Late Nineteenth-Century American Society as Reflected in Edith Wharton's "The House of Mirth"

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Diplomski rad
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ABSTRACT

The House of Mirth (1905) by Edith Wharton is a portrayal of the nineteenth-century New York upper class. This paper looks at the realization of Thorstein Veblen's principle of "conspicuous consumption of time and substance" or "conspicuous waste" (*Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899) in *The House of Mirth*. It describes the differences between the "old" and "new" rich and their respective customs and manners. The position of late nineteenth-century women is examined with respect to the domineering male establishment and the institution of marriage. The marital status of women in *The House of Mirth* also serves as a background for exploring gender issues and homosocial relations. The division between the leisure class and the working class is presented by contrasting the main character, Lily Bart, with Nettie Struther, a working girl. Whereas the characterization of Nettie Struther embodies Wharton's concept of naturalism and the Darwinist theory of determinism, the figure of Simon Rosedale, a businessman of Jewish origin, brings up the issue of race and racial discrimination in aristocratic circles of late nineteenth-century New York.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, American literature, nineteenth century, marriage, New Money, Old Money, the New Woman, New York, Leisure Class, Jewish identity, determinism, naturalism, Lily Bart

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the literary world celebrated 150 years since the birth of Edith Wharton. Edith Wharton, one of the most praised American authors, is best known for her skillful chronicling of the upper New York society in the second half of the nineteenth century. To any reader at any time (and it is now over a hundred years since the publication of *The House of Mirth*) it is striking with how much accuracy and sharpness, but also subtle irony, Wharton portrayed the leisure class – the wealthy 'Four Hundred'[1] and their complex rituals. It is astounding that Wharton, herself a descendant and epitome of the class that she described, mustered so much astuteness to separate herself from the innate characteristics of her surroundings to document these traits so vividly, earning a lasting recognition for her literary work.

The House of Mirth (1905) raises and answers many questions about morality, gender and racial issues, the definition of woman in relation to her environment and the economic and cultural forces that determine one's "fate" within society. Donald Stone notes that "while Wharton demonstrates in the novel the repressive and oppressive nature of that world, she also conveys nostalgia for an age that seemed fixed in place forever even as it was vanishing" (Stone 7). Stone also suggests that Wharton, just like her heroine Lily Bart, was caught in the gorge between society's "mannerism" in appearance and "philistinism" in thought.

The intention of this paper is to analyze the society that Edith Wharton describes in her novel *The House of Mirth*, its social hierarchy and its norms and rules. Thorstein Veblen's study *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) provided a theoretical background for the analysis of the notion of the leisure class and its representation in Wharton's novel. The paper examines late nineteenth-century class division into "old New York" aristocracy, the working class, and the "new rich". It also pays attention to socially conditioned gender roles through concepts such as marriage and divorce, as well as the issue of race, analyzing the Jewish character Simon Rosedale. Additionally, the analysis examines *The House of Mirth* as a deviation from naturalist conventions by contrasting the characters of Nettie Struther and Lily Bart. Finally, the last chapter looks for examples of manners and moral codes and the breach of the same in the society portrayed in *The House of Mirth.*

[1] One of Edith Wharton's ancestors was Caroline Schermerhorn Astor (1830-1908), the central figure of the upper New York class of the nineteenth century. She comprised a list of four hundred most prominent members of the society and an invitation to her ball in Beechwood meant acceptance into the elite (Davis).

1. THE LEISURE CLASS: EDITH WHARTON AND NEW YORK SOCIETY

In the very beginning of his essay "Downwardly Mobile for Conscience's Sake: Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart", Lawrence Buell defines the driving forces of the American society. He says that the "US culture is stereotypically a culture of capitalism, of consumption, of plenty, and of individual upward mobility" (Buell 2). All these elements are present in *The House of Mirth*. Since most of the social issues are viewed through the prism of the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* provides an excellent theoretical background for the fictionalized, but almost scientifically precise, observations by Wharton.

Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), an economist and sociologist, studied the origins and customs of the leisure class. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* he describes the leisure class as "parasitic" in comparison to the labor class which produces goods, whereas the only activity of the leisure class is "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous waste" (the display of one's pecuniary success). Veblen looks at the division in industry which consists of manufacturers and producers, and the business group which makes profit on labor of the lower class. This aspect is enhanced by Veblen's referrals to the predatory and dominant temperament of male members of the leisure class. The "conspicuous consumption", as an indicator of wealth, signals social status of its possessor. Veblen also describes the conservativeness of the group. The leisure class is fundamentally against innovations, given that it brings along changes in the social structure. This conservatism, therefore, stems from the interests of the class to retain the present state in which they are the most advantaged group. Veblen also explains the position of women of this class, who are exempted from employment and confined to the domestic sphere. Their sole economic function is to consume conspicuously and serve as an ornament, thereby putting on display their husbands' pecuniary success.

The main character in *The House of Mirth* is a young woman, Lily Bart, aged 29. She is a descendant of a once wealthy and respected family. After her father's bankruptcy, followed soon by her mother's death, Lily comes to live with her aunt Mrs. Peniston. Though penniless, Lily still has her marvelous beauty, a good reputation and impeccable manners, which bring her into the circle of the New York's wealthiest and most powerful figures. Lily spends a great deal of money to keep up with her friends, but in order to establish herself as a powerful member of the "leisure class", she needs money. She can have it only if she finds a rich husband. However, as the novel progresses her chances are getting slimmer, and despite her careful maneuvers, she never manages to catch a suitable husband. Gradually, she starts to lower her criteria and begins contemplating marriage to a

rich Jew businessman, Simon Rosedale. After Bertha Dorset, one of the richest women in Lily's circle of friends, accuses her of flirting with her husband, Lily's reputation is ruined. Because of the scandal, she also loses the inheritance from her aunt. Consequently, Lily joins the working class, but finds that she is unable to provide for herself. She turns to opium to help her sleep and to ease her nightmares. One night she takes too much, and dies.

Both Veblen and Wharton describe the same phenomena and rituals. Wharton's novel proves that the leisure class is, indeed, a very conservative and predictable circle, as Veblen proposes. Both authors based their observations on the predominant scientific and philosophical ideas of the time. One of them was the Darwinian theory of determinism. The other concept was capitalist ethics, which heavily influenced on socio-economic relationships in late-nineteenth century America.

1.1. The Leisure Class and the Canon of Conspicuous Waste

"Old" New York society consisted of descendants of the first Dutch settlers, who owned the majority of land and built their fortune on property investments. Their "old money" enabled them to live a life of leisure and luxury and was transferred through several generations. The New England (and New York) aristocracy, often referred to as "the leisure class", found itself under siege of the "new rich", people whom the industrialism, and the rising capitalism of the nineteenth century enabled to amass wealth quickly through stock market speculations, banking and building. The "new money", as quickly and easily as it was made, was just as quickly spent on gilded mansions, luxurious items and pleasure for its owners in order to assert themselves among the most powerful and richest families of New England. With it came a change in the prevailing code of manner and values that often clashed with moral and decency codes of the old aristocracy. The new rich, children of capitalism, regarded everything through its market value; they were "vulgar" materialists constantly seeking new stimuli and new vogues to follow, whereas the real "upper-class" was bent on preservation of the *status quo* and was overall very conservative (Anderson 2).

According to Veblen, "the leisure class" was "a small and inconspicuous fraction of the human race" (6), a conservative circle whose power rested on vast wealth and ensuing superiority over the labor class. The "leisure class" was also discriminating against all forms of racial "otherness" (such as Jews), and not least important, imposed a strict distinction between genders. The conduct of the leisure class was dictated by canons that Thorstein Veblen calls "conspicuous waste of time and substance" or "conspicuous consumption", and "withdrawal from the industrial process" (222). Veblen sees the beginning of ownership as the emerging point of the leisure class. He defines wealth as "a meritorious act" which is "in itself intrinsically honorable and confers honor on its possessor" (Veblen 21). The efficiency to secure the most basic survival necessities, that once defined one's success, is now in modern circumstances translated into economic power. Yet, Veblen continues, "it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (Veblen 26). Someone successful and capable is naturally inclined toward showing off one's pecuniary success, which is where the "conspicuous waste" comes in play. "Simple conspicuous waste of goods is effective and gratifying as far as it goes; it is good *prima facie* evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently *prima facie* evidence of social worth" (Veblen 113). In this "pecuniary culture", the reputability equals success, and is largely dependent on one's "proficiency in demeanor" and "methods of consumption" or, as Wharton herself would phrase it, "social credit [is] based on an impregnable bank-account" (254).

Apart from the conspicuous waste of goods, the conspicuous waste of time is just as important an indicator of one's high status. For Veblen, the word leisure "does not connote indolence or quiescence", but refers to a non-productive waste of time. It has been mentioned that one of the characteristic traits of the leisure class is the removal from industrial processes and, in addition, it provides the members of the elite with another effective indicator – that they have the "pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness" (Veblen 32) either through servants or business managers. In short, with their money the rich can pay someone else to work for them, and hence remove themselves from the industrial processes as far as possible. Most characters in *The House of Mirth* belong to this class. Lily's friends spend the summer months in Newport, Aix, Aiken, the French Riviera, Southampton and winters in the Adirondacks; they go to the Richfield Springs, Engadine, Bar Harbour, Lake George or other "watering places" health resorts; they host and attend week-long parties, indulge in Italian nights at the opera, frequent theaters and restaurants, visit the Horse Show or generally just sleep until long after the sun is out. Display of wealth plays a crucial role in the lives of the New York elite. In her review of *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (1998) by Maureen E. Montgomery, Michele Plott provides numerous details from the life of the leisure class. For example, she mentions the wildly popular Palm Garden, a restaurant at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in which:

> to enter the restaurant, patrons in evening dress walked down a three-hundred-foot long corridor lined with sofas and chairs known as "Peacock Alley." In addition, the exterior walls of the restaurant were made of glass, while the interior walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. (Plott)

Plott states that the new rules of display "closely resembled the 'new marketing technologies' of late nineteenth-century consumer culture". Despite constantly being in the centre of public attention, elite women knew how to appear as if not being aware of being watched; it was "a response learned, with varying degrees of success, by all women of her class" (Montgomery qtd. in Plott) This occurred because all public display of women was a potential harm to their reputation. The etiquette required that women dress inconspicuously so as not to draw unwanted male attention. This was especially true at night. If a woman was seen on the street at night, she was often labeled as a prostitute. Similarly, when, upon being tricked into visiting Gus Trenor late at night, Lily Bart leaves his house alone, Lawrence Selden, who sees her leaving, instantly assumes that she has a love affair with Trenor. Even though Selden is a close friend, he chooses to believe in the implications rather than trust in Lily's innocence (158).

The New York leisure class, especially the newly rich, tried to emulate the European aristocracy, "and they suffered from the knowledge that Europeans often dismissed them, declaring

that America had no aristocracy" (Plott). Leisure in New York was the woman's sphere; since many men had to work and be in their offices by late at night, they were rarely interested in participating in social activities that lasted until early hours in the morning.

After her mother's death, Lily is taken in by Mrs. Peniston, Lily's relative on the Van Alstyne side of the family. Mrs. Peniston is the epitome of "the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else; and to these inherited obligations Mrs. Peniston faithfully conformed" (38). One of the most prominent features, along with the leisure and conservatism, is the entailing passivity of the old aristocracy. Lily notes that Mrs. Peniston has "always been a looker-on at life" (38), enshrined in her drawing room. Her "mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street" (38). The omnipresent motif of the "drawing-room" and Mrs. Peniston's reluctance to re-do it can therefore also be interpreted as a reluctance to change established habits of manner and thought.

1.2. "Old" and "New" New York

The leisure class has a vast interest in preserving the *status quo* and all its financial and cultural advantages, its supremacy and privileges that it holds over the working class. There are three ways in which the leisure class, according to Veblen, hinders cultural development - first, by the "inertia proper to the class itself", most notably in their conspicuous waste of time and abstinence from industry; second, "through its prescriptive example of conspicuous waste and of conservatism," and third "indirectly through that system of unequal distribution of wealth and sustenance on which the institution itself rests" (Veblen 137). Pecuniary decency demands that one does not betray one's knowledge of the vulgar implications of materialism (such as labor). Consumption and waste of goods is not honorable *per se*, nor is sheer accumulation of wealth, as the new rich will come to realize, because in those who are "chiefly concerned in the accumulation of wealth, the incentive of subsistence or of physical comfort never plays a considerable part" (Veblen 20). The old upper New York society, the "old money", that lives less conspicuously than the newcomers, is faced with competition from the new rich as the growing materialism provides more ways to show off one's wealth in public, such as rides in new motor-cars or changing fashion in dresses and decoration of houses. The people who have money, albeit not the prerequisites and advantages of aristocratic descent, but for whom the development of industrial relations has brought a lot of money, are in *The House of Mirth* represented by the Gormers, Norma Hatch and Simon Rosedale. Norma and Rosedale have a different set of aggravating circumstances for which they are (at first) denied entrance to the inner circle. He is a Jew, and she is a divorced woman who arrived "from the West" (266) with a lot of money and no taste. Lily finds everything about her extreme and she observes with slight incredulity the "various ornamental excrescences on a vast concavity of pink damask and gilding" (266). Norma also lacks manners and disobeys the strict social creed: for example, Lily says that "no definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements, so that one had the impression of lunching at the tea-hour, while dinner was often merged in the noisy after-theatre supper which prolonged Mrs. Hatch's vigil till daylight" (267-68). In another instance she is "offering the 'Beauty-Doctor' a seat in Freddy Van Osburgh's box at the play" (269). To provide another example, "the Gormers have struck out on a line of their own: what they want is to have a good time, and to have it in their own way" (226). Despite their initial wish to break into the elite circle, they have "decided that the whole business bored them, and that what they wanted was a crowd they could really feel at home with" (226). They have therefore started "a kind of social Coney Island, where everybody is welcome who can make noise enough and doesn't put on airs"

(226). The Gormers' guests indulge in tennis, shooting, bridge and whiskey. During her first visit, Lily recognizes in them

> a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature approximating the real thing as the "society play" approaches the manners of the drawing-room. The people about her were doing the same things as the Trenors, the Van Osburghs and the Dorsets: the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the men's waistcoats to the inflexion of the women's voices. Everything was pitched in a higher key, and there was more of each thing: more noise, more colour, more champagne, more familiarity—but also greater good-nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity for enjoyment. (228)

Mrs. Peniston and the Gormers may be only a generation or two apart, but the clash between the "old money" transmitted through inheritance along with good breeding, and the "new money" quickly gained through market speculations, but without social credentials, creates an "in-between" group - the descendants of old families who have lost their money, and who are trying to keep up with the new trendsetters, facing therefore a set of new and often contradictory values. Lily belongs to that group. She is a young lady of high breeding with impeccable manners, but poor and yearning to compare herself favorably to the wealthiest. In order to be at the same table with her friends, she has to play bridge and smoke. Mrs. Peniston is genuinely shocked when she hears the gossip from the cousin Grace Stepney about Lily's vices. The new codes of conduct and morality clash with the "old" world that she belongs to. Here is how Mrs. Peniston reacts to the rumors surrounding Lily:

> Mrs. Peniston's horror was genuine. Though she boasted an unequaled familiarity with the secret chronicles of society, she had the innocence of the school-girl who regards wickedness as a part of "history," and to whom it never occurs that the scandals she reads of in lesson-hours may be repeating themselves in the next street. Mrs. Peniston had kept her imagination shrouded, like the drawing-room furniture. She knew, of course, that society was "very much changed," and that many women her mother would have thought "peculiar" were now in a position to be critical about their visiting-lists; she had discussed the perils of divorce with her rector, and had felt thankful at times that Lily was still unmarried; but the idea that any scandal could attach to a young girl's name, above all that it could be lightly coupled with that of a married man, was so new to her that she was as much aghast as if she had been accused of leaving her carpets down all summer, or of violating any of the other cardinal laws of housekeeping. (122)

The bad taste of the newcomers is the main reason why their company is not desired among the elite. As George Dorset loudly announces while leaving the Brys' mansion after a party, "life's too short to spend it in breaking in new people" (136). He is irritated by the lack of taste and manners of the new rich:

> Damned bad taste, I call it--no, no cigar for me. You can't tell what you're smoking in one of these new houses--likely as not the chef buys the cigars. Stay for supper? Not if I know it! When people crowd their rooms so that you can't get near any one you want to speak to, I'd as soon sup in the elevated at the rush hour. (136)

The Brys are aspiring social climbers who host lavish parties in hope that they will be accepted in the society, but the Dorsets are reluctant to do so.

Nonetheless, it is not impossible for the "new rich" to be accepted in high society. "Barring accidents," says Veblen, "the nouveaux arrivants are a picked body" (157). Despite the elite's constant aversion to the new rich, entrance to heaven is occasionally granted to those who are "eminently fitted for an aggressive pecuniary competition" (Veblen 156). In order to reach the upper levels, "the aspirant must have not only a fair average complement of the pecuniary aptitudes, but he must also have these gifts in such an eminent degree as to overcome very material difficulties that stand in the way of his ascent" (Veblen 157). It is therefore a "continual selective process" in which the most successful manage to cross obstacles set before them. Ironically, those who stop trying, suddenly become of more interest than those with necessary references and no money. It is not in the habit of the elite "to make advances to any one outside the immediate circle of [their] affinities" (239). Bertha Dorset, highly acclaimed because of her husband's money and social status, "had always consistently ignored the world of outer aspirants, or had recognized its individual members only when prompted by motives of self-interest" (239). These "motives of self-interest" allow another social climber, the Jewish character Simon Rosedale, to slowly build up his way on the social pyramid. Despite being one of the richest and most successful people in the novel, he is always on the outskirts of society. He is using his money to slowly build up his way by paying for entertainment or giving useful business tips. The "appeal" of Rosedale is reduced only to his power in economic terms: "A few years from now he'll be in it whether we want him or not, and then he won't be giving away a half-a-million tip for a dinner" (81). With these words Gus Trenor urges his wife Julia and Lily to be civil to Rosedale. They also prove Rosedale's social-climbing aspirations and accentuate the parasitic nature of the New York aristocracy. Rosedale is immensely useful, with his tips and "his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values" (17), yet he "had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within Lily's memory" (16).

It has been said that the Gormers want to have fun with the money on their hands regardless of the inner circle, though by the end of the novel it turns out that Mattie Gormer “has got aspirations still; women always have” (226). Bertha Dorset visits Mattie, probably only to spread rumors about Lily, who at the time is tutoring the Gormers about the ways of the upper class. Against all odds, Bertha shows interest in the Gormers, their money rather than their company, after which Mattie leaves her former circle of friends in order “to bore herself with the really fashionable” (245). From Mattie’s point of view, it is “natural enough that she should be singled out” (245), as up to this point she always was. Yet, she does not refuse the chance to enter Bertha’s circle.

1.3. Love, Marriage and Divorce

Lily Bart's quest to get married, more importantly, to marry well, is central to the plot of *The House of Mirth*. The idea comes to the forefront very early in the novel in Selden's exclamation "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" (11). His statement encapsulates the notion of marriage as both duty and career or, in Lily's particular case, as an institution to fervently pursue and dread at the same time. Marriage also becomes an issue of identity; it brings upon a sense of whole, of a unity, without which a woman can never completely be formed as an individual – the point of view greatly criticized by the feminist movement.

During her train trip to Bellomont, the Trenor mansion where the elite is gathering, Lily encounters Percy Gryce. Percy is a young descendant of an old family and the successor of its enormous wealth. Therefore, he is an ideal party for Lily. Gryce, whose sole interest in life seems to be collecting Americana, a collection of historical memorabilia, is also very shy and Lily has to take the initiative. While "studying her prey" (19), Lily betrays her attitude toward the possibility of this marriage, as well as her determination to fulfill her plans:

> She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce--the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice--but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life. (27)

To speak of any romantic notions in such a unity seems almost absurd; there is little sentiment in the marital union that Lily is after. Wharton is concurrently criticizing and persisting on the need to marry into such a social setting, and Lily is acting accordingly; yet there is little doubt as to which side prevails. To sum up, Lily simply concludes, "What else is there?" (11) and "It was a hateful fate--but how escape from it? What choice had she?" (27).

The opportunities for a woman in Lily's position are indeed meager. In the patriarchal late nineteenth century, labor was by social convention a menial task reserved for lower classes. Without any other skill with which to support herself, a woman had no other choice "but to go into partnership" (14) in order to stay financially solvent, albeit dependent. Marriage is an arrangement in which money plays an important (if not crucial) role. In the predominant atmosphere of capitalism and consumerism, marriage is a sort of business arrangement where both sides give and receive something in return. Lily seeks money and social status in return for her beauty. In her essay "Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Marital Unity", Laura K. Johnson observes the legal framework

of divorce and describes marriage in business terms; Lily's most valuable "*asset*" is her beauty, and with that *"asset*" she is a contributor to the *"partnership"* (7). This "contractual nature" is most evident in Rosedale's proposal: "I'm just giving you a plain business statement of the consequences" (169). As a woman of great beauty, grace and pedigree, Lily is his ticket to the inner circle. A woman of her status represents "money in his pocket, as he might himself have phrased it" (17). Their marriage entails an exchange of goods - Rosedale's money in exchange for Lily, who does not have anything else to give but "herself". Johnson points at the most obvious negative connotations of such an arrangement: the idea of marriage as "legalized prostitution[2]", and the commercial competitiveness, which are both equally repulsive to Lily. It goes against her moral standards to trade her body for wealth or to blackmail Bertha Dorset with the letters written to Selden during their affair, which Lily obtains from Selden's cleaning woman. Because of her conflicting wants and needs, Lily declines Rosedale's offer and closes up to any possibility of marriage to Selden, which eventually leads to her complete social degradation and, ultimately, death.

A unity that would be more pleasing to Lily's sentiments, if not to her material principles, is the one she cannot bring herself to attain. Marriage with Selden is a kinship of spirits, unlike the subservient relationship to the domineering Rosedale. Nevertheless, the fact is that Selden, for all his scorn toward the lifestyle of leisure and "reciprocity", regards Lily through a material lens as well. She is a "commodity" for Selden as much as she is for Rosedale. In the beginning of the novel he observes that "she must have cost a great deal to make" and reduces her to a "fine material" shaped to a futile form by circumstances (7). Referring to Lily's disappointment over a revelation as bleak as this, Johnson observes: "Only an idealized, abstracted wife—literally one with no space, only a place—can fulfill the romantic principle of marital unity" (Johnson 10). Consequently, when Lily visits Selden for the last time, she promises that the Lily he used to know will "take up no room" (300), as if ridding him of a useless-futile-piece of decor.

That marriage within the leisure class necessarily entails ownership and that a woman is indeed a piece of decoration is clearly discussed in Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Unlike Johnson, who observes the contractual nature of marriage and the "ownership of woman" only in the context of the nineteenth-century consumerism, Veblen traces the issue to the formative years of the leisure class. In his study, he goes back to the habits of primitive tribes who used to seize women as trophies. It is up to discussion whether Rosedale represents this urge in its most blunt form, though it is indisputable that, in a sophisticated manner, a woman is a trophy in the world of

[2] "Focusing on contract's requisite exchange encouraged some of Wharton's contemporaries to view the marriage contract as an instrument that legalized prostitution." (Johnson 8).

Lily's contemporaries. Simply put, the wife's role is twofold: first, to "beautify" the environment for her husband, and second, by doing so, to show off the pecuniary success of her husband in social circles, thereby enhancing it further. Lily herself provides proof enough; in her vision of a prospect marriage to Gryce, she resolves "so to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence" (49). That means that she is the "producer of goods for him to consume" and at the same time, an instrument for the principle of "honorific expenditure and conspicuous leisure by which this good name [of the household] is chiefly sustained" (Veblen 57) and "The good name of the household to which she belongs should be the special care of the woman" (Veblen 120).

Rosedale's proposal provides more insight into this type of marital arrangement. As a man who already has money, he needs to marry a woman who will solidify his position within the elite. "I mean to have her too", he says with a great determination, and adds, "money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman" (172). The image of woman as expensive decorum is further emphasized: "I want my wife to make all the other women feel small" (172). Rosedale knows exactly why Lily is that woman. It becomes "clear to him that Miss Bart herself possessed precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality" (120). Lily is what Veblen calls "gentle blood"; a woman who was brought up with a sense of expensiveness, grace, sophistication and manners, "ennobled by protracted contact with accumulated wealth or unbroken prerogative", a woman deemed highly marriageable, possibly because of "resulting alliance with her powerful relatives" (Veblen 38). Rosedale senses in Lily the "superior worth (...) in blood which has been associated with many goods and great power" (Veblen 38). As such, possessing her would mean more to him than his financial wealth; with Lily at his side, the doors to the Dorset ballroom would be wide open for him.

The subservience that the woman forcibly concedes to is almost equal to that imposed on servants. Veblen notes the tragedy in the position of gentle-blood wives; from their birth on, they are "chattels", first in their fathers' homes and again in their husbands' households after the marital contract has been signed. The mere fact that a woman is of noble origin does little to her personal freedom, as she is still subjected to a master and his well-being. Despite the gold and privileges of the leisure class that she is entitled to by birth, as Selden would say, "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (9).

In *The House of Mirth,* Wharton brings up the issue of divorce with a very telling statement that "there was a divorce and a case of appendicitis in every family one knows" (42). Even though she explored the topic more deeply in her later works, Wharton was aware of the increasing rate of

divorces in late nineteenth-century American society, and the more lenient laws regarding the rights of the divorced parties. Johnson points to the fact that "Wharton's home state of New York was a leader in granting greater contractual capacities to married women". In 1848, women were granted greater rights regarding property; they were allowed to "hold real and personal property for her separate use when she married" (Johnson 5). By 1862, married women in New York had gained the right to sue and be sued in their own names, and they had gained the right to enter into contracts with respect to their separate property, including their earnings (Johnson 5). The idea of an "opportunistic divorce" in *The House of Mirth* is shown in the case of Carrie Fisher, who divorces her second husband only to extract the alimony from him: "…the only way to get a penny out of Fisher was to divorce him and make him pay alimony" (42). Yet, regardless of the laws more favorable for women, the divorce rate remained rather low, probably due to ensuing scandals. Ned Van Alstyne, a character from *The House of Mirth*, observes that, "now that women have taken to tobacco we live in a bath of nicotine. It would be a curious thing to study the effect of cigarettes on the relation of the sexes. Smoke is almost as great a solvent as divorce: both tend to obscure the moral issue" (156).

According to Sassoubre, "In New York, divorce had always involved a scandal because adultery was the only permissible grounds."[3] (13) Such a divorce is the one between George and Bertha Dorset. As a lawyer, Selden is called upon for advice to minimize the extent of the scandal it might cause. He contemplates the ugliness of divorce, knowing "how exhaustive and unpleasant such a process would be" (204). The reader gets a first glimpse of how far-reaching the implications are, not only in the financial sense but also on a more personal level. There is the moral issue of divorce, the corrupted morality that divorce entails, which Selden is so sensitive about that he is left "with the feeling that he must fling open the windows and have his room swept out" (204).

The inequality of sexes comes to the foreground as well; as an advisor to Dorset, he must make sure that none of the "accumulated moral rags" (204) which could harm Dorset's reputation

[3] New York had the most stringent divorce policy in the colonies from the time the English took over from the Dutch in 1664. As a state, New York's divorce laws were far less liberal than those of New England and Southern states, which recognized more numerous grounds for a divorce (including desertion, impotence, and cruelty). A 1787 New York divorce law allowed only the "innocent" party in a divorce to remarry. Despite an ongoing debate about divorce reform in the first half of the nineteenth century, New York became even more conservative in its attitudes toward divorce after the Civil War. It was not until 1879 that the "guilty" party in a divorce was legally permitted to remarry and not until 1919 that the waiting period was reduced from five to three years. In reality, though, New York's strict laws were circumvented easily and frequently, through "migratory divorce" (first in Pennsylvania, then Illinois and Indiana, and finally in divorce colonies like Sioux Falls and Reno) or through fraud ("faked evidence of adultery") (Blake qtd in Sassoubre 26).

are unpacked. In this particular case it is the wife who commits adultery, which makes the case easier for Selden. Selden's job is to preserve the good reputation of his client, George Dorset:

> But nothing should come out; and happily for his side of the case, the dirty rags, however pieced together, could not, without considerable difficulty, be turned into a homogeneous grievance. The torn edges did not always fit—there were missing bits, there were disparities of size and colour, all of which it was naturally Selden's business to make the most of in putting them under his client's eye. (204)

From the beginning of the novel, Wharton hints at Bertha's imprudence. People notice in a sarcastic tone that she "really seems to have a very good influence on young men" (107). Even Lily wonders whether Selden joins the Bellomont company because of her or because of Bertha. Bertha takes Lily along to Cannes to keep George entertained while she "is reading Verlaine" (185) with Ned Silverton. Breach of faith can be condoned as long as there is no conclusive evidence, which appears in form of Bertha's letters to Selden. Mrs. Haffen's comment that the gentlemen's waste-paper baskets are brimming over with paper (and presumably more love letters) and how careful they get about disposing of them implies that adultery was not such a rare occurrence within the elite. Selden was always "one of the carefullest" (102), and the slip could cost him almost as much as Bertha. "Men do not, at worst, suffer much from such exposure", Lily comments, "Nevertheless, the fact that the correspondence had been allowed to fall into strange hands would convict Selden of negligence in a matter where the world holds it least pardonable; and there were graver risks to consider where a man of Dorset's ticklish balance was concerned" (104).

Tame insinuations or previous knowledge are not considered a sin in the eyes of society. In an instance, Lily even teases George Dorset that he must be jealous on the attention that his wife pays to young men: "For the last four years, the friends of the writer had smiled and shrugged, viewing it merely as one among the countless "'good situations' of the mundane comedy" (103). If anyone suspected Bertha to be cheating on her husband, it never surfaced. Rosedale looks "the situation straight in the eye":

> Everybody knows what Mrs. Dorset is, and her best friends wouldn't believe her on oath where their own interests were concerned; but as long as they're out of the row it's much easier to follow her lead than to set themselves against it, and you've simply been sacrificed to their laziness and selfishness. (251)

In the eyes of society, Bertha Dorset is protected as long as there is no conclusive evidence of her adultery, again mostly due to her "impregnable bank-account" (254). Lily knows that "there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it: it is for having betrayed its connivance that the body social punishes the offender

who is found out" (103). Luckily for Bertha, George Dorset appears to be blind to his wife's behavior until it literally happens under his nose. The code dictates that "a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval, or even of his indifference" (103). In other circumstances, the husband may choose to cover up the issue in order to avoid divorce and public humiliation, "but with a man of George Dorset's temper there could be no thought of condonation" (103). When Bertha realizes that she is on a slippery slope, she does not hesitate to ruin both Lily and Ned Silverton in order to save herself. Bertha "could be as unscrupulous in fighting for herself as she was reckless in courting danger, and whatever came to her hand at such moments was likely to be used as a defensive missile" (208). By starting nasty rumors about Lily, she diverts the attention from her own failure.

1.4. Gender Issues: "A Girl Must, A Man May If He Chooses"

The conversation between Lily and Selden where they lay out their respective gender obligations is the core of many issues in *The House of Mirth.* Late nineteenth-century American society created a clear division of male and female work, two separate spheres in which the sexes exerted their power. As mentioned before, the household was the sphere of leisure-class women, and it is the men who earned the wealth for their wives to "consume conspicuously". The obligations put before men were just as clearly drawn. Men were money-makers, and if they failed to fulfill their duty, they were rejected. Lily's mother provides a good example when she loses respect of her husband after his bankruptcy and shows no other feeling but "grim unflagging resentment" (34). Lily says that she seldom saw her father who was constantly "down-town" working. Gus Trenor offers more proof of how far women were removed from the task of money-making and how hard men worked to make a life of leisure possible: "The women all think—I mean Judy thinks—I've nothing to do but to go down town once a month and cut off coupons, but the truth is it takes a devilish lot of hard work to keep the machinery running" (80).

The "machinery" that he refers to is the never-ending displaying of wealth, consumption and luxury. In the expanding empire of wealth, where "conspicuous consumption" was the code to live by, marriage was a fitting arrangement between the "provider" and the "decorator". Yet, the social creed concerning marriage was not equal for men and women. While women were obliged to marry, men, who could provide for themselves, did not have to. Selden can remain a bachelor if he wishes to, while Gerty is considered peculiar. Lily also observes her cousin Jack Stepney who is engaged to Gwen Van Osburgh. Like Lily, Jack is on the brink of poverty himself, and it is clear that his marriage is financially motivated as well. Jack Stepney once described his future wife as "reliable as roast mutton. His own taste was in the line of less solid and more highly-seasoned diet; but hunger makes any fare palatable, and there had been times when Mr. Stepney had been reduced to a crust" (48). Lily is clearly annoyed by a social creed where such double standards exist: "All Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet and let that girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time." (48)

Nonetheless, Birgitt Flohr observes that, "compared with the servant-like female in Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class,* the women in *The House of Mirth* are enormously powerful" (5). She provides examples of women controlling their husbands, their sons, the acceptance of new people in the society, and even one another (5). Gus is pleading with his wife and Lily to be civil to Rosedale; Gryce runs home to his mother who will protect him from marrying women like Lily, as did

Dillworth's mother who packed him off to India so Lily would not have the family jewels reset and the drawing-room redecorated. Women need to control their husbands because they are economically dependent on them (Flohr 6). Still, Flohr's idea of control does not ring particularly spectacular. All the power is exerted within four walls of the home. She is not allowed to extend her power further than her family. Women "control" from their roles as wives or mothers. That, however, does little to redeem for the lack of power in determining a fate for themselves and creating an independent personality.

Wharton's novel also tackles the concept of "the New Woman" that appeared in the nineteenth century. According to Lori Harrisson-Kahan, "the New Woman" is the feminist counterpart to the self-made man. A set of double standards exists even for the New Woman and the Self-Made Man; Harrisson-Kahan notes that the invention of a new personality "may have been mythologized and heroized in men, but it was deemed dangerous in women because it signaled an active role in the formation of subjectivity, a role that the cult of true womanhood had tried to suppress" (Harrisson-Kahan 5). Through his hard work as a self-made man Simon Rosedale is slowly climbing up the social scale, while in order to do so, Lily has to marry. Consequently, late-nineteenth-century woman "was denied the moral freedom of being mistress of her own action and of learning by the merciful law of consequences what was right and what was wrong . . . she has remained, perforce, undeveloped in the larger judgment of ethics" (Gilman qtd. in Flohr 7). Similarly, in *French Ways*, Edith Wharton describes American women as children "because they are each other's only audience, and to a great extent each other's only companions" (qtd. in Schriber 8).

Meredith Goldsmith's analysis of homosocial conflicts in modern mass consumer culture in Edith Wharton's *Summer* can also be applied to *The House of Mirth.* Goldsmith mentions that late-nineteenth-century women may have had some control over men, but that it fades in comparison to what power they had over their own sex. Similarly, the women in *The House of Mirth* consistently fail Lily. Even when they set out with good intentions, different definitions of what constitutes as good, and whose advantage it serves, presents an obstacle that is too difficult for Lily to cross. At the beginning of the novel, Lily complains to Selden that "the other women--my best friends--well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me" (11). All women in her life demand something from Lily, starting with her mother who insists that Lily "bring it all back with her beauty" (30), demanding that Lily use her physical assets to gain material wealth. Even though she turns Lily into the most exquisite "marriageable" girl in her circle, her mother instills the most useless values in her daughter and leaves her unprepared for the harsh reality of life where beauty is not the most important currency to go by. After her mother's death, Lily finds a new home with Mrs. Peniston who, most probably, accepted her for the prospect of a profitable marriage so

that she could live vicariously through her niece. She "delighted in discussing the minutest details of festivities in which she had not taken part" (107), hoping to exert all the details of someone else's lives from her niece. Grace Stepney, Lily's cousin, shows the full extent of her jealousy when she lets Mrs. Peniston know what is being told of her niece. Giving Lily the blame for Mrs. Peniston, claiming: "… it was the idea of your being in debt that brought on her illness" (225). In an isolated, belated and glorious moment of superiority over Lily, she continues: "If I can do anything to make you realize the folly of your course, and how deeply she disapproved of it, I shall feel it is the truest way of making up to you for her loss'' (225), and refuses to lend Lily some money for a fresh start. Carrie Fisher appears to be more interested in Lily's destiny. Even though Lily refers to her as a "social sponge" who makes a profession of borrowing money from other women's' husbands, Carrie seems to understand the hardships put before women who are left to fend for themselves. Carrie has her own life to run, though, trying to make a living for herself and her daughter, and Lily is soon left to her own devices again. When in need, Lily turns to Gerty for help, relying on Gerty's uncritical acceptance (even blind admiration). Lily needs Gerty's help most when Gerty likes her least. Lily arrives at Gerty's place after Gus almost rapes her. That happens on the same evening when Gerty realizes that Selden's affection toward Gerty was a way to be closer to Lily. Yet, Gerty's compassionate nature will not let her refuse aid. She therefore shows admirable morality and a unique pureness of heart. On a more idealistic reading, Gerty's moral victory would suggest the bad versus evil theme in relation to class distinction. At some point, Gerty begins to see herself through Lily's eyes: "What right had she to dream the dreams of loveliness? A dull face invited a dull fate... She wanted happiness--wanted it as fiercely and unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily's power of obtaining it. And in her conscious impotence she lay shivering, and hated her friend----" (159). When the "hour of probation" comes, "Woman-like, she accused the woman" (158).

According to Veblen, "the success of a class or party presumes a strong element of clannishness, or loyalty to a chief" (150). The chief is undoubtedly the one with most pecuniary power. The ringleaders in Lily's circle of acquaintances are Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset, both married to men who make more money than they can count. Even though Judy is not as malicious as Bertha and has a friendlier attitude toward Lily, it is clear that Lily is kept in her circle because of her amusing and refined nature and her expertise in social niceties. However, the financial ravine between the two women is too deep and presents an obstacle to forming a more intimate friendship. Lily considers Judy to be her closest friend, though Judy has plans for Lily: she has set her heart on Lily marrying a great deal of money. Judy does not understand why Lily becomes "such a bore" and leaves Bellomont so soon. Lily's worries have no place in the luxurious atmosphere, and Judy cannot even begin to imagine that money (and the lack of it) could possibly present a problem:

> Affluence, unless stimulated by a keen imagination, forms but the vaguest notion of the practical strain of poverty. Judy knew it must be "horrid" for poor Lily to have to stop to consider whether she could afford real lace on her petticoats, and not to have a motor-car and a steam-yacht at her orders; but the daily friction of unpaid bills, the daily nibble of small temptations to expenditure, were trials as far out of her experience as the domestic problems of the char-woman. Mrs. Trenor's unconsciousness of the real stress of the situation had the effect of making it more galling to Lily. (76)

Judy dismisses Lily's company promptly after she learns of Lily's debt to Gus, even though Lily is not the first and certainly not the last one to borrow money from a man:

> Of course it was shocking for a married woman to borrow money--and Lily was expertly aware of the implication involved--but still, it was the mere malum prohibitum which the world decries but condones, and which, though it may be punished by private vengeance, does not provoke the collective disapprobation of society. To Miss Bart, in short, no such opportunities were possible. She could of course borrow from her women friends--a hundred here or there, at the utmost--but they were more ready to give a gown or a trinket, and looked a little askance when she hinted her preference for a cheque. Women are not generous lenders, and those among whom her lot was cast were either in the same case as herself, or else too far removed from it to understand its necessities. (79)

Having fallen lower on the social scheme, Lily is no longer the most desired company in high circles. There is no misunderstanding on a personal level between Lily and Judy, just as there was barely any real friendship to speak of in the beginning. Rather, their relationship was a convenient exchange: Lily's reputation was exchanged for Judy's help in form of some pocket money, last-season dresses and small pieces of jewelry, and when Lily's reputation got tarnished, it marked an end of the "friendship" between Judy and Lily.

It is the vile Bertha Dorset who causes most damage to Lily's reputation and honor. Bertha "delights in making people miserable" (45) and is closest to the child-like mind of women that Wharton criticizes. Her malicious personality, impulsive manner and dubious morality are no secret among the elite. Jealous of Lily's close friendship to Selden, she turns Gryce away from Lily. In order to save herself and her reputation, she tries to place the blame for her own misconduct on someone else, and starts nasty rumors about Lily.

1.5. Lily and the Working Class: Labor and Industry

Veblen's use of the phrase "exemption from ignoble work" hints at two important traits of the leisure class. Firstly, it underlines his own statement that leisure does not connote idleness. Secondly, he states that there is "discrimination between employments, according to which some employments are worthy and others unworthy" (Veblen 7). Some employments are considered respectable, while others are debasing. The most reputable employments are those that deal with ownership on a large scale or are directly related to ownership and finances, e.g. banking and law. Gus Trenor, Simon Rosedale, George Dorset and Welly Bry, the richest men in *The House of Mirth*, "had found the secret of performing [this] miracle" (119) of money-making through clever tips and investments. While banking still implies ownership on a large scale, law does not. Lawrence Selden is one of the rare male figures in *The House of Mirth* who is not involved in stock market speculations on Wall Street. Despite the fact that he is referred to as "shabby" in clothing, and lives in a bachelor flat, he is invited to high social events and has close relations to the elite. His employment as a lawyer, explains Veblen, has no other use than to serve competitive purposes, and therefore ranks high in the conventional scheme. Not of less importance is the fact that a lawyer is privy to many personal affairs of his high-class clients, which comes to surface in Dorset's divorce scene:

> The lawyer is exclusively occupied with the details of predatory fraud, either in achieving or in checkmating chicanery, and success in the profession is therefore accepted as marking a large endowment of that barbarian astuteness which has always commanded men's respect and fear. (Veblen 154)

An unworthy employment is any sort of work where goods are produced, and there are two main reasons why the elite disdain labor. Firstly, they defy the canon of conspicuous waste of time, and secondly, they connote subservience to a master or a boss, which is a mark of inferiority. Any sort of productive work is seen as blemishing for the honorable waste of time. The emerging working class takes pride in its productive efficiency, while for the leisure class "labour acquires a character of irksomeness by virtue of the indignity imputed to it" (Veblen 14).

Through the topic of employment, Wharton also poses the questions of employment for women and women in business. In the course of the novel Lily encounters a few members of the working class, and her attitude is, in the beginning, less than flattering. Consciously or not, she ascribes physical and moral ugliness to both the char-woman on the stairs of the Benedick and the women in the millinery. Describing the woman scrubbing the stairs, Lily notes that "she had a broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp

shone unpleasantly" (15). The woman's lack of manners as she takes up a lot of space on the stairs and just stares is even more grating to Lily, but she tells herself that it is simply because "the poor thing was probably dazzled by such an unwonted apparition" (15). Hence, for Lily the woman is the embodiment of a typical working-class woman who lacks decorum, femininity and domesticity and is vulgar in manner.

Lily becomes aware of the working class when she visits the Working Girls' Club. This meeting is highly symbolic because not only does it emphasize the social distinction, but it also provides the grounds for a closer look at the "exploitation" of women and their common social struggles[4]. Many associations such as the Working Girls' Club were formed after the increase of women's labor "to provide comfortable lodgings, with a reading-room and other modest distractions, where young women of the class employed in down town offices might find a home when out of work, or in need of rest" (110). These clubs were mostly run through charities by middle and upper-class women. Connell highlights the atmosphere of domesticity that these clubs tried to establish, drawing from the only "sphere", that of homemaking, where women could exercise their power. The similarity between the working girls and the bourgeois ladies that run the clubs rests on their economic dependence and subservience to men. Lily realizes that "she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly" (29). The subconscious identification with working-class girls is most likely the reason why upon her first visit to the Girls' Club Lily "had felt an enlightened interest in the working-classes" (279). On many occasions Lily distinguishes herself from the working class: she feels that "such existences as hers were pedestalled on foundations of obscure humanity. The dreary limbo of dinginess lay all around..." (147). Lily's leisure and luxury, the only atmosphere in which she can breathe, is to her "the natural order of things" (147) due to her upbringing. She "shudders sympathetically" (110) not only because she sees the poor conditions of working girls, but also because she is faced with a vision of herself among that class. Moreover, she sees the seeds of that destiny already planted in her, a destiny of dependence on someone else's cheque-book. There are more instances, like when she compares herself to her maid, when Lily draws similarities between the women from her class and those below. Lily had "never before suspected the mixture of insatiable curiosity and contemptuous freedom with which she and her kind were discussed in this underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence" (278), which can unmistakably be connected with gossip that Lily's circle engages in. Later she continues to comment that "true to the ideal of their race, they were awed only by success--by the gross tangible image of material achievement" (278).

[4] Eileen Connell examines non-literary "realities" and artifacts (such as various clubs for working girls in New York) to establish a link between "turn-of-the-century upper-class and working-class women's cultures" (Connell 3).

The key word in this quote is material success. It is hard to miss the cynicism concerning the blurred lines and double standards when it comes to the power and weakness of women. Social-climbing and indulgence are terms ascribed to the people Lily is familiar with as well. What puts a fine shade of difference is that the "toilers" openly show their aspirations to material security; it is "tangible", whereas Lily has her high breeding, manners, and the air of superiority to camouflage her own craving for luxury and success. In their core, the working women and the women of the leisure class have more in common than Lily would allow herself to admit.

Lily's exterior superiority over the working women dissipates when she begins to work in Mme. Regina's millinery establishment. Before, Lily "looked down on them from above, from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence. Now that she was on a level with them, the point of view was less interesting" (279). In the meantime, Lily's luck has turned, and little is left of the haughty woman who was looking down on the char-woman. Lily's only skill that can yield productive is trimming her own hats. When she is recommended to Mme. Regina, there is resistance; "Mme. Regina had a strong prejudice against untrained assistance" (276). Lily's pretty face and engaging character might have proven useful in the front-shop with the customers, though Lily strictly dismisses the plan in order to avoid "conspicuously" showing her employment. Lily's innate superiority has no place in the workroom; even though she hoped to assert herself "their superior by a special deftness of touch" (277), Lily finds it "humiliating to find that, after two months of drudgery, she still betrayed her lack of early training" (277) and is quickly dismissed as "forgetful, awkward and slow to learn" (289). For a moment she even contemplates using her small legacy to set up a business, but her mind that revels in leisure only dismisses the thought quickly as she realizes that "the task might take years to accomplish, even if she continued to stint herself to the utmost; and meanwhile her pride would be crushed under the weight of an intolerable obligation" (287).

Lily is aware of her shortcomings to sustain within the elite. Even worse, as a worker she fails as well. A less interesting point of view derives from the fact that Lily "has to 'acknowledge her inferiority even to herself'" (289), and accept that

> as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability. Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency. (289)

Not only is Lily untrained, but she also lacks the dexterity and inclination to any sort of work. Her fear of breaking the decorum degrades her from a more profitable position in the front of

the shop into the back, where all the futility of her upbringing comes to show. Lily is completely unable to make a living for herself.

The appearance of Nettie Struther happens when Lily has already fallen from "fashion to commerce" (280). Lily remembers that "she had furnished the girl with the means to go to a sanatorium in the mountains: it struck her now with a peculiar irony that the money she had used had been Gus Trenor's" (304). By referring to Trenor's money, Wharton again draws attention to the common economic dependence that the women share across their respective classes. Nettie defies the stereotypical image of working class women as "masculine, disloyal, promiscuous, lazy"[5], de-feminized and vulgar. The femininity and domesticity that is usually transcribed to upper-class women finds its expression in Nettie's small kitchen. The roles have reversed in a matter of months, and it is now Nettie who helps the sick Lily. The memory of Nettie upon their first meeting is a very unfavorable one: Lily remembers Nettie as "one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage: one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her dread" (304). Yet, now, Nettie is happily married, a mother, a woman teeming with energy and hope- In other words, she is everything that Lily is not. Nettie's past again brings up similarities with Lily's life: she was a girl left to fend for herself, with no one to look after her after a failed marriage arrangement, whereas Lily, predestined for a life of luxury, only fell to the lowest branches, Nettie managed to fight herself up a few steps against all odds. The domesticity and femininity that were once Lily's greatest powers are now gone as she falls into a state of deep solitude. On the contrary, Nettie has a family to come home to.

Connell suggests another possible reading of the Working Girls' Club in *The House of Mirth*. First, she discusses the "sisterhood", a sense of sympathy that binds women across classes and races (Connell 30), and the motivation of women of leisure to support working women. By running charities, noble ladies were given a chance to leave their homes and prove their capacity to executively and successfully run an organization. There were no alternatives to leaving the sphere of domesticity but to enter the "other" sphere – the men-dominated sphere of work. Without fearing competition and viewing it as another way of asserting the boundaries between the upper and lower classes, from the male point of view there was no fear of "breach of decorum" in running a charitable organization. (Connell 11-12). This aspect of philanthropy and charity is also discussed in Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. On the other hand, as Connell and other scholars suggest,

[5] Connell notes that during that time many male workers were fired because of the implementation of new machines in production, and women were hired to operate the machines for smaller wages than male workers used to receive (13).

it was also the first step toward forming a united group of women which would later ensure more rights for women in all classes.[6] As women began to organize, they realized that they had common interests and became more aware of the power of unification in attaining rights. However, since, paradoxically, rich women were lacking the resources to wage battles, Connell and other scholars conclude that they implemented their material resources to strengthen the forces among working women, which helped to encourage the feminist movement.

Lily's link to the Working Girls' Club, Gertie Farrish, is an echo of the New Woman herself. Despite Lily's resistance to live a dingy life as Gerty's, there is something in Gerty's lifestyle that Lily envies. Gerty represents the "New Woman" who is free from social "manacles" that chain Lily to her faith of a "marriageable" girl. "She is free and I am not" (9). Gerty's un-marriageableness frees her from the obligations imposed on Lily. In Lily's world, being good and being happy involve two completely different spheres of life and thought: that of personal satisfaction and the contrasting strive to conform to a social creed. "I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat" (9), Lily admits to Selden, and shows a moment of weakness, but continues promptly: "...she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know" (9).

Lori Harrison-Kahan[7] also draws attention to the contorted comprehension of power and subservience; even though Lily's femininity puts her in a subservient position and Lily admits to not being free, Lily repeatedly refers to the "low" position that Gerty occupies. At the same time Lily emphasizes her own power of femininity, which is virtually no power at all in the grand scheme of things.

With her yearning for personal freedom, Lily too marks a step toward the New Woman; yet her archaic view of a woman's obligations defies her natural inclination toward gender equality and freedom. Lily has no choice but "to be herself, or a Gerty Farrish" (27). The wish to create an independent personality for herself is the most threatening characteristic of the new-womanhood and is very much present in Lily Bart. Lily, though, is tightly bound to social restrictions, and still too weak to demand freedom for herself.

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[6] Connell refers to various sources, Jones and Balch for example, and concludes that "the power of holding together" without "class-antagonism" will "improve the standing of the lower-class worker" (39).

[7] In her essay "Queer Myself for Good and All": The House of Mirth and the Fictions of Lily's Whiteness", Lori Harrisson-Kahan examines different notions of "queer" in the society on the example of Rosedale, Gerty Farish and Lily (2, 4).

1.6. Race Issues

In *The House of Mirth*, there is only one reference to an Irish girl who brings the mail, so that the principal example of race issues in *The House of Mirth* is the Jew Simon Rosedale. Even though one of the reasons for Lily refusing to accept Rosedale's marriage proposal is his profound and vulgar money-making attitude, the main reason, Rosedale being a Jew, asserts itself from the first moment Rosedale enters the scene. It is peculiar why Edith Wharton singled out one single race and chose to ignore e.g. black people or European immigrants. As will be shown, the answer may lie in the fact that only Jews, an economic force to be reckoned with, posed a real threat to the established scheme of financial power on Wall Street.

Through the character of Rosedale Wharton clearly shows that interracial marriages were a taboo in American elite society. "We don't *marry* Rosedale in our family" (155), says Jack Stepney, Lily's cousin. The family he refers to are the Stepney-Van Alstyne's who represent the purest blood of New York aristocracy, a white Anglo-Saxon race, a closed and conservative clan of traditional Catholic beliefs, which felt threatened and at the brink of extinction in the end of the nineteenth century. Rosedale is described as "a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were brica-brac" (13). This description offers more than a simple physical description. His "appraising" eyes betray his materialism and inclination to the acquisition of wealth, a trait that is a cliché characteristic ascribed to many Jews in fiction. Furthermore, his plump body and blond hair make him the exact opposite of the type of man that Lily is attracted to. Biological factors might be at play here as well; in order to preserve the clean gentle blood, Lily is drawn to the Anglo-Saxon type of man as represented by Selden.

There is yet another issue, which Meredith Goldsmith points at in her essay "The Year of the Rose: Jewish Masculinity in *The House of Mirth*", and that is the increased anxiety within the inner circle toward imposters on their economy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Jews owned large parts of Manhattan. In addition to the seclusion on racial grounds, the financial aspect was another factor that created a shunning attitude against Jews. The leisure class was clearly not happy to see non-Americans changing the order of economic power of Fifth Avenue, because

> the leisure class has also a material interest in leaving things as they are. . . Under the circumstances prevailing at any given time this class is in a privileged position, and any departure from the existing order may be expected to work to the detriment of the class rather than the reverse. (Veblen 127)

It is interesting to observe how similar Lily and Rosedale are in their "otherness". Gender, race and class issues in *The House of Mirth* are so closely interwoven that it is often impossible to observe them independently of each other. This interplay of different social factors is further enhanced in the character of Lily, who is unable to define herself independently of her aristocratic blood or her womanhood. Both Lily and Rosedale face certain limitations due to their gender and race and all their advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of their abjection to the Jew, Rosedale still has a place on the outskirts of the elite that takes advantage of his financial power. Lily is kept around for entertainment (especially during Bertha's affair with Ned). They both maneuver their way into the inner circle with varying success, and she "understood his motives, for her own course was guided by as nice calculations" (17). Not of less importance is the fact that he is the only person from her former circle of acquaintances who regularly visits her after her fall from "fashion to commerce" (280). Gerty Farrish, also a rare remaining friend, closes the triangle of "otherness" that consists of an unmarried girl, a Jew and a spinster by choice – all of them social outcasts in their respective ways. Lori Harrison-Kahan remarks:

> Rosedale has attempted to trade an unstable Jewish identity for a more fixed white one and thereby lose some of his queerness, but marriage to Lily—whose social decline parallels his ascent—would reverse this process. It would ironically fix him as "queer," as beyond the pale. In implicating Lily as one who could "queer" him, Rosedale draws attention to her new status on the margins of society and reveals the instability of her sexual, racial, and class identities. (Harrison-Kahan 2)

Lily's attitude toward Rosedale changes in the course of the novel, from irritation to tolerance, with a hint of friendly affection at the end before their dispute over the blackmail of Bertha Dorset. Lily's internal debate over morals and money is mirrored in her relationship to Rosedale. As she contemplates marrying him, she opens up several interpretations, one of them also suggested by Goldsmith: Rosedale's money would mean more power for Lily than the Dorsets and Trenors possess, although "that marriage would still be a source of contamination" for Lily (Goldsmith 16). Yet, while "he was sensitive to shades of difference which Miss Bart would never have credited him with perceiving" (119) for, after all, he knows what it takes to break into society and intends to have it, she cannot escape the vision of him as completely blunt, bent on material success only and deaf to her more refined artistic and spiritual needs.

1.7. American Naturalism: Determinism in The House of Mirth

Quoting Hermione Lee, the author of Wharton's extensive and detailed biography, Stone notes that Wharton, who never received formal education, educated "herself through an ambitious and strenuous programme of reading", which included philosophy, science, poetry, drama, history, and art history and has therefore acquired the "expertise of an anthropologist and social historian" (Stone 4). Referring to other Wharton's biographers, Lewis and Lawson, Pizer notes that Wharton was familiar with European naturalism. "Wharton revealed little interest in Zola's fiction", while "she did admire the German naturalist Clara Viebig's *Daily Bread*, which she read in late 1907" (Lawson qtd in Pizer 7). Another example is given by Ticien Marie Sassoubre who quotes from *The Writing of Fiction*, where Wharton praises Balzac for connecting the identity of a character to his material environment:

> [he] was the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, with all their personal hobbies and infirmities, and make the reader see them, but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other. (Wharton qtd in Sassoubre 4)

"*On the Origin of Species*" by Charles Darwin was published in 1859. Edith Wharton was familiar with Darwin's theory. Wharton's foray into determinism, marked by the "belief about the insignificance of individual will in relation to social environment" (Pizer 2), began with her short story "The Descent of Man" published in 1904, only a year before the publication of *The House of Mirth*. Marysue Schriber indicates that, having chosen this particular title for her short story, Wharton must have been familiar with the full title of Darwin's content and work, having not only built the story on Darwin's postulates, but even borrowing a part of the title from his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). In addition to the "imprisonment by society" (Pizer 3), Wharton also borrowed two main themes from Darwin: the descent of man and selection in relation to sex (Schriber 2). Schriber also points to some observations made by Blake Nevius, who claims that *The House of Mirth* is, consciously or not, "replete with suggestions of determinism" in discussing "social tyrants" and "fate" (Nevius qtd. in Schriber 2) – the idea that not God or fate, but society and its conditioning determine one's life.

In his article "Three Scenarios or Literary Darwinism" Joseph Carroll draws attention to an emerging discipline in evaluating, criticizing and analyzing literature. The fundamental method, as Carroll proposes, "is using evolutionary psychology to examine the motivations of characters in novels, plays, and (less frequently) poems, concentrating chiefly on the sexual aspects of

reproductive success but taking in also family dynamics, social dynamics, and survival issues such as acquiring resources and avoiding predators" (Carroll 3). He also draws attention to the necessity of evaluating "literary works in specific ecological and cultural environments", which is the prerequisite of accurately establishing "the interaction between genetically transmitted dispositions and specific environmental conditions" (Carroll 10).

To examine *The House of Mirth* and Wharton's notion of naturalism, the reader must be aware not only of the fundamentals of naturalism as it was translated into American literature, but also know that the critics of the time were reluctant to view *The House of Mirth* as a naturalist work. In fact, the tendencies of Wharton and Dreiser were "considered as antithetical tendencies" in early twentieth-century American literature (Pizer 1). Both Wharton and Dreiser recognize and explore the driving forces behind the deeds of their heroines. They are seeking material comfort, but respond differently to the moral implications of their acts. Though the first part of *The House of Mirth* can be read as a typical naturalist work, representing a female character that is imprisoned in a cave of social obligations and is unable to escape them because of her conditioning and genetic heritage, Wharton juxtaposes these tendencies toward the end of the novel by throwing Lily into a completely unfamiliar and foreign setting, and introducing the character of Nettie Struther that rivals Lily's beliefs and ideals.

Even at first reading, the determinism in *The House of Mirth* is quite obvious to identify. Membership in the elite group is transmitted and inherited, along with the accompanying wealth and acquisition of a set of strict moral and cultural codes: "A standard of living is of the nature of habit. It is a habitual scale and method of responding to given stimuli" (Veblen 71). As the quintessence of a leisure class woman, Lily cannot think of anything that is "more dreadful" than poverty. She is "not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty" (27), which is logical considering her family tree and the atmosphere of luxury in which she was brought up:

> A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly-ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be

> spent, grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense--such was the setting of Lily Bart's first memories. (30)

Lily's first memories are evidence of a busy social life, an army of servants, spending sprees and expensive holidays which formed her scornful attitude toward poverty and dinginess. From early on, she was taught by her mother that "whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called "'decently dressed'" (31). The role of the male as the money-maker and the woman as the consumer of that money in order to show the pecuniary success of her husband in their household has already been discussed in relation to marriage. Those are the roles that Lily's parents assume as well. Lily views her father as a man with whom she has little contact and who brings in the money and occasionally joins them for dinner. There is no doubt that Mrs. Bart is doing an exceptional job in fulfilling her role of the consumer of her husband's money; whenever there was even a slightest chance that the pecuniary success was not displayed well enough, there would be "cabling to Paris for an extra dress or two, and telephoning to the jeweler that he might, after all, send home the turquoise bracelet which Mrs. Bart had looked at that morning" (31). Thus, it is no wonder that Lily "imbibed the idea that if people lived like pigs it was from choice, and through the lack of any proper standard of conduct" (31). In those formative years of her childhood, she acquires the air of superiority which stems from her unlimited access to material wealth. Very soon she begins to, independently of her mother, "foster her naturally lively taste for splendor" (31). She also begins to disdain everyone who, by Lily's conviction, chose to live like pigs; and probably most tragically, "knowing very little of the value of money" (32).

After her father's financial breakdown, "to his wife he no longer counted; he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose" (34). Ominously, she warns Lily that despite the pity she feels for her father now, she will "feel differently when you see what he has done to us" (34). Probably not even Mrs. Bart could fathom the full extent of her prediction, and in this context it seems completely implausible that Lily had ever had any chance of a happier ending. What her parents did to her was to raise a person completely unable to function on her own. Hereby Wharton underlines the determinism, where the upbringing features prominently and is often viewed as an incapacitating factor impairing a character to lead a functional life and possibly leading to that character's demise. Lily describes the beginning of her own demise, when she states that it started:

> in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no—I won't blame anybody for my faults: I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the

> homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses! (220)

With no inherited money and no way of providing for herself, Lily is completely what Selden calls "the victim of the civilization which had produced her" (9). The society has imposed its attitudes and manners, so much so that the luxurious background for Lily "is the only climate she could breathe in" (27).

Wharton then introduces Nettie Struther, who at first glance is a clever plotting technique for Wharton to contrast Lily's world to that of a lower class, as well as to portray the working class life. Furthermore, as observed by Donald Pizer, in the character of Nettie, Wharton finds expression for her "antithetical tendencies" to the strict determinism so fundamental to literary naturalism. When they first meet, Nettie is described as "one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anemic parentage; one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into [the] social refuse-heap" (313). After a failed relationship which did not result in a marriage and a serious illness, upon their next meeting, Nettie is in a much better condition: "Nettie Struther's frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy; whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle" (313). Lily and Nettie have undergone similar trials, with the difference that Nettie has risen, while Lily is continuously sinking lower. Therefore, Pizer concludes, "if Nettie can triumph in the face of the physical and social handicaps which are hers from birth, this victory is also possible for Lily within her own seeming manacles of environmental conditioning" (Pizer 4). Nettie is, indeed, proof enough that one's natural predetermination is not conclusive and is possible to escape. The difference is, for Pizer, "not an absolute distinction but a relative one. Unlike Lily, Nettie has both a sufficiently powerful will and the providential actuality of a man willing to take a chance on her" (Pizer 4).

According to Pizer, Wharton is to a certain extent concurrently defying (but never denying) the notion that one cannot escape the manacles of a predetermined fate. That, claims Pizer, is the main difference between Wharton and her contemporary naturalists. Possibly, while confronting the siege of a new industrial bourgeoisie, Wharton witnessed the American Dream taking shape and must have wondered whether, after all, it would also be possible for women to "reinvent" themselves.

1.8. "Republic of Spirit": The Old New York Morality and Manners

One of Darwin's main postulates was the existence of a "moral sense or conscience" that sets apart the human race from lower animals (Schriber 2). He argued that this conscience, to some extent learned and acquired, is still rivaled by individual wishes, self-evaluation and the need to pass the judgment of peers. This theory can serve as a perfect description of Lily's inner turmoil. "Society is a revolving body which is apt to be judged according to its place in each man's heaven" (50), and no one knows that better than Lily. As her fate turns from better to worse, so does her attitude change from blind admiration and fierce endeavors to break in into bitterness and disgust toward the society that dismissed her so easily. Lily is relentless in her crave for money and prestige; yet, there are moral codes that she refuses to break and manners she refuses to obey. However, manners do not equal morality, but, on the contrary, serve as a disguise for deep moral corruption. Selden says that he does not

> underrate the decorative side of life. It seems to me the sense of splendour has justified itself by what it has produced. The worst of it is that so much human nature is used up in the process. If we're all the raw stuff of the cosmic effects, one would rather be the fire that tempers a sword than the fish that dyes a purple cloak. And a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple! (70)

The negative connotation of manners comes to show in Bertha's breach of faith. Trenor's manners just prevent him from raping Lily, even though the event in his home results in her conspicuously breaking the social creed by leaving his house alone late at night. As will be shown, the rumors this entails lead to her ruin in the eyes of society: "A breach of faith may be condoned but a breach of decorum cannot. Manners maketh man" (Veblen 34). "Manners," as Veblen defines them, "are in part an elaboration of gesture, and in part they are symbolical and conventionalized survivals, representing former acts of dominance or of personal service or of personal contact. In large part they are an expression of the relation of status, — a symbolic pantomime of mastery on the one hand and of subservience on the other" (Veblen 33). In Lily's world, they are called manners of the drawing-room where the drawing-room represents an inherited, archaic, but still legitimate social creed. All these manners have a very pragmatic function, which is to emphasize the leisure and impose an air of authority and superiority. They serve to show their possessor's honor and "brilliance of mind" which does not bother with vulgar trifles; manners are the expression of the "decorative instinct" instilled on the privileged, and "the accepted canons of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed, as well as in the decorous employment

of his time and effort" (Veblen 77). Appearance, such as in dress, is the most effective way of showing off one's conformism and pecuniary success because "our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance" (Veblen 112). Aside from showing that one has the means to consume freely, by bringing up examples such as corsets and high heels, Veblen notes how completely inappropriate and uncomfortable such dressing is in doing any sort of physical labor; therefore it also signalizes the leisure status of its wearer. The apparel also has to demonstrate conformism to "established usage", and one's compliance to "accredited standards of taste and reputability" (Veblen 113).

Manners extend much further than appropriate visiting hours, seating arrangements or smart dresses. Their imperative is decency, nobility and compliance to codes established and implemented by society. An individual is required to "accept and practice the standard of living which is in vogue", and the "agreeable and expedient" way of living is one which is "indispensable to personal comfort and to success in life" (Veblen 75). Lily wants to be and do what everybody does, even when it is contradictory in itself: "Everybody smokes at Bellomont," says Selden, and Lily rebuts, "Yes--but it is not considered becoming in a *jeune fille a marie*r; and at the present moment I am a *jeune fille a marie*r" (69).

The same applies for playing bridge; among Lily's friends "it's quite the custom for girls to play for money" (124). It is an effective way to be conspicuously wasteful, but Lily cannot afford to play and lose as much money as her rich friends do; yet, she feels compelled to, lest she becomes one of the "poky people" (128), as Mrs. Trenor calls them. A vice becomes a socially accepted indicator of good taste; all in order to show off one's pecuniary success. Lily's wish to conform leads to complications when Gryce is scared off, and into disgrace when Mrs. Peniston refuses to cover her debts.

To maintain her place within the leisure class, Lily must comply with the more liberal and "wasteful" lifestyle of her rich friends, even though she cannot afford it. Talking to Gerty, she confesses how much humiliation there is in her position:

> You think we live on the rich, rather than with them: and so we do, in a sense--but it's a privilege we have to pay for! We eat their dinners, and drink their wine, and smoke their cigarettes, and use their carriages and their opera-boxes and their private cars--yes, but there's a tax to pay on every one of those luxuries. The man pays it by big tips to the servants, by playing cards beyond his means, by flowers and presents--and--and--lots of other things that cost; the girl pays it by tips and cards too--oh, yes, I've had to take up bridge again--and by going to the best dress-makers, and having

> just the right dress for every occasion, and always keeping herself fresh and exquisite and amusing! (259)

Manners determine what is good, expedient and convenient, and they are set by individuals who have enough power to impose their own ideas of what is good, bad, right and wrong. Despite her carefully constructed web of manipulations to enter a profitable marital union and assert herself as indispensable, Lily never resorts to unfair or dirty actions. Even when she is given the chance for vindication against Bertha, who never pauses to think of moral implications of her conduct, Lily refuses to blackmail her because it goes against her moral standards. It is hard to define where exactly Lily stands on the moral scale. Her breeding and manners have imprinted on her a strong sense of nobility and honor, but as previous examples have shown, manners often exclude morality. Carry tries to define Lily's personality by saying "I think it's just flightiness--and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (185). Lily confirms the dichotomy when she says that it is "easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region" (255).

Lily's morality is greatly put to test when Mrs. Haffen, the char-woman, tries to sell her Bertha's letters to Selden. At first Lily recoils before "the kind of vileness of which people whispered, but which she had never thought of as touching her own life" (102-03). The power that these letters could give her cause ambivalent feelings in her; at first she feels "a confused sense of triumph", and then the more prominent disgust. Lily's "instinctive resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against the other feeling" (103). Lily thereby contradicts her previous statement that she was not raised with a sentiment of regard for others. Even though she convinces herself that she wants to protect Selden, her hesitance poses a question: is her selfishness expressed only in relation to the dingy and poor, but is tamed before people from whom Lily could profit, financially or emotionally? Even more so, she does not use the letters to terminally burn bridges with Bertha, but rather contemplates using them as an instrument of reconciliation. Furthermore, if she does form a sort of reconciliation with Bertha, there is still something to be gained -- a moral superiority by avoiding the public scandal -- and something to keep Bertha in her power even when the letters are disposed of. Apparently, Lily is not a stranger to finer ways of turning the conditions to her advantage, but she has also mastered disguise so expertly to make morally less favorable events never even betray a hint of her own corruption. Lily's genius, as Selden calls it, "lies in converting impulses into intentions" (67).

The complexity of Lily's character seems to show Wharton's attitude toward the New York society that she at the same time condemned and wanted to uphold. There are references to the crumbling of an empire, not in financial terms, due to all the newcomers, but rather of a decline of

honor, morality and decency. On the other hand, Wharton's nostalgia for the Old New York as she knew it is embodied in Lily who trusts that events will take a turn for the better and disdains the philistinism of her "friends".

The same duality of sentiments is accomplished in Selden's belief in a "republic of spirit". The republic of spirit is Selden's idea of success, to be free from "everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (68). Lily feels the lure of this republic, but, according to Selden, Lily will not easily find the way into that republic because she wants to marry someone rich, and "it's as hard for rich people to get into as the kingdom of heaven" (68). Marrying someone rich is Lily's main goal in life, and at the same time she yearns to be free from her materialism. She is concurrently experiencing very conflicting emotions: the approval for her way of life, and resentment toward it. The notion of personal freedom is not completely incomprehensible to Lily, but it is unattainable under given circumstances. Selden tells her that there are sign-posts as long as one knows where to look. Lily was not raised to look for freedom, but for material stability. The two are mutually exclusive, according to Selden. Lily finds the idea contradictory in its core: "That's unjust, I think, because, as I understand it, one of the conditions of citizenship is not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it" (68). Her point of view is that of a leisure class, denoting conspicuous waste without conspicuous materialism. Lily admonishes Selden, "You spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of" (69). In a sense, so does Lily; her internal ambivalence toward the life that was chosen for her is a recurring theme in the novel. The difference consists in the fact that Selden, as a man, has privileges that are denied to Lily. He presents to her a "republic" that she never could enter, even if it were not for the prominent materialistic streak in her. The society would not condemn Selden's bachelor status, while Lily experiences all the hazards of being an unmarried girl.

Eventually, Selden proves to be quite a hypocrite and as susceptible to the mechanisms of the society as Lily. Lily is to him what she is to all other men in *The House of Mirth*, and what every woman was to every man in the old New York society: a commodity that costs a great deal of money, a doll to decorate the house with, and an interesting and entertaining spectacle to watch.

The power that society holds over an individual's fate turns fatal for Lily when Berta accuses her of wanting to marry her husband. Gossip and slander are not a rare occurrence in Lily's circle of acquaintances. Every step is scrutinized, and reported in gossip supplements such as *Town Talk*. Even abroad, everything is closely monitored in the *Notes from the Riviera*. Lily gives the example of her cousin Grace Stepney whose "mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an

inexorable memory''(120). During a round of gossip where Judy reports to Lily who said what to whom, she adds, "They're all alike, you know: they hold their tongues for years, and you think you're safe, but when their opportunity comes they remember everything'' (76). The opportunity comes when Lily is seen leaving Trenor's house late at night, and suddenly everyone remembers that Lily had close connections to Van Alstyne, a cousin from whom she borrowed money. Lily's fragile reputation is destroyed when the very influential Bertha fuels the fire. Everyone follows the lead and Lily is accused without ever having a chance to defend herself.

Lily is aware of the force she is battling, most probably having herself participated in more than one round of gossip. She admits that she ''knew every turn of the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood . . . in her set such gossip was not unusual, and a handsome girl who flirted with a married man was merely assumed to be pressing to the limit of her opportunities" (109). Lily is not difficult to target at all, and she is well-aware of her own missteps and her walking a thin line:

> That was what she was "there for": it was the price she had chosen to pay for three months of luxury and freedom from care. Her habit of resolutely facing the facts, in her rare moments of introspection, did not now allow her to put any false gloss on the situation. She had suffered for the very faithfulness with which she had carried out her part of the tacit compact, but the part was not a handsome one at best, and she saw it now in all the ugliness of failure. (222)

With as many circumstantial evidence at hand, society is more prone to believe the gossip than to hear the truth. Being a woman, an unmarried and poor one, Lily's word does not hold much value: ''What is truth?' Lily asks. 'Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house'" (220). She also continues by saying that "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks''(220). Hence, Lily is aware that her position is so pitiable that not only is she slandered, but also blamed for every insinuation. It is particularly hurtful that these insinuations against a woman come from other women: "It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made'' (125).

CONCLUSION

The House of Mirth is a thematically complex novel with just as complex characters. It deals with many issues related to the upper-class society of the nineteenth century. Edith Wharton examines all the driving forces of her society with equal objectivity. Scholars have often argued about what position Wharton assumes as she depicted "old New York society". She neither fundamentally condemned nor did she appraise that closed universe and, logically, it cannot be conclusively established that Edith Wharton was completely supporting or deprecating it in its entirety. This duality is expressed in many ways in *The House of Mirth.* Lily's fate is an interplay of many contradicting expectations and aspirations, her own and those of society. Lily wants to get married, yet she herself destroys what little chance she has. She is at times manipulating and calculating, only to succumb to a moment of impulsiveness and destroy her carefully calculated plans. The society that apparently rests on honor and decency proves to be deeply corrupt in the moral sense. Carrie Fisher and Bertha Dorset, generally disapproved of by society, do not suffer the same consequences as Lily does, even though their behavior is much worse. Despite her never-ending attempts to live just like her rich friends and truly belong, Lily never manages to. On the outset of the novel she is close to having what it takes, yet she remains on the threshold between the "old" and the "new". Lily is never equal with her rich friends. She is constantly the "other", not only in the most obvious gender terms, but in financial terms as well. In comparison to Nettie Struther Lily ends up to be the less fortunate one. Even compared to Rosedale, who is also the "other" because of his race, Lily becomes the rejected one.

In this paper I have examined many dichotomies. The first dichotomy, and one of the most prominent themes in *The House of Mirth*, is the division between the "old money" and the "new money" societies. The former earned their wealth through property investments made by first New England settlers. It was inherited and maintained through many generations, and the members of these families were considered to be the real leisure class. The "new money", on the other hand, came from business investments on the stock market and was prompted mostly by rising industrialization and capitalism. The "new rich" seek to identify themselves with the most respectable leisure class families given that their wealth often exceeds that of the "old money". However, they do not have the inherited manners and customs that define the lives of the leisure class. They are therefore considered less worthy, vulgar and odd. They are also feared because they pose a threat to the previous scheme of economic power. The "old money" loses its power before the "new money", which is why it is firmly holding on to old creeds and establishments. Still, the

leisure class occasionally accepts new members into their circle if they realize that they could profit from their acquaintance. This allows Simon Rosedale and the Gormers to fulfill their social-climbing aspirations.

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the leisure class is the "conspicuous consumption of waste and time", as Thorstein Veblen calls it. This means that wealth should be put on display for everyone to see its owner's pecuniary success. The newly rich often went to extremes. They invented new ways to show off their wealth, and make everything public. Consequently, their behavior also attracted a lot of attention. It was very easy to fall prey to gossip and slander, which could completely ruin one's reputation. One such example from *The House of Mirth* is Lily who is accused of flirting with a married man. Not only does she lose all her credibility in society, but she also loses her inheritance. Her being a woman makes her even more susceptible to gossip. As opposed to Lily, there are other women who are being talked about such as Bertha Dorset or Carry Fisher, but society does not punish them as harshly as it does Lily because they are either married or rich.

Marriage is the only way for a woman to be a respected member of society. The role of a woman within a marital unity is chiefly ornamental. Within her domestic sphere, she "conspicuously consumes" her husband's wealth. She is not to be concerned with money and business. She is reduced to a very child-like existence, and her concerns are mostly trivial. She is also denied the right to express herself as an individual. Therefore, all the power and respect that she has in society stem from her husband's money. Lily's attitude toward marriage is divided between her wish to get married, as she was taught that this is the only way for a woman to succeed and her wish to be free and independent. Oftentimes these two contradictory wishes cross and, as a result, she fails in her pursuit of marriage. Similarly, there are two different standards for women and men regarding marriage. Selden can choose to stay a bachelor, whereas Gerty Farrish is ridiculed for the same lifestyle.

Lily's upbringing and conditioning also pose a problem when she begins to work. Having spent all her life removed from work and industry, she fails to perform even the simplest duties. Her failure as a member of the labor class can be read in more than one way. Firstly, having been shaped for a life of leisure, she cannot function in a working environment. The fact that she was raised in that manner implies that her failure is not her fault entirely. Secondly, despite her initial resolve to prove to her environment that she can provide for herself, Lily is reluctant to work, even refusing to do the easiest task in the millinery - to model hats on the sale floor. Her resolve quickly wavers and she seemingly takes the easier way out- she accepts her job failure and takes solace in opium.

Lily's passivity is opposed to the character of Nettie Struther, a working girl who succeeds in life despite all the hardships that she went through. If Nettie was able to escape the chains of a pre-determined fate, Lily should be able to do the same. Nettie therefore shows Wharton's conception of Darwin's theory of predisposition and determinism. Nettie is also the opposite to the image of a working woman; she is neither vulgar nor masculine, but a tender mother and wife with a warm and clean home.

Simon Rosedale, on the other hand, is presented as truthful to the image of his race. He is chiefly concerned with money and possesses his race's ability in matters of finance. Rosedale also shows the cynicism of the elite that at first rejects him based on his race and him being the so-called "new rich".

In addition to being a wonderfully written novel with multi-dimensional and sympathetic characters, *The House of Mirth* is also a testament of a lifestyle and an era. It is also an author's exploration of her own world, a study of the people and conditions that she saw around herself, all of which make *The House of Mirth* a timeless novel.

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