

## SEA-ANEMONES AND ROCKS: EDITH WHARTON'S THE HOUSE OF MIRTH IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN NATURALISM

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Edith Wharton, in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1937), recalls *The House of Mirth* (1905) as the first novel in which she had found an appropriate tone and subject matter to express her concerns, something for which she had been looking throughout her previous writings. Critics, Millgate for instance<sup>1</sup>, also consider this novel as her first major work. Wharton found her own literary voice in a purely naturalistic design: a woman who is an imperfect product of her environment but to which she is inextricably bound. Naturalistic tendencies appeared in different degrees in other novels by her, including the Pulitzer-prize winning *The Age of Innocence* (1920) or the one which is probably her most famous work, *Ethan Frome* (1911). However, *The House of Mirth* can be safely placed within the mainstream of American Naturalism, ranking alongside two of its widely-acknowledged manifestations: Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Crane's *Maggie* (1893), two novels with which Wharton's shares plenty of elements. However different the New York's Bowery and the more elegant quarters of the same city appear to be, the way society works in both and the individual's struggle for survival within them are very similar.

That *Sister Carrie* and *Maggie* are naturalistic novels is a fact that needs no further discussion. In *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton says of Lily Bart: «Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product

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1. Millgate, M.: «Edith Wharton,» in Ford, B., ed.: *American Literature*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991.

she was: an organism so helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock» (p. 301)<sup>2</sup>. Nearly everything that is basic to Naturalism is contained in this short quotation: biological determinism, the influence of and dependence on the environment, images taken from biology. Every element in this sentence clearly places Edith Wharton's approach to her character within the naturalistic tradition. Her use of naturalistic theories is not as overt and explicit as Dreiser's or Crane's but is, nevertheless, present.

Using Nevius' words it is only «circumstantial evidence» to say that Edith Wharton was familiar both with naturalism as a literary tendency and with recent biological discoveries including those about biological determinism, the influential role of the environment and the darwinian conception of life as a struggle for survival. Being only «circumstantial,» the fact that this knowledge is combined with clearly naturalistic inclusions in *The House of Mirth*, makes it illuminating for this analysis. According, then, to B. Nevius «There is some indication that Mrs. Wharton conceived of her action, perhaps unconsciously, in terms of naturalistic tragedy. In *A Backward Glance* she recalls her introduction to 'the wonder-world of nineteenth century science' and the excitement of reading for the first time the works of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Haeckel, and other evolutionists . . . She was perfectly acquainted, moreover, with the French naturalistic tradition beginning with Flaubert . . . » (p. 56)<sup>3</sup>. In the light of a passage such as the one from *The House of Mirth* quoted above it is quite difficult to believe Wharton's unconscious use of naturalistic material, as suggested by Nevius.

It is not only that Edith Wharton had read French naturalistic authors and that she was acquainted with the theories from the «new» biology, but also that she made conscious and frequent allusions to them throughout her numerous short stories. The protagonist of «Expiation»<sup>4</sup> is a woman writer obsessed with the idea that some readers might take her first novel for conventional literature when, in fact, she has attempted to shock and disturb her audience by being deeply unconventional; there is a passage in which she compares herself to Flaubert: «I've put so much of myself into this book and I'm so afraid of being misunderstood . . . of being, as it were, in advance of my time . . . like poor Flaubert . . . » (p.3)<sup>5</sup>; later on, she again chooses naturalistic authors to compare herself with: «A writer who dares to show up the hollowness of social conventions must have the courage of her convictions and be willing to accept the

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2. This and subsequent quotations from *The House of Mirth* are taken from: Wharton, E. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Penguin, 1985.

3. This and subsequent quotations from Nevius are taken from: Nevius, B. *Edith Wharton. A study of her fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

4. «Expiation» appeared in a volume of Wharton's short stories with the title *The Descent of Man* (1904).

5. This and subsequent quotations from Edith Wharton's short stories are taken from: Wharton, E. *Short Stories*. New York: Dover, 1994.

consequences of defying society. Can you imagine Ibsen or Tolstoi writing under a false name?» (p. 3). In «The Pelican»<sup>6</sup> we find a woman who earns her life by lecturing from town to town on the most fashionable topics to a group of leisurely upper middle-class wives; in her list of fashionable topics, evolutionist biology occupies a prominent position: «... it was the fashion to be interested in things that one hadn't always known about – natural selection, animal magnetism, sociology and comparative folklore.» After a while she adds: «Mrs. Amyot, warmed by my participation in her distress, went on to say that the growing demand for evolution was what most troubled her. Her grandfather had been a pillar of the Presbyterian ministry, and the idea of her lecturing on Darwin or Herbert Spencer was deeply shocking to her mother and aunts» (p. 52). In what is probably one of her wittiest satires, «Xingu.»<sup>7</sup> Wharton deals with the vacuity of erudition when used simply as a means of showing off and not of intellectual self-improvement; she presents a group of boring and bored women trying to come to terms with the eccentricities of a successful woman writer. Again, deterministic theories are brought up as belonging to the core of fashionable references: «... it may be looked at from so many points of view. I hear that as a study of determinism Professor Lupton ranks it with *The Data of Ethics*» (p. 88).

In *The House of Mirth* we do not find explicit allusions to all the topics she referred to in many of her short stories. However, in that particular novel, she goes further than that by replacing references to naturalism or evolutionism by directly applying their principles to her study of society and its members. Hence, given her knowledge of naturalism and its sources, and her putting its tenets into practice in this novel, two powerful elements to prove our thesis are combined.

There are ample grounds for establishing a comparison between *The House of Mirth*, *Sister Carrie* and *Maggie*. First of all, the dates of publication for these three novels are within a scope of thirteen years – 1905, 1900, and 1892, respectively –; the three are, moreover, dealing with the same period in American history, though from different view-points. The miserable and desolate landscapes of Crane's New York in *Maggie* are the result of the same historical processes which permitted the emergence of the affluent and fashionable settings in Wharton's novel. In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser offers us a glimpse of what Edith Wharton would later display with a full range of details: those elegant women riding along Fifth Avenue in their carriages, the ones whose contemplation had stirred Carrie's craving for clothes and money, were probably members of Judy Trenor's or Bertha Dorset's circles. Apart from these obvious connections, it is, however, the naturalistic approach employed by their authors what clearly lies at the basis for any comparison between the novels.

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6. «The Pelican» appeared for the first time in the first collection of Wharton's short stories *The Greater Inclination* (1899).

7. Wharton published «Xingu» for the first time in 1916 in her collection *Xingu and Other Stories*.

As far as technique is concerned, two elements are outstanding for the inclusion of *The House of Mirth* within the context of Naturalism: the use of irony and the introduction of impressionism at certain points in the novel. Wayne C. Booth in *A Rhetoric of Irony*<sup>8</sup> quotes Edith Wharton in *A Backward Glance* on the subject of irony: she considers that it is necessary to share someone's beliefs in order to understand and enjoy his/her ironies. Probably no member of the society she was devastatingly attacking would laugh at Wharton's analysis; but the emotional and ideological sympathies needed to share an ironic view were, according to the author, the bases for her friendship with Henry James. Consequently, she made extensive use of this device in her novel. On the one hand, as Nevius suggests, an ironic mood helps to establish a pessimistic tone: this is evident in Crane's *Maggie*, where the tragic outcome of the protagonist's relationship with Pete is precisely foreseen by the author's insistent recurrence to dramatically ironic contrasts. It is also present in Wharton's rendering of Lily Bart's society, which, glamorous as it is, proves as destructive as that true human jungle, the Bowery.

It can be argued that irony is a vehicle for criticism as, most times, it conceals some kind of a judgment. Naturalism, from its beginnings, was not as scientific in its approach to human reality as it claimed to be. Zola's ideas about the writer's detachment<sup>9</sup>, contained in theoretical tracts such as *Le Roman Experimental* or *Le Naturalisme*, are not, usually, wholly put into practice even by himself: his novels are not absolutely scientific studies of human nature, partly because of his repeated use of situational and verbal irony. Other naturalistic authors share this with Zola, including Crane, Wharton, or even Pérez Galdós in his naturalistic novel *La Desheredada*. What they all avoided were explicit judgments in their works though they favoured implicit ones, mainly through ironical remarks or situations. Examples abound in *The House of Mirth* of Wharton's use of irony to cast serious doubts on the validity of the moral values of her target society, a tool very typically, though by no means exclusively, naturalistic.

If biology was a central source for Naturalism, another one was pictorial Impressionism. According to Roland N. Stromberg in *Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism*,<sup>10</sup> Zola saw the job of the naturalistic writer as corresponding to that of the impressionistic painter: to observe reality and render it in «its actual conditions of light,»<sup>11</sup> by which he meant the portrayal of reality as it was without any kind of previous arrangement. In the case of Impressionistic painters, this was reflected in their preference

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8. Chicago: UP, 1974.

9. Zola considered that a writer should adopt the same cold perspective towards his subject scientists employed in their studies of natural reality.

10. STROMBERG, Roland N. *Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism: modes of thought and expression in Europe, 1848-1914*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

11. These words and the ones in the following quotation are Zola's in an article reproduced by Stromberg, op. cit., «Naturalism in the Salon,» *Le Voltaire*, Paris, June 18-22.

for depicting spontaneous scenes from real life rather than preparing them carefully in a studio. With writers, it required the courage not to draw back from those sordid aspects of life they happened to come across. According to Zola, impressionistic painters «have worked to reproduce corners of nature around Paris, under the true light of the sun, without flinching before the most unexpected effects of coloration.» In the same way, naturalistic writers were encouraged to describe reality not in a continuous way but paying close attention to the different shades and colors which were present in it. The result is a technique by which some objects are offered to the reader in the form of a series of apparently random brush-strokes.

*Maggie* is one of the most accomplished examples of the use of impressionistic technique. Probably, Crane's mastery of it in this novel is not independent from its length; saying so much in such a short space is only possible when descriptions purport to transmit the essence of an object and not an accurate visual presentation of it. From the often-quoted first paragraph of Chapter 2, *Maggie*, the reader does not probably draw a very clear visual image of the building in which Maggie lives, though he can surely infer an accurate idea of its essence: a four-page particularized description could not be more effective. Impressionism also consists in that paragraph of fragmentary flashes mixing sensory elements of a different nature, something quite recurrent in literary impressionistic descriptions. Also typically, authors do not seem to see objects or people but only different types of light and colors, maybe some objects glimpsed at random.

In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton does not give us a minute description of Lily Bart's childhood but a clear grasp of its nature is conveyed by means of a series of rapid and well-chosen brush-strokes:

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company'; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of bronze a jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly-ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent, grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense –such was the setting of Lily Bart's first memories. (28-9)

A great deal of information about the way Lily Bart's family lived may be inferred from this short paragraph. What is important to notice is, however, the way in which it is presented. The writer takes us from one flash to another without any kind of transition. The reader is, then, supposed to use those fragments in order to compose a global picture.

Impressionism is a useful tool for those naturalistic authors who do not want to render reality in a whole range of details but in its essentials. Wharton was one of them.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing is as frequent a concern of Naturalism as the all-pervasive role of the environment. The first thing which must be pointed out is that the three novels we are considering are city novels. Urban settings tend to be favoured by naturalistic writers, even though examples of rural environments are not lacking<sup>13</sup>. This is also true of *The House of Mirth*: though some chapters take place at Bellomont, a country estate belonging to the Trenors, and at the French Riviera, the manners, ideas and characters that we find are typically urban; in fact, the city acts as a gravity center to which all the characters sooner or later go back. Their staying away for some time is the result of their decision that remaining in the city at certain times is simply not fashionable.

Since the nineteenth century, writers have repeatedly pointed out the different negative aspects of modern cities. This does not mean that they have not been attracted to use them as proper subjects in their works. Oscar Wilde, the most widely quoted author in the history of English literature, and one who cannot easily be considered naturalistic, wrote: «... anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there. That is the reason why people who live out of town are so absolutely uncivilized. Civilization is not by any means an easy thing to attain to. There are only two ways by which man can reach it. One is by being cultured, the other by being corrupt.»<sup>14</sup> Obviously, there is an ambivalence in Wilde's view: for him, civilization is desirable but in the city, which is where it can only be attained, it usually implies corruption and evil. Nowadays it has almost become a commonplace to refer to the corrupting influence of cities on their inhabitants. It was, however, within Naturalism, where the most powerful condemnation of city life was contained. Theodore Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie*, wrote: «When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things: either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse» (3/4)<sup>15</sup>. Dreiser is here assuming that the city's moral code is necessarily corrupted. Edith Wharton does not present a much more pleasant view. Her New York is luxurious and fashionable, but equally corrupting, materialistic and superficial. Such is, then, Lily Bart's environment.

In *The House of Mirth*, characters appear to have no more existence than that which they assume within the social role they perform and which does not tend to be particularly transcendental. When dealing with Mrs. Trenor, Edith Wharton writes:

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12. The desired effect is attained at the cost of leaving much behind. Syntactical ellipsis –mostly of verbs, excepting those in subordinate clauses– is in the quoted paragraph a reflection of those other elements from reality which have been omitted in the account.

13. Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is one of them

14. Wilde, O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oxford: UP, 1974, p.209

15. This and subsequent quotations from *Sister Carrie* are taken from: Dreiser, T. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Penguin, 1981.

« . . . it was difficult to define her beyond saying that she seemed to exist only as a hostess» (40). Alice Wetherall is described as «an animated visiting-list, whose most fervid convictions turned on the wording of invitations and the engraving of dinner-cards» (55). Moral values are equated with the most insignificant household details: for Mrs. Peniston, «the modern fastness appeared synonymous with immorality, and the mere idea of immorality was as offensive to Mrs. Peniston as a smell of cooking in the drawing-room» (127). Irony is made extensive use of in order to underline how materialistic and superficial this society is. In fact, money seems to be the only «value» capable of excusing the attack to the most deeply-held convictions: «Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no divorcées were included, except those who had showed signs of penitence by being re-married to the very wealthy» (57). Irony verges on satire in Wharton's devastating assault on the moral code of her own society.<sup>16</sup>

Lily Bart is a product of this environment, and, according to herself, a very «expensive» one. She can be as superficial as her aunt, who considers her niece's engagement with a married man as terrifying as «being accused of having her carpets down all summer» (124); when Lily is surveying Selden's library, she can only see superficial details: « . . . her eyes lingered on [the books] caressingly, not with the appreciation of the expert, but with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities» (10). Not surprisingly, she sees marriage with Percy Gryce as a business transaction in which she would become an appreciated object of expenditure: « . . . she determined to be what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it.» (49). Nevertheless, no matter how fully she accepts the guidelines of her society, she cannot avoid feeling disappointed upon discovering that even moral dignity is liable to be sold to whom can pay the highest price: «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» (169).

Similarly, the protagonist of *Sister Carrie* will acquire a very urban appreciation of values. She will quickly associate happiness with money and luxury, the latter automatically becoming synonymous with the former: «She imagined that across these richly carved entranceways where the globed and crystalled lamps shone upon panelled doors, set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness» (116). Both Carrie and Lily Bart are determined by their environment to see everything in terms of money, comfort and luxury; their appreciation of their surroundings is blinded by their belonging to a

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16. Edith Wharton herself belonged to the social group she is describing. Her wealthy family occupied a prominent position in the New York society of that time.

particular environment. Lily Bart is, however, fully conscious of the grounds on which she is standing, whereas Carrie Meeber's perceptions are spontaneous reactions rather than well-informed responses.

Lily Bart's world is unstable: a mobile society implies that there is a constant movement in its members, and some of them may be going up the social ladder when others are going down it. This is another naturalistic concern: man's position is never unalterable as he is at the mercy of forces he cannot control. In *Sister Carrie* we witness the opposite courses Hurstwood and Carrie's lives take: while he is on his way down towards absolute poverty she is reaching a certain peak of money and success. In *The House of Mirth*, while Lily is falling farther and farther from the social Olympus,<sup>17</sup> Rosedale is steadily getting closer to it:

Rosedale, in particular, was said to have doubled his fortune, and there was talk of his buying the newly-finished house of one of the victims of the crash, who, in the space of twelve short months, had made the same number of millions, built a house in Fifth Avenue, filled a picture-gallery with old masters, entertained all New York in it, and been smuggled out of the country between a trained nurse and a doctor, while his creditors mounted guard over the old masters, and his guests explained to one another that they had dined with him only because they wanted to see the pictures. (121)

The instability of a social position only attained by money is dramatically presented here together with the ironic view of the victim's previous guests running away like mice from every possible connection with the corpse other than shared artistic tastes.

Edith Wharton's negative view of the very wealthy is reinforced by the realization that their wealth is the result of the poverty of others. Both extremes of the social scale are permanently held apart by a delicate balance: one of them is defined by the existence of the other. Referring to Selden's evaluation of Lily Bart, Wharton writes: «He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her» (5). Selden's view proves prophetic, as Lily's later sacrifice seems to serve for Rosedale's production. Dramatic though it is, the balance is never broken and welcoming a new member in the society of the very rich inevitably means getting rid of another, no longer useful. Theodore Dreiser seems to share this view when he writes: «These endless streets which only present their fascinating surface are the living semblance of the

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17. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* have analogous roles: they are both reversing the phrase «from rags to riches.» Curiously enough, the character of Lily Bart had been previously given the name of Juliet Hurst, bearing thus an obvious resemblance to the name of Hurstwood.



hands and hearts that lie unseen within them. They are the gay covering which conceals the sorrow and want, the ceaseless toil upon which all this is built.»<sup>18</sup> Dreiser, in the same article, goes on to compare society to a tree, in which the rich would stand for the leaves –its most beautiful parts– whereas the poor would be the roots: «Some must enact the role of leaves, others the role of roots, and as no one has the making of his brain in embryo he must take the results as it comes.» In his words, there is also a hint of social determinism: man has to accept his place in society as the power to change it does not lie within him.

Some examples of how Lily's behaviour is determined by her social environment have been shown. Following Nevius:

Lily, in short, is as completely and typically the product of her heredity, environment, and the historical moment which found American materialism in the ascendant as the protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel. Like any weak individual –like Clyde Griffiths or Carrie Meeber– she is at the mercy of every suggestion of her immediate environment; she responds to those influences which are most palpably present at a given moment. (57)

There is still another factor which contributes to shaping Lily's personality: her education. According to Nevius, «the society into whose narrow ideal Lily Bart is inducted at birth conspires with her mother's example and training to defeat from the start any chance of effective rebellion» (56). Her mother's determining importance is reflected in the word «dingy,» which Lily uses to refer to everything she dislikes and which was also used by her mother: the use of that word is a recurring motive throughout the novel and becomes a symbol of how much Lily's upbringing has conditioned her view of the world: «She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch» (39).

Lily's mother had seen her as a weapon for the recovery of the family's lost fortune:

She studied it [Lily's beauty] with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instil into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved. (34)

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18. Dreiser, T. «Reflections» in *Ev'ry Month* 3 (Oct. 1896) included in Dreiser, T. *Sister Carrie. An Authoritative Text. Backgrounds and Sources. Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton.

This was the backbone of Lily's upbringing and her mother's goals when educating Lily in the precise manner she did. The best account of the role her education has played is given by Lily herself, with an added allusion to biological determinism:

Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have! 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, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses. (226)

At this point it is easy to understand the exact meaning of the first quotation included in this paper: «inherited tendencies combined with early training,» in which the blame for the production of someone like Lily Bart is attributed both to her upbringing and to innate trends present at her birth.

Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* has the same feeling of dependence on the outer world that Hurstwood has in *Sister Carrie*: «It was as though all the weariness of the past months had culminated in the vacuity of that interminable evening. If only the ring meant a summons from the outer world—a token that she was still remembered and wanted» (p. 101). She is a social being and cannot live in isolation from what nourishes and gives meaning to her existence: society. Similarly, Dreiser presents this feeling in his Hurstwood by means of the image of the «walled city»: «He began to see it as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside» (p. 339). In a pathetic way, Hurstwood tries to keep in touch with the «inside» by confining himself at home and consuming his whole days by avidly devouring newspapers. Both Lily Bart and Hurstwood are so dependent on the environment which has produced them that, expelled from it, their fate will be that of «the sea-anemone torn from the rock»: they will have no chance to survive.

Sometimes in naturalistic fiction writers simply allude to obscure forces which control the lives of the characters. By those forces they are referring to the theoretical substratum of their movement; in fact, to all those biological principles which prevent the individual from following his free will: environmental pressures, biological inheritance, . . . There are several instances of Wharton's use of different embodiments for those forces in *The House of Mirth*: «. . . she had never been able to understand the laws of a universe that was so ready to leave her out of its calculations» (p. 27), or «. . . Lily knew that the acuteness which enabled Mrs. Fisher to lay a safe and pleasant course through a world of antagonistic forces was not infrequently exercised for the benefit of her friends» (250). Whether they are «laws of the universe» or «antagonistic forces,» the fact is that she is personifying the same principles to which Dreiser refers

in *Sister Carrie*: «There are large forces which allure, with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human . . . half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman» (4). The importance both authors attach to those «forces» is clearly realized in the fact that both see them as powerful beings, fully conscious of their task, which is opposing and endangering the character's adaptation. By not using their proper names, these authors try to reflect the individual's frequent incapacity to identify them.

Some of those «forces» can be found in biological inheritance: much of what the individual is has been present in him even before his birth in what we may refer to as instincts. In *The House of Mirth* several examples can be found of people behaving in an instinctive way, obeying inherited drives. Referring to Bertha Dorset's letters being owned by Lily Bart, Wharton writes: «For a moment the irony of the coincidence tinged Lily's disgust with a confused sense of triumph. But the disgust prevailed – all the instinctive resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against the other feeling» (p. 104). Referring to Trenor, she remarks, echoing Lily's thought: «With all his faults, Trenor had the safeguard of his traditions, and was the less likely to overstep them because they were so purely instinctive» (115). Finally, about Rosedale, she observes: «He knew he should have to go slowly and the instincts of his race fitted him to suffer rebuffs and put up with delays» (121). In the same way that animals are driven by natural instincts, so are human beings partly determined by them. There is, however, another important part of behaviour that must be assigned to education. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser refers to Carrie's inherited drives but he also considers how much those drives might still be modified by many other factors: «She came fresh from the air of the village, the light of the country still in her eye. Here was neither guile nor rapacity. There were slight inherited traits of both in her, but they were rudimentary. She was too full of wonder and desire to be greedy. She still looked about her upon the great maze of the city without understanding.» (122). Dreiser suggests that Carrie's gradual understanding of the city and its ways will perfect those features which had always been present in her from her birth though in a primitive way.

Something that the three novels have in common is their tragic endings. In *Sister Carrie*, of course, this is referred to Hurstwood.<sup>19</sup> Lily Bart, Maggie, and Hurstwood are victims of the same environments which have created and nourished them. Following Nevius again: «In the naturalistic tradition, the action of *The House of Mirth* is in a sense all denouement, for Lily's conflict with her environment – no more than the feeble and intermittent beating of her wings against the bars of 'the great gilt cage' – is mortgaged to defeat» (56). On the one hand, she is defeated because she is excluded from society: the word «sacrificed» is the one which Wharton employs: «. . . she knew she had been

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19. And this is not surprising as Hurstwood's role in the novel is as crucial as Carrie's. Some critics even think that Hurstwood is really the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*.

ruthlessly sacrificed to Bertha Dorset's determination to win back her husband . . . » (227); referring to the Gormers' willingness to ascend the social ladder, she writes: « . . . it was inevitable that Lily herself should constitute the first sacrifice to this new ideal » (261). In this way, Lily is defeated by others' willingness to turn their back on her. At the same time, she is a victim of her own drives: deprived of her natural environment, which is the Trenors' and the Dorsets', she will prove unable to adapt to new surroundings: a sea-anemone cannot live if it is torn from the rock which constitutes its natural medium of survival. She is, then, a double victim: consciously to others and unconsciously to herself. Wharton also considered that determinism was an enslaving and victimizing force; she applied the conception both to Lily and Selden: «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» (151-2).

Hurstwood's course in *Sister Carrie* is parallel to Lily Bart's. He proves incapable of adapting to his New York's surroundings, far from the glamorous existence he had lived in Chicago, and which was as vital to him as the rock to the sea-anemone. He is another victim of an enslaving environment. So is Maggie. However, her victimization is not carried out so much by a failure to adapt to new surroundings as by Rum Alley's distorted moral code. Donald Pizer in «Stephen Crane's *Maggie* and American Naturalism»<sup>20</sup> writes:

'Maggie' is thus a novel primarily about the falsity and destructiveness of certain moral codes. To be sure, these codes and their analogous romantic visions of experience are present in Maggie's environment . . . But Crane's ironic technique suggests that his primary goal was not to show the effects of the environment but to distinguish between moral appearance and reality, to attack the sanctimonious self-deception and sentimental emotional gratification of moral poses. He was less concerned with dramatizing a deterministic philosophy than in assailing those who apply a middle-class morality to victims of amoral, uncontrollable forces in man and society.

Maggie's violation of Rum Alley's moral laws is, however, caused by the fact that she is an imperfect product of her environment, as discussed later. Nevertheless, apart from a study of deceptive moral standards, *Maggie* is also a naturalistic approach to the relationship between the individual and his/her natural medium.

We have so far analyzed how environment, heredity, and education combine to determine the characters' outcome. Our next step will be to devote some time to look at those characters from a closer perspective, never departing from what is naturalistic in

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20. Included in Bassan, M., ed. *Stephen Crane*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

their design. The most obvious point of convergence between the three novels is the fact that their protagonists are women.<sup>21</sup> Differences between them can be found at all levels but their general profiles are undoubtedly similar.

The sea-anemone uses its tentacles to remain attached to the rock. Adaptation always requires instruments or, using naturalistic jargon, weapons. As the three protagonists are women, they are perfectly conscious that beauty, good clothes, make-up, jewelry, in a word, an agreeable appearance, is the weapon they have to use in order to assure their survival. Lily Bart, being the most articulate of the three, is absolutely certain of it: « . . . it seemed an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defence against them» (28). She is, furthermore, aware that beauty is a complicated artifact and that long and accurate training is required to learn how to use it properly: «To a less illuminated intelligence Mrs. Bart's counsels might have been dangerous, but Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required . . . it did not take her long to learn that a beauty needs more tact than the possessor of an average set of features» (34). This is something in which she differs from Carrie and Maggie: they can see appearances and their importance but they do not go beyond; Lily Bart knows that beauty is only a first step, but that it must be supplemented by familiarity with the rules of the game if something is to be obtained by it

Inarticulate though she is, the importance of luxurious appearances for an ambitious person is not missed by Maggie: «She began to note with interest the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women» (25)<sup>22</sup>, and also «She began to see the bloom upon her cheeks as valuable» (26). However, if beauty and good appearance are essential tools in Lily Bart's world, in Maggie's they are not only valueless but also dangerous. The craving for a better life, which she thinks Pete can offer her, is what determines her fate. That craving is implicit in the growing importance she attaches to the display of an agreeable surface.

At some point in their novels the three female protagonists start working. The three are employed in factories manufacturing adornments for women [Lily Bart makes hats; Maggie, cuffs and collars; Carrie, shoes]. And the three prove utterly incapable of adapting themselves to lives as wage-earners. However different in their origins they are, factories are not their natural environments and very soon they would abandon

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21. Though Hurstwood must be taken as a central figure in *Sister Carrie*, for the purposes of our analysis, we will discard him in the following paragraphs. Our main concern in them will be the similarities in the presentation of the three female protagonists: Lily Bart, Maggie, and Carrie Meeber.

22. This and subsequent quotations from *Maggie* are taken from: Crane, S. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

them; they do not seem to be the places they are made for. The sea-anemone needs a rock and a tree will not do.

Dealing with *The House of Mirth*, Nevius states: «Its theme is the victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products» (56). We have already seen how Lily Bart is a product of her environment. However, what brings about her tragic outcome is precisely the fact that she is an imperfect one. Bertha Dorset, Judy Trenor or even Mrs. Peniston can be said to be absolutely characteristic, but in Lily Bart's personality we find crevices signalling that, for some unknown reasons, nature has made a mistake that is going to prove fatal for her.

The causes of Lily Bart's destruction are manyfold. Firstly, being proud is never utilitarian and Lily Bart sometimes is. Her being a social flower-vase amounts to nothing in itself if it is not smartly and knowingly handled in order to reach certain objectives. Sometimes, however, she admires her beauty for its own sake and not for the rewards it can mean if properly employed. This is not to say that she does not know how to do so: she can even control bodily involuntary responses: «... she still had the art of blushing at the right time» (6); she knows perfectly well how to attain her ends as we perplexedly witness in her careful and mastery seduction of Percy Gryce: «She began to cut the pages of a novel, tranquilly studying her prey through downcast lashes while she organized a method of attack» (17).

Nevertheless, like Dorian Gray, she is too much in love with her own image. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has repeatedly pointed out,<sup>23</sup> her image of herself depends on others' perceptions, that is, she sees herself beautiful only if others see her that way. She cannot stand her not being perfect and even less her being thought of as immoral. This is one of the reasons why she cannot bring herself to use Bertha Dorset's letters. Furthermore, being so self-assured, she cannot avoid looking down on other people: «Even such scant civilities as Lily accorded to Mr. Rosedale would have made Miss Stepney her friend for life; but how could she foresee that such a friend was worth cultivating?» (122). The fact is that it would have been, as, had she not created an enemy out of Grace Stepney by ignoring her, the latter would not have broken Mrs. Peniston's trust in her niece, who would not have been disinherited. Lily Bart even forgets the lesson she knows by heart, that beauty is nothing if knowledge of how to use it is lacking, and becomes excessively self-reliant: «How should she have distrusted her powers? Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end» (49). The problem is that she has forgotten to shoot her

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23. The following ideas are contained in Wolff, Cynthia Griffith. *A Feast of Words. The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. Oxford: UP, 1977. They are summarized in her Preface to the edition of *The House of Mirth* which is used here.

prey, thinking that having frightened it was enough. She acknowledges her mistake: «I was proud – proud» (164). Pride, then, something she was not brought up to feel, as her beauty was merely utilitarian, endangers her position. At crucial moments, she is driven by it to weaken her natural defences.

Another crevice in her upbringing is an apparent craving for something which her society is not going to offer. We never get to know exactly what it is.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Edith Wharton seems to point out her lack of freedom and the necessary dependence imposed on her by her society, «... as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room» (13), or even by her simply being a woman: Lily Bart says to Selden «How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman.» (p7). She is, however, no Virginia Woolf and, little by little, she grows to identify her desire with an affective relationship with Selden. This is not consistent with the world in which she lives: she knows very well that, for her, marriage is to be regarded as the result not of love but of purely materialistic concerns: «We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop - and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership» (12). She will, however, follow love rather than other interests when she does not use Bertha Dorset's letters, afraid of hurting Selden by doing so.

Her chances of success are crushed by her «wanting for something else,» whether that implies freedom or love. When she has nearly captured Percy Gryce, she decides to spend the afternoon with Selden; this neglect of her duties causes Gryce to run away from her. Something similar had previously happened to her with an Italian prince: «An Italian prince, rich and the real thing, wanted to marry her; but just at the critical moment a good-looking step-son turned up, and Lily was silly enough to flirt with him while her marriage-settlements with the step-father were being drawn-up» (p. 189). Lily's behaviour is superbly summarized by Wharton: «... she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself and goes off on a picnic» (189). After putting all her craft at work, suddenly and at the last moment, she fails to be consistent with her objectives and lets the prey escape.

The other women from her circle would have never behaved in the same way. The fact that Lily has implies that she is a less perfect product of her upbringing. Lily, talking with Selden, says: «... but as you have always told me that the sole object of a bringing-up like mine was to teach a girl to get what she wants, why not assume that that is precisely what I am doing?» (281), to which he answers: «I am not sure that I

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24. Something similar happens in *Sister Carrie*. When the protagonist has finally achieved money and success, she starts thinking that they could not be enough and that she might need something else. This same trait is present in Lily Bart: though her whole life is planned to attain money and social status, she cannot avoid feeling at times that maybe those things would not satisfy her: «'Then the best you can say for me is that after struggling to get them I probably shan't like them?' She drew a deep breath. 'What a miserable future you foresee for me!' (71).»

have ever called you a successful example of that kind of bringing-up» (p. 281). Selden has hit the point: Lily is going to be defeated by her own imperfection. She is not going to give up easily, however: Chapter 9 closes with her challenge «Don't give me up; I may still do credit to my training» (282). Pathetically enough, Chapter 10 opens with the words «Look at those spangles, Miss Bart – every one of 'em sewed on crooked» (282). It was too late and she had already made too many mistakes as the scene in Mme. Regina's workshop proves. If Lily's inability to fulfil the duties her environment imposes on her brings about her fall, the impossibility of her adapting to new surroundings will do the rest.

Maggie is not either a «successful example» of Rum Alley: she «grew to be a most rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl. None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins» (16). Her rarity (she is beautiful, innocent, and good, which are not very useful features in her world) is what awakens desires in her, primitive though they are. She lacks the tools to face the life she has chosen and, as a result, she is deceived and abandoned by Pete, whom she had trusted. Nature has made another mistake: a sea-anemone willing to abandon its rock and see foreign lands. By contrast, Jimmie accepts his place and is a more typical «production of a tenement district»: he will survive.

A further similarity between Maggie and Lily Bart, connected with their environmental imperfections, is the fact that both share a romantic and sentimental aura. In the case of Lily Bart, we can read: «She was fond of pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction . . . Lost causes had a romantic charm for her, and she liked to picture herself as standing aloof from the vulgar press of the Quirinal, and sacrificing her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition» (35). She had, however, already discovered the impossibility of romantic dreams in a world such as hers: «Those ambitions were hardly more futile and childish than the earlier ones which had centred about the possession of a French jointed doll with real hair» (35). Nevertheless, her attachment to romantic ideals will be reflected again in her love for Selden, which is going to appear in the novel from time to time. Sentimentality is a sign of poor adaptation in both Lily's and Maggie's worlds. About Maggie, we read: «Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover» (19). She thinks she has found the lover of her dreams in Pete. Her mistake is dramatically presented by Crane by means of irony: whereas she considers he has the manners and education of an aristocrat, he turns out to be everything but romantic or gentlemanly, a more typical product of the slums than she is.

Carrie Meeber's success can only be explained by the darwinian principle «the survival of the fittest,» central to Naturalism. Lily Bart's imperfect adaptation to her world causes her not to be among the fittest; something similar happens with Maggie's dreams of a better life with the lover of her dreams. Carrie is, on the contrary, capable of adapting to new conditions, just as Hurstwood is not: «The effect of the city and his own situation on Hurstwood was paralleled in the case of Carrie, who accepted the things



which fortune provided with the most genial good nature» (313). Though her new life in New York is not exactly what she had dreamed, she can manage to wait patiently till the appearance of better opportunities while she «developed rapidly in household tactics and information» (p. 313), though being a modest housewife is not the best position the city can offer her. Similarly, her overcoming her moral scruples and accepting Hurstwood when he was in a good position is a further sign of her adaptability.

Having dealt with environment and character design, there is a last feature which definitely proves the naturalistic delineation of *The House of Mirth*: imagery. It has already been pointed out that Naturalism sees human life as a struggle for survival and as a hard one as well. No wonder most of its imagery is, then, derived from the military field; this is very typical of this type of novels and, of course, it is to be found in the ones that we have been analyzing. On the other hand, Naturalism's debt to biology is further illustrated by comparisons between people and biological entities, both animals and plants.

Military images are used throughout *Maggie* especially applying them to the character of Jimmie; in this particular novel fight is a real thing and not simply a device used in describing certain actions. In *Sister Carrie*, the protagonist's arrival in the city is seen as the beginning of a knightly high-spirited quest for adventures that would lead her to a brilliant victory in which the city itself would surrender to her: «A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy which should make it prey and subject, the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman's slipper» (p. 4). The world of medieval romances is by no means the one Carrie is entering. Hurstwood's confrontation with New York is less knightly: «All this he realized, as he faced the city, cut off from his friends, despoiled of his modest fortune and even his name, and forced to begin the battle for place and comfort all over again» (p. 306).

Warfare in *The House of Mirth* is much more sophisticated. It is not based on physical strength but on complicated strategies whose success depends on the degree of familiarity with its rules:

The Welly Brys, after much debate, and anxious counsel with their newly acquired friends, had decided on the bold move of giving a general entertainment. To attack society collectively, when one's means of approach are limited to a few acquaintances, is like advancing into a strange country with an insufficient number of scouts; but such rash tactics have sometimes led to brilliant victories, and the Brys had determined to put their fate to the touch (130-1)

Fighting is as necessary for Lily Bart as it is for Maggie or Carrie. As Carry Fisher suggests, «the only way to keep a footing on that world is to fight it on its own terms» (252), a struggle that begins with an aim at improving Lily's position and gradually becomes an authentic requirement of simple survival: «Reason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation»

(162-3). War is an instinctive behaviour within the individual and is predominant over all other considerations when survival is at stake.

Lily Bart's sophisticated world incorporates imagery of its own. War becomes a complex game whose rules are quite mysterious to us, like those regulating a strange dance: «I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time» (48). According to Nevius, «The individual episodes in Lily Bart's story are moves in a game played against heavy odds, and the fact that the game is conducted according to an elaborate set of rules which are unfamiliar to the general reader gives it an added interest.» (59). Lily Bart is perfectly acquainted with those rules and knows how fatal a mistake could be and how much she can lose. In the same way that a game is futile and heavily dependent on chance, so is human life from a naturalistic point of view.

Another important field from which plenty of images are taken is biology and nature. In *Sister Carrie*, for example, Hurstwood's fall is signalled, among many other things, by the animals Dreiser chooses to compare him to. At the beginning of the novel he is a spider trying to catch a fly: «It is only by a roundabout process that such men do draw near a girl of the kind described. They have no method, no understanding of how to ingratiate themselves in youthful favor, save when they find virtue in the toils. If, unfortunately, the fly has got caught in the net, the spider can come forth and talk business upon its own terms» (122). In New York, having lost his power and money, he is no longer a dangerous spider but a harmless fish in a sea full of whales: «The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view, remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing» (305). In *Maggie*, an animal instinctive behaviour is what could be expected to come from the Bowery. We are not disappointed. Pete identifies himself with a brave monkey: «Once at the Menagerie he went into a trance of admiration before the spectacle of a very small monkey threatening to thrash a cageful because one of them had pulled his tail and he had not wheeled about quickly enough to discover who did it. Ever after Pete knew that monkey by sight and winked at him, trying to induce him to fight with other and larger monkeys.» (27) His own behaviour parallels that of the monkey he admires. The idea that human conduct is partly a reflection of animal one, central to Naturalism, is perfectly illustrated here.

In *The House of Mirth* the subject's dependence on his environment is suggested by means of comparisons with plants. Lily Bart needs certain weather conditions in the same way plants do: «Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in» (26). Grace Stepney is compared to «poor soil» in which certain features of her personality are particularly resplendent: «. . . but poor Grace's limitations gave them a more concentrated inner life, as poor life starves certain plants into intenser efflorescence» (122). Maggie's growth is figuratively described as if she were a plant: «The girl, Maggie, *blossomed* in a mud puddle» (19, italics are mine).

Images taken from the animal world are used in Wharton's novel to present a very negative view of the characters' actions. Some of them are usually seen as predatory beasts while others are their victims: «Mrs. Fisher, to whom they had entrusted the conduct of the affair, had decided that tableaux vivants and expensive music were the two baits most likely to attract the desired prey» (131). If comparisons with plants tend to be neutral, in the sense that they do not usually try to denigrate people, those with animals create that effect. In particular, relationships between men and women are placed at the same level of animals with their mates. In all human relationships there must be certain values that, when compared with animal ones, are completely lost: «Lily found herself the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season» (46), or «Yes, he would be kind –Lily, from the threshold, had time to feel– kind in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate» (249). The use of this kind of imagery is not a neutral and harmless testimony of Naturalism's indebtedness to biology. It is, moreover, a useful weapon at the disposal of the writer to criticize a society which has lost some of its most humane pillars. In *The House of Mirth*, at any rate, it is not merely the result of its naturalistic design but also a judgment on the part of its author.

Edith Wharton judges her society. In fact, most writers do. The idea that criticism is contradictory with a naturalistic approach is only partly true. Whether one believes that someone's conduct is determined by heredity, environment, a need to survive, or simply by one's free will is indifferent: whatever are its causes, one's behaviour can be said to be good or bad, respectful or not, harmful or harmless. That is what Edith Wharton is doing: evaluating the results of people's actions, not blaming them for their faults, but pointing out which those faults are and how disastrous their consequences may be for others. Art is not and can never be objective –as some pioneers of Naturalism seemed to exact– because art always stems from personal choice (of characters, style, subject matter, . . .), which is always a highly subjective process.

Crane, Dreiser and Wharton wrote their novels in a period of rapid social and economic change. Artists were then astonished at the contemplation of the complexity society was acquiring. Money and technology were becoming its supreme rulers. No wonder man was seen by these writers as a helpless creature, a victim of forces beyond his control and understanding. The city epitomized much of this process; naturalism was clearly associated with city-life and its emergence coincided with the development of the big cities and was particularly favoured in those countries which had undergone a substantial industrial development. However, partly by the example of Zola, the great master of Naturalism, this trend is often associated with low-class characters, slums, factories, poverty, . . . Wharton proved that the guidelines Zola employed when describing his situations could similarly be applied to luxurious environments and rich characters. In *Ethan Frome*, she employed them to present rural life and discovered their force was even more deeply felt. If there was a writer who tried to broaden Naturalistic boundaries it was Edith Wharton.