The Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s
The House of Mirth

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Edith Wharton’s effort in The House of Mirth to excoriate the nexus between sex and money in turn-of-the-century upper-class New York life and to reveal the tragic effects of a society of this kind upon a sensitive young woman has been recognized from the publication of the novel in 1905. Criticism of the day, however, and indeed for the next half-century, shied away from an identification of these themes with literary naturalism. The fictional worlds of Norris, Crane, and Dreiser, the naturalists of Wharton’s generation, appeared so distant from those of Wharton that the almost inevitable tendency of the literary historian, as revealed most notably in a well-known section of Alfred Kazin’s On Native Grounds, was to consider Wharton and Dreiser as antithetical tendencies in early twentieth-century American expression.

A notable attempt, however, to free Wharton criticism from this conventional assumption occurred in 1953, when Blake Nevius observed that Lily Bart, in The House of Mirth, is “as completely and typically the product of her heredity, environment, and the historical moment . . . as the protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel” (57). Although Nevius failed to pursue this insight, it nevertheless became, if not a critical commonplace, at least one of the options for a way into the complexities of this pivotal work in Wharton’s career.¹

Indeed, in recent years, with the emphasis in critical discourse on the controlling role of the contemporary moment in shaping the beliefs and values both of fictional characters and of their authors, the idea that The House of Mirth can best be read as a form of naturalistic fiction has often been endorsed. In much of this commentary the attempt has been to refine the gross categories of naturalistic determinism into the
fine gold of recent critical preoccupations. Above all, the specific deterministic character of Lily's social environment has received a number of full readings. Whether Lily's fate is shaped by the capitalistic exchange values of her society or by its patriarchal power structure or by some variation of these two central readings in contemporary criticism of the novel, it is now common—whether or not the critic employs the terms of naturalistic criticism—to view the work as in the naturalistic camp.

Absent from almost all of this recent reexamination of The House of Mirth, however, is an effort to reconcile a view of Lily Bart as naturalistic victim of her world and Wharton's bold and concerted attempt, at the close of the work, to modify or counter an interpretation of this kind. We seem to have returned, in this respect, to the critical climate of the 1930s, when the need to view fiction in specific cultural terms because of the social work which this reading could provide led to a simplification of the novels of such figures as Norris and Dreiser. The rediscovery of Wharton as a naturalist, in other words, has also led to the redeployment in her case of the critical assumption that American naturalism in its various forms is an unqualified representation of social determinism in action. It is this assumption about The House of Mirth which I wish to test.

Even the casual reader of The House of Mirth is made aware throughout the work that Edith Wharton had been reading widely in social evolutionary theory of her day and that she was applying much of its central belief about the insignificance of individual will in relation to social environment (including belief and value as conditions of environment) to Lily Bart. Thus, with Wharton using the conventional language and imagery of a pessimistic environmental determinism—of man as not merely related to or dependent on his social setting but as destructively imprisoned by it—we are told during the course of Lily and Selden's first encounter that "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (7). Lily herself, unlike many contemporary naturalistic protagonists, is fully aware of her condition as one bound by her social matrix. When Gerty Farish later in the novel seeks to comfort Lily by asking her to tell "her story ... from the beginning," Lily responds, "Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and things I was taught to care for" (226).

These and many similar overt efforts to link Lily to a naturalistic context of social determinism (e.g., 39, 262)—to say nothing of the
implicit rendering of Lily in this context, as pointed out by much recent criticism, through scene, action, and metaphor—is brought to a head and summed up in two often-cited passages toward the close of the work, when Lily fully realizes both the nature of her social conditioning and its baleful effect on her life. “She had learned by experience,” Wharton comments, “that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines.... Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock” (301). To nail down the deterministic implications of this conventional biological image, Wharton shortly thereafter joins it with an equally conventional mechanistic metaphor. Lily tells Selden during their last interview, “I have tried hard—but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. 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” (308). And to make sure that we do not consider Lily a special case, Wharton uses, though less often, the same language of imprisonment in a social matrix to describe the seemingly free and independent Selden. We are told that “He had meant to keep free from permanent ties, not from any poverty of feeling, but because, in a different way, he was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment” (151–52). He has acquired from his mother, Wharton explains, the qualities of mind and taste which are the source of his damaging ambivalence toward Lily—“his detachment from the sumptuary side of life; the stoic’s carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean’s pleasure in them” (152).

Toward the end of The House of Mirth, however, Wharton juxtaposes this conscious deterministic theme of victimization by one’s familial and social environment—of being forced into roles and attributes which both imprison and destroy—with two striking alternative forms of belief and value. The first involves Nettie Struther, the second the final “union” of Lily and Selden. These are alternative forms of belief, I will suggest, because they are non-materialistic in their conception of the human will and emotion—that is, they posit either a transcendent strength, one which can defeat the forces making for victimization in life, or a transcendent faith, one which holds that some values exist despite their seeming defeat in life.

Nettie Struther, as some critics have pointed out, has on her appearance toward the close of The House of Mirth the effect of seeming to be a refugee from another kind of novel. As she is remembered by
Lily from an earlier phase of their lives, when Lily has encountered her at a working-woman’s club organized by well-meaning society ladies, Nettie was “one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anemic parentage; one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into [the] social refuse-heap” (313). This interpretation was indeed confirmed by Nettie’s later serious illness and by her jilting by the somewhat more highly socially positioned man she had hoped to marry. But in fact, when Lily meets Nettie again immediately after Lily herself has broken for the last time with Selden and is returning home deeply disconsolate and with the thought of chloral “the only spot of light in the dark prospect” (311), “Nettie Struther’s frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy; whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle” (313).

Nettie, we learn, has returned to life through marriage with a good man who has accepted and loves her despite her relationship with a previous suitor. Nettie explains, “If George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn’t see why I shouldn’t begin over again—and I did” (315). The infant which she now dotes on is thus the symbol of the triumphant rebirth of her will to live and indeed to live happily. “The strength of the victory shone forth from her as she lifted her irradiated face from the child on her knees” (315). Nettie’s progress from “victim” to “victory” within her own category of social determinism is thus a clear gloss on a potential of a similar kind within the category represented by Lily. If Nettie can triumph in the face of the physical and social handicaps which are hers from birth, this victory is also possible for Lily within her own seeming manacles of environmental conditioning. What differs in the two instances, in other words, is not an absolute distinction but a relative one. Nettie, unlike Lily, has both a sufficiently powerful will and the providential actuality of a man willing to take a chance on her. As Lily herself tersely sums up the differences between Nettie’s fate and her own: “It had taken two to build the nest; the man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage” (320).

The meaning of this distinction between Nettie and Lily for Wharton’s naturalism can perhaps best be discussed in relation to a roughly similar distinction in the fates of Carrie and Hurstwood in Sister Carrie. There, too, a figure seemingly equipped by social status to weather the storms of life is left desolate and destroyed by the close of the novel, while a poor waif of a girl who begins urban life in a shoe factory becomes a Broadway star. Dreiser and Wharton are similar as naturalistic writers, in other words, not in a desire to depict life as fully
and destructively conditioned for all mankind; they rather wish to render the powerful effect of environment and heredity on various specific kinds of temperament and experience. All are exposed to and deeply affected by the conditioning forces of life, but some not only survive but even triumph, as Dreiser and Wharton make abundantly clear through the Netties, Carries, and Cowperwoods of their fiction.

The second way that Wharton modifies a conception that she is participating in a conventionally conceived naturalism is in her depiction of Lily's death, an event which would indeed seem to confirm the theme of pessimistic determinism in the novel. Lily and Selden have parted with his love for her "dead" at that point. But, we are told, "something lived between them also, and leaped up in her like an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had [earlier] kindled, the passion of her soul for his" (309). Lily goes to bed that night therefore both with the overdose of chloral which represents her inability to overcome her socially determined fate and with thoughts or feelings of love which constitute the transcendent in human affairs—the capacity to believe that certain values and conditions have significance because of the human capacity to believe in them despite their being unachievable by some or even all of humankind. The first such belief is that encapsulated in Nettie's story, as rendered now by Lily's dream or hallucination that Nettie's child—the child that Lily had in fact held rapturously in her arms earlier that evening—is there in bed beside her. What she had not achieved in life, in short, is here achieved in the imagination and is thus affirmed and even celebrated as a human value even in the face of its actual denial in life.

As Lily lies in bed imagining the sleeping child beside her, "she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them" (323). She tries to articulate this word, "which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought" (323), but falls asleep before she can do so. The next morning, Selden, once he has determined the truth of Lily's relationship with Gus Trenor, approaches her deathbed.

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her—had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her—and if the moment had been
fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now
that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their
lives.

It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over
themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction;
which, in turn, had reached out to him in every struggle against
the influence of her surroundings, and in him, had kept alive the
faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side.

He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last
moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them
the word which made all clear.5 (329)

The language of this extraordinary conclusion is essentially
religious in character. The “conditions of life” conspire to defeat the
spiritual fulfillment which is human love. But love did exist and
continues to exist despite this defeat. Lily and Selden’s “brief moment
of love” had earlier provided them with a “fleeting victory over
themselves,” keeping them from “atrophy and extinction,” and now, in
his realization of her love, has supplied him with a “faith” that has made
him “penitent.” Thus, in the “silence” of physical actuality there can
nevertheless be transmitted the “word”—the clear expression of their
love for each other—which was never spoken in life. Life seemingly
defeats the human effort to believe in a spiritual force in life, but in fact
that belief transcends defeat both in its functional force in human
affairs during life and in its permanence despite the transience of life.

Just as Wharton’s earlier discussed modification of a presumed
normative naturalism is related to Dreiser’s similar modification, so, too,
in this instance, one can find an instructive analogue in the conclusion
of Frank Norris’s The Octopus. There also, by means of the final
reflections of Presley on the meaning of the tragic events which he has
witnessed, Norris offers a religious reading of existence. Annixter is
killed and the ranchers are defeated by the forces of greed and
corruption. Nevertheless, Presley concludes, the wheat which has been
harvested symbolizes a transcendent force of good controlling all
human destiny despite the seeming evidence to the contrary in the
specific evidence before him.6 Norris and Wharton are of course
operating in different spheres of the transcendent—the one in the
beneficence of natural processes, the other in the indestructibility of
personal love. But both ask of their readers, as does most religious
belief of its followers, to have faith in a truth despite its lack of concrete
supporting evidence and its frequent denial or defeat by life itself.

The naturalism of The House of Mirth is therefore both different
from and similar to that of Wharton’s principal naturalist contemporar-
ies. She of course depicts very different levels of society and of social behavior than those present in *Maggie, McTeague*, or even *Sister Carrie*, and she also renders social conditioning with greater attention to codes and conventions of belief than to such physical states as extreme poverty or alcoholism. But like her fellow turn-of-the-century American naturalists, Wharton was, in her own way, not committed to a doctrinaire or prescriptive notion of environmental determinism. Lily may be manacled to her fate, but others apparently similarly chained break free. And the love of Selden and Lily, though unfulfilled in life, functions in its very possibility of fulfillment as a testament to man's capacity to posit a spiritual dimension to experience. Wharton by these qualifications is not herself denying the central premise of naturalism that human life is largely conditioned. She is rather adding to this premise what can be called the American codicil that the premise is not the entire story—that men and women also gain strength and derive meaning from their desires, hopes, and faiths.

NOTES

1 See in particular Rubin and Price.

2 Recent critics stressing economic determinism of various kinds, including usually a feminist emphasis within this theme, are Dimock, Michaels, Kaplan, and Yeazel. For a greater stress on the deterministic role of Lily's family background, see Wagner-Martin and Ehrlich.

3 See Wharton *Backward* 94, where she notes her absorption in the writing of various evolutionary theorists during the late 1880s.

4 See Pizer “American Literary Naturalism: The Example of Dreiser” (*Theory* 54–68.)

5 Feminist readings of the novel occasionally view this final passage of the novel as ironic (see, for example, Dimock 791). We are to believe that Wharton intends in it to emphasize Selden's major causative role in Lily's fate by having him justify his behavior through a bathetic reconstruction of their relationship on this high plane. I myself can find no trace of irony in the passage.

6 See also Pizer *Novels* 145–47.

7 Although Wharton revealed little interest in Zola's fiction (Lewis 85), she did admire the German naturalist Clara Viebig's *Daily Bread*, which she read in late 1907 (Lawson 27–28). The difference between the example of early twentieth-century European naturalism provided by Viebig's starkly pessimistic novel and *The House of Mirth* is therefore as instructive as are the similarities between *The House of Mirth* and the fiction of Wharton's American naturalist contemporaries.

WORKS CITED


