THROUGH A SELECTIVE LENS: DARWINIAN ANALYSIS OF CLASS STRUGGLES IN GILDED AGE LITERATURE

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In their 2005 publication *The Literary Animal*, editors Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson compile essays from a multitude of notable scholars who argue for the use of evolutionary theory as a legitimate form of literary criticism. In the introduction, they contend, “The problems of survival and reproduction are ‘on the minds’ of all species that have minds and should dominate the stories of the one species that speaks and writes” (xxv). Yet as something so prevalent among all living beings, including authors, evolutionary theory remains somewhat underrepresented in major works of literary critics and the pages of critical textbooks. Gottschall and Wilson acknowledge that “Numerous evolutionist and literary scholars have become interested in exploring this territory, but it has not become part of the normal discourse for the field of literary studies as a whole” (xvii). Those theorists who argue for the integration of evolutionary theory into mainstream literary theory recognize its opposition and provide their own evidence for why it should be accepted into critical theory.

In his essay within *The Literary Animal*, “Human Nature and Literary Meaning: A Theoretical Model Illustrated with a Critique of Pride and
Prejudice,” Joseph Carroll views evolutionary theory as universal, asserting that “There is no work of literature written anywhere in the world, at any time, by any author, that is outside the scope of a Darwinian analysis” (79). In his 2009 publication On the Origins of Stories, Brian Boyd supports Carroll’s claim by analyzing both Homer’s Odyssey and Dr. Seuss’s Horton Hears a Who! through an evolutionary lens. Bert Bender’s 1996 publication The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926 traces sexual selection through novels focusing on love and courtship by authors such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton. Carroll himself performs a brief evolutionary analysis of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice within Gottschall and Wilson’s publication.

Despite these instances, there is an overall dearth of evolutionary analyses of literary works, even those works that have been examined repeatedly through the same critical approaches. Part of this appears to stem from a resistance to integrating science and literature, with many viewing the two disciplines as incomparable and incompatible. Gottschall discusses his own negative experience as a graduate student interested in an evolutionary analysis of male conflict in Homer. He recalls that his professor “flatly forbade” him to take such a critical approach based on its “absurdity and irrelevance” and instructed him to write a psychoanalytic analysis instead (xix). In the scientific community, including the psychological
community, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is considered far more absurd and irrelevant than Darwin or Spencer’s, and is currently used only rarely in practice. Yet in the humanities, a psychoanalytic critical approach is frequently used in literary studies, while evolutionary theory is typically, and I would argue, unjustly omitted. Gottschall justifies the use of evolutionary theory in literary studies as stemming from concrete evidence that provides insights into human behavior that are lacking in other critical theories:

As I continued to read Homer, and to work my way through the broad and interdisciplinary literature associated with sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, I became convinced not only that an evolutionary perspective could bring something new and useful even to a poem that had been picked over by scholars for twenty-five hundred years but that it could do the same for literary analysis generally by providing it with its first truly scientific theory of human psychology and behavior. I believed at the time that what ultimately drew most people to study literature was a desire to explore the behavior and psychology of human beings—a desire to play one's humble role in the ancient project of seeking the nature of the human. And here was a theory of why, ultimately, humans think and act as they do, a theory based not on intuitive speculations but in the bedrock of evolutionary theory and scientific method. Since most literary scholars spend their lives engaged in the study of why people (i.e., characters, authors, and readers) act and think as they do, the potential benefits for expanding understanding of literary phenomena seemed almost boundless. (xix)

Although it has been fifteen years since Gottschall first faced resistance at the idea of merging literature and evolution, literary studies have not yet fully embraced evolutionary theory. Gottschall and Wilson described their trouble at finding a publisher for *The Literary Animal*, claiming that while
the science editors of a publisher were receptive, the literary editors were much less so and held views similar to that of Gottschall’s professor (xxiv).

Boyd’s On the Origin of Stories examines both literature and art from an evolutionary perspective, which he terms “evocriticism” (384). Boyd claims that evocriticism has the potential to:

Link literature with the whole of life, with other human activities and capacities, and their relation to those of other animals, as they compete, cooperate, and play, as they observe, understand, and empathize with others. It can reconnect literature with the whole range of human experience, and especially with what matters most in literature and life—and not just the features of life closest to animal existence. (384-85)

This approach emphasizes the connection between what is written and what is real, strengthening the bond between biology and culture, both of which require humans as an essential element. In regards to some of the current approaches in critical theory, any theory that moves towards the “dehumanization” of a text does not allow for a nurturing environment for evolutionary criticism. The recognition of a human is essential for a biological approach and is nonsensical without this element. Any critical approach that discredits the human element in the text is automatically at odds with an evolutionary approach. In Beginning Theory, Peter Barry identifies the belief that “Human nature is a myth” as one of the five recurrent ideas in critical theory (35). If this constitutes a common belief within theory, it is no surprise that evolution remains unwelcome. As Joseph Carroll states:
In contrast to current practice, a critic who aligned himself or herself with evolutionary biology would once again take the ‘subject’—the living, individual, human personality—as a primary point of reference. The critic would regard texts not merely as an arrangement of elements within a given system of signs but, rather, as a structure of references to an actual world, including the audience that, along with the author, inhabits this world. (95)

This approach forces the audience to connect with the subject and bond through the mechanism of human experience. By viewing the subject as being alive within the text, that subject is governed by the same rules of human evolution that are inflicted upon the audience. The basic human drive of survival is present in the minds of the audience, the author, and the characters created by that author. Survival is a real world concept that is transferable to all individuals and species in any and all environments. By maintaining this point of reference to the subject, the reader-subject relationship is strengthened and subsequently reemphasizes the role of the author as an actual living being, subjected to the experiences of his or her characters. Carroll states that “If texts were taken as the intentional productions of living, individual human beings who are responding to their own particular environmental circumstances, including their cultural circumstances, criticism would presumably find it considerably more worthwhile to pay close attention, once again, to the structure or determinate meaning within the text” (95).
As an emerging form of literary criticism, evolutionary analysis lacks a set approach or method, leaving a certain degree of freedom in its employment. Regarding this Boyd argues:

Evocriticism should not be easy, should not impose a template, should not arrive at a priori conclusions. It is a research program, not a set of prefabricated conclusions or all-purpose methods. It is open-ended at both ends, in terms of the evidence in literary works and the evidence about human nature or culture arriving from anthropology, biology, economics, history, psychology, and sociology. (391)

As a broad and all-encompassing theory, evolutionary literary theory has the advantage of being applicable to numerous aspects of literature, allowing those who use it a wide range of interpretive possibilities.

Additionally, application of evolutionary theory to literature requires some modification as a result of the cultural influence on the characters. Within The Literary Animal, Carroll argues that simply taking Darwinian concepts and trying to match them directly to situations in literature to try to explain human behavior is “naïve and is vulnerable to obvious objections” (76). His reasoning is that “People in reality do not simply exemplify common, universal, patterns of behavior,” and cites that part of this is a result of their “cultural conditioning” (76). Culture and social dynamics are significant elements when applying natural selection to situations outside of raw, uncultivated nature. Carroll is acknowledging the necessity of factoring social influence into an evolutionary analysis for the reason that an individual’s
environment is responsible both for shaping that individual’s traits and imposing selective pressures which dictate survival.

Some discussion of the relationship between biology and culture is necessary to lay the groundwork for this thesis and align my personal views within the overall conversation. The first chapter will focus on two foundational aspects of the thesis. It will address the connections between evolution, culture, and literary theory, and will tackle some of the resistance that the theory has been facing. Additionally, there will be some discussion defending the validity of learned traits and how in an industrial or social environment these traits are essential for survival.

An application of the collective theories of Darwin and Spencer to literary studies has the potential to be exceptionally broad unless boundaries are established. I have selected the areas of natural selection and sexual selection to illustrate the struggle for survival experienced within the novels, both serving as mechanisms of a broader evolutionary theory. Additionally, I will examine the presence of altruistic behavior, competition for resources, environmentally advantageous attributes, and mechanisms increasing success within sexually selective spheres.

To illustrate the use of evolutionary theory on literature, I will examine four novels: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. Of these novels, *Sister Carrie* and *The
*Jungle* are commonly associated with Darwin and Spencer. Although Bender includes works from both Howells and Wharton in *The Descent of Love*, *The House of Mirth* or *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are only mentioned in passing. In Bender's defense, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is not a courtship novel and would not fit with his overall theme of sexual selection. However, *The House of Mirth* has undeniable ties to sexual selection. All four novels can be examined through the scope of natural selection, while only *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* venture into the realm of sexual selection. Additionally, all of my selected works were written and published within close proximity to each other and therefore depict a reasonably consistent social sphere. For each of the comparisons, I will place the novels within the context of the environment in which the characters must survive, focusing specifically on issues of wealth and social class. After establishing the confines of the environment, I will within the works, apply the theories of both Darwin and Spencer to the characters’ circumstances in an attempt to explain why the characters face such overwhelming difficulties in achieving their goals of wealth and social status. Additionally, I will examine the role of traits, such as altruism and self-preservation, which can be viewed as beneficial to the characters within selective environments.

To fully illustrate the importance of wealth and class to the characters, I will utilize portions of Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, an 1899 satiric commentary on the leisure class and their conspicuous
consumption. Veblen emphasizes the importance of wealth in survival, stating that “All classes are in a measure engaged in the pecuniary struggle, and in all classes the possession of the pecuniary traits counts towards the success and survival of the individual” (148). This concept of wealth as a resource necessary for survival is what I would like to focus on and trace throughout the works. This resource and the characters’ pecuniary traits which grant access to it is what will be focused on as one of the primary naturally selective pressures presented within this work. It is wealth in the context of the texts presented which determines the success or failure of an individual and their “fitness”. Collectively, these various texts will provide a multifaceted insight into the competitive environment created during the industrious and society conscious Gilded Age, and how evolutionary theory can be used to examine the effects.

It is my goal throughout this thesis to demonstrate the applicability of evolutionary theory to literature, specifically through the mechanisms of natural selection, thereby reducing the divide between two presumably distant areas of academia. By utilizing alternative critical approaches to examine seasoned works, the possibility of innovative literary analyses can be unveiled.
CHAPTER II

LITERARY THEORY, CULTURE, AND EVOLUTION: PUTTING THE HUMAN BACK IN HUMANITIES

“Literature has been the great repository of our detailed knowledge of human nature in the past. It will be illuminated by, and it will illuminate, our knowledge of an even deeper past.”

---Brian Boyd

Part I. “Like Confessing Murder”: Evolution’s Dangerous Reputation

After spending twenty years researching and analyzing his findings on natural selection, Charles Darwin kept his groundbreaking theory from the scientific community and the public, notably stating that it was “like confessing murder.” It was not until another researcher, Alfred Russell Wallace, was on the verge of publishing similar findings that Darwin was forced to make public his research in On the Origin of Species in 1859. Part of Darwin’s reasoning for delaying publication was the knowledge that his newfound theory would be controversial and face much resistance. According to his autobiography published by his son, Sir Francis Darwin, after realizing the success of his work, Darwin published The Descent of Man in 1871,
focusing on the origin of man and one of his favorite topics, sexual selection (67). However, as Barry Werth notes in the introduction to *Banquet at Delmonico’s*, Darwin “publicly avoided the question of what evolution said about human behavior and society,” crediting Herbert Spencer with the application of evolution to parameters outside of nature (xii). Darwin’s theory of evolution, while widely accepted due to concrete scientific evidence, is still faced with some of the resistance that he originally feared. It should be noted that currently the modern scientific community displays no collective resistance or disagreement on the validity of Darwin’s theory, even with the addition of new scientific findings such as genetics. Rigorous scrutiny and investigation have only strengthened the legitimacy of natural selection as an evolutionary mechanism, as well as the broader theory as a whole. It has only been selective groups within society who have tried, unsuccessfully, to refute the basis of the theory. According to Michael Shermer in *Why Darwin Matters*, “Although the scientific community is now united in agreement that evolution happened, a century and a half later the cultural world is still divided” (xvii).

Darwin and Spencer’s theories of natural and sexual selection have the tendency to make people uncomfortable. Bert Bender acknowledges this possibility and reasons that:

Natural and sexual selection pose grave threats to liberal ideology, in general—to the ideal of democratic equality and to possible moral or social reform: and this threat is especially felt
in reference to biological questions of racial or sexual differences and the attendant problems of social equality. (4)

As a society, we are conditioned to maintain the belief that “All men are created equal,” a statement that natural selection and evolution may refute. While all men are born as humans worthy of respect and equality, not all men are created under equal environmental conditions with equal genetic traits. It is these differences in men (and women) that natural and sexual selection impact.

It is possible to look at Darwinism socially, without turning to social Darwinism. The term itself came about after the death of both Darwin and Spencer, and is often wrongly associated with their theories. Spencer’s coining of the term “survival of the fittest” for Darwin’s theory of natural selection is based on the concept of “fitness,” or “the contribution an individual makes to the gene pool of the next generation, relative to the contributions of other individuals” (Campbell and Reese). This concept was unfortunately misconstrued to imply the inferiority of less fit individuals, leading to the theories of Social Darwinism and eugenics. Social Darwinism is linked to horrific historical events, such as the Holocaust, as well as the field of eugenics, responsible for the advocacy of racial and genetic purification. The founder of eugenics, Sir Frances Galton, was a cousin of Darwin’s and drew his theories from *On the Origin of Species*, yet Darwin himself did not support the movement.
While I will discuss the inability of certain individuals to survive based on their social, financial, and inherent traits, I am in no way stating that these individuals are less worthy of survival than their more fortunate counterparts in humanistic or ethical terms. Rather, I am arguing that the social system in place during this era created an environment of extreme competition in which individuals that were of a lesser social and financial position faced overwhelming obstacles in their efforts to survive. Therefore, the causation is rooted in the rapid growth of society and division of social classes as well as various other environmental factors which produce naturally selective pressures that govern an individual’s success or failure.

It is possible that some of this misunderstanding and resistance carries over to the humanities, influencing those dealing directly with humans and human behaviors through various media. To be fair, there is a thin line between declaring an individual unfit in terms of his or her ability to survive in an environment and declaring an individual unfit in terms of the right to survive. Evolutionary literary theory supports the former, using the theory to explain human behavior within literature as well as analyze the outcomes of individuals based on their adaptability to their given environment.

Darwin’s theory of natural selection, while still extremely relevant, requires a certain degree of modification when removed from the natural environment and placed within the cultural environment that is human
society. As a result of this, the impact of culture on a species must be factored in to the equation. There has been a movement away from the purely inherited animal traits as the only determining factor in survival. That is not to say that these foundations of human behavior are no longer present; but rather that they are often complicated and occasionally overshadowed by the modified behaviors that are expected by members of society. While Darwin in later work did relate his theories to humans and cultured society, Spencer focused on these issues more exclusively. Evolution and natural selection have continued to evolve and expand upon the knowledge base created by Darwin and Spencer. The contributions of modern scientists, both natural and social, have provided a more thorough understanding of the impact of natural selection on societies and culture.

Part II. The Descent of Culture

In his 2009 publication *On the Origin of Stories*, Brian Boyd argues for the use of a biocultural approach to literature as the “first truly comprehensive literary theory,” stating that it “invites a return to the richness of texts and the many-sidedness of the human nature that texts evoke” (2). This approach utilizes Darwinian theory in conjunction with culture and analyzes the relationship between the two. I agree with Boyd and argue that evolutionary theory has the potential to be a foundational
approach to the study of literature just as it plays a similar role in other fields. I am not arguing against the validity or effectiveness of traditional literary theories, only suggesting that by applying evolutionary theory either by itself or in conjunction with other theories, there is potential for innovative avenues of interpretation. Evolutionary theory does not inherently oppose other forms of literary analysis and has been proven an effective addition to theories in other fields, particularly the social sciences. Literature, as a part and generator of culture, is directly related to the social sciences and is equally eligible for an evolutionary examination. As a result of the link between nature and culture, an evolutionary approach to literature demands the acknowledgment of the cultural, historical, and social factors surrounding the literary work to lay the foundations for the selective processes which govern its outcomes. As such, a foundational evolutionary approach to literary criticism pairs well with many other literary theories, most of which focus on the cultural, social, and historical. The cultural and social elements align with the historical, and both sides can be used to aid in the understanding of the other. Culture and history are both created by humans, and both are driven by human nature and the basic drive for survival. History is often documented by literature, an element of culture created by people, for people, and about people. If a novel is regarded as a type of historical document, the text provides a glimpse into the life and culture of
that era. More specifically, the text gives defining characteristics and selective pressures which determine character outcomes.

E. O. Wilson, known for the development of sociobiology, states “Human behavior is determined by neither genes nor culture but instead by a complex interaction of these two prescribing forces, with biology guiding and environment specifying” (viii). This complex interaction causes biology and culture to form a thick web of connections that shape individuals and entire societal groups. In his 1978 publication *On Human Nature*, Wilson describes a “dual track of evolution” where “genetic evolution by natural selection enlarged the capacity for culture, and culture enhanced the genetic fitness of those who made maximum use of it” (85). Cultural and genetic inheritance are of equal importance in survival, both contributing vital attributes to an individual that allow them to compete with other similarly equipped individuals. While a character is born with their genetic traits, their environment both shapes those traits as well as leads to the development of learned traits that allow an individual to adapt to the environment.

As we attempt to grasp a more complete understanding of the relationship between biology and culture, the potential for conflict increases. The cultural evolution debate as outlined by Robin Allot is rampant with varying theories deliberating the exact relationship between biological and cultural evolution, with Allot concluding that none of the theories are sufficient due to the fact that “they say little or nothing about the human
potential for the creation of culture, about the major aspects of culture in human evolution, and about the evolutionary source of the potential and of the content and form of the major cultural systems” (72). Despite the differences in the various theories, there appears to be a consensus that culture does evolve, and that cultural and biological evolution are somehow related. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to navigate this debate, I believe it is important to acknowledge that this relationship remains open for consideration due to its complexity. Within this work, I will maintain a perspective aligned with that of Ian McEwan, who argues that “Each of these two elements, genes and culture, have had a reciprocal shaping effect, for as primates we are intensely social creatures, and our social environment has exerted over time a powerful adaptive pressure” (11). This adaptive pressure is based on inherited and learned survival traits that drive an individual to make the necessary adjustments in their behavior in order to better their chances of survival in their given environment. In A Hazard of New Fortunes, the character Lindau relocates into a community where he is among individuals of a similar socioeconomic station. His prior home made him somewhat socially isolated, and since he was unable to adapt to that environment, he moved to one that was more fitting to his social needs. Our need for social contact forces us to adapt to cultural standards to the extent that our genetic makeup and inherent abilities allow. A desire to fit into a certain niche in society does not imply the ability to do so, despite
our best efforts. This is evident in *The House of Mirth* as Lily struggles to maintain a position in the leisure class. Our limitations, both biological and environmental, set barriers that even the highest degree of adaptive pressure cannot alter.

In his 2008 publication, *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities*, Gottschall maintains that culture is an important part of biology, stating that “An evolutionary biology that ignores or de-emphasizes the importance of physical and sociocultural environments is, in fact, *profoundly un-biological*” (33). Gottschall argues that “Environments—social and physical—shape, constrain, and elicit the behaviors of organisms” (33). The environment is of utmost importance in all four of the novels in the study, providing the characters with obstacles and adaptive pressures that shape their subsequent behaviors. Each novel places these characters in opposing environments ranging from the depths of the slums to the pinnacle of wealth and excess. When a character is shown out of his or her accustomed environment, that character appears somewhat uncomfortable and even dysfunctional in terms of their ability to fit into their new environment. This is evident in Dreiser’s novel with Carrie’s apparent discomfort with both her sister’s apartment and her efforts to secure a job. Carrie constantly goes to the bottom of the stairs of the apartment, lingering on the outmost borders and distancing herself from the repressive atmosphere of routine domestic life. While seeking employment and nearing the door of a business, Carrie is
intimidated by the new environment and the men at the door and fails to enter to apply for a job. Carrie “looked helplessly around, and then, seeing herself observed, retreated. It was too difficult a task. She could not go past them” (18). She lacks the courage to enter into this and many other buildings based on her belief that she is ill-equipped for such an environment. The discomfort of a new environment can also be seen in *The Jungle* as Jurgis finds himself the unlikely guest at Master Freddie’s colossal mansion.

As a result of the merger between biological and cultural evolution, genetic traits have been joined by environmental or learned traits. These traits do not involve the passing of genetic information from parent to offspring. Instead, they arise based on the need to adapt behaviors in order to maintain competition with other individuals in an environment. These traits can be taught to an individual by his or her parents, or can be learned directly from the environment and other individuals that occupy that space. These learned traits are subject to the same rules of natural selection as genetic traits and impact the “fitness” of an individual within the cultural environment in which they reside just as any inherited traits are. Within the confines of a literary work where the genetic traits are either limited or impossible to distinguish, learned traits can be a valuable medium for analysis of characters and provide a valid perspective regarding their drives, actions, and behaviors. In both *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*, the reader is provided with only partial information regarding the parents of the
heroines. This causes a need for supplementation in the form of non-genetic traits in order to successfully assess the fitness of a character within the setting and selective environment of a novel.

A focus on learned traits does not imply that the genetic traits must or should be ignored. Whenever present this information should be utilized to its fullest within the scope of the evolutionary lens. The more obvious genetic traits such as those connected to physical appearance are relevant to the analysis of a character. The physical attributes of an individual, including strength and attractiveness, are both relevant to their success and survival within a society. While strength and beauty are traits that can be genetically predisposed, society has determined what is valued in an individual and what is required for them to be successful. In the societies examined, these physical traits are an essential part of the process of obtaining wealth, yet they alone do not guarantee the maintenance of wealth or its initial acquisition. Additionally, in relation to the female characters, physical beauty is often overshadowed by material beauty and the need to possess proper dress and ornamentation, which in turn require wealth to obtain.

Within this work it should be understood that the birth of a character will be defined by authorial creation. It is the traits which the characters have at this “birth” which can be observed and analyzed with regard to their “fitness” given the environment in which they reside. Examples of these traits include but are not limited to: physical, psychological, social and
financial characteristics. We are given a limited scope by which to judge and
analyze them, and while we can make assumptions about them, we must
remember that they are assumptions and not based on fact. The limited
amount of genetic and familial information normally provided in a novel is
typically not sufficient for something as in-depth as a genetic analysis. In his
1995 publication *Evolution and Literary Theory*, Carroll states “Any given
literary text emerges out of the experience of an individual human being, and
this experience is itself the product of an interaction between the genetic
characteristics of a person and the characteristics of his or her environment,
both social and nonsocial” (117). Mapping and determining genetic
characteristics of a character can be inconclusive within a literary work.
Additionally, when separated from the environment, these traits become
meaningless and have no context against which their value can be measured.
However, when examined in conjunction with the environment and the
learned traits, the genetic aspects of an individual become grounded in more
tangible and textual evidence. For example, if we are told a character
possesses great physical strength due to his or her genetic predisposition of
superior bone and muscle structure, but are not given information regarding
his or her environment and social situation, the physical strength cannot be
defined as the trait that selective pressures are working for or against. If we
are told that this character possesses physical strength and is a lower-class
character who must work a physically demanding factory job, then the trait
can be determined to be beneficial to that character in that environment. Likewise, if we are told that this same character occupies the leisure class in which he is not required to perform any physical labor, the genetic trait of physical strength is typically not vital to the survival of the individual. Additionally, the individual’s offspring will more than likely occupy the same social sphere and also have a decreased need for physical strength.

Part III. Industrial Evolution

The period of 1890 to 1908 was a time of rapid economic, industrial, and cultural growth in America. Known as the Gilded Age, this era was inundated with images of wealth and excess among the upper class. This is especially true within the big cities of New York and Chicago where cities were expanding both horizontally and vertically while the social scene flourished amidst the prospects of a class of nouveau riche. While the wealthy expanded their entrepreneurial endeavors, immigrants were flooding the cities and bringing with them both their culture and their hope for a better life. With this came an increase in competition for employment and resources, both necessities for the survival of families. On the opposite end of the social spectrum, the leisure class sought to maintain and exceed the standards of wealth, while those lurking in the middle class struggled to move up the social ladder. As a result of the immense social struggles, this era provides an
ideal background for applying natural selection. Vast numbers of people and limited resources create a competitive atmosphere that favors certain traits and selects against others both between and within social classes. Upward mobility, both social and financial, was of utmost importance to all classes for different reasons. However, because of the vast differences between the classes, this was often an impossible task. Alexis Gregory notes that “social climbing was as rough and difficult a task as accumulating wealth” (185).

Gregory acknowledges this distinct separation between social classes as “the chasm that yawned between rich and poor, a chasm sparsely occupied by a still fledgling middle class” (9). For those in the middle class, admittance into the leisure class was the goal, despite the fact that the middle class allowed for a comfortable lifestyle. Those unfortunate enough to occupy the lower class sought to achieve a higher class because it offered them and their children a better chance at survival and freedom from the harsh and dangerous conditions of poverty. Even the upper class demonstrated an ongoing need to obtain more material goods and trump the possessions of others within the same social sphere. Therefore, the attainment of wealth is directly correlated with survival, yet it must be acknowledged that each social class maintains a distinct definition of survival that is tailored to their needs and their cultural conditioning. The meaning of survival that an individual upholds is, in part, a result of that individual’s learned traits and social environment.
A desire to obtain wealth and a higher social status ventures beyond mere vanity. It provides an individual or group of individuals with the means to obtain the necessities of life required for survival. In some instances, the definition of survival becomes tainted with the desire for increased material possessions and a higher position on the social ladder. Additionally, as an individual moves up the social ladder, the definition of survival becomes less focused on actual human survival and more focused on what Veblen terms “conspicuous consumption.” However, despite the vast difference in these concepts of survival, both are valid within the contexts of the level of society an individual occupies. In some instances where the individual occupies multiple social classes within a novel, this change in the comprehension of survival can be noted. Both Wharton’s Lily Bart and Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber experience multiple levels of society and must adapt to the demands of their environment. However, because both women are born into social classes lower than what they intend to reach, they lack some of the learned traits that would benefit them in elite society. Despite being born into a wealthy family, Lily experienced consistent financial strain that inflicted a certain amount of discomfort into her lifestyle. Her mother’s manipulation and frequent disregard of the family finances creates disadvantageous practices in Lily as an adult with her own financial responsibilities. As a result, they risk being selected against because of their lack of necessary traits. Veblen acknowledges:
Financial success is vital to entering the leisure class: In further qualification it is to be noted that the leisure class of to-day is recruited from those who have been successful in a pecuniary way, and who, therefore, are presumably endowed with more than an even complement of the predatory traits. Entrance into the leisure class lies through the pecuniary employments, and these employments, by selection and adaptation, act to admit to the upper levels only those lines of descent that are pecuniarily fit to survive under the predatory test. (144)

It is important to note that while Veblen speaks of a “predatory test,” predators differ when the environment is changed. Those individuals who possess predatory traits that are advantageous in the lower classes may be at a disadvantage when in the leisure class.

While wealth may be the most advantageous resource in the situations examined within this thesis, this does not imply that it is transferable to other situations. A species may possess a trait that aids survival in one environment, yet when that environment changes or the species is forced to relocate, that trait may no longer be advantageous to survival. An individual’s learned traits are vital to their adaptability as social and environmental conditions change. Genetic traits are stable, imposing limits on what an individual can or cannot do. In contrast, learned traits can be altered based on environmental pressures, new traits can be adopted into an individual’s repertoire of adaptability.

Darwin’s influence on Gilded Age industry and culture is irrefutable. Not only did he influence the writers of the novels I have selected, but he also influenced the environment of the authors as they wrote about that time
period, creating characters that they would then set loose into their
historically relevant and selective environments. This does not imply that
other historical literary periods do not warrant an evolutionary examination.
I would argue that even in more stable periods of history these trends can be examined.

In the following chapters I will apply this theoretical approach to the literary texts I have selected. Through this examination of the texts the applicability of natural selection as a literary tool will be shown. The reciprocal effect of biology and culture in the selective process is undoubtedly inescapable for the characters within their competitive environments.
CHAPTER III

SELECTIVE SOCIETY: MAINTAINING STANDARDS IN EDITH WHARTON’S THE HOUSE OF MIRTH AND THEODORE DREISER’S SISTER CARRIE

“Transplantation is not always successful in the matter of flowers or maidens. It requires sometimes a richer soil, a better atmosphere to continue even a natural growth.”

---Theodore Dreiser

Part I. Altruism and Self-Preservation

Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth and Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie depict through the eyes of young women the appeal of the leisure class, the despair of the working class, and the difficulty of maintaining a position somewhere in between. Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber realize that wealth is the necessary resource to lead them to their desired social level, but only Carrie succeeds in obtaining that resource and using it to her advantage. Lily, as an individual who not only does not possess or obtain the necessary traits for survival, but also is unable to adapt to her environment, dies
penniless and “dingy,” the two qualities she struggled to avoid. As a result of her altruistic nature, Lily Bart follows a gradual descent into poverty. Carrie Meeber’s self-preservation enables her to rise to fame and fortune. The primary difference between the two women is the presence or absence of self-preservation and altruism. Within the texts, a direct correlation exists between wealth and self-preservation, and poverty and altruism. As the characters and their environment increase in wealth, their instinct to be self-preserving subsequently increases. Alternatively, as the characters descend into poverty and their environment becomes more destitute, altruism becomes a viable method and survival tactic that can be used to meet their needs.

Wharton’s novel challenges readers to question how it is possible that a young, beautiful girl with a lavish debut ends up dying miserable and alone in a dingy boardinghouse, abandoned by her former friends despite her seemingly moral qualities. Even Lily questions her fate after realizing that her beauty, the only advantageous trait she possesses, was beginning to fade: “But why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?” (25). Similarly, Dreiser is criticized for allowing his heroine to live an immoral lifestyle without negative consequence. In Sister Carrie, Rachel Sarah observes, “If readers had expected a moralistic story that rewarded virtue and punished vice, this wasn’t it” (491). Not only does Carrie go unpunished for her various wrongdoings, she actually reaches remarkable levels of
success. Carrie is rewarded with fame, fortune, and social prestige, while Lily dies practically forgotten by her former social circle.

The question of Lily’s failure echoes throughout the words of critics, the minds of readers, and the text itself. Bonnie Lynn Gerard favors a social explanation and argues that Lily is “a victim of the social environment that created in her such a lack” (410). Gerard places the blame on the social environment or culture of the time without acknowledging the impact of both natural and learned traits that were passed on to Lily. This classic example of the nature versus nurture debate is paramount to determining why Lily fails. Brian Boyd argues against solely favoring the nurture aspect by stating that “Far from denying cultural difference, an investigation of human nature that takes into account our evolutionary past makes it possible to explain cultural difference in a way that insisting that humans are completely ‘culturally constructed’ cannot” (23). Bert Bender notes that Wharton “was too well-read in the biological and cultural debate at that time to imagine that either nature or nurture exerted the determining force in one’s life, or to imagine that any human being could assert her complete freedom from either force” (321-22). Therefore, it is unlikely that Wharton would construct a character that was completely shaped by society. Comparatively, Lingeman states that Dreiser “sees each character’s fate as intimately bound up with his or her inherited nature and social origins; his characters are buffeted by the prevailing socio-economic winds and bobbed about on the roulette wheel.
of chance” (xv). Both authors display an acute awareness of the often conflicting relationship between biology and culture, a concept that is reflected in their characters. Lingeman argues that Dreiser designed his novel with the belief that “the city is the social equivalent of Darwinian nature” (xiv). In the Darwinian perspective, it is those who possess the most advantageous traits that survive in their given environment. Although Carrie begins her journey in Chicago, a place Dreiser describes as designed to make “the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep,” she ultimately ends up in New York City, the place where Lily finds both her beginning and end (16). Thus, the two women occupy similar environments where social climbing and Veblen’s conspicuous consumption were paramount to the upper class.

Dreiser acknowledges the relationship between nature and culture within the text of his novel:

Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that is not yet wholly guided by reason...We see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free will, his free will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces...We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail. (74)
Dreiser recognizes the conflict between natural instinct and culturally constructed behaviors and how humans appear to be trapped somewhere in the middle of the two extremes so that both influence human behavior.

Lily and Carrie occupy similar positions when they are first introduced to the reader. Lily, as a financially unstable orphan, must rely on the handouts of others to maintain a comparable level of financial and social comfort. Carrie reveals herself to be completely vulnerable to the seduction of the city and glow of ornamentation. However, it does not take long for readers to discover that these two women are travelling down drastically different paths, yet always motivated by the need for wealth and social status. In many ways, Carrie Meeber’s perceptions of survival echo those of Lily Bart, both women believing that it is based on money and Carrie maintaining that “plenty of it would clear away all these troubles” (66). Carrie admits that “she could not hold the money in her hand without feeling some relief” (66). In Lily’s society, support went well beyond the basic necessities of survival and ventured into the realm of excess and luxury. Her refusal to marry Selden stems from her belief that she must achieve through marriage a certain level of wealth as well as the fact that “she had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called ‘decently dressed’” (26). While technically Selden would have been able to support her, Lily’s standard of living is beyond what Selden can offer. However, Selden is a comparable match to Lily’s natural
financial state and social class, despite her inability to accept this fact. Had Lily married Selden, she would likely have been able to live by standards that mimicked her previous social standing yet still been able to associate with her desired leisure class. Although both women find themselves in positions where they are practically penniless, they never completely lose sight of entering or reentering their desired social and financial worlds.

For both women, beauty is their most valuable trait, drawing the attention of wealthy men and making them eligible for high-class amenities from a more modest social position. The first impressions of both women highlight their natural beauty. The first images of Lily Bart portray her as a “highly specialized” creature that stands out amid “the throng of returning holiday makers, past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans” (6). Even Lawrence Selden, after comparing her to the surrounding women questions: “Was it possible that she belonged to the same race?” (6). In Dreiser’s novel, Carrie is given immediate attention by the finely dressed Drouet, smiling as he tells her of her resemblance to a popular actress (5). While Lily is finely dressed, Carrie still resembles a young country girl in “commonplace garb” (59). Although both women possess a natural beauty, Lily and Carrie understand the value of ornamentation to make themselves appear attractive. Physical beauty, both natural and artificial, is a vital aspect of self-preservation. In an environment where women are selected based on this
appearance, beauty and ornamentation increases the chances of selection by a financially and socially stable mate. Both Lily and Carrie are acutely aware of this factor and are often found to be obsessing over beauty and ornamentation. Carrie’s consumer desire, her desire for consumption, emerges strongly as she passes through the glittering displays of a department store:

She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, haircombs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. (21)

Carrie’s inherent need to ornament herself is indicative of her constant struggle to enter a higher social class. She views these accessories as a way to make herself more attractive, thereby increasing her overall beauty. Carrie is consistently fixated on dress and aesthetic supplementation as a means to survive under sexually selective pressures within her environment. Yet Carrie does not possess the financial means to obtain these items and is acutely aware that lacking proper ornamentation is a deficit.

Lily’s range of purchase remains equally limited throughout her social decline, finding herself frequently in debt to her dressmaker and jeweler. Like Carrie, she acknowledges the freedom she feels after receiving the first check from Gus Trenor: “Lily felt really virtuous as she dispensed the sum in
sops to her tradesman, and the fact that a fresh order accompanied each payment did not lessen her sense of disinterestedness” (68). It is the lure of the financial stability to make these purchases freely that leads both women to put themselves in vulnerable situations with financially stable men.

It would be fair to state that neither Lily nor Carrie would be satisfied with the average standard. Veblen explained this phenomenon by stating that “In any community where goods are held in severalty, in order to his own peace of mind, that an individual should possess as large a portion of goods as others with whom he is accustomed to class himself: and it is extremely gratifying to possess something more than others” (20). This gratification is indicative of the necessary “traits” both of the characters see as required for selective success within their respective worlds. Furthermore, the feeling obtained could be viewed through the biological lens as a positive feedback mechanism triggering the continuation of the exploitation of the useful traits being portrayed with regards to ornamentation.

Part II. Carrie Meeber’s Self-Preservation

In Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Carrie embraces the self-preserving instinct and puts her own survival ahead of others. At several points during the course of the novel, she abandons her current environment in favor of an environment that will provide her with a better opportunity to reach her
social and financial goals. Each time Carrie enters into this different environment, her instinct of self-preservation becomes stronger and her proximity to her desired level of survival increases. Self-preservation implies the ability to put one’s own needs ahead of the needs of others and be dependent upon oneself for survival instead of relying on the assistance of others.

When Carrie sets off on the train to Chicago as a “half-equipped little knight,” she reveals herself to be extremely vulnerable and perhaps even foolish, allowing herself to develop a relationship with a man she just met, and leaving him with her address (2). Carrie is immediately drawn to Drouet by his outward appearance and directs most of her attention to his attire. His fine apparel makes her “conscious of an inequality” between her and Drouet, suddenly feeling “shabby” (5). Veblen argued that “at no other point is the sense of shabbiness so keenly felt as it is if we fall short of the standard set by social usage in this matter of dress,” indicating the importance of meeting the social standards of one’s class (103). Drouet’s appearance and manner “built up for her a dim world of fortune,” the dimness being indicative of her current distance from this glowing and sparkling world (6). This dimness comes back to haunt Carrie as “She realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women” (22). Ironically it is the brightness of the theater lights that Carrie is drawn to, admitting her into the sparkling world of conspicuous consumption. It is the “shine and
rustle of new things which immediately laid hold of Carrie’s heart,” causing “a warm glow” to overtake her pale complexion (70). This initial exposure to wealth and fine things stimulates Carrie’s self-preservation and her drive to enter into the leisure class.

As Carrie settles in to her new home with her sister’s family, she second-guesses her invitation to have Drouet call on her at home, recognizing the environment of morality she now occupies. As Carrie becomes increasingly unsatisfied with her environment at her sister’s home, morality and self-preservation begin to conflict. Carrie’s self-preservation is directly linked with her desired standard of living. While at times she displays awareness of the importance of actual survival and the necessities of food and shelter, the lure of fine things is stronger than the emptiness of her stomach, and she admits that “She could possibly have conquered the fear of hunger and gone back; the thought of hard work and a narrow round of suffering would, under the last pressure of conscience, have yielded, but spoil her appearance?—be old-clothed and poor appearing?—never!” (99). Carrie’s financial handouts from Drouet cause her mild distress over the morality of the situation. Her “instinct of self-protection, strong in all such natures, was roused but feebly,” pinned against the potential of the “two soft, green handsome ten-dollar bills” placed in her hand (64, 61). Carrie is aware that the bills in her hand give her the ability to buy the clothes she needs to distinguish herself as one of the finely dressed women of the city. Carrie
believes that her appearance is weighed upon the obtainment of material objects, stating that “She would look fine too, if only she had some of these things” (67).

Moreover, the instinct of morality that Dreiser speaks of is overpowered by a separate instinct of self-protection and preservation that allows Carrie to take the money so that she can survive. Carrie recognizes that her desired lifestyle cannot exist in her sister’s home. The frugal hand of Hanson rules the household expenses, making any extra purchases seem frivolous. Even the purchase of an umbrella is deemed “foolish” by her sister who was ready to lend Carrie her old one (53). It is this realization that she can never reach her desired social sphere while maintaining the same environment that prompts Carrie to take the apartment offered by Drouet. Carrie’s hesitance at taking the apartment indicates the point where self-preservation and morality have reached their height of conflict, with the winning trait dictating the outcome of the novel. Self-preservation ultimately wins, and Carrie begins to see “a prettier Carrie than she had seen before” (91). As Carrie’s confidence about her self and situation increases, it fuels the self-preservation instinct, making her increasingly less altruistic. Carrie’s only concern throughout the novel appears to be the creation of a life for herself that is focused on the finer things. Carrie’s initial failure at providing for herself leads her to become dependent upon men to provide her upkeep until she learns to utilize her abilities and finally provide for herself.
Carrie views Hurstwood exactly as Dreiser describes him: “altogether a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class—the first grade below the luxuriously rich,” and “the picture of fastidious comfort” (44, 45). Hurstwood’s environment is a step higher than the environment that Carrie occupies with Drouet. In the nature of self-preservation, Carrie views Hurstwood as a way to increase her self-preservation by increasing her financial stability. This self-preserving instinct causes her to betray Drouet, the man who initially helped her increase that instinct by increasing her financial security. Therefore, Carrie’s altruistic behaviors have decreased further, leading her to think only of herself. If she does feel an obligation to Drouet, she ignores it through her flirting with Hurstwood.

The environment in New York City poses new challenges for the couple as Hurstwood struggles to rebuild his social sphere. As soon as Carrie realizes that Hurstwood is unable to maintain her standard of living, Carrie takes the self-preserving initiative to use her natural resources to obtain employment that will enable her to maintain her standards. As Carrie’s income increases, her altruism towards Hurstwood decreases as she puts more and more money aside to fulfill her consumer desires. When an opportunity arises to take a suite at a luxurious hotel for less money than she pays to rent the apartment with Hurstwood, Carrie leaves him in order to care for herself and her standards. Carrie realizes that Hurstwood is a parasite to her success, a danger to the security of her social sphere. By
abandoning him and focusing on her own survival, Carrie is able to successfully free herself from the limiting nature of her previous relationship.

Part III. Lily Bart’s Altruism

Lily’s pattern of self-preservation follows a different path than that of Carrie. Lily’s initial environment is a childhood that is filled with “grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense” (25). These dull and temporary intermissions were performed only in secret in order to maintain a façade of wealth and excess created by a “wonderful manager” (26). Mrs. Bart’s ability to mimic the lifestyle of the leisure class is what Veblen observes to be a “curious inversion,” where “there is no pretence of leisure on the part of the head of the household,” yet “the middle-class wife still carries on the business of vicarious leisure” (50). The Bart household existed on “a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need—the need of more money” (26). Mrs. Bart understood how to preserve the image of her and her family as being of a higher social class than they actually were. This attitude is evident in Lily as well, particularly when she suggests to her father that they have the florist send new flowers for the lunch table every day despite the exorbitant price. Lily is not concerned with the expense or the effect that such spending has on her father. She remembers him as someone
who “filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came
to wind the clocks” (25). Mr. Bart is only a source of money, a necessary
addition to the household to keep the fire of self-preservation sufficiently fed.

After the financial ruin of her family, Lily finds herself at the mercy of
generous family and friends who provide her with the means to survive on
her own. As her environment changes, her self-preservation waivers only
slightly thanks to the impact of Mrs. Bart on her daughter’s self-image,
insisting that her beauty was “the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus
around which their life was to be rebuilt” (29). Through this belief, Lily does
everything in her power to maintain her upkeep in order to secure a wealthy
husband. Out of all the women who classify as a “jeune fille a marier,” Lily is
among them while simultaneously remaining distinctly separated from them
(56). Lily is acutely aware that her lack of wealth is a severe handicap to her,
yet she maintains high standards for her match. While Lily’s dependence
upon others increases as a result of her own lack of resources, Lily is far from
altruistic. Even after being an extended guest at the Trenor residence, Lily is
perturbed at being summoned to help with “tiresome things” as reciprocation
for her host’s hospitality (33).

Lily’s decision to return to her aunt’s house for the holiday season is a
result of her realization that “people were tired of her” and that her financial
resources were lingering (79). In order to continue to preserve her reputation
and meager resources, Lily opts to take a break from high society to reduce
the risk of permanent damage. When approached by Mrs. Haffen with the incriminating letters between Bertha Dorset and Lawrence Selden, Lily becomes aware of their potential to help her seek revenge on Bertha, believing that “there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it” (82). Additionally, Lily’s rather blind acceptance of Gus Trenor’s financial investment services bestow upon her somewhat of a renewed sense of self-preservation in the sense that she is more financially stable. After her discovery of the fine print in her contract to Gus, Lily flees to the home of Gerty Farish, a place that Lily previously described as “horrid” with “no maid, and such queer things to eat” (8). However, at this point Lily’s level of self-preservation begins to fall, leading her to come to terms with the severity of her social and financial situation.

As Lily’s social and financial reputations become increasingly strained, her altruistic nature increases as well. Lily is not shy regarding the fact that she has botched multiple prospective marriages, admitting that she is “horribly poor” yet “very expensive” (10). Yet as she becomes desperate to secure her social and financial position, Lily begins to entertain the idea of reducing her standards of a match in return for the security of wealth and prestige. This conflict between altruism and self-preservation can also be seen in the relationship that Lily develops with Gerty, someone she snubbed when at her highest level of self-preservation. Gerty introduces Lily to
charity work and recalls that she “laughed and talked with them—not a bit as if she were being charitable,” indicating that Lily developed an altruistic relationship with the girls at the club, helping them as they helped her. Once in the boarding house, Lily is officially a member of the working class. Lily moves from using others in order to maintain her own self-preservation to forming a more altruistic relationship out of necessity.

Lily’s short time as a milliner and secretary to financially support herself differ from the efforts of Carrie in Dreiser’s novel. Carrie displays actual talent and desire to succeed as an actress while Lily works at positions that she finds humiliating and is criticized for her poor performance. There are obvious differences in the occupations of the two women that impact their success or failure. Lily’s position lacks the glamour and prestige of a career on the stage. Instead, she is at the service of others, providing services that offer no additional benefits aside from a meager salary.

Lily’s final decision to burn the incriminating letters is evidence of the triumph of altruism and failure of self-preservation. When Lily places them in the fire, she is at her lowest point and is well aware of the hopelessness of her situation and the fact that the letters could potentially save her. However, Lily knows that the letters will hurt Selden, someone who has remained by her side at the best and worst of her moments.

As she descends into the depths of poverty and dinginess, Lily’s altruism that she exhibited earlier on when volunteering at the girl’s club
returns to her. The brief visit with Nettie Struther seems to provide a temporary bout of relief to Lily. Nettie admits that when she was at her worst she would “remember that you were having a lovely time, anyhow, and that seemed to show there was a kind of justice somewhere” (243). Lily reciprocates the situation, telling Nettie: “It will be my turn to think of you as happy—and the world will seem a less unjust place to me too” (243). At a higher point in her life, Lily would likely have refused to visit Nettie’s home, seeing it as dingy and beneath her. Upon leaving Nettie’s tenement, Lily realizes “It was the first time she had ever come across the results of her spasmodic benevolence, and the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart” (246). The fellowship or altruistic nature that Lily discovers is the cause of her eventual demise due to lack of self-preservation, which is naturally selected against.

The outcomes of both Lily and Carrie are evident of the reciprocal relationship between nature and culture. Nature is what drives the self-preservation instinct; the raw and often selfish drive to take actions to ensure one’s own survival even at the expense of the survival of others. Culture dictates our morality, instilling the understanding of what is right and what is wrong. Instances occur where these two forces conflict, forcing us to follow one and abandon the other. When Lily makes the choice to burn the letters, she is abandoning her instinct of self-preservation, indicating that the cultural influence and altruistic trait of morality has overtaken her. Had Lily
opted to follow her self-preserving instinct and used the letters to reclaim her name and social position, she would have tarnished the reputation of her good friend, Lawrence Selden.

With both Lily and Carrie, the changes in environment are directly correlated with the changes in self-preservation and morality. As Carrie moves up the social ladder, her preservation instinct increases and her morality (altruism) decreased. Conversely, as Lily descends into poverty, her altruism increases as her preservation decreases. This supports the concept that self-preservation is naturally driven while altruism is culturally driven, echoing the debate between nature and culture as well as the ultimate governance of natural selection over the characters’ outcomes.

Nature typically favors individuals who are self-preserving and selects against those who put others first. This is the case with the two circumstances with the novels examined within this chapter. While this is maintained throughout most of the animal kingdom, the social nature of the primate family allows for more complex interactions including altruistic traits that do not necessarily immediately benefit the individual. This form of altruistic behavior will be examined in the following chapter.
CHAPTER IV

“FORGET THE BOOR!”: SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXTS OF NATURAL SELECTION IN WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS’S A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES AND UPTON SINCLAIR’S THE JUNGLE

Part I. Lindau’s Struggle

While several of William Dean Howells’s works have been examined in the context of evolutionary theory, A Hazard of New Fortunes has been largely ignored. Bert Bender’s 1996 publication The Descent of Love devotes a significant portion to Howells’s Their Wedding Journey and A Modern Instance. As Bender’s focus was on the courtship novels and utilizing sexual selection to explain human behaviors, it is understandable why A Hazard of New Fortunes was only mentioned in passing. While Their Wedding Journey focuses on the courtship and marriage of Basil and Isabel March, A Hazard of New Fortunes greets the couple at a later point in their life when the novelty of new love has faded. Bender discusses Howells’s complicated relationship with Darwin’s work and how as the new editor of the Atlantic, Howells was in a position where he needed to please both the old and new generations of
readers and supporters of the publication, some of whom were not necessarily open to Darwin’s findings (36). Bender notes that Howells failed to mention Darwin’s work in his fiction until *A Modern Instance*, over ten years after *The Descent of Man* emerged onto the scene in 1871 (37). For this reason, it would be impossible to argue that Howells was unaware of Darwin’s work when he published *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in 1890.

A far cry from the lavish social scene of *The House of Mirth*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* goes to the business class of New York, where the necessity of self-preservation is maintained, but the traits governing its success differ. In this section I will argue that it is the group dynamics, competitive struggle and kin selective traits which produce success for the individuals presented. Kin selection is defined as “A phenomenon of inclusive fitness, used to explain altruistic behavior between related individuals” (Campbell and Reese). While Lindau’s actions mimic this type of selection, due to his internal definitions of the surrounding population as family, it is more appropriately defined as reciprocal altruism which will be discussed within this chapter. Darwin’s theory of natural selection encompasses multiple aspects of group populations that stem beyond the process of sexual selection. In this case, the obvious instances of sexual selection are completely absent from the struggle for survival, yet Darwin would argue that the “most important function, the reproduction of the species” is always the primary goal of any species, regardless of its blatant appearance (“Indelible” 617). In
order for natural selection to take place, a variation within species must be present that identifies a sub-group among the species as somehow ill equipped for survival. Within the context of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the lower-class carries this unfortunate distinction. While critics such as Amy Kaplan have criticized Howells for his “lack of lower-class characters” within his novel, the absence of these characters from the main action of the plot does not indicate their lack of importance (71). If one were to examine the city as a whole, Kaplan’s observation would be incorrect: Basil and Isabel catch glimpses of these others during their coupé ride, leading them to conclude that there is “enough misery” in New York (61). However, within the limited environment and social sphere of the main characters, the poor are the minority, represented solely by the disabled war veteran Berthold Lindau.

Unlike Lily Bart who desired to join a class higher than her own, Lindau seeks to dissolve the class system entirely, embracing an anti-capitalist motto while accepting the unity of socialism. Capitalism, as a mechanism to maintain a division in wealth, can be compared to the process of natural selection where this division is necessary for the strongest group or individuals to survive and propagate the species. In contrast, Lindau’s fight for socialism would create an environment where a more equal opportunity for survival would exist that would not favor those of greater wealth and prestige. Therefore, Lindau is a threat to the environment that society has
created. Despite his struggle to rise against the dominant group, his ideals and inherent beliefs cause him to be selected against.

The novel opens with Basil and Isabel’s seemingly impossible task of finding an appropriate environment, or flat, to reestablish themselves in New York. Their apprehension is evident as Basil remarks “But here we are, looking for shelter, and a little anxious about the disposition of the natives” (43). To the Boston couple, New York is an entirely new jungle-like environment. The search for an apartment proves to be slow and cautious process, much like exploring new territory. However, the search itself has been criticized for its “excessive detail and its aimlessness, a point underscored by the Boston couple’s decision to take one of the first flats they see” (Kaplan 71). While the apartment scene does seem to be never-ending at times, it is far from pointless and unnecessary. The search becomes a mechanism for differentiating between the variations within the population residing in New York. During this search, the poor are viewed as animalistic, reacting to their basic instincts yet numb to other stimuli. Isabel’s horror at witnessing a man “pick up a dirty bit of cracker from the pavement and cram it into his mouth” shows how far she is from having to resort to her basic instinct for survival (70). Yet Isabel remarks: “I don’t believe there’s any real suffering—not real suffering—among those people; that is, it would be suffering from our point of view, but they’ve been used to it all their lives, and they don’t feel their discomfort so much” (69). Isabel views her class of
people as being distinctly separate from “those people,” going so far as to assume that they are to a degree incapable of emotion and feeling. “Those people,” along with Lindau, represent the weaker population of the species that harsh conditions threaten to extinct, yet must continue to exist, as Colonel Woodburn argues, for the benefit of the rich (344). Even Basil, who demonstrates sensitivity to his old friend Lindau’s poverty, subtly views the poor as inferior, weak, and of a different species.

On his way to visit his friend, Basil observes the other riders on the elevated, those “poor animals” that he understood to be “worked and fed and housed like beasts” (182). The majority of these people are of foreign birth, an additional defining factor to segregate them from the middle and upper classes. Out of their “natural” environment of their native countries, these people face even greater challenges for survival. German-born Lindau falls into this category. Basil takes note of the changing environment of the Bowery, noting the misery of its inhabitants while admitting that “It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this; what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were” (183). He acknowledges that among the “certain audacities of the prevailing hideousness that always amused him” lingered the “fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay of the weaker” (183, 184). Basil demonstrates an acute awareness of the
suffering and misery of the poor, yet remains selectively distant from it, turning his attention instead to “the neglected opportunities of painters in that locality” (184). As a business man and someone who is adjusting to life in the city, Basil lacks an understanding of the poor despite his awareness of their existence.

When Basil approaches Lindau’s home, he finds himself faced with “abounding evidences of misery” and refuses to believe that his friend “lived there because he was too poor to live elsewhere” (186). Basil’s fears are put to rest when Lindau explains that he “tidtn’t gome here begause I was too boor to life anywhere else” (190). However, Lindau continues his defense by explaining to Basil: “Well, you zee, I foundt I was begoming a lidtle too moch of an aristograt. I hadt a room oap in Creenvidge Willage, among dose pig pugs over on the west side, and I foundt’—Lindau’s voice lost its jesting quality, and his face darkened—‘that I was beginning to forget the boor!’” (190). Lindau indicates that he feels a distinct separation from the aristocrats and does not identify himself as being one of them. He stresses this further in his later defenses of socialism and condemnation of the capitalist mentality. As a result of this, Lindau views himself as benefiting from distancing himself from the aristocracy and immersing himself in the like-minded company of the poor.

Lindau describes the game he plays with the children of the tenement that involves him leaving scraps of food on his table for them to come in and
steal. In return, Lindau tells Basil that “I whistle, and one of those lidtle fellowss comess. We haf to dake gare of one another in a blace like this. Idt iss nodt like the worldt” (192). Lindau’s disability leaves him needing some assistance with basic tasks such as dressing himself. As such, he forms a symbiotic relationship with the children of the tenement so that they both benefit from the interaction. This concept of caring for those in the same society can be explained by Darwin’s theory that “those animals which were benefited by living in close association, the individuals which took the greatest pleasure in society would best escape various dangers, whilst those that cared least for their comrades, and lived solitary, would perish in greater numbers” (687). Lindau’s humanity dictates that he needs to be in a social environment for survival, yet society and the harsh competitive environment in which he resides, determines where he can go.

The other inhabitants of the tenement serve as a family for Lindau since he is without an actual family. Lindau even goes so far as to refer to them as “my brothers—the beccars and the theifs!” (190). Darwin found that “Every one will admit that man is a social being. We see this in his dislike of solitude, and in his wish for society beyond that of his own family” (“Indelible” 689). Even Basil comments that Lindau allowing the children to steal from his table is “a sociable existence” (190). Lindau’s relationship with the children and the sharing of his food is a benefit to his existence. Biologically, this type of relationship is referred to as reciprocal altruism, and
is defined as: “Altruistic behavior between unrelated individuals, whereby
the current altruistic individual benefits in the future when the current
beneficiary reciprocates” (Campbell and Reese). This, in contrast with the
conclusions drawn from *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*, that altruism
was a harmful characteristic to the protagonists, shows the adaptability of
using natural selection as an analytical tool and how it can adapt itself to
explain the advantages or disadvantages that occur from the same trait
under diverse environmental pressures.

Lindau’s socialist views make him an outsider among the rest of the
*Every Other Week* members, most of whom harbor capitalist values. The
Colonel states his beliefs as being that “The working class shall be
responsible to the leisure class for the support of its dignity in peace, and
shall be subject to its command in war. The rich shall warrant the poor
against planless production and the ruin that now follows, against danger
from without and famine from within” (344). Colonel Woodburn articulates
the desire of those in the leisure class to maintain the class divisions that are
established. He views the working class as the less fit variation of species,
requiring the guidance of the leisure class to exist. To him the poor are
expendable, required to give their lives so that those more capable
individuals, or the fittest, can survive and continue the stronger variation of
species. Woodburn is demonstrating what Wilson describes as “soft-core
altruism,” a concept based on Darwin’s findings and tailored to sociobiology.
Wilson explains it as being “entirely selfish,” where the “altruist’ expects reciprocation from society for himself or his closest relatives” (155-56). As Wilson’s altruist, Woodburn views the gift of meager protection of the poor as an exchange for their complete self-sacrifice.

In contrast, Lindau argues “There shall be no rich and no boor; and there shall not be war any more, for what bower wouldt dare to addack a people bound togeder in a broderhood like that?” (344). As evident from his desire to live amongst his equals, Lindau is a strong believer in collective unity among all men to create an equal quality of life for all along with an equal chance at survival. To Woodburn, utilizing the poor for the gain of the rich is an acceptable sacrifice that leaves the leisure class untouched. However, to Lindau and the less fit, this mentality poses a threat to their existence. In reference to the lower animals, which, in this case, could be interpreted as the perceived weaker class, Darwin found:

It seems much more appropriate to speak of their social instincts, as having been developed for the general good rather than for the general happiness of the species. The term, general good, may be defined as the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected. (“Indelible” 698)

This general good is aligned with the success of a species in reference to both sexual and natural selection. Lindau’s advocacy for socialism would give the poor an equal advantage in survival in that it would redistribute the wealth.
In order for the rest of the *Every Other Week* group to continue with their efforts under their belief system, Lindau must be removed. He is viewed as a threat to the survival of their business, the profits and success of which directly affect the quality of life of the workers. The actions Dryfoos decides to take against Lindau are summed up and analyzed with the basic fundamentals of natural selection. Dryfoos with his inherited “fitness” and wealth displays his prowess over the inferior and weaker Lindau by firing him from the newspaper and taking away his resources in order to better proliferate his own existence without the distraction or competition of Lindau’s views. This also follows one of nature’s greatest laws that all reactions and processes within the natural world always take the path of least resistance. By removing Lindau from his company he is removing a resistance and making his survival more effortless. It is Lindau’s persistent individuality which is selected against within his environment. This inevitably leads to his demise under the selective pressures governing his existence and success.

Part II: The Human Animal

Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* depicts a struggle for survival amid the most deplorable and hopeless conditions and situations, pairing man against man where the strongest have a chance at continued existence and the weak
are practically guaranteed death. Darwin concluded “as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life” (“Indelible” 380). The struggle that Darwin describes is a result of competition for the resources that are vital to survival. In The Jungle, the primary source of competition is the rivalry for employment, a fierce battle to secure a position in one of the usually dangerous factories. Without such employment, individuals and families face the likely prospect of starvation, life on the streets, and eventual death.

Sinclair describes the first impressions that Jurgis and his family had when visiting the meatpacking factory:

It was all so very businesslike that one watched it fascinated. It was pork-making by machinery, pork-making by applied mathematics. And yet somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs; they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests—and so perfectly within their rights! They had done nothing to deserve it, and it was adding insult to injury, as the thing was done here, swinging them up in this cold-blooded, impersonal way, without a pretence at apology, without the homage of a tear. Now and then a visitor wept, to be sure; but this slaughtering machine ran on, visitors or no visitors. It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory. (45)

Sinclair’s description of the inner workings of the meatpacking factory is undeniably parallel to the inhumane treatment of the Chicago lower class in the early 1900s. Most of this lower class was made up of first generation
immigrants, their pockets void of money but overflowing with hope, lured to America with the promise of a better life than the one they left behind. Just as the hogs came “so very trustingly” into the factory, these immigrants arrived naïve to the fact that they were merely parts of the machine, the slaughtering machine, which continued to destroy them.

As Philpott notes, “By 1900 the foreign-born would constitute a population larger than the whole of Chicago had been in 1882. And the poverty of masses of these people would consign them to the meanest streets of the city” (16). The vast numbers of these individuals created an environment of extreme competition for jobs and resources. Just as the hogs were crammed into crates with barely room to move, immigrant workers were crammed into living conditions unfit even for animals. Philpott states that “Like other cities of the time, Chicago sweated their labor, stacked them in shambling tenements, and seemed to mock the promise that had lured them to urban America” (xix).

Darwin states, “the struggle will almost invariably be most severe between the individuals of the same species, for they frequent the same districts, require the same food, and are exposed to the same dangers” (386). For Sinclair, these “same districts” are the filthy and overcrowded tenements of the back of the yards, where humans are clustered together in the same manner as the cattle awaiting slaughter. The struggle continues in the packing yards where starving workers wait for hours at the doors of the
factory, desperate to be given any type of work: “All day long the gates of the packing houses were besieged by starving and penniless men: they came, literally, by the thousands every single morning, fighting with each other for a chance for life” (97). The strongest looking men were selected for jobs and therefore had an undeniable advantage over the other job-seekers within this environment. This allowed for increased income and therefore increased the chance for survival. Jurgis was confident in his ability to rapidly secure a job based on his size and physical health, questioning: “Do you want me to believe that with these arms’—and he would clench his fists and hold them up in the air, so that you might see the rolling muscles—‘that with these arms people will ever let me starve?’” (28). While the crowd of other men had been standing in front of the factory for months, Jurgis is there for less than half an hour when “the bosses noticed his form towering above the rest” and chose him for work over the smaller and weaker men (39). Jurgis’s physical appearance of strength serves as an advantageous trait for survival within his species, yet the destructive labor of the factories have a devastating effect on his health until he becomes weak, standing as just another man in the crowd of those who are “simply the worn-out parts of the great merciless packing machine” (153).

While physical strength and a healthy appearance may be advantageous traits in securing a job, (and I use the term securing loosely, since there was nothing secure about any job), a job alone did not guarantee
survival. Sinclair acknowledges the temporary nature of employment, stating “Sooner or later came the day when the unfit one did not report for work; and then, with no time lost in waiting, and no inquiries or regrets, there was a chance for a new hand” (97). The environment that the workers occupied required wealth beyond what was obtainable in order to survive. They are attempting to exist in a situation that has been designed against them.

Besides Jurgis, Marija is the only other character to demonstrate superior physical strength as an advantageous trait. Determined to secure employment, Marija set out with “her two brawny arms and the word ‘job,’” marching from factory to factory until her “muscles of a dray horse” caught the attention of a forelady in a canning factory (54). The other members of the family were deemed unfit for employment, including Dede Antanas, whose efforts to work cost him his life. Jurgis is told that “it was a waste of time to seek employment for the old man in Packingtown,” and that “the packers did not even keep the men who had grown old in their own service—to say nothing of taking on new ones” (55). In this environment, Dede Antanas is essentially unfit for survival, and without the aid of his family would likely have perished. Even though he is eventually able to find a job, his previous health ailments and physical weakness make him unable to survive. Ona’s frailty is emphasized early on in the novel as one who is “so young—not quite sixteen—and small for her age, a mere child” (6). Jurgis initially does not want his new wife to have to work outside of the home.
However, the family later determines that every able individual must work and contribute to the household expenses.

Within Sinclair’s work, the struggle for survival is constant. Finding a job was only a temporary solution, providing meager financial support until that job was taken away for whatever reason. Even in a factory full of strong men, there were always stronger ones waiting to take the positions of those who had been worn down by their work. The process of “speeding them up and grinding them to pieces and sending for new ones” was a recurrent event that allowed for the factories to profit off of the energy and enthusiasm of the new workers before they became weary (83). Often workers would be replaced by these stronger looking men even if they had been doing their job sufficiently. Additionally, factories would be shut down without advance notice, leaving workers without a job and forcing them back into the cruel human market. Sinclair’s repeated references to his characters’ physical strengths and weaknesses are evident of their importance in survival. This is not only because of the nature of the labor, but also because of the dangerous living conditions. However, as Sinclair demonstrates through the repetition of financial strain, physical strength alone does not guarantee survival. Biologically speaking, Jurgis’s physical strength should be sufficient to guarantee his survival. Culturally speaking, strength is not a prerequisite for entrance into the leisure class.
Sinclair acknowledges that his characters strain themselves to survive, stating that “Life was a struggle for existence, and the strong overcame the weak, and in turn were overcome by the strongest. Those who lost in the struggle were generally exterminated; but now and then they had been known to save themselves by combination—which was a new and higher kind of strength” (398). While this combination that Sinclair describes may have been advantageous to the weaker members, it was actually harmful to those with the strength to contribute to the group. Jurgis and Marija both worked long hours only to have to share their resources with the noncontributing members of the family. Once liberated from the burden of caring for a family, Jurgis is able to use his resources for his own survival.

Jurgis considers his relationship with his dependents, concluding:

An unmarried man could save, if he did not drink, and if he was absolutely selfish—that is, if he paid no heed to the demands of his old parents, or of his little brothers and sisters, or of any other relatives he might have as well as of the members of his union, and his chums, and the people who might be starving to death next door. (154)

When Elzbieta’s crippled child dies, most of the family members view it as a relief with one less mouth to feed since he wouldn’t have survived anyways and made no contribution to the support of the family:
At any rate he was wretchedly sick and undersized; he had the rickets, and though he was over three years old, he was no bigger than an ordinary child of one. All day long he would crawl around the floor in a filthy little dress, whining and fretting; because the floor was full of draughts he was always catching cold, and snuffling because his nose ran. This made him a nuisance, and a source of endless trouble in the family. (155)

As saddened as Jurgis is by the death of his wife and own two children, he is aware that “This was no world for women and children, and the sooner they got out of it the better for them” (260).

While physical strength is an initial advantageous trait, it is not powerful enough in this environment to guarantee survival to those who possess it. A strong person is not guaranteed work, and even those who have a job may be turned out at any point. Generally speaking, those who are physically stronger have a better chance at survival over those who are weaker based on the harsh living and working conditions of the city, and are therefore more likely to survive and be eligible for employment. This is a clear representation of natural selection at work.
Throughout this thesis, it has been clearly shown that natural selection can be utilized in order to analyze text and predict or explain character outcomes. Furthermore, its ability to entail other types of analysis makes it a universally applicable and useful mechanism. Because the laws of natural selection are governed by the multiple working parts and processes present within any given environment, the implications of its use, as shown can be applied to literary texts. It should also be noted that by expanding the defining characteristics of natural selection to include governance over acquired traits based on the defined “birth” of a character as their “creation on the page” drastically increases the reach and benefit of this analytic tool.

Within *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie* the traits of altruistic and self-preservative nature were examined and explained under the governing laws of natural selection to show reason for Lily’s downfall through altruism and Carrie’s success through self-preservation. While the novel is generally criticized for the success of Carrie as an immoral character, Darwinian analysis can portray this success without the obvious moral faults the character displays hindering the conclusion of her triumph as incorrect.
Within the natural confines of the environment, these traits of self-preservation plainly define Carrie’s path to survival and in contrast define why Lily’s faced such a dismal conclusion.

_A Hazard of New Fortunes_ was analyzed from the perspective of Lindau, whose altruistic trait was selected against and his only means of obtaining resources for survival taken away. This analysis also showed Lindau’s use of reciprocal altruism as a beneficial trait within an environment that favored such behavior. Lindau’s competing ideals and actions to the environment around him also defined his eventual fate under the laws of selection. This is evidence of the true pliability of this evolutionary approach and its ability to explain different outcomes when similar circumstances are present. Society and culture create the environment in which the processes of natural selection continue to select for or against certain traits, regardless if they are socialized, adopted, learned, or inherited.

Upton Sinclair’s _The Jungle_ was also shown to exist well within the confines of evolutionary analytical theory. The presence of strength in a character is shown to be necessary for survival but not the only thing necessary for successful preservation of the individual. Furthermore, the harsh living and working conditions portray an environment in which selection can occur more dramatically due to the extreme competition for limited resources.
The division between science and the humanities is not the great cavernous divide that many perceive it to be. Biology, the study of life, and the humanities, comprised of various disciplines studying human beings and their culture, may have varying approaches to the study of their fields, yet their subject matter is undeniably connected. Human beings are comprised of a unique combination of natural, inherited instincts and learned behaviors that are shaped and altered by the culture and society in which they exist. This alteration as has been shown here is controlled and portrayed through means of Darwinian Selection. To ignore these correlations would be to ignore the humanity that is literature and the cultural keystone that it provides for our species as a whole.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


