



The Rise of Silas Lapham (Penguin Classics)

William Dean Howells

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William Dean Howells' richly humorous characterization of a self-made millionaire in Boston society provides a paradigm of American culture in the Gilded Age. After establishing a fortune in the paint business, Silas Lapham moves his family from their Vermont farm to the city of Boston, where they awkwardly attempt to break into Brahmin society. Silas, greedy for wealth as well as prestige, brings his company to the brink of bankruptcy, and the family is forced to return to Vermont, financially ruined but morally renewed. As Kermit Vanderbilt points out in his introduction, the novel focuses on important themes in the American literary tradition: the efficacy of self-help and determination, the ambiguous benefits of social and economic progress, and the continual contradiction between urban and pastoral values.

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