

**Subverting 'The Politics of Class': A Marxist Rereading of Class and Agency in****Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*****Eman K. Mukattash, PhD**

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*"Nettie Struther's frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle"* (HoM 313)

*"Every emancipation is restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself."* (Marx, Zur Judenfrage)

**Abstract:** Wharton's portrayal of the attempts of the upper-class Lily and the working-class Nettie at recovering social security turns *The House of Mirth* into a rich ground for a Marxist reading of class and gender. It leaves space to challenge the traditional Marxist notion of the individual as a product of class. By contrasting Lily's fall from the upper-class and Nettie's re-entry to the working-class, I propose to prove that the classical Marxist notion of class struggle can be subjected to critique. Emancipation is not only economic but is also the "restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself."

*Yet, though change is possible in the case of the two women, it is Nettie, not Lily, who manages to challenge the economically deterministic views inherent in traditional Marxism. Far from any upper-class prejudices, Wharton seems to spot hope in the figure of the working-class woman.*

**Key Words:** *Marxism, identity, class, gender, change*

Though Lily Bart<sup>i</sup> and Nettie Struther<sup>ii</sup> suffer the same feelings of loss and alienation after being rejected by their class members, it is Nettie, not Lily, who eventually manages to shed the fetters of poverty, recover her position in society and assert herself as an active member of her class. From a Marxist viewpoint, both women are said to derive their identities from the class they belong to. Both are seen as passive products of class stratification in a capitalist society, which works as an antagonistic force leading to their social and financial downfall (Pizer 1995, 1-2). Lily Bart is cast out by her own people (the upper class) after her father's financial ruin, her social disgrace and her later disinheritance by her deceased aunt. Likewise, Nettie Struther's social reputation is lost and her health deteriorates after being abandoned by a working-class lover. The two women's fall from society and their subsequent suffering, however, makes each of them realize the need for emancipation if she is to assert her agency. In the novel, each attempts to free herself from the passive identity forced on her by her class. Lily tries hard to resume her position among her class members. Nettie tries to begin anew by marrying into the

working class and starting a family. Yet, unlike Nettie's, Lily's attempts turn out to be a successive series of failures.

Wharton's portrayal of Lily's and Nettie's social decline turns the novel into a rich ground for a Marxist reading of class and identity. No doubt, Wharton realizes that class forms identity for both women, yet, a close reading of the novel shows that she is subversive of the traditional Marxist views on class and identity in two ways. First, the development of events in the main plot (Lily's social decline) and the minor plot (Nettie's social recovery) shows that the relationship between class and identity is not one-way as traditional Marxists claim it to be. It is a two-way relationship where identity is not only determined by class (the economic position of the individual), but is also determinant of it. Thus, though the individual derives his identity from the class he belongs to, he can still free himself from 'class determinism' through economic emancipation. Second, the development of events in the two plots shows that emancipation should not be singularly economic, since, in Marxist terms, economic advancement can only be achieved through revolutionary triumph and disruption of social relationships. In order for it to become socially effective, economic emancipation has to take on a human dimension.

In the novel, the challenge to the class-identity double is represented in the characters of Lily and Nettie. Therefore, by contrasting Lily's fall from the upper-class with Nettie's re-entry into the working-class, the study shows that the classical Marxist notion of the individual as a product of his class can be subjected to critique. As Lily and Nettie realize the restricting effect class has on the individual in the capitalist society, they work to free themselves from this system by asserting their right to construct an identity free from class stratification. Such attempts on the part of the two women show that the novel stresses the importance of emancipation. Yet, Lily's failure at achieving financial security and Nettie's success at recovering her lost position *not* through economic advancement or revolutionary triumph question the nature of emancipation Marxism calls for. Far from being singularly economic, emancipation, as seen in the novel, proves to have a human dimension. It is, as in the case of Nettie, the "restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself" (1844, 46).

### **Karl Marx: A Struggle of Classes and A Call for Emancipation**

It is worthwhile shedding light on the Marxist notions of class, identity and emancipation before applying them to the way Lily and Nettie change in the novel. To begin with, Marx believes that history is best explained in terms of class struggle. Drawing on the Hegelian dialectic of history,<sup>iii</sup> he argues that the different historical, political and economic phases (serfdom, feudalism, capitalism, socialism) are theses that contain "the seeds of [their] own destruction" (2010, 1), i.e. the antitheses. The shift from one phase to another, i.e. from one thesis to another, is what causes history to evolve in time and what creates, as a result, the social being called 'man'. And since man is a creation of this process of evolution, he is more or less constituted as

a passive bearer of an ideological position imposed on him by his economic status. In other words, man becomes the product of his class and is seen to act upon the identity conferred upon him by his social position.<sup>iv</sup>

The base/superstructure metaphor, a model of interpretation devised by Marx, helps explain how history, which takes the form of class struggle, determines the way identity is constituted by class. In *The Communist Manifest* (1848), Marx notes that history is a product of class struggle indicating that the base of any human organization at a particular stage in time stems from its economic status (economic determinism) and that other forms, whether cultural, social or economic, are no more than ‘superstructures’ growing out of this base and reproducing it.

Emancipation from this imposed subjectivity can only come through what Marx calls ‘revolutionary triumph’ over the dominant class, which is in most cases achieved by disrupting human and social relationships in society. Yet, what should not be neglected is the fact that Marx denies not the role human and social relationships play in freeing the individual from a class-based form of identity. In “Zur Judenfrage” (“On the Jewish Question”) (1844), a Marxist document written in response to a Hegelian account by Bruno Bauer on the attempt of Jews to achieve political emancipation in Prussia,<sup>v</sup> Marx stresses the human aspect of emancipation which is not only achieved through economic advancement and/or revolutionary triumph over the wielders of power in the capitalist society, but through “a restoration of the human world and of human relationships of man to himself” (46). This shows that though Marxism introduces change primarily through economic advancement, the role of human agency and social relationships is not totally undermined. In fact, the “Zur Judenfrage” quote underpins the human aspect of class revolution indicating that what makes history is not only class struggle, but also the actions of the individuals who participate in this struggle. For the Marx we hear in “Zur Judenfrage”, the human factor is not altogether diluted; it is one of the means by which history is constructed and interpreted: “History is not like some individual person, who uses men to achieve its ends. History is nothing but the actions of men in pursuit of their ends” (322).

In the novel, the challenge to the conventional notion of ‘progress through economic advancement’ is clear in the change Lily and Nettie experience. Though the two women are, from a Marxist viewpoint, seen as products of their class upbringing, both work to free themselves from this imposed form of identity. Change, Marxists would argue, is a must especially in the case of Nettie. Yet, it is in the nature of this change that the challenge to the traditional Marxist concept of emancipation lies. This explains why it is eventually Nettie’s attempts, not Lily’s, bring forth change in the positive sense. Unlike Lily’s, Nettie’s social recovery comes through the recovery of lost human relationships, not through economic advancement or revolutionary resistance.

### **The New York Society: A Moneyed Class Structure**

It is clear that Wharton has chosen *The House of Mirth* (1905) to be an upper-class novel. As a member of an old-moneyed New York family, Wharton was well aware of the transitional phase

the American society has been going through starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. She herself has been resentful to such a change and tried in her novels to shed light on the negative aspects it resulted in. In what came later to be termed as ‘The Gilded Age’<sup>vi</sup> in the history of America, the years between 1876 and 1901 witnessed the birth of an era of great industrial expansion in railroads, shipping, the stock market and banking as well as a change in the class structure of the society. The rise of a new-moneyed class, the *nouveaux riches*, which shuffled the older structure and resulted in an unbridgeable gap between the rich and the poor, has turned the American society into a moneyed society and has threatened the strict sense of morality and strong family ties of older generations. In her introduction to the novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1985) remarks that the old New York society, represented mainly in the old Dutch families and the Yankees (Americans of English descent), was gradually being displaced starting from the middle of the nineteenth century. In its place, a new-moneyed class was rising. Unlike its predecessor, the new New York class was known for its moral laxity, loose family ties and shallow artistic sense. Wolff also notes that while the old New Yorkers had their connections and strict code of ethics to establish their family names, the new New Yorkers “had money, a great deal of money” (viii) instead.

Though the new class brought with it an increase in the national wealth, it has turned the American society into an extended marketplace where everything, including human relationships, was judged by its materialistic value:

No longer touched by family values, not interested in intellectual pursuits, immune to all but the most shallow artistic sensibilities, the great newly moneyed families of New York created a gala world of solid gold...but most of these *nouveaux riches* cared very little for the aesthetic value of the objects they purchased. They cared only about flaunting the fact that they had limitless money to spend. (ix)

Wolff’s words show that the new-moneyed did not have to work as hard as their predecessors to establish their names and accumulate their fortunes. In fact, investing money in the stock market meant exerting the least effort while gaining the most benefit. Having no regular job like the working-class and no particular field of interest like the old upper-class, people like Simon Rosedale and Gus Trenor in Wharton’s novel spend their time lunching and partying, and have their money doubled, or sometimes tripled, by the end of the day. Their lifestyle replaces the traditional American values of industry and hard work with the bad habit of gossip, a change which, in the novel, has had the effect of turning the Wall Street society into a wild place where survival is only for the ones with the means and the ways to do so.

Under this new-moneyed force, the American society acquired a new stratification. In the novel, the *nouveaux-riches*, like the Dorsets and the Van Osburghs, represent those with the social power and financial means to control every single aspect of life in this society. The Upstarts, the class immediately after the *nouveaux-riches*, represent the wealthy Americans from the Mid-

West, like Mrs. Hatch, and successful immigrants, like the Jew Simon Rosedale. The facilitators, like Mrs. Carry Fisher, represent those who help orient the two other classes socially so that they would be accepted by the rich upon their entry into society. The working-class, like Nettie Struther and the charwoman, represent the poor immigrants who flooded in from Europe and had to work to make ends meet (Wolff 1985, viii-ix).

Being the center of social life and the source of financial income, the new-moneyed class was the one to determine the codes of behavior and social relationships in America's capitalist society at the turn of the century. In the novel, Wharton portrays the New York moneyed-class as the class governing social and financial relationships not only between its members, but also with members of other classes. And since money is the driving force of all activities and relationships of this class, Wharton tells us that it (money), by analogy, becomes the driving force by which social activities and relationships between this class and other classes are governed. In fact, the novel shows that every single act is measured by its economic/materialistic value to the moneyed-class code of ethics. In "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" (1985), Wai-Chee Dimock denounces the Wall Street values as ones steeped in the marketplace ethics of exchange (1). Almost all characters in the novel, the new-moneyed New Yorkers in particular, speak the voice of the marketplace which, according to Dimock, legitimates a transactional language of exchange. Words like 'investments, returns, interests, payments' are recurrently heard throughout the novel from different characters and in different places (not only the marketplace) and situations, making it clear for the reader that the economy of the marketplace is infused into all aspects of social life and human conduct in the Wall Street capitalist society. To use the words of Dimock, the power of the marketplace and its economy is not singularly present in places where stock exchanges and business transactions are carried out, but also in its ability to

...reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain. As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of the business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic. (1)

Wharton also shows that money is not the only used currency to carry out successful transactions in the Wall Street society. In the novel, she depicts different types of markets that copy the stock market and conform to the politics of consumerism. The 'marriage market' and the 'social market' are two other forms of capitalist markets that promote transactional exchanges and require payment, though not always in the form of money, if these transactions are to materialize.

Similarly, the new-moneyed class maintains a business-like relationship with the working-class. For the rich, the poor only exist to be employed by them or to increase their wealth. Other than

that, they are non-existent. Socially, an unbridgeable gap sets the worlds of the two classes apart and blocks any possibility for communication outside the frameworks of money and business. If they are forced to communicate with them, the rich would treat them with an air of superiority and aloofness. In the novel, this is clear in the fact that the reader can hardly find a business-free encounter between the rich and the poor except for the one that takes place between Lily and Nettie towards the end of the novel.

Yet, as part of this society, the working-class is also driven by the economy of the marketplace. Even though the poor do not own the means to control the marketplace or even to carry out business transactions, they live by these terms. For them, money is the one and only means for survival, and getting a job is the only way to secure it. Wharton might not have showed how the politics of consumerism permeates the working-class relationships in detail (since *The House of Mirth* is more of an upper-class novel), yet a close reading shows that though working-class relationships are not governed as much as upper-class relationships by the marketplace economy, they are, nevertheless, not completely devoid of it. In Mrs. Regina's millinery, for instance, the relationship between the working-class women seems more genuine than the relationship between the upper-class women. They even seem to have a strong sense of solidarity and belongingness, a fact seen in their rejection of Lily's presence, a former upper-class woman, in the place they work in: "She knew she was an object of criticism and amusement to the other work-women" (*HoM* 284)

Contrary to what is expected, those women do not seem to feel embittered by the inferior social position they hold and the limited financial sources accessible to them; they seem to have come to terms with the fact that, for them, money will always be a necessity for survival, not a means for luxury. At the same time, the fact that Lily is no more the upper-class woman, whose abundant financial resources gives her an air of superiority, changes not the way they look at her. For them, even if money becomes a means for survival in her case, her presence remains odd amongst them. Apparently, Wharton is trying to show that, in Marxist terms, loss of financial means does not make an upper-class member welcome among his inferiors; for, as in the case of Lily, he can never come to understand how money ceases to be a luxury and becomes a burden.

It is in such a context that Lily and Nettie are presented to the reader. As members of this society, they learn to behave according to the way they are brought up by their class, and this, in the novel, has the effect of putting them under the pressure to conform if they are to be accepted by members of their class. Even before they are brought together through Gerty Farish's philanthropic work, Lily and Nettie seem to have something in common. They both derive their identities from the class they belong to. And since they belong to two different classes, each is brought up differently and trained by her class to see herself and her relation to society in different ways.

**Lily Bart: “Why! The beginning was in my cradle, I suppose- In the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no- I won’t blame anybody for my faults: I’ll say it was in my blood...” (HoM 229)**

As an upper-class woman, Lily is exposed to a code of behavior that is more or less governed by the marketplace economy. Conformity, in her case, lies in the ability to live by this code and to acquire an identity that fits with it. Speaking of the role the stock market plays in the lives of Wharton’s characters in “Edith Wharton as Economist: An Economist Interpretation of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*” (2008), Jenny B. Wahl introduces Lily a ‘willing victim’ (3) who is not only aware of the business transactions and the marketplace economy by which her class is governed, but is also willing to invest whatever talents she has to achieve the same kind of economic success. In fact, Lily realizes early in the novel that the market is controlled by the ones with the most successful investments. She also realizes that her father’s bankruptcy and her being a woman, an unmarried one, have already denied her the chance to be among the successful investors.

Lacking the financial means, Lily finds herself forced to look for alternative ways through which she can become one of those successful investors. Speaking to Gerty Farish of the reason why she has been doomed to a life of servitude, Lily notes that “the beginning was in [her] cradle...In the way [she] was brought up” (HoM 229). Brought up by a mother who hated nothing as she did poverty and dinginess, Lily internalizes from an early age the decorative/ornamental role of the upper-class female.<sup>vii</sup> She also realizes, as her mother does, that after her father’s death and bankruptcy, she has her beauty only to rely on if she is to recover her lost position among her class. To use the words of Dimock (1985), Wharton’s protagonist is “clearly caught up in the ethics of exchange” (1). Like other girls of her class, she is raised to believe that the only ‘profession’ she is trained for is making a good marriage. And since Lily lacks the financial means to make her the prospective wife any wealthy gentleman wishes to have, she has to rely on her beauty as the last “human merchandise” (Dimock 1) and “the last asset in their fortunes” (HoM 34) to find herself the buyer who would be willing to pay the demanded amount in return.

Lily’s marriage transaction, however, is not as easily carried out as one expects. For though she possesses “the only raw material of conquest (HoM 34), her beauty, to “convert it into success” (HoM 34), Wharton argues that other “arts are required” (HoM 34) to put it into use. In such a society, Lily has to play the role dictated by her class to get what she wants (Showalter 1985, 1-2). And for the kind of girl brought up by such a mother, Lily proves to be an expert at playing society’s game; that of the beautiful girl in hunt of a wealthy husband. In the novel, she is repeatedly seen contriving to lay hands on one of the Wall Street wealthy men and is even feared by many prospective mothers-in-law for her conniving character. On her way to Bellomont, she tries to seduce Percy Gryce and is on the verge of success hadn’t Bertha Dorset interfered to disrupt the fast flow of events. To lay hands on Percy Gryce’s fortune, Lily is even ready to

become to him “what his Americana had hitherto been, the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it” (*HoM* 49).

Realizing, however, that the marriage transaction she planned well for is not going to work, Lily starts looking for an alternative means to cover her increasing expenses. This time, Lily’s attempts are not directed at a well-off husband, but at a well-off businessman. Instead of the well-off unmarried Percy Gryce, Lily chooses the well-off married Gus Trenor. Ironically enough, her choice proves to be promising this time, for though Percy Gryce has grown “eloquent under her receptive gaze” (*HoM* 20), he is not as willing as Gus Trenor to accept some of Lily’s unreserved behaviors. Wharton notes that for Lily, Gus Trenor serves as the gate through which she could ensure her entry and long stay in the active business world of Wall Street. As he eludes her into believing that she, like other business figures, has become an active participant in the Wall Street stock market, Lily ceases to worry herself about finding another wealthy gentleman to marry. Leaving Bellomont, Lily leaves behind the “hateful fate” (*HoM* 25) that has kept her in bondage to other people’s whims for so long. In a magical moment, “the two lines at her mouth” (*HoM* 28) seem to disappear, and life, which seemed to be “the mockery she had thought it three days ago” (*HoM* 50) seemed to make lots of “room for her” (*HoM* 50) now.

The more the reader gets acquainted with Lily, the more he realizes that she is not only a victim of her upbringing and class, but also an accomplice in her victimization (Kassanoff 2000,1). In fact, Wharton notes that her protagonist has “a fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it” (*HoM* 117). Lily’s obsession with money and her inability to let go of any of the luxuries of the upper-class lifestyle are also said to lead to her social downfall.

In the *tableaux vivants*,<sup>viii</sup> Lily’s tendency to reproduce the market’s economy is seen at its peak. By participating in the Brys tableaux, she seems to approve not only of the capitalist society’s way of identifying women as mere consumers of luxury goods but also of turning them into human goods for sale. During the performance, Lily’s physical beauty is turned into a ‘materialistic asset’, which, she is sure, when paid for with money, would ensure her social and financial well-being.

By accepting the reductive role forced on her by her class, Lily is denying herself the right to assert her individuality. She might seem, in the words of Wharton, to have “a touch of poetry in her beauty” (*HoM* 134), yet this sense of artistic creativity is annulled by her readiness to weigh its value in financial terms. In “Lily Bart as Artist in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” (2010), Leslie Backer quotes Wharton to argue that, when read in Marxist terms, Lily’s artistic creativity can be seen as a form of ‘self-promotion’:

Her dramatic instinct was roused by the choice of subjects...but the keenest of all was the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her



loveliness was no more fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace. (*HoM* 131)

By accepting to represent her beauty in physical terms, Lily is not only reducing herself into an object for consumption, but is also relinquishing her right to construct her identity away from her class upbringing.

The fact that Lily could easily adapt herself to her surroundings (social rehabilitation) leads also to her social ruin. Early in the novel, Wharton describes Lily as “malleable as wax” (*HoM* 53) and as “a water-plant in the flux of tides” (*HoM* 53) indicating that regardless of her surroundings and her company, Lily is always able to renew herself in new conditions. At one level, Lily’s ability to socially rehabilitate herself shows that Wharton dooms not her protagonist to complete failure, but leaves some space for reconciliation. Nevertheless, Lily’s social pliability makes her more of a product of her class upbringing. At one point in the novel, Selden describes Lily as an amphibious being, who, though “poised on the brink of a chasm” (*HoM* 192) every time she is abandoned by one of her class members, can, through “the illusion of distance” (*HoM* 192), renew herself. In fact, Selden realizes that though the change of scenery and the change of faces might have helped Lily find an alternative financial source of income for some time, the talent she has for self-renewal does not save her from social ruin. On the contrary, it causes to alienate her the more from herself. Eventually, even her upper-class people cease to see her presence in new places and among new people enjoyable. For them, Lily becomes a bore.

**Nettie Struther: “destined to be swept pre-maturely into the social refuse-heap” (*HoM* 313)**

As a working-class woman, Nettie is not brought up to be decorative. On the contrary, she is taught that since the market is controlled by the ones with the financial means, there is never time for a poor woman to spend on her looks and appearance. Even if she had the time to do so, the lack of financial means would make her abandon the merest idea of doing so. Without the sufficient means, she is pressured to conform to a code other than the code of beauty the upper-class woman conforms to. In her case, it is the ‘code of work’, and conformity, according to it, means that the working-class girl is brought up to be productive and has, therefore, to be taught the needed skills and talents to help her become part of the market and make a living.

Nevertheless, it is not only the need to find a job and be productive that dooms Nettie in the novel. Through her relationship with the new-moneyed class, Nettie is turned into a passive tool employed by those people to serve their financial interests. Getting a job means not, therefore, that she has become an active participant in the market. Quite the opposite, it means that she is used only to reinstitute the rich in power and to reproduce the same class system through which she is given this passive identity. To add to this, Nettie’s personal life proves to be even more tragic. Abandoned by a lover who had promised to marry her, Nettie feels the double burden of being a woman and a working-class member in a capitalist society. Socially, she has risked her reputation and ended up as the ‘talk of the town’. As in the case of Lily, the loss of reputation

dooms Nettie to feelings of loss and alienation. She is not only doomed for not conforming to the economic codes governing relationships in the capitalist society, but also for trying to turn those economic relationships into human ones (in the case of her lover).

Lily's participation in charity work leads to the incident where she and Nettie Struther are brought together before her death. The reader is told, towards the end of the novel, that the money Lily donates goes to a working-class woman called Nettie whose health has deteriorated and whose lover has abandoned her leaving her socially disgraced and heartbroken. Ironically, it is the money Lily gets from Trenor that helps the girl recover her health and gives her a push to reintegrate herself to her surroundings. Lily, of course, is kept in the dark as to how her charity is invested and what wonders it makes. It is late in the novel (after she meets Nettie and her daughter) that she is made to know the truth. In fact, Lily's meeting with Nettie and her daughter gives the novel's last pages a new meaning and adds to the irony behind the novel's ending (Lily's death). Lily, the upper-class woman who is supposed to have the means to lead a more comfortable life is outstepped by Nettie, the working-class girl who barely has the means to help her recover her health. As a matter of fact, it is Nettie's ability to rise beyond the hopeless situation she finds herself in that makes Lily's fall from the upper-class more tragic. Despite the fact that the two women are cast out by the members of their classes, Lily's re-entry into the upper-class proves to more difficult, if not impossible, when compared to Nettie's re-entry into the working-class.

### **Lily Bart and Nettie Struther: Towards a New 'Politics of Class'**

As the events develop, both women come to realize the need to free themselves from the inhibiting effect class has on them. They both attempt, though with varying degrees of success, to challenge their class' norms and to assert their right to a class-free identity. Such attempts are primarily seen in their challenge to the notions of work, marriage and human relationships in the capitalist society.

Unlike Lily, Nettie is not brought up to be decorative. On the contrary, she is trained from an early age to see herself as a breadwinner and to see getting a job as the only means for survival. Speaking to Lily of the suffering she has been through as a working-class girl, Nettie notes that "work girls are n't looked after the way [she is], and they don't always know how to look after themselves" (*HoM* 315). Instead, they are taught the skills and talents they need to enter the marketplace and become efficient workers. Lily also remembers that when she first met Nettie:

She had known [her] as one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage: one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept pre-maturely into the social refuse-heap... (*HoM* 313)

In the eyes of the upper-class Lily, having a job is the reason why Nettie is 'anaemic' and 'destined to be swept pre-maturely into the social refuse-heap'. While Lily's thoughts seem to

reflect part of the truth behind the suffering of the working-class, they seem to discard the other part of this truth; the one showing that the concept of 'work' has a different meaning for the working-class. For the poor, work is not a choice; it equals the effort the worker exerts to make life better and to ensure a financial source of income. In fact, it is the 'seriousness' of what work means for a work-girl that Lily fails to understand and ends up equating with being 'over-worked' and 'anaemic'.

For Lily, however, having to work means losing her social position. And since she is raised to be decorative, her work experience proves to be a complete failure. Wharton notes in the novel that Lily's "untutored fingers were still blundering over the rudiments of the trade" (*HoM* 285) and that, as a breadwinner, "she was likely to prove as helpless and ineffectual" (*HoM* 285). As an upper-class girl, the only 'profession' for which she is trained is getting married to a wealthy upper-class gentleman who would secure her financially without the need to get a job. Failing to do so leads to social and financial ruin since she has no other skill to help her sustain herself. This is why Lily finds herself not only helpless after her father's financial ruin, but also forced to stay under the control of her aunt for financial sustenance. Had she learnt any skill, Wharton argues, she would have been able to depend on herself for a living. Later, when she realizes that her aunt's meager sustenance is far too little to cover the increasing expenses of the luxurious upper-class lifestyle she is leading, she decides to look for other sustaining sources. Finding a job, of course, is no alternative to consider. Thus, she tries seducing Trenor into investing her 'humble' resources in the stock market. After the whereabouts of this questionable investment begin to show to people around her and after she is about to be socially disgraced, she tries her hand at another 'upper-class profession', that of the social facilitator. Joining the Dorsets' cruise to the Mediterranean, Lily is attested the task of keeping George Dorset blind to his wife's extramarital affairs. Again, unlike Nettie's serious and industrious efforts to make a living, Lily's attempts are steeped into an upper-class luxurious lifestyle. The concept of work for the spoilt Lily is ironically one devoid of the 'exerting of efforts' found among the members of the working-class. Similar to the kind of life she used to lead in Wall Street, Lily's life on the *Sabrina* is spent on lunching, feasting and partying till her reputation is once more ruined. The social decline Lily suffers at the hands of Bertha forces her to descend the more down the social ladder leaving her in a situation where work-for-money becomes a must for survival.

Even here, Lily chooses not to abandon her upper-class notion of work. She chooses to go on working as a social secretary although this time it is with the less refined new-moneyed Mrs. Gormer and Mrs. Hatch. Bertha's destructive influence follows her, however, making it impossible for Lily to be accepted even among those who needed her social orientation to enter the upper-class society. Eventually, Lily finds herself forced to identify with a new concept of work; that of the working-class. Sharing other working-class women the job of hat-making, Lily is brought face to face with the concept of work in which manual effort is only rewarded with money. Of course, since Lily is not trained to show the needed industry and consistency, she fails

to be as productive as any of the working-class girls and eventually loses her job and the chance to be accepted among her inferiors.

When compared to Lily's, Nettie's attempts to free herself from the restrictions imposed on her by her class are also strengthened by the role marriage and motherhood play in her life. It cannot be denied that for both women marriage serves as a safety net. Yet, while the kind of security marriage gives Lily is financial, it is social security that Nettie looks for in marriage. Having experienced how harsh it is to be abandoned by one's lover, Nettie feels emotionally bankrupt and her health even deteriorates, whereas Lily's failure to find a wealthy husband makes her feel financially, not emotionally, vulnerable. Ironically enough, it is the working-class, not the upper-class, notion of marriage that seems to have an emotionally and socially healing effect in the novel. In the case of Nettie, marriage helps her stand on her feet and recover her position among her class members. What is more, marriage secures her financially, emotionally and socially. As she sits in the warm kitchen of the Struthers, Lily remembers Nettie's words about her husband. The fact that Nettie "*knew that he [her husband] knew about her*" (HoM 320) has helped her restore the socially disrupted relationships after her first experience and has given her the chance for a new start. With the help of her husband, Nettie is also able to ascend the social ladder and reestablish herself as a reputable woman: "it had taken the two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage" (HoM 320). Moreover, the fact that she has become a mother adds to her ability to see things away from the materialistic framework of relationships in the capitalist society. Like marriage, motherhood helps Nettie retie the socially disrupted relationships with her class.

Speaking of male-female relationships in Wharton's world, Dimock (1985) argues that marriage among the Wall Street upper-class is governed by the economy of its market. It amounts to nothing more than a business transaction in which one party makes an offer and a second party pays for this offer to make it materialize. In the novel, Rosedale's offer to save Lily from Bertha's schemes and marry her is no more than a business transaction through which he offers Lily financial security in return for getting a wife who would help him enter the high class and be accepted by its members. Unlike Nettie's husband, Rosedale refuses to risk his reputation by marrying the socially disgraced Lily and getting nothing in return, even though deep down he is completely sure that Bertha's accusations are no more than mere feminine jealousies.

Unlike her relationship with Rosedale, Lily's relationship with Selden helps her challenge the upper-class notion of marriage. Himself averse to the upper-class ways of encumbering one's individuality (the female's in particular), Selden speaks to Lily about the need to construct her identity away from what her class dictates. The novel ironically opens with Lily's secret visit to the flat of the unmarried Selden. This visit, in fact, is one way through which Lily rejects the restrictions imposed on her by her class. The conversation that ensues between them is also subversive of the conventional talk that takes place between a man and a woman in such a society. It is ironic that Lily is at her best as a self-willed individual in this scene. The reader

notices that she is not the typical girl raised to fit certain upper-class ways of behavior. She appears to know exactly what she wants and how to shape her future. She even seems to appreciate how valuable independence and individuality are, “to have a place like this to one’s self!” (*HoM* 7), and how difficult things are for the upper-class female, “What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!” (*HoM* 7). In fact, Lily seems to realize that the kind of identity forced on her by her class chains her to a hateful future where “a girl must” succumb to social norms while “a man may if he chooses” (*HoM* 12). Right from the start, the reader realizes, as Selden clearly does, that though Lily might seem the perfect embodiment of her class upbringing, she is, in the words of Dimock (1985), “something of a rebel” (1). Selden even wonders if it is “possible that she belonged to the same race” (*HoM* 5) of her class.

Such rebellious tendencies on the part of Lily are not consistent though. They are momentarily sustained by the short and infrequent meetings with Selden. In a walk Lily takes with Selden during their visit to Bellomont, Selden talks to Lily of the ‘True Republic of the Spirit’ which, he explains, conforms to no norms but to its own. Selden’s Emersonian ideas appeal to Lily who feels eager to venture into this untrodden realm and live by its laws. She is overwhelmed by the newness of the experience and is even willing to forsake her class luxuries to become a citizen in a country where “one has to find the way to one’s self” (*HoM* 68) on his own. Yet, it is not too long before the reader realizes that Lily’s Emersonian self is “so little accustomed to go alone” (*HoM* 70), and that, in the words of Wharton, it is easily left “gasping for air in a little black prisonhouse of fears” (*HoM* 64). Marriage, for Lily, remains a means for financial security till the very end. Regardless of how strong her Emersonian love for Selden is, it never seems to transcend the materialism to which marital relationships are reduced in the upper-class society.

The fact that social relationships among members of the working-class are not solely governed by the market’s politics of consumerism as social relationships among the upper class is another reason why Nettie’s attempts to challenge her class upbringing prove to be more successful than Lily’s. In fact, Nettie’s relationship with her class members, with the exception of that with her previous lover, proves to be more human and less materialistic than any of Lily’s upper-class relationships. Thus, at the time that Lily’s acquaintances find it easy to betray or abandon her in order to preserve their personal interests, Nettie’s acquaintances do not. Her husband, for instance, helps her establish a more human relationship with the people around her. As she meets Lily towards the end of the novel, Nettie reminds her of how her charitable donations have helped her recover her health and start a new life:

Only it’s so lovely having you here, and letting you see just how you’ve helped me.’ The baby had sunk back blissfully replete, and Mrs. Struther softly rose to lay the bottle aside. Then, she posed before Miss Bart. ‘I only wish I could help *you*, - but I suppose there’s nothing on earth I could do,’ she murmured wistfully. (*HoM* 315).

The fact that Nettie acknowledges Lily's role in helping her re-enter society establishes more of a human relationship between the two women. Though the two of them belong to two different classes, the relationship between them is not controlled by the one with the more financial power. On the contrary, it is one tinged with a human touch and this gives the bereaved Lily one more chance to re-enter society and find meaning for her life.

A close look at upper-class relationships, however, shows that they lack the human factor found between members of the working-class. Bertha Dorset, for example, finds it easy and even justifiable to disrupt her relationship with Lily and disgrace her to protect herself from being talked of. She even goes as far as to ruin her social reputation with her later employers to keep hers intact. Similarly, Lily's aunt chooses to forsake her niece and disinherit her as soon as she gets news that she is being talked of. Though an aunt-niece relationship is supposed to transcend the politics of consumerism by which other business relationships are controlled, Mrs. Peniston's and Lily's does not. In fact, Mrs. Peniston sees ending her relationship with her niece an easy thing to do once her interests are put on risk. She even chooses to weigh the value of her relationship with Lily with the amount of money she leaves her after her death. Like Bertha Dorset, Mrs. Peniston chooses to overlook the human aspect of her relationship with Lily and to turn it into a business transaction where value is determined by how much she gets in return.

Lily's challenge to the materialistic relationships developed between members of the upper-class is strengthened by her relationship with Gerty Farish. Like her cousin Selden, Ms Farish is not the typical product of her class. She refuses to pursue the same ends; that of getting married to a wealthy husband to ensure financial support. She even goes far as to have, like Selden, 'a room of her own' where she does not find herself forced to conform to any of the materialistic upper-class behaviors and habits. During her recurrent visits to her place, Lily is fascinated by the idea that a woman can be financially independent and have a place of her own. Yet, the dinginess of the place and the shabbiness of its belongings makes her change her mind immediately. At the very end of the day, Lily sees her aunt's repressive drawing room more liberating than Gerty Farish's independent rooms.

Moreover, the fact that Lily's relationship with Ms Farish brings her together with members of the working-class helps her turn some of the economically-determined relationships in the capitalist society into human ones. Early in the novel, the reader is told that Ms Farish's center of attention is charity work. Being unmarried and living on her own, she has the time needed to devote to philanthropic work, especially in relation to working-class women. Through Ms Farish's philanthropic activities, Lily is set apart from the upper-class prejudices for a while and is made able to see things in clearer light. She is also encouraged to participate in similar activities where she actually helps one of the poor girls, the later Nettie Struther, recover her health from an anaemic lung disease. Lily's participation in charity work gives her more confidence in her ability to transcend the decorative role she is raised to fit by her class. She is no longer the good-for-nothing beautiful girl in pursuit of a rich husband. Far from this, she

becomes an active member of society and begins to feel “a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts” (*HoM* 112). It also helps free her from the money-governed relationships connecting her to her class members. Even after she is deeply wronged by her own people, Lily still abhors Rosedale’s offer to bargain with Bertha using the letters for her reputation. Deep down, Lily makes it a point to herself that even if she is not “used to recovery at high levels,” the meanness of her class “won’t validate her sacrificing her honor and morality” (*HoM* 300). Through charity, Lily is also able to establish more human relationships with her inferiors. The relationship she develops with Nettie towards the end of the novel is what eventually saves her from spiritual death and leaves her satisfied.

What irritates Lily, however, when she looks back at her philanthropic experience, is that the source of the money she donates is already corrupted with the transactions and business world of the marketplace. At the back of her mind, Lily could never forget that the amount of money she helps the working-class girls with is Gus Trenor’s; not hers, and this leaves her helpless under the power of the moneyed system. She even feels that all her efforts to establish a more human and a less materialistic relationship with the working-class girls are getting her no where.

### **Conclusion: Wharton’s Hope for the ‘Working-Class’**

It cannot be doubted that class plays a crucial role in shaping the identities of Lily and Nettie in the novel. As an upper-class woman, Lily is brought up to be decorative, to get married and to see money as a means for social sustenance. As a working-class woman, Nettie is brought up to be a breadwinner and to see money as a means for making ends meet. Yet, the fact that the two women see the identity forced on them by their class limiting turns the novel into a rich ground for a deconstructive reading of the Marxist notions of class and identity. In the novel, both women try to challenge their class identity, yet, change, in the case of Lily is not as tangible as in the case of Nettie.

Deep down, Lily refuses to fit into the decorative role she is brought up to by her class. Every time a marriage arrangement seems to take place, she seems to subconsciously react against it. Yet, Lily is all the way weighed down by the delights and luxuries of the upper-class, and therefore finds it hard to do without them. As Wharton notes:

...after all, it was the life she had been made for: every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to center around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty. (*HoM* 317)

Nettie, on the other hand, shows more strength and determination in challenging her class restrictions. Though she is as socially rejected as Lily is, she manages to gather up the ashes of her old self and start anew:

Nettie Struther's frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle. (HoM 313)

No doubt, Nettie could not have been able to do so without the help of the people around her; Lily, Ms Farish and her husband. Yet, the main reason why Nettie could challenge her class upbringing and assert her individuality lies in her ability to turn the materialistic relationships holding her to the members of her class and other classes in the capitalist society to human relationships. Rather than disrupting the relationship with Lily or making use of it to accomplish economic advancement, Nettie chooses to restore this relationship and give it a more human meaning.

It cannot be denied, however, that Lily also attempts to free herself from the business-like relationships of her class, yet, since she has all the way regarded money as the one and only means to make possible her re-entry into society, her attempts are more or less destined to failure. For Lily, money is not only a currency used to carry out business transactions in the marketplace; it becomes the only currency with which social relationships are established and maintained. Though she manages to free herself from the money-syndrome at some points in the novel, the desire to own it, enjoy it and secure it prevents her from envisioning a life without its luxuries. It is only after burning the letters in Selden's flat and meeting Nettie and her daughter on her way home that Lily comes to see the worth of a money-free human relationship, yet for the weakling self inside her, the "restoration of human relationships" (1844: 46) is more easily accomplished in death rather than in life. With the phial in her hand and the bank statement with Gus Trenor's name on the desk, Lily proves that what she has failed to accomplish in life, she could eventually accomplish in death:

That was the feeling which possessed her now- the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. (HoM 319)

Though both women's lives change drastically towards the end of the novel, this change takes different forms. Nettie's life changes to the better, while change in the case of Lily takes the form of social decline and financial ruin. Far from any upper-class prejudices, Wharton seems to spot hope in her New York upper-class novel, *The House of Mirth*, in the figure of the working-class woman. Unlike the upper-class Lily, Nettie eventually manages to challenge the economically deterministic views inherent in traditional Marxism by overcoming the barriers her class forces on her. What is more, change in the case of Nettie takes not the form of economic advancement or revolutionary triumph over the injustices of the upper-class, but the form of restored human relationships, which is in fact what Lily fails to achieve and what leads to her willed death at the end of the novel.<sup>ix</sup>



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<sup>i</sup> The two characters' names are symbolic. Lily has the name of a delicate white flower which stands for fragility and purity at the same time. Being white indicates that Lily is, unlike the upper class society she lives among and is ironically a member of, innocent and pure. Being fragile indicates that she could never be as cunning as them. It also hints at how hard it will be for her to survive in such a society. Eventually, Lily is smothered just as a real lily would be if denied oxygen and sunlight.

<sup>ii</sup> Nettie's name is likewise symbolic. A net in her case refers to the new niche she works hard to find herself among the working class. After all, Nettie wants a new start after she has been abandoned by her lover. A net, therefore, gives her a stable ground on which she can stand still. Yet, the fact that this net is in reality no more than a "nettie" shows how hard it is to start again.

<sup>iii</sup> In "What is the Hegelian Dialectic?" (2005), Niki Raapana and Nordica Friedrich argue that we ought to "step outside the dialectic" if we want to free ourselves from "the limitations of controlled and guided thought" (1). Hegel's interpretation of history has indeed offered an explanation of history as a series of conflicts leading into an expected solution, yet, it has also exerted an outer control on our thoughts and actions so that we have become part of this dialectic. Thus, Raapana and Friedrich's critique of Hegelian thought comes as a warning not to see things as opposites, unless we want to "remain locked into dialectical thinking" and not to "see out of the box" (1). For further information, see also "The Hegelian Dialectic and its Use in Controlling Modern Society" (2013) by General Maddox.

<sup>iv</sup> This points hints at the clash between classical Marxists and modern Marxists. Following in the steps of Marx, modern Marxists see history and explain it in economic terms, believing that the different forms of political struggle and revolutionary movements result from the economic status of the different groups in society at that time. But, after it failed to account for the failure of different revolutionary movements in Europe, Marx's reductive metaphor (base/superstructure) was challenged by them in an attempt to give more attention to culture by redirecting orthodox Marxism from economic and political analysis to cultural theory.

Parting ways with classical Marxism, neo-Marxists reject the rigidity with which Marx defined the relationship between the economic base and the different superstructures it produces. Rather, they call for a freer relationship where it is not only the economic base that determines the different cultural, social and political forms in a society, but the other way around also.

<sup>v</sup> In "Zur Judenfrage" ("On the Jewish Question") (1843), a document written in response to a Hegelian account by Bruni Bauer on the attempt by the Jews to achieve political emancipation in Prussia, Marx argues that Bauer is mistaken in his assumption that in a "secular state" religion will no longer play a prominent role in social life. In Marx's analysis, the "secular state" is not opposed to religion, but rather actually presupposes it. On this note, Marx moves beyond the question of religious freedom to his real concern with Bauer's analysis of "political emancipation." Marx concludes that while individuals can be 'spiritually' and 'politically' free in a secular state, they can still be bound to material constraints on freedom by economic inequality, an assumption that would later form the basis of his critiques of [capitalism](#).

The quote referred to in the article is taken from "Zur Judenfrage" where Marx remarks that "Every emancipation is a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to man himself. Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as social powers so that he no longer separated his social power from himself as political power. "

<sup>vi</sup> Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) is a critique of an age which he describes as one covered with a gold surface. No doubt, Twain has had in mind the double standards, especially hypocrisy, that characterized the new-moneyed American class. Though expansion, industry and wealth are what mark the era from an economic aspect, the loss of the human element and the spirit of cooperation and brotherhood on which the ancestral Puritan American society has been founded are lost. Here, we find a common aspect between Twain's description of the American society which has witnessed the rise of that new revolutionary rich class and Marx's future vision of the rise of the revolutionary working class. Both have missed the human element needed to extend their contribution to the advancement of society beyond the economic level.

- <sup>vii</sup> Wharton's relation with her mother is a troubled one. As an upper-class old New Yorker whose utmost concern is proper behavior, her mother has been frustrated by the fact the Edith has not been that much beautiful. She had also been too hard to please and never liked Edith indulging too much in intellectual activities. This has had an effect on Wharton's portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in her novels. In *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (1998), Carol J. Singley touches on this point by arguing that Wharton's troubled relation with her mother resulted in "fictional portraits of deficient mothering" (101), a good example on which is the relation between Lily and her mother in *The House of Mirth*. For further information, see *Edith Wharton* (2007) by Hermoine Lee.
- <sup>viii</sup> It is ironic that these tableaux, which had become a trend in the nineteenth century, are described as lively. Participants are presented to the audience in specific poses for a duration of time with no speaking or moving ever. For the kind of person Lily is, such kind of visual display comes as suitable. First, she has been taught to rely on her beauty as a visual asset. Second, her participation in those displays hints at how passive she is compared to her surroundings. She is too weak to act; thus, she chooses to be acted upon.
- <sup>ix</sup> Lily's death at the end of the novel can be read on positive grounds. Though her death ends her life and her being a self-willed subject, it is self-willed. Too weak to fight back, she sees death as a triumph rather than loss. Had she lived, she would have sunk further into the helpless situation she has been at the time of her death. This reading can serve as an argument suitable for a feminist approach to the novel.

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