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## LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | CRITICAL ESSAY

# The collapse of the American upper-class collective identity: Capitalism and the *nouveaux riches* in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the American upper-class collective identity in terms of clannishness and capitalism in Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905). It also demonstrates that the changes this class known as the *vieux riches* undergoes trigger its annihilation. Therefore, the survival of such class is probated by maintaining the tenets of capital and lineage; otherwise it will be consumed by the less prestigious and newly emerging class recognized as the *nouveaux riches* or *nouveaux arrives*. In the novel, both classes are illustrated as contrasting forces separated by imaginary boundaries that are by no means static but rather dynamic. The changes in question are yet traceable in the salient modification of particular pronouns. That is, the first-person plural (*we*) embodied by Lily Bart and her set, and the third- person (*he, they*) exemplified by Simon Rosedale and his ilk, lose their distinctness towards the end of the novel. All in all, the class boundaries become nebulous as soon as the foreign heterogeneous lineages assimilate into the blood-based American genteel class. The assimilation is made possible on account of the capitalist competitive system symbolized by Rosedale. This system is illustrated as one that conduces to the obliteration of the upper-class collective identity allegorized by Lily's fall. To this end, the validity of Thorstein Veblen's theory regarding



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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Literature of the 20th century offers a valuable account of social-thought and generic perceptions of the time, many of which are equivalent to today's social media. These perceptions are still relevant as history seems to repeat itself. Racism, class, and "white supremacy" are ever prominent motifs. These strands may well be connected to epithets of eugenics, Darwinism or social Darwinism. Despite the fact that the latter are inherently antithetical, they are often used interchangeably. Such misinterpretations have long triggered wide-scale public reactions. With Nobel laureate James Watson stripped of his honors, U.S representative Steve King rebuked, and writer Laura Wilder removed from book award, one wonders whether these instances could be also attributed to the "universal" misinterpretation of related epithets. This article does not intend to justify or nullify the reactions associated with controversial issues, but instead, it invites an interesting study of how such issues are reflected in works of literature.

class “predatory test,” premised on Darwinian and Spencerian principles of evolution, will be applied to Wharton’s novel to enhance the proposed arguments and because Wharton’s thematic tropes align with Veblen’s philosophy.

**Subjects:** American Studies; Jewish Studies; Prejudice; Literature; Literature by Period; Women; Literature; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Marxist Theory

**Keywords:** collective identity; racism Darwinism; capitalism; predatory test; class

## 1. Introduction

*The House of Mirth* is a full-fledged controversial novel and has therefore been discussed, analyzed and cited by scholars from varied disciplines including language and gender (Barnett, 1989),<sup>1</sup> anthropology (McGee, 2001),<sup>2</sup> philosophy (Polley, 2017),<sup>3</sup> religion (Singley, 1998),<sup>4</sup> and science (Bruni, 2014).<sup>5</sup> In many instances, the novel has been frequently associated with Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous consumption” concerning the leisure class. Some examples of such association are Esch’s and Elliot’s book *New Essays on “The House of Mirth,”* (2015)<sup>6</sup> Mizruchi’s *The Rise of Multicultural America: Economy and Print Culture, 1865–1915* (2009),<sup>7</sup> Nordloh’s *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual* (1994),<sup>8</sup> and Wasserman’s essay “Getting into *The House of Mirth*” (2002).<sup>9</sup> Critics like Wharton’s biographer Lee (2007),<sup>10</sup> Banta (2007)<sup>11</sup> and Burden (2016)<sup>12</sup> equalize the dynamics of social competition handled by both authors and they even suggest that Wharton has probably read Veblen’s work. However, others assume that Wharton has done her own research before writing *The House of Mirth* and that notions of evolution have been part and parcel of the era’s public discourse.; Ohler (2003) attributes the thematic proximity of both works to Wharton’s vigorous reading of Mendel, Huxley, Spencer, and Darwin. Similarly; Drizou (2016) argues that such propinquity of the subject matter of both works is “a result of [Wharton’s] keen engagement in the evolutionary debates of her time” He also adds that “critics have remarked the influence of nineteenth-century science on Wharton who incorporates various Darwinian tropes”.

Whilst my research also discusses Veblen’s theory, it centers basically on his “predatory test” stemming from social Darwinism and particularly the term “the survival of the fittest” (Spencer, 1910). By and large, social Darwinism underscores the element of inheritance as a prerequisite of one’s social success. Some scholars in the field misinterpret the phrase “the survival of the fittest” principally as they take “the fittest” for “the strongest.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, they tend to regard “the survival of the fittest” as a referent to social Darwinism and racism. Darwinism itself which harmonizes with the “survival of the fittest” trope does not ineludibly connote racism. It should be noted that “A Veblenian application of generalized Darwinian principles to social evolution does not mean the adoption of “social Darwinism’ as widely understood” (Hodgson, 2008).

Veblen rejects natural selection and even affirms that it ensues regression rather than social progress. Still, illustrating the paradigm of American classes in the social domain he utilizes the “predatory test” theory which is based on Darwinian and Spencerian principles particularly “the survival of the fittest” theory. He reconciles both theories by discarding the genealogical element from the latter whereby he regards the predatory test as an epitome the social competition that is capital-oriented. Veblen (1994) maintains that the predatory/monetary test is what motivates the survival of class members. He yet considers other effective factors with which one must comply in order to belong to the upper-class: “[T]o gain entrance to the class, the candidate had to be gifted with clannishness, massiveness, ferocity, unscrupulousness, and tenacity of purpose. These were the qualities that counted toward the accumulation and continued tenure of wealth.”

## 2. The predatory test

Six years before the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Veblen (1994) writes a book entitled “*The Theory of the Leisure Class*” about the American leisure class proper. Veblen infers that such class comprises two circles. The first is the aristocracy of the ancient line whom he describes as “the early barbarian leisure class.” This circle upholds its place by the possession of “prowess,” and it is

principally aggressive, fraudulent, and status-alerted. The second circle is the “*nouveaux arrivés*” that represents the “later barbarian culture society” and is characterized by its aggressive, deceptive, and violent methods of capital accumulation. Both circles eventually form one class in terms of emulation. The “*nouveaux arrives*” emulate the aristocracy in their pecuniary fashion until the differences between both are hardly discernable. Veblen’s theory in this sense echoes Spencer’s claim that “Evolution is a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; through continuous differentiations and integrations” (Spencer, 1863). The principal condition of survival is that those inside the class, old and new, survive the predatory test (i.e. the pecuniary test), otherwise they lose caste. In his sociological studies, Veblen emphasizes the callousness of the struggle in the business world calling the strugglers “barbarians” and “predators” who must pass the “predatory test” in order to survive. Like Spencer’s social Darwinism, Veblen’s theory of the “predatory test” owes its origins to Darwinian natural selection as he advocates Darwinian codes of selection practiced in social structures and “[generalizes] Darwinian principles” to socioeconomic evolution (Hodgson, 2008). It is obvious that by the “generalization of Darwinian principles” Hodgson refers to Veblen’s advocacy of the controversial “survival of the fittest” trope upgrading it to encompass the competitive nature of human beings in the social domain while discarding the factor of inheritance. Promoting the “predatory test,” Veblen conveys a vivid realistic model of class whose momentum surpasses race and genealogy. Conversely, though not using the expression blatantly, Wharton seems to reject the “predatory test” because it annuls the inheritance part and permits other elements to take over. This is evident as she draws the calamitous repercussions of such a test. In so doing, she appears to lament over the extinction of the mainstream white race.<sup>14</sup> Like Darwin and Spencer, Wharton believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics rejected by many of their successors (Bowler, 2003).

Veblen’s theory suggests that genealogy per se does not inevitably denote fitness. In a different manner, Wharton underscores how discarding the genealogical factor can be cataclysmic. Like Lee, Banta, and Burden I tend to believe that Wharton read Veblen’s work. This is evident as we apply Veblen’s predatory test to Wharton’s novel. Wharton demonstrates an opposite course of survival when incorporating other factors than that of genealogy such as capital, temperament, and habit.<sup>15</sup> Even more, the result of the predatory test as well as the novel underpin the “survival of the (economically) fittest” and “the extinction of the (genealogically) fittest.” Lily Bart, who represents the natural force of heredity and regarded as the fittest according to the novel, perishes because she does not survive the pecuniary test. Contrariwise, Rosedale who represents the manufactured force of capitalism survives although he is thoroughly delineated as genealogically the least fit. Thus, Rosedale’s survival as the economically fittest complies with the competitive nature of people in the economic realm where the “fittest” prevails.

In this regard, Veblen promotes Darwinian principles of causality but dismisses teleology: “For Veblen, the Darwinian rejection of teleology became the necessary basis of a scientific and ‘post-Darwinian’ approach to economics and social science” (Hodgson, 2004). In his article “How Veblen Generalized Darwinism” (2008), Hodgson contends that “it is [...] only by injecting a wholly illegitimate teleological meaning to the term ‘fittest’ as used by Darwin and the Darwinists that the expression ‘survival of the fittest’ is made to mean a survival of the socially desirable individuals.” Hodgson adds that “social scientists have often wrongly dismissed Darwinism as supporting racism or nationalism [...] It endorses neither inequality nor strife.” Hence, discarding teleology acquits Darwinism of enhancing racism and imperialism. Ohler’s statements such as “Wharton’s rejection of social Darwinism” (2003), and “Wharton’s fictional challenges to social Darwinism” (2006) tend to invoke positive responses to Wharton’s attitudes concerning social Darwinism. As these statements are probably meant for defending Wharton against the accusations of her racism; still, it is not totally true that Wharton is not racist,<sup>16</sup> but this is another avenue for another research that need not be elaborated here.

Lily’s class which is alleged to be genealogically the most fit as it has so far survived the struggle of existence throughout history now faces a new struggle posed by a more economically powerful class, but which does not reach out to the same biological asset of the former. As such, Wharton’s

description of Lily's versus that of Rosedale's underlines such a situation. Wharton makes it clear that biologically, Lily is the "fittest," while Rosedale is the least fit, but economically the opposite is true. The destinies of both characters are antithetical to Darwin's natural selection. Still, they very much tend to align with the Veblenian predatory test.

After losing her family's fortune, Lily is left with clannishness only, unlike her class members who possess almost all the qualities, especially that of wealth. Although Rosedale is not privileged with "clannishness," he retains all the other assets. Evaluating the transformation of the social statuses of both Lily and Rosedale, it becomes obvious that "massiveness, ferocity, unscrupulousness, and tenacity of purpose [and wealth]" disqualify clannishness and genealogy. Veblen (1994) explains this transformation by maintaining that:

The conditions of success within the group, as well as the conditions of the survival of the group, changed in some measure; and the dominant spiritual attitude of the group gradually changed, and brought a different range of aptitudes and propensities into the position of legitimate dominance in the accepted scheme of life. Among these archaic traits that are to be regarded as survivals from the peaceable cultural phase, are that instinct of race solidarity which we call conscience, including the sense of truthfulness and equity, and the instinct of workmanship, in its naïve, non-invidious expression."

Against all odds the blue-blooded Lily does not outlast this condition and hence is replaced by Rosedale, the *nouveau riche*. Veblen's predatory test facilitates changing the rules of permitting or dismissing a class member and thus class becomes more contingent on capital rather than on lineage. The predatory test epitomizes the new struggle where society selects only the individuals who possess the "fittest habits of thought," and those adapt to the newly progressed environment. However, there are additional effective factors mandatory for this process of selection such as "special methods of life," "human relations," "habits," and "temperament" (Veblen, 1994).

Similarly, by determining that capital subdues genealogy in Lily's case, Wharton drifts away from the Darwinian doctrine of natural selection which postulates that biological aspects are responsible for one's existence and continuity, and instead, she approximates Veblen's theory.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, such distancing underscores the author's anxiety and insinuates that changing the class rules, (i.e. clannishness) will induce racial extinction. Indeed, Darwin's statement regarding the principle of natural selection is not workable in *The House of Mirth*: "the preservation of [the] individual [...] will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving" (Darwin, 2007). Contrary to all expectations, Rosedale who embodies the capitalist system substitutes Lily who represents the American clan. This fact is further accentuated by the pronouns employed to function as boundaries between both sides, first-person and third-person. Simply put, the functionality of these pronouns changes and assumes new values as a result of the inevitable deconstruction and reconstruction of classes. In linguistics, one of the prominent functions of using the first-person plural pronouns is to unambiguously "state that [a person] is a member of [a] group excluding others from membership in this group at the same time" (Helmbrecht, 2002). Therefore, the first-person plural pronouns evoke the collective identity which excludes the foreigner/s.

### 3. Background: Collective anxiety

Collective identity takes form within the clan, the tribe, or the set. Such expressions are used interchangeably in *The House of Mirth* to denote "class." The instability of class status caused primarily by external factors (outsiders) generates anxiety and even violence because such instability involves insecurity and hence threatens the selfhood and identity of the class. Jenkins (1997) maintains that collective identity "must be validated by an audience of outsiders or others—because without such an audience the issue would not rise."

The most compelling outsider portrayed in *The House of Mirth* is Rosedale. Rosedale is a perfect example not only because he represents the *nouveaux riches* but also because he is Jewish. This does not mean that I will approach his Jewishness in terms of Wharton's elsewhere suggested anti-Semitism, but rather, light will be shed heavily on his Jewishness as a typical foreigner whose "race" and "blood" are presumed different from those of the *vieux riches*. The following line suggests that Rosedale as a foreigner of a different "race" makes quicker financial progress than native-born Americans. It also highlights the first-person plural "we" versus the third person "he": "A few years from now **he**'ll be in it whether **we** want him or not."<sup>18</sup> The fact that Wharton distinguishes Rosedale from Lily's "people" at first, then as one belonging to the same people later, is what makes him an interesting study. It is crucially essential to see how this distinction between these two pronouns dissolve as the story proceeds. This happens because the power of money surpasses the collective identity marked by racism.

Only Rosedale, and not any of the other foreign characters in the novel, is particularly juxtaposed with Lily because he obtains all the adversative elements an outsider may have. Marking him as an outsider is what maintains the boundaries between both classes. In any case, these boundaries are not concrete and hence are unidentifiable as long as either group is homogeneous and only when the group is imperiled, do these boundaries materialize. Hudson (1977) claims that any regime is necessarily situated within some agreement concerning national identity. He more so argues that the regime will collapse if the class members are disunited. Therefore, stability and harmony from within are needed for the ethnic clan. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) connect such "stability" to "social equilibria with high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and collective well-being" of "virtuous circles" *vis-à-vis* "vicious circles." When Wharton stages Rosedale and Lily as epitomes of these circles she intensifies the divergence between them. Rosedale is outlined as a "plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type" who is "glossy," "intrusive," and "obtrusive" and whose "presence [...] would swell to the dimensions of the room." He is also portrayed as "fat, shiny", and a man of "a sloppy manner." His reputed typical vulgarity is implied by his "smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery." More, his "repulsive" nature is recurrently suggested by the word "repugnance."<sup>19</sup> The comparison Wharton draws between Rosedale and Lily is unrelenting. He is Jewish, foreign, ugly, repulsive, moneylender, vulgar, and opportunist, whereas Lily is Gentile, Anglo-Saxon, beautiful, graceful, refined, tactful, and altruistic. Everything about Rosedale is designed to be abhorrent, even when he is humorously considered a "best man." Moreover, he is presented as a social climber, an interloper, and a capitalist. Rosedale's moneymaking nature is specified by the narrator's words: "His small sidelong eyes [...] gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac." The tips he pays to make his way through society and the deals he makes in the mysterious world of Wall Street indicate the corrupt enterprises he ventures. Lily is conscious of Rosedale's power gained by such "deals" and "tips." All the same, she cannot envisage herself "stooping" to the intrusive Jew for a tip; but she *does* stoop for Gus Trenor on account of "fraternal instinct." This "fraternal instinct" does not spare her Trenor's misconduct whereas Rosedale the outsider offers to "lend [her] money to pay Trenor." Still, the negative image of Rosedale is inexorable.

His image as an intruder is recurrently set against Lily's training and upbringing. While Lily and her coterie "snub[...] and ignore[...]" Rosedale, he insists on keeping their company. The so refined Lily endures him only because her "training and experience had taught her to be hospitable to newcomers" and because she must be congenial to "the most unpromising." Despite the unremitting rebuffs he does not yield since associating with people like Lily Bart means status to him. As a collector he longs for the unreachable and the *recherché*: he objectifies Lily. Wharton's illustration of both characters upholds the author's concerns. These concerns are yet collective, and they convey the widespread angst of foreigners/immigrants in the early-twentieth century America.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, America confronted a number of acts of anarchism. Genteel American citizens (to whom Wharton and her set belonged)<sup>20</sup> felt threatened. The proposed threat emerged particularly because most radicals were foreigners who endangered the stable social stratifications and hierarchies in America.<sup>21</sup> Anarchism was not merely an individually-driven opposition, but rather a well-

established movement that assumed many faces. Its members were mainly communists, socialists, and anti-war groups. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century, the “postwar ideal of color-blind citizenship” was replaced by a “resurgence of an Anglo-Saxonism that united patriotism, xenophobia, and an ethnocultural definition of nationhood in a renewed rhetoric of racial exclusiveness” (Foner, 1998). Such phenomena as Anglo-Saxonism, the science of eugenics, and American Literary Naturalism that materialized in America in the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, are unquestionably connected to racial and collective identity.

In light of the previously illustrated instances that went hand in hand with the proliferating racial theories, anxieties concerning identity were on the rise simultaneously emphasizing the significance of “collective identity.” Thus, Wharton’s anxieties regarding identity and selfhood are not entirely unexpected in *The House of Mirth*. That is, during the period under study it was deemed a fantasy and even impossible to think of the Jewish businessman Rosedale as Lily’s husband. Her family and her set never approved of him as a family member and even joking about the subject was regarded inappropriate. When Mrs. Fisher jested about such a possibility, Ned Van Alstyne (a cousin of Lily’s father) was appalled and blamed Jack Stepney for imposing “the brute” on them. Even Stepney who had oppressively strived to introduce Rosedale into society, found this joke extravagant and out of proportion: “**We** don’t marry Rosedale in **our** family.”<sup>22</sup> In this example, the distinction between Americans and foreigners is doubly emphasized by the pronouns utilized to distinguish class boundaries. The family that Stepney talks about does not refer to the small biological family, but rather to the larger family, America. This is not a fanciful parable as might be presumed since Lily is continuously illustrated as one who allegorizes America: “Lily’s body becomes a supreme emblem of her race in all of the turn-of-the century senses of the term” (Kassanoff, 2004). Considering the turmoil and mayhems that hit America back then, in addition to the immigration waves and lurking poverty, preserving identity and selfhood was a do-or-die matter for native-born Americans. Stepney’s utilization of the first-person plural “we” and “our” (the insiders) debars the third person “he,” (Rosedale, the outsider), from entering their circle of genteel Americans. In like manner, Wilson (1915), the 28th President of the United States, warns against the assimilation of immigrants:

The gravest threats against **our** national peace and safety have been uttered within **our** own borders. There are citizens of the United States [...] born under other flags but welcomed under **our** generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of **our** national life; who have sought to bring the authority and good name of **our** Government into contempt, to destroy **our** industries wherever **they** thought it effective for **their** vindictive purposes to strike at **them**, and to debase **our** politics to the uses of foreign intrigue.<sup>23</sup>

Along with this censure of outsiders/foreigners, Wilson also uses the first-person plural versus the third-person plural to mark the boundaries of the American clan. Such calls to protect the American collective identity from “contamination” became a holy undertaking of every “true” American. Evidently, the anti-immigrant sentiment was not only some kind of fueled-gossip of the native-born American circles, neither was it a passing colloquy reverberated in the margins of the political system, but a fully-empowered resistance that initiated successive and long-lasting anti-immigrant laws.<sup>24</sup> Fearing immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who were mostly Catholic and Jewish, religious leaders also embraced this backlash. In 1907, Day, minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, conveys this agitation by ascribing the menace of immigrants and calls for maintaining the American collective identity. In the following instance, Day reprimands immigration and suggests cautiousness for the sake of preserving social cohesion and homogeneity, while suggesting that collective identity is endangered:

The most serious thing about the betrayal of **our** citizenship is in the fact that it is at a time in the history of **our** country when because of **our** increasing numbers and the varied elements of socialism by immigration eternal vigilance is the only price at which **we** can retain our liberties. And only a **homogeneous** people will find unity of thought and a common ground of patriotism.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Capitalism, identity, and clannishness

I have argued that *The House of Mirth* depicts the realism of the upper crust of the American metropolis overwhelmed by the culture of capitalism. In many cases, capitalism has been linked to consumerism, and mass consumption has become the main characteristic of the modern capitalist society. In this section, I shall demonstrate the correlation between capitalism, identity and clannishness.

Goldsmith (2011) discusses the rapidly emerging consumer culture of the turn of the twentieth century: “American culture moved into the consumerist mode of the early twentieth century. The burgeoning commodity culture of the period accompanied a growing anxiety around the concept of addiction.” Goldsmith yet underscores Wharton’s anxiety concerning a culture of this kind. Although Wharton’s angst is significant, the real matter of concern as to how the capitalist system brings about the collapse of the American collective identity. One reason triggering such collapse is what Riegel (1992) suggests as a multifaceted conflict between “old New York society, with all its inherent traditions and conventions” and the “fast emerging and very wealthy new capitalist society.” The members of this new society are entitled “invaders” by Wharton and the conflict between both groups is exemplified by Lily and Rosedale. This conflict can be outlined in the tension between those who promote the capitalist system and those who become its victims. Hence, whereas the capitalist system is calamitous to Lily, to Rosedale it is a tribute.

Rosedale’s personification of capitalism in the American society is confirmed in Levine’s line where he maintains that “capitalism [...] becomes contained in the body of [...] Simon Rosedale” (Levine, 2003). Gates (1987) similarly argues that “*Simon Rosedale* [...] is a true representative of economic determinism in New York society.” Likewise, Hoeller (2000), maintains that “Wharton uses *Rosedale’s* Jewishness as an icon for merciless, invincible *capitalism*”. Hoeller also suggests that “when Rosedale is increasingly incorporated into the upper class of New York, Wharton implies that we will distance ourselves from that class” (Hoeller, 1994).

Despite the challenge the new intruders encounter in their assimilation process, capital is an effective way to tackle such predicament. Still, to complete the process, a wealthy intruder like Rosedale only needs to find the ideal woman who belongs to the genteel class. This is articulated in his own words: “it takes just two things [to join the upper class] Miss Bart: money, and the right woman to spend it.” Ammons (1980) emphasizes this theme by pointing out that “unless the rich man also accumulates a woman [but not just any woman], all his money and property and power do not extend beyond the narrow mercantile world into the social realm, into the society at large.” Rosedale owns capital but lacks the proper lineage needed for his prestigious entrance into the upper class. However, all his advances have been rejected by Lily who refuses to be accumulated or to become part of this subjectivation process. Nonetheless, the capitalist system eventually precipitates Lily’s end.

Such a capitalist system dehumanizes individuals who, in turn, generate an object-centered society bereft of spiritual values. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that capital acts as a formidable “point of subjectivation that constitutes all human beings as subjects.” Similarly, Lazzarato (2008) claims that “we are enslaved to a machine when we are a cog in the wheels.” Subjectivation and enslavement are two primary byproducts of capitalism. In this sense, capitalism echoes immorality, especially as it directs one’s destiny against one’s will. Lily does not straightforwardly use the word “capitalism,” but the implication is obvious. Consider Lily Bart’s last words to Selden, the man she loves:

I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap—and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish heap

This quotation foreshadows Lily's miserable destiny. Despite her aspiration to retain her original abode, the capitalist system hinders such a possibility. Lily loses her identity and hence she becomes totally objectified and consumed. Lily's words verify that clannishness is essential to collective identity and that those who are excluded will cease to exist because their individuality collapses. She illustrates her feelings as an outcast: before being collectively punished and ostracized, she at least has been a fraction of something called class. She *has* held a fixed position no matter how tiny (i.e. cog) in the machine of class. Later, belonging to the lower classes, she is described as futile as a cog that cannot be screwed in the rim of any wheel. The contradiction resulted by Lily's integration, and later, disintegration in her class is unambiguous. When integrated, Lily becomes involuntarily a cog in the soulless machine against which she rebels: she resists becoming "a screw or a cog in the great machine." Excluded from her class, she becomes disintegrated and hence suffers for not being a cog in the machine. Lily's condition resonates Kierkegaard's idea of objectification. He contends that objectification is a consequence of the capitalist system that generates spiritlessness shrinking one to a cog in the machine (Taylor, 1980). In terms of class, one's identity becomes overwhelmed by the collective identity. Lily realizes that she cannot survive outside her circle, therefore, her craving to return does not cease. However, the class' frequent rejections of Lily fuel her desire to commit suicide. Insisting on retaining a shred of her selfhood, one that is connected to the past, she visits Selden for the last time to farewell her old self in his presence:

There is someone I must say goodbye to. Oh, not you—we are sure to see each other again—but the Lily Bart you knew. I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you—I am going to leave her here. When I go out presently, she will not go with me. I shall like to think that she has stayed with you.

The materialist culture that stimulates Lily's doom is indisputably related to social class. One of the class rules is limiting the entrance of others by virtue of clannishness. Nonetheless, on account of capitalism, this rule of class admission is substituted by ascribed clannishness. Rosedale as the new money realizes such condition. He is a newcomer who infiltrates into the American upper class. The golden pass is not given to him voluntarily, but rather mandatorily as he places "Wall Street under obligations which only Fifth Avenue could repay." Not only does Rosedale prosper, he even "doubles [...] his fortune" as "most [other] people's investments" shrivel. One example of such cases of financial ruin is Lily's father. Lily's family and home depended on money, and once the money disappeared, so did her home and her family. When Lily's father could not support his wife's squandering habits, (as he put it) he was literally "ruined" and ceased to exist: "To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose."

In her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, Wharton (1934) refers to herself as a member of the upper class of "aristocratic genealogies" and that her family "[belongs] to the same group as this little aristocratic nucleus." Kassinoff (2004) uses a similar term when she distinguishes between two types of the rich: "Lily's wealthy friends" and the "less genealogically privileged citizens." The latter invert the once stable social stratification and induce Lily's fall by promoting capitalism and "mobility." Unlike the previous example, Wharton does not utilize the expression "genealogies" in the novel, but using clannish words like "set," "circle," "class," "instinct," "inheritance," "training," and "upbringing" resonates a similar anxiety about racial lineage. She employs such terms as distinctive features of the genealogically privileged citizens to exclude the "less genealogically privileged citizens." Apart from Rosedale, other examples of the "less genealogically privileged citizens" are the Brys and the Gormers. These "*nouveaux arrives*" of no distinctive origin have passed the predatory test and thus admitted into Lily's class. Lily's reference to these families as the "new people" of vague "origins" suggests that they are foreigners.

The materialistic capitalist system complies with Veblen's theory regarding the predatory test and fulfills both the theory of socioeconomic evolution with its implications of haphazardness and

struggle. Wharton proposes that the emulation process of the new people occurs as they impose themselves on members of the aristocratic class and imitate them by the extravagant but vulgar parties they throw. In any case, their integration transpires rather strenuously and gradually. At first, their parties are attended only by few members of the ancient line; then, more and more individuals follow those who have joined, until the *nouveaux arrivés* assimilate into the upper class. Lily is appalled by the newcomers and initially rejects their invitations such as those of Mrs. Brys, a woman “of obscure origin and indomitable social ambitions.” However, later, when the protagonist’s chances are diminished, she has no choice but to yield. Describing the Brys’ recently-built house as an exhibition for displaying their opulence, Lily underlines its deficiency and vulgarity: “whatever it might lack as a frame for domesticity, was almost as well-designed for the display of a festal assemblage as one of those airy pleasure-halls.” Similarly, Gus Trenor describes the Brys’ party as “damned vulgar.”

Unlike the outsiders’ aforementioned successful assimilation into her erstwhile class, Lily’s chronicle of adaptation fails. No matter how much effort she expends to integrate, she cannot survive outside her clan. Here, it is implied that Lily’s innate clannishness is different from Rosedale’s ascribed one. Unlike Rosedale who adapts successfully, Lily who is no longer an “insider” cannot assimilate in the new class/es because they are occupied by people who live in a random fashion, abide by no rules, and seem “to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements.” This is a fundamental issue that Veblen does not consider. He mostly emphasizes the destinies of newcomers who easily assimilate but overlooks the repercussions of such assimilation on the ones expelled from their native circle. Wharton highlights this point and even admonishes such a reality that impels the collapse of the genteel class and its collective identity. Such exemplification is outlined by Lily as the: “strangest part of [her] strange experience.”

There are yet the other outsiders. Not those who have assimilated into Lily’s erstwhile class, but those whom Lily confronts as soon as she is banished from it. Lily’s description emphasizes the disparity between her previous circle and the working class she has just joined. Lily’s adaptation to the new “habitat” fails. Associating with people of other nationalities like Mrs. Hatch and her type, whose values of “oriental indolence and disorder” clash with Lily’s “training,” makes this undertaking even harder. Mrs. Hatch’s Bohemian life style only enhances Lily’s desire to “[restore] her self-possession.” Consequently, Lily is terrified of losing herself in such an ambiance of foggy morals and values. It is not overtly specified that Mrs. Hatch is a foreigner, but it is implied that she is one: “her showiness, her ease, the aggression of her dress and voice” characterize “ladies of her nationality.” In this scene, one sees how the collective identity of the upper class is mutilated inside out by the *nouveaux riches* who assimilate into the class, and also by the other outsiders (foreigners) who remain outside but promote such mutilation.

With Lily’s and Rosedale’s places on the social scale reversed, Rosedale’s changed attitude towards Lily becomes more palpable. At the Gormers’, he shows the guests that his relationship with Lily is “a mere ripple on the surface of a rushing social current, the kind of relaxation which a man of large interests and manifold preoccupations permits himself in his hours of ease.” Nevertheless, Lily’s conduct towards Rosedale does not change; he is *still* “impossible”<sup>26</sup> and she despises him for “[daring] to admire her.” Lily’s descent versus Rosedale’s ascent are further inspected in Rosedale’s declining marriage offers. This situation conveys the rock bottom Lily has reached: “If she slipped she recovered her footing, and it was only afterward that she was aware of having recovered it each time on a slightly lower level.” At first, her rejection of Rosedale’s proposals is outlined as an instinctive reaction: “her whole being had risen against it.” Yet later she compromises, accepting the once most implausible overture. This gradual alteration underlines Lily’s despair spawned by losing her social status and her collective identity: “her own existence was shrinking.” The English maid’s note: “I used to watch for your name in the papers, and we’d talk over what you were doing, and read the descriptions of the dresses you wore.

I haven't seen your name for a long time, though" heightens Lily's banishment from her aristocratic circle. It also underscores the avails and tutelages Lily has lost on account of such banishment. After being shunned next by the Gormers and their ilk, Lily descends into a new yet lower circle, one that is "more dimly-lit region."

Wharton presents marriage and reproduction as the only solutions to maintain clannishness and collective identity. Therefore, the notion of marriage is persistently imposed on Lily by her set. Their collective anxiety mimics the native American concern raised by 1900. The restless spirit of the *fin-de-siècle* was triggered by the decreasing birth rates of American whites, and by the fear that they might be outbred by immigrants. In 1878 Anderson (2006) wrote that: "census data were suggesting that [...] including immigrants and people of color, were reproducing at much faster rates. Concerned that 'the old native American stock' would soon lose its ascendancy, President Theodore Roosevelt (1905) warned of 'race suicide'." This theme of race suicide is similarly resonated in Grant's words (1916):

The man of the old stock is being crowded out of many country districts by these foreigners just as he is to-day being literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews [...] and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the American looks calmly abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race.

Lily's fears of having to associate with such foreigners as Rosedale increase when she is asked to persuade Mrs. Trenor to treat Rosedale civilly on account of his capital prospects: "he's going to be rich enough to buy us<sup>27</sup> all out one of these days." Although this sentence connotes the collective attitude of the debaters, it suggests the need to accept Rosedale in their circle. Ohler explains such change of class precepts by providing a Darwinist evolutionary conception: "The depiction of [Rosedale's] gradual social acceptance draws on the evolutionary idea that a shifting environment can result in the success of any species adapted to it" (Ohler, 2006). Despite the negative characteristics attributed to Rosedale, he does pass the predatory test eventually, whereas Lily's unrelenting rebuffs of him aggravate her fiscal status: she renounces her apartment and moves to a "boarding-house." Subsequently, reconsidering his offer of "good time" and "settling" Lily realizes that her assent per se is no longer valid, but is contingent upon "revenge" on Selden and Bertha Dorset. This time it is Rosedale who dictates his conditions because the "situation is changed" and he wants to "avoid mistakes." Moreover, he does not want to lose the newly acquired status granted by "the right people" as a result of associating with Lily (the wrong ones). Still, "he would marry her at once on the sole condition of a reconciliation with Mrs. Dorset" and by using the letters as a latent threat. Lily is shocked realizing that Rosedale knows about the letters that prove her innocence.<sup>28</sup> Although she is tempted with the venture of using the letters with which she would "triumph over Bertha," she suddenly changes her "direction." In her last encounter with Rosedale, Lily feels like a "superfine [...] merchandise," especially when he inspects her with his "small stock-taking eyes." Even when he offers help, Rosedale does so in a business-like manner: "Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and-take [...] like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines" (Kassanoff, 2003). Goldsmith (2005) suggests that such behavior is typically Jewish and is regarded as a threat by a majority of the upper-class Americans.

Rosedale reproaches Lily for protecting Selden: "I suppose it's because the letters are to HIM [Selden], then? Well, I'll be damned if I see what thanks you've got from him!" Choosing to sacrifice herself and her reputation for someone of her own clan instead of accepting assistance from the outsider is a demeanor instilled in Lily's racial psyche: "What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defence." With all the means at her disposal, Lily does not avenge Bertha Dorset. Lily's behavior is inexplicable even to her own self. Nonetheless, Scott (2009) justifies Lily's withdrawal from retaliating against Bertha by suggesting that "the competitive law of the jungle that motivates Lily's desire to destroy Bertha also threatens to conquer her innate morality, which according to

Darwin, is a natural product of evolutionary forces.” This is exactly what Wharton attempts to show; genealogy cannot be beaten even by capital. Despite Lily’s unfortunate fate brought about by the faults of her own clan she still considers herself part of the same clan. Hence, insisting not to abuse it is a way to preserve her identity. Scott further suggests that identity is formed by two constituents: biology and society:

Wharton’s extensive study of nature vs. nature debate made her only too aware that neither biology nor society alone determines one’s character, and that human beings can never completely free themselves from either component of identity. Not surprisingly, then, as early as 1905 she portrays Lily Bart’s identity as a combination of biological and social inheritance.

Scott’s definition of Lily’s identity is significant; nonetheless, she does not distinguish between Lily’s and Rosedale’s identities formed by the same two components of biology and society. Namely, Rosedale and Lily act differently and even contradictorily. Unlike Scott, Wharton does distinguish between Lily’s and Rosedale’s identities in terms of their paradoxical behavior when she fuses the social and biological inheritances in genealogy. Lily’s conduct in accordance with her “innate morality” for instance clashes with Rosedale’s behavior that complements “the competitive law of the jungle.” In this case the virtue of morality reinforced and fostered by the society is fused in the biological element. Wharton emphasizes that these components are static and constant in all situations whether Lily is in a choosing position or not. That is, when Lily has the choice, she refuses to avenge Bertha or defame Selden. With vengeance and reputation being social standards, she acts innately stirred by biological affiliation rather than the social one. When choiceless, Lily blames her blood for her blunders and claims that she has inherited profligacy from one self-indulgent ancestress. However, Rosedale’s identity constituents of biology and society are emphasized by Wharton only negatively. His different modes of behavior (social) are always attributed to his blood (biological). He is depicted as one who belongs to a different race. Some examples of such a depiction are: “[the] artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race” and “his race’s accuracy in the appraisal of values.” The “instincts of [Rosedale’s] race” are what make him the most successful businessman, immunize him against ruination, and even make him untouchable. Rosedale is recurrently signified by his blood and is presented as someone different from other human beings: “disciplined by the tradition of his blood.” Wharton’s choice of words insinuates different connotations as to Lily’s and Rosedale’s modes of behavior; yet in both cases, they are both ascribed to clannishness and lineage.

## 5. Conclusion

Wharton indicts the foreigner as a major cause of the capitalist system leading to the loss of the American selfhood. In this case, Rosedale symbolizes outsiders that endanger old-stock Americans and the extinction of the American race is epitomized by Lily’s death. Rosedale takes Lily’s place, and the once most desirable girl becomes an Ishmael: “Lily becomes a Christ figure destined to die for her principles that her self-absorbed, ignorant ‘well-wishers’ fail to recognize or honor” (Kassanoff, 2003). After being snubbed by Lily’s set, Rosedale’s wealth subsequently gives him a limitless pass to the world of the same set. The same people who have condemned and ridiculed Rosedale are later ready to bow at his presence. When Lily herself becomes an outcast, she notices “a party headed by Mrs. Trenor and Carry Fisher [...] these ladies and **their** companions- among whom **Lily** [she] had at once distinguished **both** [they] Trenor and Rosedale.” Shifting from *we-he* mode to *she-they* mode emphasizes the catastrophic fate that befell the American-upper class and the American collective identity to which Lily once belonged. Evidently, the first-person plural *we*, shatters into particles and withdraws in the face of the recently formed class. The new *they* in this sense assumes a different connotation, that of mixed races. Following from this, Lily’s life and death can be seen as an allegory for the American collective identity and its destruction: “Lily personifies [the] squandered Anglo-Saxon promise. She is caught in a complex web of racial discourses that require at once her apotheosis and her extinction” (Kassanoff, 2004).

As the novel develops, it unfolds the narrator's view as to how morality has no place in a social order dominated by the capitalist system. The innocent Lily is doomed and exiled without a fair trial, whereas the guilty Bertha is acquitted: "Was it her fault that the purely decorative mission [...] is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples?" It is also underlined that although Rosedale is convinced of her innocence, his offer to release her does not come gratis. Seeking an exit from the quagmire into which she falls, Lily realizes that integrity and decency cost money: "She was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it." Even the so-called "truth" belongs to those who have the money. People are likely to believe Bertha Dorset's story over hers because the former is rich: "she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her."

Veblen's realist social theory of the leisure class applies perfectly to the fictional major events of *The House of Mirth*. Class in this fashion harbors the collective identity of those inside it. Veblen's meticulous study regarding the conflict between insiders and outsiders can be seen as a perfect model that illustrates the progression to and the regression from class. His work underscores the Darwinian principle of causality identified by radical shifts in the social statuses. For example, Lily's and Rosedale's newly acquired statuses in class are subjected to capitalism. Lily's impoverishment is attributed to causative factors that may stroke the American upper-class. This class represents the white supremacy versus other richer but despised models such as that of Rosedale's. Lily's moral dilemma is attributed to her clannishness and genealogy which are inherent, and their effects are uncontrollable. Wharton's utilization of expressions related to genetics endorses her interest in Darwin's natural selection whereby one's behavior is controlled by genes, race, genealogy, and lineage. She seems proud of Lily whom she illustrates as a refined, perfect figure. Yet she reproves the protagonist's tragic fate. In light of this, Lily's existence conveys more than the literal fictional meaning, it exceeds the work of art when it becomes allegorical for the real world, proposing psychological, philosophical, and historical dimensions.

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#### Notes

1. "Reflecting a speech community that defines living well and dressing expensively as "inherited obligations," the language of upper class New York society elevates the superficial and the frivolous to the level of seriousness"; and "Within the dominant discourse of society gender-specific sub categories exist that reflect the role and status differences between men and women."
2. "From a general anthropological perspective, diners [...] create structure, facilitate sociability, and define membership in a group. All of these aspects of meals are at issue in *The House of Mirth*."
3. "*The House of Mirth* addresses several core concerns of transcendentalism: man's relationship to society," and "In the House of Mirth, Emerson's philosophy is reenacted in this new historical

moment [...] *The House of Mirth* becomes a cultural litmus test, an investigation into the complex relationship between American philosophy and history."

4. "Wharton's mental toughness and self-sufficiency had already alienated her from sentimental religion;" and "Like many of her contemporaries facing science's challenge to religion, Wharton sought alternative sources of spiritual comfort in art."
5. "*The House of Mirth* express[es] an oppositional vision, rewriting the traditionally harmonious, open clean and organic 'outside' of naturalism" (34).
6. "Like Veblen, Wharton represents a world in which people acquire and maintain status."
7. "Wharton seems to have been aware that the novel betrayed class secrets. She was familiar with Thorstein Veblen's 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class*."
8. "[F]or both Veblen and Wharton, the study of the leisure class is a study of waste."
9. "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*."
10. "[Wharton] read herself out of [...] Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Nietzsche, [...] Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Thorstein Veblen;" and, "Certainly [wealthy New Yorkers] were driven by a spirit of competitiveness; [...] exhibitionism would be analysed and satirised in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* and in the novels of Edith Wharton" .
11. "It was no coincidence that Ward's 1900 review of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* singled out what

it was about books like Veblen's [...] Edith Wharton's (2000) signature novel *The House of Mirth* was also published in 1905, followed later by her Pulitzer Prize novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920). All three accounts reject the 'barbarism' that stifles women's lives and leaves men adrift in a sea of status without value;" and, "Fond readers of post-Veblenian novels constantly encounter traces of Veblen's presence, and not simply in plot lines made familiar by James and Wharton."

12. Wharton's critical portrayal of the leisure class in the best novels draws on the Social Darwinism deriving from the work of Herbert Spencer and Thorstein Veblen.
13. See Justin Mogilski's "Social Darwinism" and Thomas Leonard's "Origins" pp. 37–38.
14. Bell (1995) underlines Wharton's racist tendencies as he maintains that "Edith Wharton's construction of whiteness in books such as *The House of Mirth*, *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence* reveals her intense engagement with dominant-culture racial ideology in the early decades of the twentieth century." In addition, her bigotry is traced both in her utterances and her personal letters calling Jews "Yids". Benstock (2004) maintains that in one letter Wharton wrote, "[L]ess am I interested in scholarships for female Yids." Laying on her deathbed did not soothe her attitude, on the contrary, her detestation of Jews only increased as she held them responsible for Jesus' crucifixion (Lee, 2007).
15. Components suggested by Veblen.
16. See previous notes.
17. Of course, by no means does this indicate that Wharton believes that this how it should be. But perhaps this is a fact she abhors but recognizes.
18. Emphasis added.
19. See *The House of Mirth* pp. 16,95,113,247.
20. See George Santayana's *The Genteel Tradition* (17–18). The widely used term "genteel tradition" coined in 1911 by George Santayana refers to the refined, educated, and well-mannered cluster of New England intellectuals. Still, this phrase echoes an earlier coinage of Oliver Wendell Persons Holmes: "American cultural gentry." Bruce Kimball maintains that "the gentry in early nineteenth-century America "were a self-constituted aristocracy of the best," monopolizing culture, virtue, and power in America. The gentry initially competed with the wealthy, until the two factions gradually formed an "overlapping group" that was coextensive in Boston and personified by Oliver Wendell Holmes. See Kimball (2009), *The Inception of Modern Professional Education* 194.
21. See Kushner's *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*; Zimmer's *The Whole World is our Country*; Miller's "Sacco and Vanzetti."
22. Emphasis added.
23. Emphasis added.
24. Some examples are the Immigration Act 1903; the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882,1902, and 1904; the Language Requirement Law 1906; the Immigration Tax Law 1907.
25. Emphasis added.
26. See pages 81 and 293.
27. Emphasis added.
28. Lily uses the only sum of money she has to buy the disgraceful letters sent to Selden by Bertha Dorset in order to save his name and honor jeopardizing her own reputation.

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