

Mason McBride

Professor Synder

English 132

29 September 2021

### The Fate, Evolution, and Post Evolution of Miss Lily Bart

“She remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: "But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back, with your face.” (House of Mirth 58)

Edith Wharton's Miss Lily Bart desperately desires to ascend the social ladder of New York society, a purpose that roots her existence as she cultivates and refines her identity all in effort to marry off to a “slippery surface to her clutch” (80). That is to say that Lily's power, her beauty and grace, “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” (103). Lily Bart, along with many others in society, operate under the force of natural selection, stemming from the dominant Social Darwinist mythos that penetrated all parts of 1900's America, and Wharton uses interactions between Lily Bart and other specialized characters to demonstrate the perceived properties and limits of Darwinism, specifically natural selection. These interactions with Selden, Gerty, and Mr. Rosedale depict the effects of a society that, structurally, can and was reduced to a game of natural selection, and predetermine the altruistic shift in Lily's strategy, freeing her from the oppressive conditions of her being.

New York high society in *House of Mirth* is a game in which the goal is to maintain, display, and earn more money than the people around you. This structure makes it possible to map the game of high society to the process of natural selection. Wharton performs this mapping for the novel, where money replaces genes, the irreducible fundamental unit of natural selection. This process is abstract enough to treat these units as equal, and success is determined by survival of the fittest. This game construction also allows the characters of the novel to be further abstracted into players who hold (1) a belief and (2) a strategy. Reducing characters into their beliefs and strategies is sufficient for analyzing the implications of their interactions with one another because of the bijective mapping to natural selection. For this game, I will define the set of actions players can take as {manners, affair, bridge, ... } and a strategy is just some rational sequence or mixture of these actions. When players' strategies clash with one another, they are written through metaphors of battle like advance, retreat, stun, and press the attack.

Selden and Lily Bart's dialectic, one that allows for the "rare joys of mental vagrancy," establishes the discordance between humanity and a naturally selective society (140). This is most clearly seen in each of the players' belief on the meaning of success, For Lily Bart it is "to get as much as one can out of life... a relative quality" and for Selden it is "personal freedom" (142). That relative quality of success is the same driving force that organisms feel through natural selection. Individuals in the population feel the pressure to push forward, to fill every crack of the finite space of society, specializing to this task with finer and finer precision. This framework emphasizes the central focus of constructing oneself to a person like Lily Bart, "it was the life she had been made for: every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the

crowning blossom of her beauty” (664). This inevitable concentration of the self for exhibition is why Selden chooses to remain “amphibious,” which, through a Darwinian lens, characterizes Selden as still being from an ancestral branch point much earlier in the evolutionary tree (146). Selden’s “less evolved” state allows him to distance himself from society, he argues that “when [society] becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life” (147) This is not to say that Lily Bart is unaware of the arbitrary construction of this such society, but it is that she desires to maintain the evolutionary profiles of both an ancestral branch point and an overdetermined, cultivated leaf node. Selden argues that Lily Bart’s intention will doom her when she comes to hate the society she wills to rise in.

“She had hated dinginess, and it was her fate to be dingy.” (House of Mirth 73)

The fate that flows through *House of Mirth* must be wrestled and struggled with to attain, contrasting it from the other themes of determination that occupy Naturalist literature. The “clumsiness of fate” in *House of Mirth* originates from the Darwinist mythos, which mirrors the clumsiness the process of natural selection often takes since it only guarantees the preservation of its fundamental units and not individual lives (370). Darwinism at this point of the theory’s development only encompassed the process of natural selection instead of the complete set of {natural selection, mutation, genetic drift, gene flow} and also during this time, a misconception existed which asserted that natural selection always acts in the best interest of the species. This sentiment permeated the philosophies of social Darwinism in which being selfish was seen as the main mode of survival rather than having a proportionally significant amount of importance.

This greed, empirically proven through natural selection, results in reduced population size and, in the case of *House of Mirth*, situations like Lily Bart’s scene with Gerty. Lily, unable

to cross the threshold of success, collapses and cries, “Oh, Gerty, he tried to help me. [Selden] told me—he warned me long ago—he foresaw that I should grow hateful to myself.” Edith Wharton weaves the stumbling fates of Lily Bart and Gerty through one another merely as a device to unravel the nature of fate in the novel. Gerty’s fate is not with Selden, but instead it is when “Gerty knelt beside [Lily Bart], waiting, with the patience born of experience” because Gerty has been consciously specialized to act as a support for a truly successful figure. Gerty’s “poor heart beat wildly against its destiny,” and was predetermined for this situation despite “no deliberate purpose on Lily’s part to rob her of her dream” (352, 351). Lily Bart is robbing Gerty of her chance with Selden, but it is not her fate either. This scene is dense with the clumsiness of temporal fate generated from the endless forward pressure of a relative quality like success. Lily Bart’s situation in this scene represents another effect of this temporal fate: the false positive swings of success that naturally arise from the noisy yet zero-sum system of society. It was clear to everyone in that scene that Lily was destined for whatever she desired. The simplicity of the dramatic way in which “she had dropped sideways in Gerty’s big arm-chair, her head buried where lately Selden’s had leaned, in a beauty of abandonment that drove home to Gerty’s aching senses the inevitableness of her own defeat” makes it almost certain she will have her resolution characteristic of Naturalist stories (351). The novel makes it apparent that natural selection still leaves the opportunity for periods of success even if one is fated for doom.

This theory of fate is tested to its absolute limit through Mr. Rosedale’s negotiations with Lily Bart, where Lily Bart’s exaltation is still impossibly stunted implying the only possible explanation is some predetermined outcome. If Miss Lily Bart wanted to achieve her idea of success, she would have married Mr. Rosedale. It is clear that Mr. Rosedale is aware of Lily’s intentions and desires the same, “he was sensitive to shades of difference which Miss Bart would

never have credited him with perceiving, because he had no corresponding variations of manner; ... Miss Bart herself possessed precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality” (256). Mr. Rosedale’s massive success is a direct consequence of his player strategy. He fully embraces the idea of natural selection, his desire leads him to propose a partnership to Miss Lily Bart who he believes can leverage the stumbling, inevitable force of natural selection to “make all the other women feel small” (372). In defiance of both the volume of attempts from Mr. Rosedale and the specialized flawlessness of his offer, Miss Lily Bart never acquiesced and ended up dingy. Edith Wharton sufficiently justifies the existence of a fate that can only guarantee its regression to the mean.

An upper bound on Lily Bart’s fate does not doom her in the end. On her last day alive, Lily Bart viewed natural selection less as “a perpetual adjustment, a play of party politics, in which every concession had its recognized equivalent” and more as a “feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (543, 669). Lily Bart breaks away from her original intention and instead embraces a rooted life, wanting to establish a root node in which all future branching memories contextualize themselves with. “her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen,” and from this point Lily embraces an altruistic strategy (563). Lily is no longer governed by the selfish misconception of natural selection; altruism, a strategy that decreases the fitness of the individual to increase the fitness of others, gives a purpose to her, even seeing Nettie Struther’s child was lying on her “she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder. She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure” (569). This strategy

makes the path of fate clear by giving Lily Bart no doubt of the effects she causes in the world. Her philanthropy, won from beauty, assisted the lives of women and future women, an action whose effects will survive through generations. Lily experiences a “multiplication of wakefulness,” reaching a state where “perspective had disappeared” and her being became independent from time. This epiphany accompanies Lily, manifesting itself as Nettie Struther's baby. Lily was not alone for the last moments of her life, for “the tender pressure of its body was still close to hers... she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept” (570).

Edith Wharton's intention with this ending approximates the condition she faced upheld by her synthesis of Naturalism and 1900's Darwinism. The limited scope of this intention stems from Wharton's reluctance to embrace feminism, but there is a deeper structure governing the laws of *House of Mirth* that lurks beneath the novel. It considers the way in which “doomed” women “naturally” arrived at altruistic strategies to survive the destructive chaos of a selfish patriarchal society. The keen perception Wharton possessed, a trait required to create a work of Naturalist fiction, also ended up generating an economic analysis that evaluates the condition of the women begging to be free to grow under a mode of production where greed eradicates those who aren't fit enough.