GETTING INTO THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

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Abstract

The text presents an analysis of the novel *The House of Mirth*, by the American writer Edith Wharton, focusing not only on the issue of gender, which has predominated among critics of the novel, but also on the way the writer elaborates a critique of the precepts of the period through the use of words that refer to business and commerce, thus mirroring the world view of the American society of the nineteenth-century.
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Resumo

O texto apresenta uma leitura do romance *The House of Mirth*, da escritora americana Edith Wharton, enfocando não somente a questão de gênero, que tem predominado entre os críticos do romance, mas também a forma como a escritora elabora uma crítica dos preceitos da época através de uma linguagem que remete a negócios e comércio, espelho da visão de mundo da alta sociedade americana do século XIX.

Around the time when Edith Wharton publishes *The House of Mirth* (1905), a cluster of novels appears approaching from different angles a constellation of anxiety-provoking historical developments: physical mobility, as many move from country to city and from country

to country, swelling the population of centers like New York and Chicago with the poor, the foreign, and the displaced; social mobility, as economic shifts endanger established social hierarchies; economic instabilities, visible in the violent swings of financial booms and busts; instabilities in gender relations. *The House of Mirth* takes on some of these from the vantage point, and through a dissection of Old New York society.

It is not always stated in these terms, yet the novel is about cultural anxieties; mostly, critics see their expression in terms of gender. Even Margot Norris's deconstructive argument leads her to the conclusion that Edith Wharton is making a feminist point. Yet, if the novel seems to show a way of handling instabilities, while in the same process embedding them into its own fabric, such instabilities may just as well be matters of class rather than – or in addition to – matters of gender; the specific nature of the problem does not necessarily affect the structure of its treatment. That the novel dramatizes conceptual gaps may be the reason why it is so often read as self-contradictory or double, the doubleness generally found in a genre conflict between its "realism" and its "sentimentality;" or, as Norris has it, in "the radical instabilities of the text's own interpretive positions" (432). These contradictions and instabilities are customarily seen as represented, or embodied, in the figure of Lily Bart.

Lily combines, in lethal proportions, as Elaine Showalter shows, the moral scruples of the romance heroine and the conviction that the world has to be engaged on its own terms for its own rewards which are always redolent of a cynicism utterly incompatible with romance. According to the morality of romance, the heroine must hold out against the temptations and evils of the world – thus shown to be morally unsatisfactory – so that, after sufficient suffering and suspense, she can be rewarded with the love of the man she loves, thus showing that the world is not as bad after all, if approached with the right principles. And Lily has the right principles, when it goes down to the wire. However, she is not unwilling to engage in the business of the world – business being the novel's carrying metaphor, which Wharton underlines with the barrage of terms from commerce and finance that

critics have repeatedly noted. Thus the character and actions of Lily Bart are infinitely suggestive and interesting to the critics, who take for granted the premise that the world crushes her in various ways. However, there is also the possibility, opened up in the novel, though not stressed – since Wharton herself does not seem to like it much – that this cruel world can be, and in fact is at times, handled without having to be destroyed or abandoned, and without in turn destroying those who go up against it. Several characters point in that direction, but the most interesting one is Simon Rosedale, the Jewish social climber and one of Lily's suitors; others are Lawrence Selden, whom Lily comes to love; Gerty Farish, who is well-born but neither beautiful nor rich, and thus excluded from the society of which Wharton speaks, and Carry Fisher, who might today be termed a facilitator and has found a niche occupation in easing into that society those whose social mobility fuels some of the anxieties that move the novel. Carry's clients introduce a sense of disorder into the presumably ordered world of wealth and privilege precisely because they throw into question the assumptions about social place whose foundations are cast into strong relief when we first see Lily.

The action opens when Lily Bart is seen alone, on the streets of New York. She is, at the same time, moving independently and subject to the gaze of a man, who appreciates her, more or less as an object: Selden's eyes are "refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart," whom he descries "in the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station," (25) that is, at one of the nodal points through which passes the flow of travelers whose movements, though orderly in detail, become destabilizing in the larger picture. And as a matter of fact, Lily is "out of order:" it is the season when people of her station should not be where she is, should not be in transit, but stably settled in the resort spots that house the rich for the summer.

Lily's next move, a visit to Selden's apartment, places her out of order in relation to rules governing the behavior of gender, rather than that of class. And there too she is spotted by the gaze of a man, Mr. Rosedale, "glossy-looking," the social-climbing "plump rosy man, of

the blond Jewish type," (35) who will also, like Selden, play an important role in the unfolding events of the novel and of Lily's life.

The displacement of Lily at the beginning of the novel allows Wharton to examine the conditions of "placement." In the process, she also operates the customary conflation between ideology, necessity, and morality that are such a hallmark of the novel form itself. Lily's decline, which is what the novel traces, happens because she, first, does not conform to the behaviors that would place her in a stable position in relation to the class where she belongs; and, second, because she shows, through her refusal to conform, combined with the sympathy requested from, and mostly granted by the reader, that such behaviors are not always justifiable as leading either to personal satisfaction or to moral growth.[1]

By birth, if not by wealth, Lily belongs among the New York aristocracy. However, the personal characteristics of her parents: her father's artistic temperament, averse to, or incapable of, doing the business that would keep the family solvent, and her mother's carelessness with money, have jeopardized her position. At the beginning of the novel, approaching the age of 30, Lily is trying to show the kind of enterprise her parents were lacking, in the business of establishing herself in life. It is made clear that her capital are her looks and youth, both waning.[2] And the question is whether she will be able to parlay them into the position that she thinks (and we are made to think) ought to be hers. However, it seems there is only one business, it seems, open to her, namely, marriage to a rich man. The way Wharton sets up the game gives the force of necessity to Lily's enterprise, but at the same time shows the rift in the system where she operates: if class is a given, then Rosedale is out of order in trying to penetrate it and Lily does not need to work in order to stay in it. Yet, both need to apply themselves. Lily's mistake then is to believe the ideology of class – which, in a sense in which it is often used, ideology is by definition unstated – and therefore not to develop the purposefulness that Rosedale knows is important, or even to see the need not to be passive in her ambition.

In the train that she eventually takes at Grand Central Station, Lily meets up with the young man whom she intends to catch. He is rich and

boring and full of self-conceit. He is also obsessed by "Americana," the newly valuable remains of a newly valued American past, and she had the foresight to gather information about them from Selden, to be prepared to make conversation. She has the young man in her pocket, almost, the conquest to be completed at the house where both are spending the weekend. But on an impulse, during the weekend, she offends his sensibilities. She ought to have known better. The reader, persuaded by the terms in which Wharton offers her dilemma, is left between regret that Lily has muffed a chance to establish herself, and pleasure that she has not sold herself. There is, however, a conflict of values at play: the values of commerce and those of sensibility; the beauty of Wharton's emplotting is that either can be identified with morality. After all, it is not proper for a young lady to be willful; as for selling herself, that is never put in quite those terms by the characters or even by the author, except as she ascribes the sentiment to Rosedale expresses the sentiment, when he tells Lily that he would like to have her and that he had never gone up to the counter without expecting to pay for the valuable he wanted. The implication is that for such a one as Rosedale, anything would be buyable or saleable.

Earlier, when Lily is seen by Rosedale leaving Selden's apartment, she considers that "if she had had the presence of mind to let Rosedale drive her to the station, the concession might have purchased his silence"; this would have worked because "he had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values." When it is identified with a stereotypically Jewish affinity for commerce, an expression of the valuation of Lily's company in monetary terms is acceptable (15).[3] (Yet Selden too had thought of her as "expensive.") By placing it in this context, Wharton is able to both state the pervasiveness and even necessity of such an appraisal, and at the same time condemn it as improper in the world of proper feeling and proper values. She thus introduces a slippage in he concept of "value" that underlies, and thus destabilizes the rest of the value statements and judgments in the novel.[4]

This slippage works itself out in the social position that Lily tries to firm up for herself. It is a slippery position, as we ascertain as soon as she

reaches her goal that afternoon. She is a guest, but is soon roped into performing the services of a secretary, helping her hostess to address invitations and keep track of the practical details of a social life of which, were she poorer, she would not know, and were she wealthier, she would control the inner workings. For work is precisely what she must not do, and if she does it, must pretend she is not.[5] Work, in her position not only is devalued; it devalues her. At the same time, her pursuit of Mr. Percy Gryce takes on the character of a job, for which she prepares herself and to which she gives her full attention.[6] As she gains his confidence on the train ride to Bellomont, Wharton's language turns to economics once again: Lily inquires about his latest purchases of Americana, his only interest, and shows, "once more... her talent for profiting by the unexpected," namely her visit to Selden and the information she had gathered to gain the favor of her prey, who is to provide her with a lasting livelihood. Her work on the train is an investment.

However, Lily has trouble with investments. We learn, soon after she arrives at Bellomont, that she has taken to playing bridge for high stakes. Now this too is to an extent a business transaction, in the sense that her losses make it possible for her in a way to repay the hospitality on which she relies both to shelter her properly throughout the summer and to put her in the way of marriageable and rich young men. On the other hand, if she loses too much, which she has been doing, she will not be able to repay her debt, a debt of honor the payment of which cannot be delayed. At the end of the first evening, Lily has very few dollars left in her purse. She is lucky that the company knows and approves of her design on young Gryce, who does not approve of gambling, and so she is let off the table. Yet her poverty leads her to make another move in the direction of securing funds, on which, more than on any other incident in the novel, hinges the rest of her future. For she is not brought down so much by her failure to secure Percy Gryce or by her waffling on whether she will throw in her fate with Selden, who eventually abandons his aloofness and admits that he loves her, but by having asked Gus Trenor, the husband of her hostess, to invest some money for her.

We have already learned that having money is a necessary, though not sufficient condition for belonging among the Old New York society. We have also verified that though money – and its operation – constitutes the metaphoric structure of Wharton's account of that society, the rules governing the expression of its operation are strict and gender-coded and one of them forbids open discussion of the system's operation. In effect, Wai-chee Dimock has noted that though there is little representation of actual business in the novel, commerce dominates not only its metaphorical structure, but also its representation of social interaction, which seems to function only in market terms: dinner invitations are worth half a million in market tips, and Lily has to pay constantly for what she does or fails to do, at a fluctuating rate set by those in power, whether they be Trenor, Bertha Dorset, Rosedale or even Selden, though he appears as one of the more appealing men in the novel. It is then to be expected that social rules for the handling of money will come into most complicated play in the transaction between Lily and Gus Trenor.

Judy Trenor keeps a sharp eye on her husband's finances; other women of that social circle are perfectly aware of what their husbands are worth, how to get to their money and what to do with it – however, they don't let on to that interest or ability. When Lily confesses that she understands nothing of the market, of investments, or of the handling and production of money, she is quite truthful; she takes the coded words and silences about money at face value, and believes that a woman has no business knowing about business. Thus Trenor can take her confession of ignorance to be simply an expression of the socially expected feminine incompetence in matters of money, easily dismissed coming from a girl no longer so young, who has lived pretty much on her own for so long, and thus also he can agree to transfer relatively large sums to her without, so to speak, naming the game he thinks they are playing. It is, as far as he is concerned, an investment, or, one could say, a down payment on Lily's favors. At this point, Lily, who has been so reluctant to put herself on the block for the prize of marriage, has effectively put herself on the block for quite a different price, of which she is unaware.

But in commerce there is no understanding for such obliviousness; the rules of commerce do not make allowance for ignorance. On the contrary, as Wharton clearly knows, they punish it severely.

The punishment for Lily is the loss of her capital. As it becomes known to the social circle where she wants to stay that she, an unmarried woman (a married woman has greater leeway, so long as the husband does not object), has received money from a married man, two conclusions are possible, given the rules governing such commerce: either she has delivered the goods that such a transaction demands and the sexual currency in which she was able to trade is spent, or she has not, and her credit is gone. In either case, she becomes tainted. When, furthermore, Trenor tricks her to visit him when he is alone, Selden sees her as she leaves his house, late at night – where he is known to be alone – and, with his customary obtuseness where she is concerned, thinks "the worst."[7]

However, if Lily rebels – or defies the prevailing custom – (as Dimmock argues [787-88]), by insisting on paying fair price, and is crushed by the unfair prices that Bertha or Trenor impose on her, it is also the case that, just as she refuses to learn the rules and use them to her own advantage, she also refuses to leave the game which plays by such unfair rules. What she wants is contained in the society that functions according to these rules. However, she will not abide by them. Though Wharton more or less skews the terms by making alternatives seem utterly unappealing, it is still the case that she flanks Lily with two characters who offer such alternatives, Gerty and Rosedale.

That both are presented negatively is significant, but for each in a different way. Gerty opts out of the system in which Lily lives (or circumstances make her opt out; she is not shown to have a choice although her actions indicate that she is not particularly interested in the life that Lily leads). In effect, with her charity work, she is palliating some of the harm done by the powerful, by those who are at the top of the scale. At the same time, unlike Lily, she does not lack human connection: when Lily does not know what to do with herself in the summer, when all her options seem exhausted, Gerty still has a relative

who takes her to the seaside; and she also has the gratitude and admiration, if not the equal-to-equal friendship of the girls she tends. Nevertheless, Lily is not entirely wrong when she sees her operating from a lack; that becomes clear to us when Gerty realizes that though she is in love with Selden, his attention to her is nothing but a desire to learn about Lily from her.

Rosedale, however, is a different matter. But it is necessary to read somewhat against the grain of the novel and also of much of the criticism of it in order to gain perspective on his role. Reading against the grain is warranted, however, by certain indications that the novel seems incapable of not giving – it is as if Wharton did not like what she saw as the logical conclusion of the terms she herself had set up. But in order to get at this conclusion one must begin by discarding the reading of Lily as a noble victim of the cruel capitalist world that was gaining strength around her. And one also needs to read past the question of the anti-semitism in the portrayal of Rosedale.

He is introduced as a member of "the race" whose genetic make-up fits him especially well for functioning in the world of capital. As Dimock points out, "the power of the marketplace . . . resides . . . in its ability to assimilate everything into its domain . . ." and make it so that "even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions" (783). But while criticism deplores this state of affairs, Rosedale does not fight against it; on the contrary, every time he proposes to Lily, he expresses himself in terms of business transactions, without thinking that this form of address precludes his being attracted to her person. Rosedale takes the world of business so much for granted, in fact, that he, of all the characters in the novel is the only one who can afford to step out of its parameters. Or rather, he knows its workings so well that he is the only one who can conceive of working close to its outer boundaries, and trying to make that serve his purposes. He is the only one who is able to see how those commodified social transactions against which generations of readers and critics have spoken – as well as various characters in the novel itself – might be made to fulfill his desires. He is the only character willing to pluck Lily out of the

descending spiral in which she seems so inevitably caught, and bring her back up into the life to which she has told herself she aspires. That he is not able to do so has nothing in the end to do with the functioning of the marketplace and everything to do with Lily's inability to see that her opposition to such forces is one of the things that permits their smooth functioning.

For it is in the story of Lily and Rosedale that Wharton shows, whether on purpose or not, that the smooth take-over of all human relationships by the marketplace, the way in which it manages to pervade all social transactions, depends on the lingering ideals of a world outside the marketplace so well represented in Lily Bart. Lily's noble sacrifice of her reputation, her livelihood, and finally her life for a non-mercenary definition of self, and for the love of an oblivious Selden is precisely what allows predators like Bertha Dorset to survive and prosper. Rosedale is right that if she simply shows Bertha's incriminating, adulterous letters around, the woman will not be destroyed or even daunted: she has shown often enough she has the lack of scruples that will, in most cases, carry her through a crisis where she would be thought of necessity to founder. However, the combination of Lily's letters and Rosedale's wealth would be able to bring her down in the sense that she would have to sponsor Lily's social rehabilitation. In effect, playing by the rules of the marketplace will bring about justice, and at the same time get Lily the rich husband she thought she wanted. Not only a rich husband, but one who appreciates her and values her much more than any of the other men on whom she has set her cap – he would in fact, make her what she thought Gryce should have: "the one possession in which he took . . . pride" (65); "sufficient pride to spend money on it," as the passage continues; but Rosedale, unlike Gryce, is not averse to spending money in general, though he makes sure that he will get as much as he paid for. Not only that, by the time when Rosedale makes his final offer, Lily has come to see him in a very different light from that in which he appeared to her at the beginning of the novel – when, as we learn, "[i]n her little set [he] had been pronounced 'impossible'" (37). She has seen him playing affectionately

with a child, and she has seen that he can be hurt and offended by what she says – that, if pricked he bleeds, in other words. In short, she is starting to overcome the view of him as that "unctuous" member of the "race" she was so displeased to see when she left Selden's apartment house at the beginning of the novel; the anti-semitic characterization that follows him in the narrative voice throughout is pierced by some of Lily's perceptions. Yet she is not able either to overcome her distaste completely or to see that in comparison with him, Selden is not only cowardly in the way in which he approaches life in general, but also niggardly in his relations with her.[8]

Because the novel never shows Rosedale doing anything particularly reprehensible (and his scheme of blackmailing Bertha sounds, under the circumstances, benign, if not outright charitable, given the brutality with which she has always used any weapons handy against Lily), and on the contrary, apart from physical descriptions never has anything particularly bad to say about him, it becomes possible to read his figure, not, as has generally been done, as representative of the heartlessness of the business world, whose negative qualities he is seen to embody, but as the one character who is able to be successful in it and also to exercise some decency.[9] And if one thinks of Rosedale in this manner, it also becomes clear that it is not circumstances, or the new market economy, that are responsible for the negative view of the overall society in which the novel moves as somehow decayed from an earlier, more humane state, but the way in which the novel itself is set up that forces that conclusion.[10] For it is in general negative toward the characters who either are still working and thus not embedded in its mores or who are not completely a part of its ethos. It is thus only very late in the proceedings that we find out that Carry Fisher not only has a private life, outside of the tutoring of society wannabes with which she earns her living, but also a child (she is the only character, apart from the Van Osburgh mother, of the previous generation, seen to care for offspring) whom she fiercely defends against the incursions of her clients' world.[11] She too belongs to the small number of people ready to

help Lily throughout and despite her maddening incompetence or obtuseness. And there too, Lily proves unable to follow through.

However, critical judgment of Lily is not negative, perhaps because of what Diana Trilling sees as her "doomed struggle to subdue that part in her own nature that is no better than her culture," which, still according to Trilling, makes of her one of the great heroines in fiction, one who, like Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary shows the ultimate triumph of spirit over good sense. At the same time, Trilling also acknowledges that, if Lily is a rebel, "she lacks the harsh consistency without which rebellion is exposed as a weakness" (109).

What remains to be seen then is why Wharton and her readers insist on considering Lily a victim and on making the novel into an indictment of commerce.[12] In effect, the novel presents an entirely convincing argument for the inadequacy of a romantic and nostalgic model of society as embodied in the aesthetics and the morality of Lily Bart – and at the same time, an equally convincing demonstration of the enduring attraction of such a model. Insofar as one is seduced by Lily, and sympathetic to her suffering, insofar as one considers Lawrence Selden as an acceptable hero and regrets that he does not "get the girl," one buys into this model. However, Wharton is also an honest enough novelist and observer to embed into her novel the counter-argument to that alluring view. It is as part of that counter-argument that one should consider the virtues of Rosedale and the defects of Selden;[13] the accumulated evidence that the working characters are shunted off while the brutal ones are given central stage, as well as their treatment of Lily, convince the readers of her victimhood. Bertha Dorset and those who condone her become then the proper representation of an age that derives its aura of brutality from their actions, rather than from the connivance of those who wish to join their world. The fact that the latter are reluctant to pay the price of admission, in effect, that they convince themselves, and the readers, that this price of admission is either not charged or not there, is not so much an indictment of that world as a confession of their bad faith. And this drama at the gates in its turn deflects attention from the acknowledgment that there are other stories

being developed, either by those who refuse to play the game or by those who refuse to lie to themselves about the rules.

The one rule among these that demands that all of them be hidden from view makes it necessary to accept a certain number of tenets that fall under the heading of either morality or aesthetics. The game demands that these tenets be held up seriously, and also that it be perfectly understood that they do not function to rule the entire system of economics and of social hierarchies. The punishment for whoever makes them or their weakness visible is severe, and Lily incurs in it. In general, those punished are the outsiders who are trying to break into "society," as the Laphams do in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham:* for the sake of their daughters, they want to be able to hobnob with the likes of the Caseys, and they cannot. That is because they are outsiders; they belong to a different class in this ostensibly classless society.

In *The House of Mirth,* however, the business of guarding the borders of class is seen from the inside, that is, through sympathy with a character who could be an insider. Lily's birth and beauty are, as she believes, keys. What she does not see, however, is that her keys, like those to the bank vault, need a counter-key, which is Rosedale's money, as well as the coldness and single-mindedness that make him a candidate for entry despite his "race," and that at the same time underpin the negative judgments about him both within and outside the novel. However, what really fuels the opposition to him is that he in fact brings the prerequisites for belonging to light, which, in the realm of ideology, is the forbidden act. And at the same time, it is precisely a lack of that single-mindedness, evident on the many occasions when she almost gets her man, that marks Lily as inept at that business. In this sense too she is entirely right when she tells Trenor that she understands nothing of business. On the other hand, she is a sympathetic character in part because she does not understand these things, that is, because through her, their operation can be hidden under a veil of readerly sympathy. Not that Wharton plays false. If one is not convinced of Lily's ineptitude by the way in which she squanders her chance with Gryce – for after all, he is boring, and an afternoon with

Selden is clearly and infinitely preferable to continued application to the job of reeling in the collector of Americana – then one will certainly get the picture when one is told that she had squandered her chance at a real Italian prince by flirting outrageously with his young stepson, and provoking a fight between the two men.

The gestures with which Lily defeats herself are all profligate. Dimock points out that she always pays and is the only character who feels under an obligation to be good for the debts she incurs, and who is also forced to pay for her mistakes. Fair enough. But it is also true that many of her actions involve the ultimate sin against accumulation – or against the getting something for nothing at which Bertha excels, which is to get nothing for something. In this sense, her burning of Bertha's letters without either letting Selden know what she is burning, or allowing Rosedale to use them in order to rehabilitate her and give him entrée to her set, is her ultimate extravagance, after which she has spent herself out.[14] It is well within the logic of the universe in which she lives that she then has to die, by taking a sleeping drought of which she does not know the real power, and that once again she acts while unconscious of what she is really doing, refusing to consider the consequences of what she impulsively does.

Wharton's play with readers' sympathies thus creates, at the same time, the ambiguity in the novel that has since its publication informed the criticism about it (as well as in the cycles of its acceptance and rejection by the public) and the way in which, when accepted, is has been able to fit into the critical preferences of various periods.[15] Like many significant works of fiction turned toward social and economic life, it examines how an important social mechanism is hidden, while at the same time pointing to its operation. The title, taken from *Ecclesiastes* 7.4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" points to a moral stance toward the action it recounts. However, as one might expect, the precise way in which this stance applies is not always clear. Neither is it clear that all who aspire to inhabit that house are nothing but fools. It is thus profitable to examine how the house functions, and who is granted

entrance or continuance on what conditions. The suggested answers are slightly askew from expectation, and it may be this skewing that provides the foundation on which this house of fiction solidly rests.

Notes

1 It must be noted that many of the readings referred to below are relatively recent. When it was published, the book had a very different reception, documented, among others, by Hildegard Hoeller, in *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 96-102. Reviewers and early critics argue about the moral stature of the characters in the novel, and about the wisdom and usefulness of writing about unlovely characters in a class that is not representative of actual Americans. In the debate, there surfaces a "sentimental" reading of the novel (which critics oppose to a "realistic" one), in which there is strong identification with Lily Bart; quoting from R. W. B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 152, Hoeller tells that one reader "'enclosed a two-cent stamp and begged Mrs. Wharton to write and say whether it might not have been possible to allow Lily Bart to live and marry Selden'" (101).

2 The description of Lily's beauty, charm, social adroitness as "capital" is common in the criticism of the novel, and abetted by Wharton's choices of words throughout it. Lillian S. Robinson, whose analysis centers on the valuation of a woman's virginity before marriage and fidelity after, as guarantees that the transmission of wealth will be under the proper control of its male holders, is particularly good at picking up the money-related vocabulary with which Wharton describes or classifies just about every relation in the novel. Margot Norris begins her essay on the novel by noting that the word "speculation" appears on its first page, to describe what Lily Bart inspires, and is used or implied in "manifold meanings" to the end.

3 At the time, "race" had a somewhat different meaning from the one it carries today; it "was used loosely to designate virtually any physical, linguistic, or ethnic group." The link between Jewishness and money is old, but a more specific connection becomes current at the end of the nineteenth century, when a number of works appeared propounding a more modern form of antisemitism. Among them was Werner Sombart's *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (1911), translated into English as *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1913), which described Jews as evincing "an avaricious love of money" and "foster[ing][the rise of capitalism" (Singerman, 104, 105). It would seem quite natural to Wharton's readers at the time that Rosedale should have a bent for making vast amounts of money in the market. Though Rosedale is not in any way a foreigner, it is noteworthy that by around the date of the novel's publication (1905) "the annual immigration from

Europe approached and exceeded the one million mark . . . [and] . . . more and more 'old stock' Americans recoiled with horror as the contemplated the newcomer's 'bad blood' entering the American gene pool" (Singerman, 108). Lily's revulsion has solid historical grounding; on the other hand, Wharton's treatment of Rosedale becomes more intriguing against this background. That Rosedale would like to marry Lily could be particularly problematic given the contemporary rejection of the mingling of different ethnic groups – which, however, had no trouble being coupled with accusations against Jews of being clannish and refusing to amalgamate themselves into the populations among which they happened to reside – that was, after all, the heyday of eugenics (Singerman, 109-11). On the other hand, there was also a common distinction made between the "older" Jewish migration, German and Sephardic, and the new immigrants from Eastern Europe, the former being considered a better sort (Singerman, 118-19). Rosedale, prosperous and ready to enter the higher ranks of society, would belong to the latter.

4 This duality in the system of values that operate the novel has been noted before. It is sometimes seen as a conflict between genres: on one hand the novel is sentimental or melodramatic or "romantic" and on the other it is a work of realism. In the former Lily's reluctance to sell herself, or to marry in accordance with her economic interests – or needs – is laudable and rewarded at the end, when the true love asserts himself, preferably in possession of an until then doubtful or hidden inherited fortune. In the latter, however, the insistence on placing sentiment above money is punished. The problem with Lily then is that in the economy of the novel, she is found lacking not only when she pursues wealth, because that is unworthy of the romantic heroine, but also when she fluffs her chances at wealth, because that is improvident in a heroine. Wendy Steiner makes the conflict into a contradiction between the work of art, which is supposed to exist and have its effect extra-contextually (and Lily consistently presents herself and is viewed as a work of art) and on one hand nature, and on the other commerce. (See "The Causes of Effect: Edith Wharton and the Economics of Ekphrasis," in *Poetics Today,* 10, 2 [Summer 1989]: 279-297). Steiner also sees a duality in the novel, in this case, the "clash between capitalist and aristocratic ideals . . . expressed . . . through two opposed plot structures: . . . the rags-to-riches story . . . and . . . the chivalric romance . . ." (279). Hildegard Hoeller sees this contradiction between romance and realism operating throughout Wharton's works, and considers it a defining characteristic of her writing (*Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000], especially chapter 5, "The Triumphant Plasticity of *the House of Mirth*").

5 According to Veblen, the function of an upper-class (or leisure-class) woman is to be a sign of the wealth of her menfolk; work, in its usual meaning, would indicate that she cannot rely on the men – usually the husband – to provide, not for what is necessary, but for the superfluities that mark wealth (see Ammons, 29). On the

other hand, conspicuous consumption, as Veblen called it, requires a certain effort, which could be called work of a certain kind. What distinguishes it from the usual kind is that it must not be productive.

6 Elizabeth Ammons describes Lily as well trained for a job: "[f]rom the first page of the novel Lily Bart is hard at work using the skills of her trade. . ." (31); or "[t]he job she has been trained for is highly specialized and her skills, if she does not choose to use them as some rich man's wife, are not transferable . . . "(32).

7 Wai-chee Dimock analyses the novel in terms of commerce, starting from the premise that in it the marketplace is "a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association . . . everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible," and spotting the market terminology – interest, payment, luxury, asset, and such – that pervades the novel. Dimock finds that Lily's failure to abide by market rules is conditioned on one hand by her powerlessness, and on the other hand, by her being a "rebel" ("Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,"* in *PMLA,* 100, 5 (October 1985): 783-92, 783).

8 Irving Howe explains that, as he is introduced, Rosedale is "mostly stock caricature...taken from the imagery of social, that is, polite, anti-Semitism." At the same time, he points out that there is a similarity between Rosedale and Lily: "each trying in a particular way to secure a foothold in the world of the rich;" in such a reading it becomes clearer how Wharton channels readerly sympathy toward Rosedale as in tandem with that accorded her heroine ("A Reading of *The House of Mirth,*" in *Edith Wharton: A collection of Critical Essays,* Irving Howe, ed. [Englewood Falls, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1962]: 119-129; 120, 121). His charge is confirmed indirectly by the early reviewer of the novel in the British *Spectator,* who "the supreme humiliation" suffered by Lily in her "failure to 'range herself' by marriage to the *odious* Mr. Rosedale" (my emphasis). See "*the House of Mirth," Spectator,* 95 (28 October 1905), 657, rpt. in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews,* James W. Tuttleton at al., eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 113.

9 Elaine Showalter is one of the few critics who sees Rosedale in a light different from that of the characters in the novel – it is, after all, he, and not the "noble" Selden who comes to see Lily when she is poor and offers her a way to start up again (16). However, she places Rosedale in a category of characters "outside the dominant class structures" (16) to which also belongs the "community of working women," with which she merges, no longer able to see them as the "anonymous female drones" that formed her backdrop when we first see her at Grand Central Station (17).

10 Diana Trilling sees the novel as an extremely class-aware account of the end of one form of New York Society (a word she capitalizes when speaking of the social

circle Wharton wrote of and where she lived) under the pressure of democratizing forces from the outside and of its own weakening: "What Mrs. Wharton is describing, in other words, is the inexorable process of history as it worked itself out in the America with which she was best acquainted" ("*The House of Mirth* Revisited," in *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Irving Howe, ed. [Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1962]: 103-118, 107). Trilling sees Rosedale as the "representative of the new social dispensation, and the old "world of privilege" already "too decadent even to envision" resisting the intrusion (107). Irving Howe has a slightly different take on the matter: for him, the action of the novel "occurs . . . several stages and a few decades beyond the dispossession of old New York," the few "distant offshoots" of the old aristocracy that appear in the book are "already tainted by the vulgarity of the new bourgeoisie," and mostly their stabs at preserving aristocratic standards consist of trying to keep out the newcomers (122).

11 One of the main points in Elaine Showalter's "The Death of the Lady (Novelist)" is the transition, of which *House of Mirth* is one of the instruments, "from one house of American women's fiction to another, from the homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism" (4), which in turn inflects the role and self-definition of women novelists and the way in which women are presented in novels. In passing, however, she notes how few children appear in the pages of Wharton's novel – she mentions the Trenors' two teenaged daughters to whom Judy Trenor refers once (10); she also mentions, in a discussion of Rosedale's importance to the novel, his playing with Carry Fisher's child (17). In Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit, eds., *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992).

12 It should be said, however, that Lily was not always seen as a positive figure. An early review is particularly scathing, if at the price of misunderstanding most of what Wharton is showing (he defense of Lily's poor mother is particularly puzzling): "[s]he has not a particle of genuine, fundamental, good human feeling, and has very little bad. . . . She cherishes no affectionate sentiments towards the mother who did her poor best for her, the aunt who supported her, the rich women who dressed her, or the poor friend who adored her. In no society could such a being exist except in that where the dismal and... often tedious drama of her life goes on." See "*The House of Mirth* and Other Novels," in *Nation,* 81 (30 November 1905), 447-48, in *Edith Wharton: Contemporary Reviews.* In general, the reviews that focus on the morality of the characters tend to be scathing; most however, are laudatory, and consider Lily either a particularly good creation, or the portrait of a young woman well deserving of sympathy.

13 It is interesting that both Trilling and Howe are sympathetic to Rosedale and critical of Selden. Both also point out that material need affects both character and moral freedom. Trilling notes that it is when he is richer and more secure in his

social position that Rosedale shows a gentler side and his indisputable virtues; and Howe berates another critic (Henry Seidel Canby) for implying that "the pressures of financial need ha[ve] nothing to do with human suffering..." (126).

14 Ruth Yeazell mentions Benn Michael's view of Lily as a risk-taker, well within the spirit of capitalism, but notes that he never examines how Wharton associates this kind of risk-taking with self-destructiveness. (See "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart," 733, n.16; the reference is to Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 228-34). Yeazell's central argument is that in Lily Bart and the society around her, Wharton has created the kind of world that Veblen describes and analyses in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* and for which he coins the phrase "conspicuous consumption."

15 The novel was first published in installments in *Scribner's Magazine,* and is said to have increased the periodical's circulation. In "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth,"* Shari Benstock says that "[n]ews of Lily Bart's death spread quickly, and readers who arrived late at their local news stand found" that the issue had sold out.; 70 000 copies sold in advance publication, and it was the fastest selling book Scribner's publishing house had ever issued (310). Popular through the thirties, the novel then lost its appeal through the sixties, despite thoughtful and favorable assessments by Diana Trilling, Edmund Wilson, and Irving Howe. But feminist critics started to re-read it in the seventies, and now it has regained sufficient popularity to have been turned into a film. And, as one can see even in the sample offered by Benstock's critical edition, it proves strong enough to support being read through the lenses of the leading critical approaches of the last thirty years.

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