

## Urbanization and Moral Corruption in the House of Mirth

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**Abstract:** Edith Wharton (1862-1937) generally deals with the social and individual problems of upper-class of her time in her novels. Some of her works are known to be the novels of manners with some central themes of sexuality, materialism and the manners of the families. One of the themes in *The House of Mirth* (1905), as Blake Nevius (1953: 55) notes, is the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests. Morality can be considered as one example of how it is reflected as a waste of human and spiritual resources. The present study is an attempt to evaluate the signs of urbanization and the corruption in the moral values especially related with the marriage institution due to urbanization and materialism and how the characters suffer at the hands of social manacles while struggling with reputation, which also demonstrates the corruption. The problems caused by the urbanization are also observed within the hostile relationships among the women, which even causes death of Lily Bart.

**Keywords:** The House of Mirth, urbanization, morality, corruption.

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Edith Wharton (1862-1937) generally deals with the social and individual problems of upper-class of her time in her novels. Some of her works are known to be the novels of manners with some central themes of sexuality, materialism and the manners of the families. One of the themes in *The House of Mirth* (1905), as Blake Nevius (1953: 55) notes, is the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests. Morality can be considered as one example of how it is reflected as a waste of human and spiritual resources. *The House of Mirth* is an excellent example of the Gilded Age, in which industrialization and thus urbanization cause the waste of morality in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marilyn McEntyre sees “moral diminishment of cities as an inevitable byproduct of urbanization” (2008, 85). The period is deliberately pictured by Wharton, who was a member of the New York aristocracy. She describes the lives of different people from different social levels who have been under the influence of the urbanization process. Within the same period of the urbanization process, too, a French art called “the art nouveau” was flourished. It seems to foster this situation through the upper-class people’s giving great importance to façade, or the period seems to emerge due to these social issues as also revealed in the novel. This intermingled matter is visible through the jewelry, home furnishings and clothing, which are valued for reflecting their wealth in the society. Women are primarily chosen even for their beauty to marry and the wives seem to demonstrate their men’s wealth. For this reason, a “good marriage” is considered to be kind of a business; women look for a wealthy man to marry and men look for marriageable girl who are beautiful and young. The present study is an attempt to evaluate the signs of urbanization and the corruption in the moral values especially related with the marriage institution due to urbanization and materialism and how the characters suffer at the hands of social manacles while struggling with reputation, which also demonstrates the corruption. The problems caused by the urbanization are also observed within the hostile relationships among the women, which even causes death of Lily Bart.

During the industrial flourishing period, the cities in the United States grew. When the Civil War broke out, the country was a country of farms, villages and small towns except the northeastern seaboard. Most of its citizens were involved in agricultural pursuits and small family businesses. By the turn of the century only about one third of the population lived on farms. New York had grown from a city of 500,000 in 1850 to a metropolis of nearly 3,500,000 persons by 1900, many of whom are recent immigrants from the central eastern and the southern Europe. The vast majority of all wage earners were employed by corporations and large enterprises, 8.5 million as factory owners. Millions of people participated in the prosperity that accompanied this explosive industrial expansion, but the social costs were immense (Norton Anthology, 1985: 2).

*The House of Mirth* reflects the characteristics of urbanization and its social problems. As well known, the urbanization is a process of moving to cities in an increased proportion. Mostly as a result of growing industrialization, cities offer hope for a better standard of living to people through employment opportunities. The positive and negative outcomes of urbanization can be observed throughout the novel. It brings much easiness to the daily life in the city where flocks of people migrate from rural places to seek for a better life or to gain bread at least. Technical innovations make life easier; railroads introduce new types of transportation. The mass-transit lines, street cars and trains connect the cities and people. Louis Auchingloss’ (1964) states that “there were immigrants in plenty to staff the great houses of Fifth Avenue, and the steam yacht and motorcar had removed geographical limits to pleasure-seeking” (344). In *the House of Mirth*, the first chapter proves this

additional information as in the narrator's description of one moment: "Lily goes to the Grand Central Station where she takes the train to Bellomont among the 'rush' and the 'dull tints of the crowd' (HM: 5).

Transportation makes it possible for people to live in suburbs. The dirt and rush of the cities drew the rich to the suburbs where they could afford to live on their private worlds away from the other common people as how the Trenors did in the novel. Their rich friends prefer enjoying out of the city and even out of the country; they spend the summers in Europe. The Trenors give party at Bellomont that is far from the "madding crowd" of the city. One Sunday, they are taken to the church by an omnibus (HM: 55), and on the following season, they are invited to Monte Carlo, when they go by their steam-yacht, called Sabrina. As we see, urbanization and technology simultaneously increase supporting each other. Technical innovations like the yacht and that omnibus help the upper class to join the invitations for entertaining.

Telegraph and telephone are the inventions during the urbanization process in the United States. In the novel, it is observed that the usage of telephone happens to be as one of the characteristics of city life but among the rich people only. We understand that only the upper-class enjoy this technology: "Mrs. Trenor, a member of the rich class in New York society says; "...that you wouldn't like me to telephone for Lawrence Selden" (HM: 49). The rich affords to buy and use the home phone.

Another outcome of the urbanization is that population influx cause the urgent need for solution of housing problem, which is also reflected in the novel. The big cities like New York and Chicago are not ready to meet the sudden and intense problems of the new comers who are keen on migrating increasingly day by day. So, the role of technology is strongly felt in building systems: "the balloon-frame house replaced heavy timber construction in the 1830s and made it possible for building to proceed more rapidly and with greater quantity than in the past. In 1848, James Bogardus introduced the use of cast iron columns and weight-bearing walls supporting the structure of non-residential buildings which eliminated the need for heavy masonry construction and which opened the internal space of buildings so that factories and warehouses could maximize their unimpeded use of floor space" (54).<sup>\*</sup> Tall building construction which is considered one of the signs of urbanization is another important factor boldly treated in Wharton's novel. Simon Rosedale's "flat-house with its marble porch and pseudo-Georgian façade," his "Benedick standing among new brick and limestone houses" is intentionally described in the book in order to give a picture of 1905 from the aspect of gradually changing face of the city (HM: 8).

Rosedale's building can be considered to be an example for the economical features of urbanization in the first quarter of the 1900s; increased capital investment is observed in this period. In relation to this outcome, we see that the newly rich Rosedale invests some of his money into that building for rent as he has done well in the Stock Exchange. In addition to Rosedale's example, Mme. Regina's millinery shop is a symbol of the capital investment and the changing role of women in the society. Just half a century ago, only widowed women could run their dead husbands' shop. As a result of the industrialization, women start to work mostly with lower wages than men. Since the early years of industrialization, women have founded their own unions. The first labor federation (WTUL) is established in 1903. Similar to these movements or settlements, Edith Wharton mentions about Gerty Farish's Girls' Club. She gathers the girls in need and collects 'liberal fraction of the amount' to use for their benefits (HM: 118). This is a kind of charity club but still it is a good start for women's solidarity.

Since many people migrate to big cities from rural places and immigrated from different countries, the balance between the supply and demand in the labor is not equal, and thus the number of employment is less than the number of the people seeking for vacant places in jobs. Therefore, people are obliged to struggle hard to get their share. Some people would be successful or lucky to be on the top levels of the stair. Simon Rosedale and the Brys in the novel are the ones who are "the new rich, the post-Civil War millionaires, 'the lords of Pittsburgh', whom Wharton dubbed the 'invaders', as the peculiarly corrupting force. Their limitless fortunes and equally limitless vulgarity seem to sweep away not only old standards of taste and decorum but old standards of morality. However, Auchincloss remarks that the 'invaded,' the forces of her old brownstone, genteel New York, made love to the invaders... Wharton saw that invaders and invaded would bury the hatchet in a noisy, stamping dance, and she saw also the pathos of the individual who was fated to be trampled under the feet of those boisterous truce makers-the pathos of her heroine, Lily Bart. She stems from both worlds." (1971, 69-70).

During this period of time, due to the increase in industrialization and urbanization, especially the upper class seem to rush in luxury purchases and to use their money to show their material power and as for women, they use money to be both consumer and object of consumption. Being well aware of the material values of the society, Lily Bart explains it to Lawrence Selden:

She surveyed him critically. 'Your coat's a little shabby – but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her

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<sup>\*</sup> <http://amounds.org/Class/Ch5-Ch6.pdf>

clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? 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.'

For this negative outcome of urbanization, Marilyn McEntyre states that "urban life itself seems to foster small-mindedness, petty ambition, aesthetic sterility, and moral myopia" (2008: 84). Her explanation highlights the general portrait of the characters in the novel, as well. They "acquire and maintain their status by displaying how much they can afford to waste" (HM: 1). In spite of badly criticized by Lily's Aunt, playing card games is kind of a symbol of their wealth no matter how much they win or lose. Even by losing money, they afford to gain their status in the high society. Other examples are that they spend huge amount of money on women's dresses, parties and expensive gifts for the couples in wedding ceremonies. As Marilyn McEntyre (2008) states, women are taught to trade on beauty as their one asset in a cruel marriage market, taught to desire the position and comforts money can buy, and unable to disengage themselves from the false economy in which they are implicated even when it drives them to despair. The dehumanization and isolation is also seen in the using women as the commodities and thus their efforts to look beautiful and marriageable all the time. Jung Hwa Oh (2003) explains that "they are purchased to be seen and demonstrative of wealth". The woman is the property of the man therefore he ornaments his property to reflect his wealth. Reflecting the influence of Art Nouveau, women are like elegant decorative art objects in curved lines that men are ready to invest on them. Lily, in her *tableau vivant*, stands as a living object for all women in that period of time.



As Marilyn Jones Lyde (1959) remarks that "the post-Civil War aristocracy had placed increasing importance on appearance, assuming that honor and good manners, if not identical, were at least equivalent, and virtue was that which avoided disturbing the familiar pattern of social custom. The attitude prepared the way for the corruption and eventual disintegration of social convention in America. Manners, unlike honor, flourish primarily among the well to do. Consequently, as more and more emphasis was placed upon mere etiquette, the lower classes, identifying the aristocracy with such superficial manifestations of wealth as decorum, came to regard money as the chief characteristic of aristocratic respectability" (108). The new rich believe that only enough amount money is necessary to enter the aristocracy. Money is regarded as a mean of getting respectability in the eyes of the other people. For example, Simon Rosedale, the new rich, wants to purchase a higher status in the aristocracy, which will not accept him if he is poor even if he were born blue-blooded. He declares his money-based marriage proposal to Lily:

"I've got the money, he continued, clearing his throat, "and what I want is the woman-and I mean to have her too"... "I generally have got what I wanted in life, Miss Bart. I wanted money and I've got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman...I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that. But it isn't every woman every woman can do it, no matter how much you spend on her... What I want is a woman who'll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it..." (HM: 184-5).

Rosedale wants to invest his money on Lily, who will be a perfect ornamental object for displaying his wealth and to solidify his social status. However, through the end of the novel, Lily lacks financial stability and loses her respect according to the social codes of the New York aristocracy. Therefore, Rosedale does not see her as a means of investment for his purposes anymore, so he leaves Lily.

As Rosedale breaks off relations with Lily then, all her friends do the same and leaves her alone. Although they have used her for their secretarial works in organizing the parties, they do not have any loyalty for her. Her beauty becomes a threat for them. Louis Auchincloss (1971) argues that her beauty is the light in

† Lily Bart/Gillian Anderson poses as Watteau's "Summer" in a "tableau vivant"

which each of her different groups would like to shine, but when they find that it illuminates their ugliness, they want to put it out (72). Their ugliness, I assume, is not only a physical but also moral and emotional one as being jealous and detrimental. Lily, then, becomes a “worn-out” commodity and no longer marketable.

The life of these characters in *the House of Mirth* reveals double standard of morality between men and women characters in the novel. A man has an affair with a married woman or a married man has an affair with a woman as in the case of Gus Trenor and Lily Bart and of Judy Trenor and her flirts, and Bertha Dorset’s extramarital affairs. The striking point in Judy’s case is that she flirts openly without losing respectability in the society because she is a rich, beautiful and married woman; these are the criteria enough to be respected by the upper class of New York City. These people also reveal that the marriages and relationships with others mean something as long as financial security exists. Oh (2003) states that “Wharton criticizes the way how the marriage system of capitalist society brings about the isolation, suffering and dehumanization on these male characters.” Bertha Dorset, for instance, is secure and powerful in her husband’s wealth. In fact, she is not happy with her husband, thus, she takes lovers, spends his money as she pleases. She has the power to control the society and makes Lily Bart rejected by the people. She has such a great influence on people because she is married a rich man. Bertha is only one of those dehumanized people. She is like the others who suffer from a peaceful mind and heart.

These people can be regarded as morally corrupt people since they justify evil acts in their minds to be fair. They are figuratively blind with the guilt of money, “of both new and old New York, seem strangely and vindictively united in a constant readiness to humiliate her: Grace Stepney to tell tales on her, Mrs. Peniston to disinherit her, Bertha Dorset to abandon her in a foreign port, Gus Trenor to try to seduce her, his wife to say he has. And in the end when she finally compromises and is willing to marry Rosedale, it is too late. He will not have her, and she falls to the job at the milliner’s and the ultimate overdose of sleeping tablets. But we finish the book with the conviction that in the whole brawling, terrible city Lily is the one and only lady” (Auchincloss, 1971, 70).

*The House of Mirth* reflects the economic and social changes in the United States caused by the industrialization and urbanization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and draws a picture of the New York aristocracy of which moral corruption is a consequence. The corruption is observed in the social structure: in marriage system, material values and relationships. Being an economic necessity for women who are treated like commodity, the marriage institution is based on materialism. In order to be purchased, the women of the New York aristocracy need to be purchased. So, they are obliged to look beautiful as ornaments with curved lines like the pieces of the Art Nouveau, flourished within the same period of time with the novel. The novel is also a kind of historical record of the industrial and urban improvements with all the technological innovations of the age from Wharton’s perspective.

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