal friend, Carrington, so as to maintain her relationship with Ratcliffe. She thus fits the archetype of the New Woman; she is independent, wealthy, and ambitious. Nevertheless, she almost abandons it all for a man whom she believes to be honest.

My analysis fits the pre-existing literary critical framework. Richards Adams considers the example of Mrs. Lee and her “stalwart consciousness,” as she drags “political corruption and her own vagrant extravagant impulses before the certain bar of her culture’s sympathy” (39). Adams believes Madeleine’s strength gives her the ability to reason toward her own “intellectual interest” and “moral discernment,” so as to move against political corruption and her emotional temperaments (40). Similarly, Colacurcio correctly assumes that Mrs. Lee left the United States because she could not reconcile her “private integrity” with her quest for “public power” because they are not compatible with her moral compass (61). Mrs. Lee therefore decides to bow out of politics and leave the “seductive temptations” of Senator Ratcliffe behind, because she is aware that her ambition for power led to the destruction of her “moral sensibility” (62). Colacurcio stresses that Mrs. Lee was able to reconcile her inner debate between “morality and power” by staying true to her “absolute private integrity” (61). I believe that Mrs. Lee’s last act prior to her departure was an act of self-discipline against Senator Ratcliffe and against the macrocosm of Democracy generally.

Self-determinism enables Madeleine and Silas to resist the patriarchal culture with its attendant male egos, and assert their moral authority to emancipate themselves from the amorality of their ambition. When both characters rebel against the status quo and retreat into themselves to reflect, they inhabit paradoxical spaces where they realize that a good life is much more than meeting ambitious goals. They use this insight to rebel against the oppressive spaces they have entered by following their blind ambitions. Inevitably, neither chooses to act at the moment of moral climax, despite the internal oppression created by their ambition to succeed.

Madeleine faces personal oppression to fulfill her own desire for power, her desire to marry Ratcliffe. Ultimately she decides not to associate with the corrupt forces of amorality, politics, and democracy. Colacurcio asserts that Mrs. Lee rejected Ratcliffe because this action was an attempt to “get into satisfactory relations with other parts of [her] experience” (55). This tends to support my argument that Madeleine is emblematic of the New Woman and a fractured identity (55). Madeleine’s fractured identity and environmental confinement help to offer a fresh analysis of the critical discussion surrounding her character. Gilley describes Mrs. Lee as a political “novice;” unlike the men in the novel; she refuses to be a “predictable pawn in the struggle for power” (Gilley 357). Like Gilley, Colacurcio asserts that Mrs. Lee’s crucial problem was whether she should “accept or reject Washington’s morality of power” (55). Like Colacurcio, Adams asserts that Mrs. Lee enters the political scene to “find a register of experience conductive to a free consciousness, an object of contemplation that will take her mind off her money and from within its logic as well” (41). These two theoretical viewpoints will serve to establish Madeleine’s internal conflict and link it to Rose’s notion of “locational vulnerability” and Minh-ha’s “fractured I.” However, these critics neglect to position Madeleine as a New Woman. Additionally, these critics neglect to indicate: a) the truly appropriate means by which Madeleine should be examined, and b) that the crux of her power and moral agency resides not only within her fortune, but within the notion of an independent core self as B. June West defines the New Woman. West states the New Woman has “the advantage” because “marriage is no longer the only career open to women;” as such the New Woman is able to “demand whatever terms they wish” (56). Literary critics should focus not just on the “economic determinism” that enables Madeleine, but also on that she has the advantage to make demands, the agency to decide who to spend time with, how long she should spend with any given man, where she should live, what places within the world she should visit, what ambitions she desires and the ability to act on such desires; this is what makes her a formidable force. Furthermore, her inaction truly renders her the self-sufficient and modern woman because it shows that she has mastered control over her fractured identities: all of her emotional, romantic, rational, and ambitious selves.

Madeleine epitomizes the New Woman because of her moral agency, her desire for power, and her position within the political arena of men. It is important to understand how Madeleine views the world and her station within it. Mrs. Lee uses her morality, sensibility, and "perceptual logic" as a means to "conceiving relationships," which permits her to "come to terms with a culture that is confined within the same arrangement that disables her imagination" (Richard Adams 41). Not only does she see the world through a lens of vulnerability and confinement, but she is also able to see the potential opportunities for more discourse that Ratcliffe brings to the table for her with his political candidacy. Madeleine is unable to accept Ratcliffe's disregard for morality. Richard Adams' claim that Madeleine can perceive the "motive power of her culture" and "its capacity to generate money and meaning" is noteworthy because it proves that she can see that boundless ambitions may not stand equally with moral ethics (42). Her position within society is susceptible because she finds herself attached to someone who cannot distinguish right from wrong. Her intellectual capacity to challenge the emotional and political beliefs of both Carrington and Ratcliffe is proof that she is an active contributor to male discourse. Madeleine's androgynous behavior allows her to exude both confidence and extreme self-consciousness despite her vulnerable position within society. Henry Adams writes "She regarded men as creatures made for women to dispose of, and capable of being transferred like checks, or baggage-labels, from one woman to another, as desired," Madeleine even believes that "the capacity of women to make unsuitable marriages must be considered as the corner stone of society" (157). Madeleine rejects the advice of the women within her social circle that urge her to remarry so that she can be dependent on someone. Henry Adams narrates Madeleine's conscious dilemma when he writes, "She did not care to marry Senator Ratcliffe; she liked his society and was flattered by his confidence; rather she hoped to prevent him from ever making a formal offer" (56).

Madeleine's refusal to remarry bolsters the notion that she placed her independence, her intelligence, and her personal ambitions above marriage to a powerful man. Henry Adams argues, “men were only valuable in proportion to their strength and their appreciation of women” (57). Her personal wealth gives her the economic stability she requires. Madeleine exudes independence, which makes her an androgynous figure of formidable strength and intelligence. Her feelings for Ratcliffe force her to examine her personal beliefs and ambitions. Madeleine asserts, “She was a woman to the very last drop of her blood. She could not be induced to love Ratcliffe, but she might be deluded into sacrificing herself for him… She had a woman’s natural tendency towards asceticism, self-extinction, self-abnegation” (Henry Adams 99). Her personal fortune permits her entry into the political sphere of powerful and corruptible men. June West defines the stigma surrounding the New Woman, and explains how her nevertheless advantageous role can be seen as a force that upsets the patriarchy. West asserts “a result of economic independence for women was that it put women in a bargaining position. The attitude that men were dependent upon feminine companionship was rather firmly fixed. Women who were financially independent could choose to make marriage secondary” (56). Each woman must undergo an extreme examination of her own conscience in order to determine the correct moral path for herself. Gillian Rose discusses the paradoxical space that someone like Madeleine must enter. Rose writes, “reality can be a quiet place in which to mediate oneself” (148). Madeleine sees the opportunity for more power with her connection to Ratcliffe. The narrator writes, “Mrs. Lee had the chance now to carry out her scheme in coming to Washington, for she was already deep in the mire of politics and could see with every advantage how the great machine floundered about, bespattering with mud even her own pure garments.” However, Madeleine forcefully states “I have got so far as to lose the distinction between right and wrong” (Henry Adams108-109). It is only after Madeleine learns the truth about Ratcliffe that she withdraws into nature, into her paradoxical space, where she delves into deep contemplation of her own morals and the condition of her own soul: “she needed all the purity and quiet that nature could give, for her soul was in revolt, wounded, mortified, exasperated” (Henry Adams 181). She says, “a night’s reflection has brought me back” to the right decision not to marry Ratcliffe (188). She tells Ratcliffe “You and I take very different views of life. I cannot accept yours, and you could not practice mine” (188). It is after this confrontation, this moral climax, this moment of inaction that she resolves to go to Egypt and see the Great Pyramids of Giza.

One may similarly explain how Silas fits into the predetermined vulnerable location that Gillian Rose describes, and into the “undetermined threshold place” of Minh-ha due to his fractured identity. Silas knows if the railroad makes an offer for his property, it will indeed be useless, worth only what the railroad asserts—virtually nothing. He ignores Rogers’ claim that the British investors will simply redistribute the loss among themselves because they are wealthy and the toll will not badly harm them. Silas then ignores the fact that Rogers is willing to take on the responsibility and refuses to sell to him. Silas’ circumstances push him to accept the deal, but he refuses to be so pushed. Silas is a morally free agent, demonstrating his free will and moral agency by not acting amorally. Similarly, Silas undergoes a parallel crisis of personal identity. Silas rebels against his own soul and his desire to become great and successful in the paint industry. By assuming the blame for someone else, he also rejects the opportunity to solidify his position within the upper echelon of society, and this causes his business to fail. Lavin suggests Silas is an emblem for the “newly palatable western” frontier (369). Silas’ role as a binary to Bromfield Corey’s “Victorian code” will help to demonstrate his position as an outlier against the Corey code because he is a “fortune-maker” and an “offensively” unrefined man (Lavin 370). Silas’ decision not to act at the moral climax of the text dismantles his position as a Nouveau Riche Man. The uncouth businessman has failed; he has been translocated to remote Northern New England, having refused to claim bankruptcy. Guldager suggests Silas is an outcast because his sense of moral “righteousness,” his “material fall” and the “cost of his fortune” do not fit with the “spirit of the ruthless times” (243). However, both Hamilton and Guldager neglect the true moment of contemplation and inner conflict within the text. After Roger’s last offer to buy the property, Silas retreats into “isolation” and begins “walking up and down” (Howells 291). Silas wife, Persis, addresses this change within him, whence she quotes Scripture, “And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of day. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh” (Howells 291). It is only after Silas enters into his paradoxical space of moral mediation within his mental realm that he can come to the conclusion not to sell. Whereas the night before Silas was almost pushed to accept Roger’s offer, Howells writes, “He did not see why he should refuse. There was no longer a reason. He was standing alone for nothing, anyone else would say” (290). However, Silas achieves moral clarity because he believes there is an ethical way to act in business. It is through the conversations of fractured identity and societal pressures that the literary perspective of Silas can be understood. In business, Silas refuses to be the predator that society suborns, and so shuns his last business deal. And while doing so, he may no longer represent the redistribution of wealth in America or the successful outcome of the American Dream—he can look at himself in the mirror without guilt. Lapham says, “I couldn’t sell out to those Englishmen, and I couldn’t let that man put his money into my business without I told him just how things stood” (Howells 320). Silas had to reconcile his internal conflict in order to achieve a peaceful state of mind.

Henry Adams’ *Democracy, An American Novel* and William Dean Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are both Realist texts because they explore the thematic issues of class, moral agency, and taste. Both explore the concepts of freedom versus determinism and of self-agency versus the role of circumstances. Both Madeleine Lee and Silas Lapham, the protagonists of the texts, are predominantly innocent, optimistic characters who demonstrate their moral independence by not acting inappropriately at the climax of their moral dilemma. Although Madeleine and Silas attempt to reject this status because of their unyielding ambitions, both undergo a renunciation of that which taints them: their own ambitions. Silas would rather be noble and honest than repeatedly betray his morals. At the end of the text, he has become relatively impotent after being exiled to the old homestead in Vermont where he began his quest for power and self-recognition. Geographically, Silas has actually left the industrial system. Likewise, Madeleine decides to denounce Ratcliffe and to leave the country. Madeleine refuses the allure of power that has infatuated her throughout the book. Although both Silas and Madeleine suffer from being in vulnerable positions and “experience being caged in,” neither takes the easy way out (Rose 148). Moreover, both characters exemplify moral agency as either the New Woman or the Nouveau Riche Man because they resist what their environment invites: a marriage for one or a dishonest business transaction for the other.

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