Edith Wharton – Rethinking Race in *The House of Mirth.*

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*The* *House of Mirth,* by Edith Wharton, was published in 1905. The novel made her into a household name. In its first weeks of publication, it sold 30,000 copies, and was the fastest selling title of any Scribner publication at that time. Inthe novel, Wharton captures the contemporary American attitude towards social mobility and race. She does this with Simon Rosedale, a Jewish self-made man, uncouth and charmless; his deviations from accepted deportment are as conspicuous as his wealth and as grating on the sensitive nerve of elite society. Much has been made of Wharton’s seemingly anti-Semitic depiction of Rosedale. Should we contextualize her attitude simply as reflective of the time or should we be less forgiving? Does she use Rosedale’s Jewishness to illuminate the economic issues and social hypocrisies in her strata of New York society that would otherwise remain hidden and need to change*?* Or do his frank and candid observations on wealth, its accumulation and its power indicate his role within the novel?

*The House of Mirth* recounts the tale of the beautiful, orphaned and unmarried Lily Bart. At the start of the novel, Lily is twenty-nine and has been on the marriage market for too long despite the opportunities that have presented themselves. The title of the novel is taken from Ecclesiastes 7:4: “The heart of fools is in the house of mirth”; “the house” represents the enclosed, exclusive New York society in which Lily longs to dwell. She is aware that a woman of limited means, to stay in this milieu, must be attractive, beyond reproach, charming but discreet, perfectly presented and always entertaining. She knows that to succeed, she must sell herself: success in this constricted world requires entry into a rich marriage. But she lets opportunities slip through her fingers because she cannot turn herself into a commodity to get married. The plot moves with Lily’s repeated wasted chances and when she finds herself in questionable circumstances,[[1]](#footnote-1) she retreats. Lily extracts herself from “an ambiguous situation in time to save her self-respect, too late for public vindication,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and with every withdrawal from these situations she plunges further down the social ladder until she slips into social excommunication, poverty and death. At the end of the novel when she is impoverished, Rosedale is the only character from her milieu to display any sympathy or compassion to Lily. What is his purpose? Is he merely the “Jew,” or is he a well-rounded character, whose success underlines the need for change within an ossified and moribund society? To answer these questions, we must consider Wharton’s writing style.

Wharton was a proponent of literary realism. She understood the power of literature to shape ideology, and ultimately gives Rosedale a more nuanced and sympathetic depiction than initially seen.In the early nineteenth-century, it was possible to conceptualise literary realism as a simple process of a text reflecting its world.[[3]](#footnote-3) This binary model – that imagines the world as stable with a unitary mirror held up to it – has become profoundly complicated. Nowadays, the more persuasive notion is that literary realism creates the reality it claims to reflect. In this way, the realistic novel engages in “the task of producing as though for the first time that life world, that ‘*referent’*… which this new narrative discourse claims to be the ‘realistic’ reflection.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The text we read, therefore, is not an isolated, coherent, self-contained, fictive “reflection” of the world. Instead, it is an interactive site of multiple cultural inscriptions and multiple interpretative possibilities. Some of these possibilities can be traced to an author’s conscious intention, but some of them fall outside of authorial control or even authorial knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5) Perhaps this is why attention is drawn to Wharton’s seemingly anti-Semitic depiction of Rosedale that critics assert reflect her anti-Semitism and her negative view of social mobility.

Wharton’s treatment of race is not clear-cut and consequently, as modern readers, we criticise her for putative anti-Semitism. But, rather than decry her characterization of Rosedale, we must engage with and understand her social context.At the turn-of-the-century, explicitly racist theories were accepted, even scientifically supported. These were biological and imperialistic theories that grew out of nineteenth-century social Darwinism and eugenics. Western European theorists applied Darwin’s principle of natural selection to groups of people on the basis of skin colour, geography and culture. The conclusion was that some people and some civilisations had evolved more than others and were, therefore, superior. At the top of this hierarchical evolutionary ladder of race were, in the scientific opinion of the Anglo-Saxon scientists producing this theory, Anglo-Saxons. Wharton’s letters and diaries note she had read Darwin’s theory and the work of the white supremacist Herbert Spencer. Spencer argued that natural selection was “nature’s indispensible method for producing superior men, superior nations and superior races.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The commentator Christine Goldman also states in New York at this time, “racial ideologies grew in importance as a way of understanding history, designing political policy and perhaps reinforcing a wavering sense of superiority of the Anglo-Dutch upper class.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, unlike the current definition of race, Wharton’s generation applied an expansive definitionto the term. They followed Hippolyte Taine’s determination of race, milieu and moment. Taine argued that literature was the product of the author's environment, and that an analysis of that environment yielded an understanding of the work of literature. Taine did not mean race in the now [specific sense](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(classification_of_human_beings)), but rather, the collective cultural dispositions that unknowingly govern everyone. What differentiates individuals within this collective “race,” for Taine, was *milieu*: the specific circumstances that develop the dispositions of a particular person.

In the novel, Wharton makes racial references not just to Rosedale but to a number of other non-Jewish characters, including: Lily’s friends Judy and Gus Trenor; Lily’s cousin, Jack Stepney; Lily’s father, Hudson Bart; and her potential suitor, Percy Gryce. Lily is also noted as the product of “inherited tendencies.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Despite this alternative ethos, to the modern reader, the initial descriptions of Rosedale do look like crude stereotypes. It is worth remembering that in Wharton’s lifetime, discussions on race took such classifications for granted.

The introduction of Rosedale is controversial. He is referred to as “a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type,”[[9]](#footnote-9) and Wharton indulges in broad stereotypes that reproduce many standard examples of Jews prevalent in the United States at that time. These stereotypes also reinforce the leisure class’s perceived views of the *nouveau riche,* particularly the intrusion of mercantile values into leisure class society. Rosedale is shiny, ostentatious, intrusive, vulgar, and pushy. Drawing on late nineteenth-century racialisations that also associated Jews with Asians, she gives him “small sidelong eyes.” The text repeatedly states that he is fat, showy, and “glossy.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Wharton refers to his “plump jewelled fingers,”[[11]](#footnote-11) his conspicuous “fur overcoat”[[12]](#footnote-12) and even the way Lily sees him as “gross, unscrupulous, rapacious” like a “predatory creature.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is not a flattering picture. By today’s standards, these stereotypes are unacceptable, but they are useful to remind modern readers of the anti-Semitism and the disdain expressed towards the *nouveau riche* rife in Wharton’s day.

Rosedale’s role as an up-and-comer grasps the endemic contradictions within this sub-group of society. He alone understands the importance of money whilst the remainder of the characters, whose conduct is entirely governed by the exchange theory of economics --namely the entry into financial transactions for the sole purpose of personal advancement, social or pecuniary-- maintain a wilful silence about their involvement in such transactions. For example: Rosedale frequently speaks candidly of money; he is aware of its power and what it can buy. He sets forth his agenda with remarkable candour:

Why should I mind saying I want to get into society? A man ain’t ashamed to say he wants to own a racing stable or a picture gallery. Well, a taste for society’s just another kind of hobby. Perhaps I want to get even with some of the people who cold-shouldered me last year – put it that way if it sounds better. Anyway, I want to have the run of the best houses; and I’m getting it too, little by little.[[14]](#footnote-14)

His willingness to discuss with Lily her financial needs is considered vulgar and typical behaviour of the uncultured Jew. “Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible,” Wharton states was, “one of the first rules of conversation.” Yet, Lily is relieved and offended by his frankness: “she understood that Rosedale was ready to lend her money; and the longing to take advantage of the offer began to haunt her insidiously.”[[15]](#footnote-15) After all, Lily is in the marriage market to sell herself to the highest bidder. But because Rosedale is a member of a race reputed to be vulgar, but economically savvy, traits that Wharton takes pains to emphasise in him, he can speak honestly of subjects that are considered taboo within the leisure class.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Whilst Rosedale is initially presented in a negative light, his character grows, and becomes multi-faceted as Wharton then gives him positive social traits such as his love and compassion for Lily. This social behaviour and social mobility reflects her innate appetite for change. Rosedale acts outside of the overtly stereotypical racial etiquette that Wharton originally gives him and these traits demonstrate how his character goes beyond the facile stereotypes he begins with.

This development of Rosedale’s character and Lily’s consequent change in attitude toward him refutes the tendency to read him as a reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. The critic Dale Bauer states that Wharton’s views on cultural and racial politics do not necessarily collide with her characters’ views, since Wharton does not give us the vantage point of one character’s perspective. In fact, she forces us to see the characters as fragmented: they are merely subjects who are not grounded with a single sense of “self.” Wharton orchestrates the contradictions she sets out through the narrative. For example, Rosedale, who appears to Lily to initially be socially ambitious, overly familiar and too interested in money, is less of a threat than Lily’s friends. Bertha Dorset, is more dangerous than Rosedale in the way she single-handedly destroys Lily’s reputation, which she does to retain her own money and power. These are precisely the motives ascribed to Rosedale in particular and Jews in general. As for familiarity, it is Gus Trenor, one of her “set,” not Rosedale, who imposes on her physically and socially. It is Trenor, not Rosedale, who exhibits a distinctly ill-bred, sexually charged manner towards Lily in Rosedale’s opera box and comes close to raping her. And Lawrence Selden, whilst he purports to love Lily, is always ready to believe the worst of her, whereas Rosedale knows the behaviour they accuse her of, “aint [her] style.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Rosedale acts as the scapegoat for the secret identities of the insiders. The nature of his and Lily’s interactions makes us understand that his image – that the other character’s see – does not accurately represent who or what he is.

Rosedale’s position in society indicates the assertion Wharton makes about society: he exposes the hypocrisy of New York society.[[18]](#footnote-18) His position, character and behaviour denote that real change must come from outside the dominant class structure. He accepts the reality of this society: he understands the parasitical game that the leisure class and the *nouveau riche* must play together. After all, whilst Jack Stepney takes Rosedale to the “fashionable restaurants” that give him valuable exposure to the upper level of New York society, Rosedale pays for the dinners.[[19]](#footnote-19) This illustrates the interdependence between the two groups of the leisure class and the *nouveau riche*. To Trenor, Rosedale becomes “a chap it pays to be decent to.”[[20]](#footnote-20) To know a person such as Rosedale, who performs the miracle of “growing richer at a time when most people’s investments are shrinking,”[[21]](#footnote-21) is to be in “possession of a precious commodity.”[[22]](#footnote-22) His function within the novel is, therefore, to force an examination of New York society and its feigned indifference to money.

The novelprovides a platform to comment about the inefficacy and malaise of the leisure-class. Wharton makes a case through Rosedale for her readers to reflect and see potential in men who can achieve prosperity and/or mobility through action. Moreover, in her letters and notes, she is clear about the meaning of the novel with its damning critique of New York society. She did not want it to be a superficial study of trivial people so, as she later wrote in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance,* her solution was to invest in the “tragic implication” of a frivolous society with no “inherited obligations” by concentrating “on what its frivolity destroys,” through “its power of debasing people and ideals.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The level of scholarly interest still devoted to discuss Rosedale demonstrates that within American culture the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes of racial ideology is a constant, and shifting feature. This is rooted in the dissemination of racial images in literature, film and television. The power of literature and the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but also in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place. These images establish what people in these groups look like, how they behave, and define, in essence, ‘who they are’. Hence, the benevolent characteristics that Wharton attributes to Rosedale of sympathy, compassion, love and kindness take on even greater importance. Rosedale reflects Wharton’s discomfort with American mores and values, and reinforces the view that only external forces such as new “up and comers” can instigate change within a decaying leisure-class society. He articulates the unspeakable in thenovel*:* he highlights that society is so frivolous, so irresponsible, so wasteful and self-serving that even a vulgar Jew is better than they are. The paradox overlooked in literary criticism today is that the writer who appears to be the least concerned with social or political renovation has the most to say about the social good.

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1. Lily asks a member of her “set,” the married Gus Trenor to invest money on her behalf; rather naively she assumes he invests her money whereas he uses his own and then expects “favours” from her as repayment. She accompanies George and Bertha Dorset on their cruise around the Mediterranean Sea and understands that she is a distraction for George so Bertha may continue her affair with the young bachelor Ned Silverton. When Bertha’s infidelity is discovered, Bertha sacrifices Lily with the claim that Lily has indulged in an affair with George. Bertha’s counterclaim and act of turning Lily off the yacht damages Lily’s reputation. Lily then takes employment as a “social secretary” to the *nouveau riche*, Midwesterner Norma Hatch, but leaves when she realises Mrs. Hatch has employed her to take advantage of Lily’s social credentials to orchestrate an advantageous marriage between Mrs. Hatch and an eligible bachelor of New York’s social elite, Freddy Van Osburgh, which thereby further damages her reputation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *House*, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Part of the “Realist Art” movement, literary realism came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century particularly in French literature with the work of Stendhal and Balzac, writers whom Wharton admired. The main aspect of the oeuvre is the faithful representation of reality. In American literature, William Dean Howells is widely credited as the first American author to bring the realist aesthetic to American fiction with his stories of the Boston elite of the 1850s, and with his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), which Wharton read. Wharton admired Balzac and Stendhal due to their ability to create figures that were living breathing human beings. Wharton believed it imperative that lifelike fictional characters grew out of social contexts readers would recognise. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ammons quoting Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1981, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ammons in “Edith Wharton and Race” (72) in Bell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton,* 68-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Goldman, 28. Also note the terms “Anglo-Dutch” and “Anglo-Saxon” are used interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *House*, 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *House*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *House*, 14, 97, 266, and 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *House*, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *House*, 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *House*, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *House*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *House*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Goldman, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *House*, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Goldman, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *House*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *House*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *House*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *House*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *A Backward Glance,* 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)