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*Rise of Silas Lapham* Essay

In William Dean’s Novel, *Rise of Silas Lapham*, Dean shows two different images of womanhood that are out of the norm for the time period they were based in, and then he shows how he sees both of their lifestyles as selfish and childish. I will talk about how the tone the author uses when describing the sisters trivialises their way of living. I will also talk about how societal views of women at the time led to a certain view of what women should and shouldn’t be.

The way the author talks about the sisters’ way of life shows he doesn’t see their way of life as the right way for a woman to live, and instead as childish. Dean frames this as them “not knowing how to do otherwise.” It feels as though throughout this piece he treats the way women acted in society at the time as the proper way for a woman to live. As though settling down with a man, getting married, and becoming a mother is the end goal and is both what the sisters want and what will make them happy. Dean treats their current way of life as living “for their own satisfaction.” He then says that this isn't because they're being selfish, but because they don’t know any better. Their way of life isn't harmful to them on a personal level, only within the context of the society they live in.

Society at the time the piece is set in also saw women who acted outside of the norm in a negative way. The way the older sister “scares away the young men” she met at the dances shows this. In the past people, especially those perceived as women by society, were held to strict societal norms. Eventually it seems she gives up on finding a young man or even on interacting in society at large. The younger sister does seem like she doesn’t fully understand social norms for a different reason. She is written to be almost vain “dress[ing] herself very stylishly and spending hours on her [appearance] every day.” However, the author uses her loving to work on her appearance to say she doesn’t understand the world. Dean also uses this to say she needed a traditional husband to learn the error of her ways.

The societal view of women at the time not only pressured women into certain social roles, but also restricted ones view of what women can be. From the way the author talks about them being “content in their own ways” and similar phrases seems condescending. They also reflect a more regressive view of women, especially compared to what we see today.

This piece is effective in showing how societal expectations of women in the past were restrictive. It also shows how they can affect your view of women, especially looking back from a modern perspective.