

The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 116.

¹⁹Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 31.

²⁰María Celeste Arrarás, *Selena's Secret* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²¹See Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (San Francisco: Children's Books, 1990), 31-32.

²²This notion has a relationship to the culturally specific idea of "good people," or *gente decente*. For an historic look at how Mexican American women have negotiated this contradictory socio-cultural phenomenon, see Leticia M. Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente: A Borderlands Response to the Rhetoric of Dominance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 10, 88-89. Garza-Falcón's analysis of Jovita González's efforts to negotiate (crossover to) the predominately white male world of academia and continue to be loyal to her home culture is testimony to the endurance of restrictive social codes Chicanas confront from within and outside Mexican culture.

²³*Selena Remembered*, commemorative film, produced by EMI Latin (1996).

²⁴José Limón, "Selena, Sexuality, Performance, and the Problematic of Hegemony," in *Reflexiones 1997: New Directions in Mexican American Studies*, ed. Neil Foley (Austin: CMAS Books, 1998), 14.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶Fregoso quoted in Carmen Huaco-Nuzum, "(Re)Constructing Chicana, Mestiza Representation: Frances Salomé España's *Spitfire* (1991)," in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 260.

A Taste of the Best: Social Habits in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*

Sara Martin

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Sister Carrie, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Rise of David Levinsky* indirectly document the opening of new public urban spaces in America and the development of new social habits associated with them in the decades between 1890 and 1920. Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Abraham Cahan coincide in using as background for key scenes in their novels one of these new spaces, the luxury restaurant. In this environment the authors' main characters come to terms with their fate and social status as restaurant scenes mark turning points in the rise and fall of their lives. Thus, while a dinner at Sherry's first teaches Dreiser's heroine, Carrie Meeber, to hunger for the power of the wealthy patrons, a visit to the same place shows Wharton's Lily Bart the true dimensions of her downfall. Cahan's David Levinsky chooses the dining room of the Waldorf-Astoria to celebrate in style the twenty-fifth anniversary of his landing day in the United States and his subsequent business success. His choice is, significantly, the very same hotel where we last see Carrie Meeber, remade into the successful vaudeville actress Carrie Madenda.

Although these writers focus only incidentally on the social function of the luxury restaurant, an examination of restaurant scenes contributes to a portrait of the historic America looming behind the whole legacy of the realist novel. What one novel alone cannot express about American reality, many can and do. Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton thoroughly understood the social significance of the new restaurants and hotels and were among the first writers to exploit the rich potential of these establishments for fiction. Luxury restaurants furnished perfect settings for dramatic scenes depicting

the vices and virtues of American social mobility. In this new meeting ground traditionally rich and newly rich patrons could display their wealth in apparent freedom. The extent to which this freedom exists in reality is one of the topics these novels address. Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton were among the first writers to portray the effects on the individual of the transition from capitalism to consumerism. They similarly compared the mastery of table manners with the mastery of an exclusive social code and also of the rising consumerist ethos. Their restaurant scenes invite the reader to consider how some social habits originated and why they still survive today.

As the novels of Jane Austen show, balls and costly dinners in private homes were the types of social gatherings traditionally preferred by the upper classes in early nineteenth-century Britain. In the United States, the wealthy followed a similar pattern. The French, however, introduced important changes in social habits that would eventually reach the United States. According to Bill Brysson, the French word *restaurant* entered American English in 1827.¹ Eighteenth-century France saw the opening of the first restaurants and also their transformation from places where, simply, one's forces could be restored (hence the word *restaurant*) into elite spaces run by renowned chefs. These places saw their first period of splendor in the early nineteenth century under Napoleon. Travel and the vogue for tourism brought important changes to the United States beginning in the 1830s. Rich Americans who missed the luxury hotels and restaurants enjoyed during their travels in Europe were the first patrons of similar new American establishments. Wealthy cravings for the pleasures of European restaurants also meant business opportunities for great chefs employed until then as servants in private homes. Once these chefs fled the confining margins of their employers' homes to set up their own business places, the golden era of private dinners was over, and a whole way of socializing died. Luxury restaurants started the vogue for flamboyant entertainment of one's acquaintances in a public place, reserving the home for family occasions. This process was well under way during the period depicted by Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton, concluding just after World War I.²

The luxury restaurant also assumed the function of educating American palates, otherwise accustomed to a rather limited diet. Daniel J. Boorstin explains that until the Civil War, "a varied, well-flavored diet was reserved for those who could afford an expensive meal in one of the few new elegant restaurants in the largest sea-

board cities."³ Among these he mentions possibly the most famous establishment of all, Delmonico's. This restaurant opened in 1832 in New York thanks to nineteen-year-old Lorenzo Delmonico, an immigrant from the Italian-speaking Ticino in Switzerland. Giovanni and Pietro Delmonico, Lorenzo's elder brothers, had opened a coffee and pastry shop in New York's Battery district in the 1820s and invited Lorenzo to join them, beginning his American adventure. Boorstin points out that rather than being a good cook, Delmonico was a great manager who imported both recipes and chefs from Europe and also taught Americans to appreciate delicacies in their own backyard. "Few did more than Delmonico to educate the nation's palate," Boorstin adds. "Before his death in 1881 Delmonico's restaurants had set a standard for New York gourmets which by the mid-twentieth century made that city, next to Paris, the restaurant capital of the world."⁴ Brysson comments that "inspired by Delmonico's example, restaurants sprouted all over. By the 1870s New York City alone had over five thousand restaurants, many of them, like La Maison Dorée, Louis Sherry's, and Lüchows, of a standard comparable to the finest restaurants of Europe."⁵

Why were restaurants necessary at all? Amy Kaplan explains that when New York became the financial heart of America at the end of the nineteenth century, the old oligarchy lost "the authority to control the admission to an elite coterie."⁶ New luxury dining rooms also limited the appeal of private dinners which, as Wai-Chee Dimock argues, were worth "paying for" only in so far that they guaranteed access to an elite. Dimock refers to the case of Jewish financier Rosedale in *The House of Mirth*, who claims satisfaction with the tacit deal he strikes with his society hosts because, as a Jew, he knows that he must "buy" their invitation to enter the world of the very rich.⁷ This he does with presents and well-placed loans. In contrast, David Levinsky, another wealthy Jew, belongs to a world in which the power of those salons can be safely ignored, unless, of course, one plans to marry into New York's elite circles, as Rosedale does. For Levinsky, newly rich, what is relevant is having access to the appropriate public space (i.e. luxury restaurant) in order to display one's wealth for others like him to see. The privacy of the exclusive social gatherings with which this elite had consolidated its status, as a group with a common interest, was thus replaced by "extravagant public spectacles" in which old and new money mingled and competed for power and public prominence.⁸ The newly rich resisted formal etiquette and preferred instead to

display their wealth with an almost theatrical sense of public performance, far from the stifling decorum of the private homes.

The red velvet rope, Tom Quirk and Gary Scharnhorst report, first appeared in the 1890s used by an inspired maître d' at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago. Desperate to find a way to attract the hotel's clients into its empty dining room, the maître d' hit on the idea of exclusivity. "The best way to bring people in, he discovered, is to pretend to keep them out," Quirk and Scharnhorst observe, adding that "the night the red velvet rope was invented, people lined up to get into the hotel dining room."⁹ The red velvet rope still works today, appealing to a basic human instinct for marking differences. How it works for each period shows how social habits evolve. Paul Fussell argues in his witty *Caste Marks: Style & Status in the United States* that eating out is today a "fixation with both middles and proles, since it gives you a chance to play King and Queen for a day, issuing orders, being waited on, affecting to be somebody."¹⁰ He identifies today's luxury restaurants with middle-class patrons, who seek elegance believing this is what their betters also seek. Ironically, according to Fussell, the upper classes have returned to the privacy of their homes rather than endure the company of middle-class patrons in elegant restaurants.

Advertising campaigns use the vague concept of elegance to entice prospective patrons to visit new restaurants. But today all kinds of restaurants exist providing satisfaction to all kinds of customers, not just expensive restaurants segregating the rich from the poor. Cliff Stafford's fascinating *The Best in Restaurant Corporate Identity*, which documents restaurants of many different ranges, proves that the restaurant, from Maxim's to McDonald's, remains an essential part of consumer culture and one of the key spaces where consumer culture is enacted.¹¹ Luxury restaurants participate in the construction of consumerism's success, which is based on the tension between the availability of all consumer goods and an individual consumer's desire to distinguish him or herself from other consumers. The luxury restaurant exists today as a paradox, an elitist place for the few but also an accessible space where the less fortunate may indulge their fantasies now and then. The contemporary luxury restaurant cannot survive only on the money of a limited set of clients. It needs those clients, but it also needs new faces to keep the business afloat without degrading it to the level of less exclusive restaurants. Hence, this establishment must offer the general public a promise of accessibility: The very poor are excluded, but the middle class, even the lower middle class, can afford a very

expensive meal if only rarely. For this is the secret of an upscale restaurant's success: it is a public space that offers an illusion of privacy, but it is also a space in which less well-to-do customers enjoy the illusion of sharing the lifestyle of the very rich without actually ever meeting them.

This was not the case in the period when Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton wrote. Then the consumer's dream had barely begun, and the luxury restaurant remained strictly off-limits for most. But in the new palatial hotels and restaurants two simultaneous phenomena could be observed—the expansion of the new competitive elite and the consolidation of these establishments as part of the luxury promised to the masses by falsely utopian consumer culture. The luxury restaurant appeared initially as an extension of the upper-class home, an exclusive meeting place, but it became, in the course of time, an establishment that partly undermines the very idea of exclusiveness. Guardianship of the exclusive circle formed by the great houses was traditionally the responsibility of the society hostess, but in restaurants the maître d', as a delegate of the owner, performs this service. The luxury restaurant is, after all, nothing but a business run for profit like all other businesses, and it needs to fill its tables with satisfied customers—food being just one ingredient in the menu of pleasures offered by these establishments. The maître d' must strike a delicate balance between the needs of upper-class clients for privacy and exclusiveness and the needs of newly rich clients for publicity and admission to the upper circle of society.

Wharton, Dreiser, and Cahan indirectly document the replacement of early capitalist elitism by later capitalist consumerism in their respective novels. In Lily Bart's world, the luxury restaurant, viewed by its upper-class clients as an annex to their own world, exists simultaneously as a showroom where they are eagerly watched by the "others," the masses. Ordinary people might observe the wealthy, if by no other means, through the presence of the press. Wharton's elites simply ignore the less well-to-do. New customers include Carrie Meeber and David Levinsky, for whom dining out in a luxury restaurant is a new experience that sets them on the path of consumerism. They do not belong to Lily's elitist circle, which they watch as spectacle from a certain distance, but to the world of business—show business in Meeber's case, the clothing business in Levinsky's—which Lily's circle pretends to loathe but actually depends on.

As noted above, the luxury restaurant occupies a central position within consumer society as a place where business transactions take place and also where business success is celebrated. The main difference between Lily, on the one hand, and Carrie and David on the other, is that while Lily is expelled from this artificial paradise because she cannot accept the commodification of individuals, Carrie and David are welcome into it because they understand the process well. As a lady of leisure, Lily is deprived of the means to sell her labor and enter the consumer's marketplace by the ideology of her own class. As an impoverished upper-class woman, her tragedy is that she cannot work under penalty of losing her respectability, and so, she cannot earn the money to keep her in the luxuries she adores. Work, as the novel later shows, signifies a nightmarish world to Lily, ironically, the same world produces Carrie Meeber. Carrie and David, newcomers to the city and unencumbered by social conventions, triumph where Lily fails because they understand better the new consumer ethos and the benefits they can reap from using themselves for business ends. Lily's refusal to exploit herself by entering a mercenary marriage and her supposedly heroic death seem oddly quixotic in the pragmatic world Carrie and Levinsky inhabit.

David Levinsky, Carrie Meeber, and Lily Bart could have appeared together in a novel as customers of the same restaurant in the same time and place, New York in the 1890s. Nineteen-year-old Carrie arrives in New York in 1890 and only two years later enjoys a superb dinner hosted at Sherry's by the well-to-do Vances. Her story ends in 1896, when she is an independent twenty-five-year-old woman. Cahan also placed the bulk of his novel in New York, between 1885 and 1910. Levinsky dates his arrival in New York in 1885, and the start of his business activities in 1889. A year later he launches himself into the world of business with a scene in which he invites a prospective buyer to lunch in an expensive restaurant. Internal evidence offers fewer clues in *The House of Mirth*. When the story begins Lily is twenty-nine, and it ends with her death approximately two years later, in the early 1900s. Their internal chronology corroborates the fact that the worlds of these three novels are compatible with each other; they converge to form a comprehensive, arguably hypertextual, image of New York in the years between 1885 and 1905.

Early in *Sister Carrie*, in chapter 6, the showy Charles Drouet invites Carrie Meeber for lunch at the old Windsor dining room, a "large, comfortable place, with an excellent cuisine and substantial

service."¹² Drouet's invitation is part of his plan to seduce Carrie. Indeed, this seduction scene may have pioneered others of the type which are now commonplace. Since he knows that his worldly-wise manners will give him an advantage in a fashionable place, Drouet takes her, for the first time in her life, to an expensive restaurant. Notably, both Carrie and Levinsky are invited to expensive restaurants to be seduced, literally in her case, metaphorically in his where the seduction implies business. As shown later, the word invitation has a more dangerous edge in Lily's case. In the restaurant, Drouet acts as the "master of ceremonies" for Carrie, commanding the black waiter at will and ordering the right food and wine with dexterity. Carrie, then a badly dressed, poor working girl, blushes at the high prices of the dishes she fancies but approves Drouet's choice of a table by the window, which allows him "to see and to be seen as he dined" (SC, 58). She enjoys this new experience despite the fact that she cannot help noticing, in contrast to the other diners, the grim reality of her poverty. "That little soldier of fortune," Dreiser wrote, "took her good turn in an easy way. She felt a little out of place, but the great room soothed her and the view of the well-dressed throng outside seemed a splendid thing. Ah, what it was not to have money. What a thing it was to be able to come in here and dine" (SC, 60). In her unembarrassed behavior, Carrie shows not so much her ignorance but her (candid?) belief in her potential as a consumer. As George Cotkin noted, "Carrie is a young woman swept along by the power of objects and the insatiable hunger of desire. In making transitions from country to city and from a stable self to an actress who occupies different selves, Carrie becomes the modern woman, defining herself by the objects she can obtain."¹³ Expensive meals serve as one of the consumer treats that lure her towards the top.

David Levinsky's first visit to a luxury restaurant is described by the author as a first "baptism of dismay."¹⁴ As a budding businessman, Levinsky feels for the first time the enjoyment of buying his way into an expensive restaurant, and he even allows himself the pleasure of inviting another businessman, Charles M. Eaton, a "full-blooded Anglo-Saxon of New England origin" (DL, 259). As an immigrant, David lacks the social ease of Americans like Drouet or Eaton. He naively acknowledges to the reader that he feared the waiter could rob him of his bulging wallet and that the bill-of-fare was "Chinese to me, though I made a pretense of reading it" (DL, 259). The scene is potentially pure comedy but is also tinged by the

self-pity affecting the forty-five-year-old narrator when he retells the blunders of his twenty-nine-year-old self.

Unlike Carrie, Levinsky cannot learn from silent imitation of others. She never embarrasses Drouet and so he feels at ease with her. Levinsky, on the other hand, is too impatient. Like many immigrants, he wants to learn to behave in a proper, American way at once and embarrasses the others with his own lack of embarrassment about his eagerness to learn. Yet his strategy works. When he blurts out "I have never been in such a fine restaurant in my life. I am scared to death, Mr. Eaton. Take pity" (*DL*, 260), Mr. Eaton's heart is touched by David's candid appeal. Eaton, flattered to be David's first teacher of table manners, happily carries out the role that Drouet performed for Carrie. Drouet is so pleased with his pupil that he buys Carrie out of her workshop, thus sending her on her way to the top; Eaton takes pleasure in Levinsky's improvement and volunteers further lessons in table manners. This leads to his ordering a large quantity of goods that establish Levinsky in his new business. In Levinsky's case the acquisition of refined ways, of proper table manners, is not part of his entrance into upper-class circles but functions as part of his informal training as a businessman. For literary scholar Philip Barrish, this means that David never really acquires refined ways for his motive is always "vulgarily economic."¹⁵ Since the luxury restaurant clearly belongs to the world of business, there is no point in Levinsky's disguising his true motivations for learning appropriate table manners.

A marked contrast emerges between Carrie's and David's rites of passage and the first scene in which Lily Bart appears as a diner in an expensive place. The location is not America, but Monte Carlo, the ideal location for Wharton to present a significant sample of upper-class style. The restaurant is Bécassin's and the occasion a dinner offered by Mrs. Bry for an English Duchess but actually orchestrated by Lily in her capacity as an unofficial, high society public relations officer. Lily is one of a party of thirteen selected people, ranging from the Duchess herself to Dabham, the reporter of the *Riviera News*. "In the thronged restaurant," Lily feels, "taking their places about Mrs. Bry's illuminated board, their confidence seemed to gain support from the familiarity of their surroundings."¹⁶ But this is just an illusion. Lured by their money, Lily has accepted the wealthy Dorsets' invitation to travel with them against the advice of her friend Laurence Selden. In Monte Carlo she finds herself in an awkward position because Bertha Dorset uses her as a cover to carry on her love affair with young Ned Silverton. The

price Lily pays for her rash acceptance of the Dorsets' invitation turns out to be very high.

Wharton implies with this scene that Lily's surroundings are in fact treacherous, because they are superficial and rely on the presence of outside spectators, Dabham the main one among them. Mrs. Bry, for instance, feels satisfied with her dinner not because her guests enjoy themselves, but because they offer an enticing celebrity parade for the customers of the restaurant who come to see rather than to be seen. Like Drouet and Carrie, the rich enjoy seeing and being seen in expensive places, but unlike them, the group also enjoys patronizing those below them. Dabham's presence is the most revealing aspect of the real lack of dignity and depth of this flamboyant set. As Lawrence Selden reflects:

It was before him again in its completeness—the choice in which [Lily] was content to rest: in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dullness of the talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance. The striding setting of the restaurant, in which their table seemed set apart in a special glare of publicity, and the presence of Dabham of the "Riviera Notes" emphasized the ideals of a world where conspicuousness passed for distinction, and the society column had become the roll of fame (*HM*, 216).

People like Carrie Meeber enjoy the spectacle from the outside and nourish their minds and dreams with news published by the likes of Dabham, perhaps expecting to be the next feature in the local (or even national) equivalent of the *Riviera News*. Later, when she dines at Sherry's, Carrie recalls the many celebrated social events she had read about in newspapers such as the *Morning World* and the *Evening World*.

Wharton organized the scene at Bécassin's as a theatrical event for the benefit of the gossip Dabham. The mounting tension peaks when Bertha, instead of thanking Lily for helping her carry out her love affair, leaves her stranded in Monte Carlo. Bertha's jealousy of Lily's charms, and of her relationship with Selden, and also the fear that Lily knows too much about her, make Bertha falsely accuse Lily of being her husband's mistress. In her position as a penniless guest of Bertha, Lily cannot answer back, disclose the affair, and disprove Bertha's lies. The nasty trick played on Lily is the blow from which she never recovers; the fact that the episode is staged in

a restaurant and within the circle of her acquaintances gives Lily's humiliation a public dimension that destroys her.

The second scene showing Lily in a restaurant completes her fall out of the upper circles of American society. Because she lingers in Europe, where no questions are asked, Lily defers her defense in New York society for too long only to find that talk about her has preceded her to America and deprived her of her respectability. Scandalized by her behavior, the aunt she depends on also denies her money and a home. When Lily realizes how desperate the situation is and that she is alone in the world except for Gerty Farish, an independent, though poor girl, she tries to recover her lost position and reputation. Since she has been officiously banned from the private houses of her circle, Lily must resort to eating with Gerty at the expensive restaurants her set frequents, with the hope of seeing her former acquaintances. In places such as Sherry's, Lily Bart carries on the pretense that nothing has happened and "lunched luxuriously, as she said, on her expectations" (*HM*, 228), that is the little money she never inherits from her aunt.

Wharton's works at her ironic best when, in the middle of Lily's choice of a fanciful dessert, she lets her heroine grasp simultaneously the enormity of her disgrace and the unreliability of her friends. Worried by whether the waiter will think she is short of money, Lily carefully considers her choice when Mrs. Trenor, her former protector, appears with a lunch party that includes Simon Rosedale and Gus Trenor. The presence of the men stresses the connection between Lily's sexuality and money. Rosedale had earlier proposed to Lily, hoping that a fashionable wife would ensure his entrance into New York society, but she had rejected him out of disgust at the idea of a mercenary marriage but possibly also out of prejudice against his Jewish heritage. Trenor had tried to rape her as compensation for a loan she failed to return. Mrs. Trenor's embarrassed greeting and the different degrees of discomfort among the rest of the party quickly show that Lily is no longer welcome in their circle. "It was over in a moment," Wharton observes, "—the waiter, menu in hand, still hung on the result of the choice between Coupe Jacques and Pêches à la Melba—but Miss Bart, in the interval, had taken the measure of her fate. Where Judy Trenor led, all the world would follow; and Lily had the doomed sense of the cast-away who has signaled in vain to fleeing sails" (*HM*, 229).

Carrie could have enlarged her comprehension of the world by watching a similar scene during her dinner at the same restaurant, Sherry's, where she dined invited by her neighbors, the Vances, and

where she meets the attractive, cynical Robert Ames. Dreiser's description is thorough and detailed, including extensive information about the interior, the price of dishes on the menu, the quality of the crockery and the waiters' pride in the extravagance of their workplace. Wharton names only indirectly the place where Lily is humiliated, perhaps expecting her readers to locate for themselves the most suitable place for such a scene. In contrast, Dreiser spells out for his readers the social relevance of the venue where Carrie spends her evening out, having been himself also fascinated by similar places. As Kenneth S. Lynn observes,

Sister Carrie is the work of an insider, writing out of the heart of his own experience. In New York he felt the excitement of being known as a prominent magazine writer and the thrill of dining in expensive restaurants where the headwaiters nodded to him in recognition. He poured so many of these personal memories into his first novel that Dreiser might well have said of the principal characters, "I am Carrie; I am Drouet; I am Hurstwood."¹⁷

Perhaps like Dreiser, Carrie feels that she is "really in" (*HM*, 331) when she enters this place which has "an almost indescribable atmosphere about it which convinced the newcomer that this was the proper thing" (*HM*, 331). Whether she is really "in" and whether this is "the proper thing" remains debatable, for at this stage of the book she still depends on her lover Hurstwood for money. Later on, after becoming a famous vaudeville actress, she is sought after by the proprietors of a fashionable hotel (the Waldorf-Astoria) and offered one of the new suites in the expectation that her presence and her celebrity will attract new customers. Carrie is "in" but not just because she has access to the world of the very rich. Actually, her success relies on the machinery of publicity and advertising in the consumer's world. Carrie has a marketable public image as a successful actress and the hotel uses her to publicize their establishment.

Reading the bill of fare at Sherry's takes Carrie back to the first evening with Drouet at the Windsor. Her memories show Carrie the difference between her working days in Chicago and her idle, domestic New York life previous to her life as a performing artist. Just like David Levinsky, Carrie feels a great self-pity that colors her past. Yet, she easily dismisses her thoughts to concentrate on Robert Ames's wry observations about the spectacle of wealth at Sherry's. These are not very far from Laurence Selden's, but they

do not spoil in any way Carrie's enjoyment of the evening; quite the contrary, they contribute to her social education. As Amy Kaplan argues, Carrie's sentimental view of her past is not glossed over but "recontextualized and given new life in Dreiser's aesthetics of consumption." She enjoys the consumption of commodities, including dining out, as a compensation for "the lack of power at work and at home but [her life] also expresses and channels a utopian desire for change, for the 'good' which consumer goods promise."¹⁸ After dinner at Sherry's, Carrie herself soon becomes part of consumer culture, not as Hurtswood's kept mistress but as a respectable vaudeville actress. She becomes respectable ironically because instead of selling herself to a single customer—Hurtswood—she sells herself to a mass of spectators. Carrie discovers that her true talent lies in playing roles both on stage and in her daily life, which is why David Minter notes that

even after she becomes a wealthy performer, she remains curiously blank. During her performances, she goes down, into time and history, where she becomes a social creature and makes money. After or between performances, she moves up and out of the fray, protected by her jewels and furs and bank account, toward a kind of secular transcendence, where she can look down on the street life of her world and feel almost free of society and its requirements.¹⁹

Carrie's success differs from the traditional fate of the heroine of American theater's favorite genre, the melodrama, and makes Carrie a genuine twentieth-century heroine, the female survivor. Vaudeville helps her to overcome the melodramatic fatality that surrounds Lily. Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues in her essay "Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity" that Lily dies because her dramatic story, closely modeled on the conventions of Edwardian melodrama, leaves no other option. "It is not simply that Lily chooses to die," Wolff writes. "In nineteenth-century theater, heroines *did* die. If they had been virtuous, they died tragically; if they were no more than fallen women, they died trivially. In either case death was a suitable ending, and Wharton's theatrical heroine had nowhere else to go."²⁰ Carrie, however, represents another fictional model in which, in contrast to Lily, women can resist society's pressure and construct a socially acceptable adult identity in their own terms. Carrie's blankness (and Levinsky's) might be the price for this newly found freedom. Modernity seemingly finds no use for melo-

drama, preferring instead energy and variety to the theatrical genre that makes Carrie famous.

Wharton allowed no alternative for Lily, except death. Her life concludes with an "accidental" poisoning, not quite a suicide, after a vague dream of maternity. Most critics, like Wolff, read this death in tragic terms. Wharton attacks the narrowness of society's select circles and celebrates Lily's heroism. But Lily dies out of sorrow because of what she and Wharton present as a double humiliation—the loss of her status as a lady and her transformation into a working-class woman. As Laura Hapke says, "in Wharton's vision, a lady must fall, but a worker cannot rise."²¹ Melodrama evokes upper-class tastes and preferences in Wharton's novel. Once Lily becomes a worker, she cannot rise again; she can only fall to death. This also means that Carrie's rise could not be legitimate in Wharton's eyes. As Carrie's case shows, upward mobility in consumer society favors working-class women like Carrie. With her beauty and her passion for exhibiting it, as the tableaux scene shows, Lily could have become a successful performer like Carrie if she wished. But she cannot even consider this choice. The rules of upper-class decorum and female behavior that she internalized prevent her from seeing a way out of her drudgery and poverty. Her sacrifice becomes an empty gesture in view of Carrie's success.

Minter further notes that by rejecting "a proper marriage" (if a marriage of convenience can be called proper) Lily places herself out of the "house of mirth." "Her resistance to that world," Minter adds, "centers on its tendency to turn everything, including human beings—and specifically her—into commodities."²² But is Lily such a dignified, heroic character in comparison to Carrie? Actually, both women turn out to be children of the same time and circumstances. Their inability to love men shows how ambiguously they feel about those around them. Lily cannot really love Selden, though only he understands her. Carrie is alone at the end of her novel despite her attraction to Robert Ames. Neither hesitates to use those around herself to survive. Both spend other people's money and live off friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, critics of Wharton's novel usually read Lily's tragedy in romantic terms because of her ladylike, perhaps feminist, refusal to sell herself and become a commodity. Carrie, however, has been deprecated because of her readiness to sell her labor, as factory worker, kept mistress, or vaudeville actress, and her willingness to enter show business. Her success inspires dislike rather than admiration because she is, clearly, an amoral woman. Yet Lily dies a sad death

and Carrie survives. And it seems odd if not plainly absurd to go on exalting Lily's virtues when people like Carrie, the prototypical star, are admired worldwide. Carrie's blankness is the blankness of the consumer, always ready to take on the role required by each item offered in the marketplace. Lily's own blankness, for she is also empty, stems from a scrupulousness that can hardly elicit sympathy from the working women who read her story. Why, indeed, should we sympathize with a heroine unable to keep herself rather than with one who struggles to survive and succeeds?

David Levinsky also recalls his past during a very expensive dinner to which he invites his "ship brother," Gitelson, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of their arrival from Europe. Since the occasion calls for brotherly feelings, and because he is utterly alone, Levinsky decides to repay generously the ten dollars loaned by Gitelson that started David in the cloak-making business twenty-three years earlier. Under the pretense of a sentimental mood, Levinsky actually wants to show off his prosperity to his failed ship-brother and becomes bitterly embarrassed by Gitelson's behavior. Not too eager to reprise for Gitelson the role Charles M. Eaton played for him during his first expensive lunch, David grows angered by Gitelson's lack of good table manners and by his drunkenness. Moreover, the hollow Yiddish words of his own toast and the French waiter's disagreeable aloofness make David feel like a mere "greenhorn" again. The intimidating presence of the waiter, Donald Weber writes, "exposes the despised yet inescapable greenhorn self beneath the layers of denial and flight," and so the end corroborates the view of *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a novel that "charts the growth of shame, repression, self-hatred, and denial in the immigrant psyche."²³ David's feeling that "at the bottom of my heart I cow before waiters to this day" (*DL*, 515), illustrates how far, despite his money, he remains from Lily Bart, who refuses to crumble before the waiter awaiting her choice of dessert, or from Carrie, who gracefully accepts the waiter's offer of a seat at the table, learning to behave properly by imitating Mrs. Vance. David further disapproves of Gitelson's half-joking request for his original ten dollars plus interest. He concludes, "I realized that I had made a mistake—that I should have taken him to a more modest restaurant" (*DL*, 515), as if the luxury of the Waldorf-Astoria accounted for his failure to bridge the gap between his past and his present. The episode ends when David returns to his beautiful hotel suite to live a life as lonely as Carrie's, a life that Lily Bart cannot accept.

The scenes set in luxury restaurants that appear in *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Rise of David Levinsky* expose the contradictions resulting from increasing social mobility in turn-of-the-century America. Seemingly peripheral, actually such scenes belong to the ideological core of realist novels. Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton were among the first American writers to analyze the ambiguous effects of consumerism in the lives of Americans. They saw in the luxury restaurant a suitable location to deal with the commodification of all human life. Together, the scenes create an effective fictional locus strongly suggesting the actual existence of a common reality behind these writers' very different worlds. Wharton wrote about the inevitable destruction of an upper-class woman who would not accept a mercenary marriage as her only chance to survive. Cahan penned a novel about the rootlessness of a European Jewish immigrant who sacrifices his past for the hope of his American future. Dreiser, without judging her moral faults, focused on a young working-class woman who manages to become independent and succeed as an actress. These three very different worlds converge in the luxury restaurant, where Dreiser, Cahan, and Wharton stage and dramatize significant turning points in the lives of Carrie Meeber, David Levinsky, and Lily Bart. The efforts of these three authors illustrate moments of social triumph or failure that lead to the final fall or rise of their main characters.

Meeber and Levinsky belong to the new world ruled by the emerging consumer ethos. By the end of their stories, Carrie, a working-class woman of rural origins, and David, a Russian immigrant, have climbed out of obscurity to a comfortable place in the sun. They won it for themselves by understanding the benefits of the commodification of their own selves. They paid a high price for their success, however, living with a spiritual blankness from which there was seemingly no redemption. The luxury restaurant is the place where their dreams of social mobility first take form and where they later celebrate their achievements. For Carrie Meeber and David Levinsky the luxury restaurant is an institution firmly planted in a world run by business interests. There, individuals are judged by the money they possess and not by the class they belong to by birth. Learning table manners is for them the equivalent of learning a social code, something they do for the immediate benefits it may entail.

In Lily's case, proper table manners are part of a class consciousness that entraps individuals like her. The luxury restaurant is for her a public extension of the private elite world. Born a lady, Lily

grows up to be a penniless woman of upper-class values. Since she can neither work without losing her respectability, nor do without luxuries, Lily must choose between a mercenary marriage or dependence on other people's money. Her refusal to sell herself to a rich Jewish businessman leads her to depend on the treacherous Dorsets, for which she finally pays a very high price. Two restaurant scenes dramatize Lily's loss of reputation and her inability to recover her lost position. These settings, at Bécassin's and Sherry's, are portrayed as self-enclosed, upper-class environments where the existence of people like Carrie and Levinsky can be safely ignored. But as the restaurant scenes in the novels by Dreiser and Cahan suggest, the world of Lily Bart overlaps with the worlds of Carrie Meeber and David Levinsky, something that Wharton herself ignores. The chair Lily occupied at Sherry's was promptly taken by Carrie, and Levinsky became wealthy enough to issue the invitations Lily will never receive again. In this brave new America, Lily is doomed while Carrie and Levinsky enjoy the pleasures of social habits and a new lifestyle we may still recognize in our own day.

NOTES

¹Bill Brysson, "What's Cooking?: Eating in America," in *Made in America* (1994; reprint, London: Minerva, 1995), 224.

²Ibid., 225.

³Daniel J. Boorstin, "Varying the Everyday Menu," in *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 323.

⁴Ibid., 324.

⁵Brysson, "What's Cooking?" 225.

⁶Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 99.

⁷Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," in *Modern Critical Views: Edith Wharton*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 125.

⁸Ibid., 99.

⁹Tom Quirk and Gary Scharnhorst, "Introduction," *American Realism and the Canon*, ed. Tom Quirk and Gary Scharnhorst (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 13.

¹⁰Paul Fussell, *Caste Marks: Style & Status in the United States* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 104.

¹¹Cliff Stafford, *The Best in Restaurant Corporate Identity* (London: Quarto Publishing, 1992).

¹²Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 58. Hereafter cited in the text as SC.

¹³George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publications, 1992), 117.

¹⁴Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 259. Hereafter cited in the text as DL.

¹⁵Philip Barrish, "'The Genuine Article': Ethnicity, Capital, and *The Rise of David Levinsky*," *American Literary History* 5 (Winter 1993): 651.

¹⁶Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 215. Hereafter cited in the text as HM.

¹⁷Kenneth S. Lynn, "Sister Carrie: An Introduction," in *Theodore Dreiser: "Sister Carrie," A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald Pizier (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 510.

¹⁸Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 140.

¹⁹David Minter, *A Cultural History of the American Novel: Henry James to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

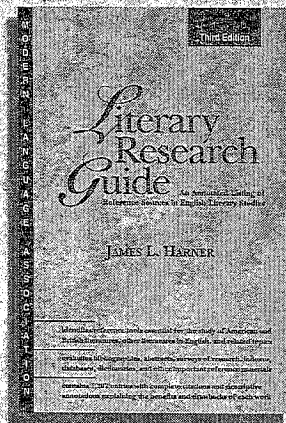
²⁰Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity," *American Literary History* 6 (Spring 1994): 83.

²¹Laura Hapke, *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature 1890-1925* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 68.

²²Minter, *Cultural History*, 59.

²³Donald Weber, "Outsiders and Greenhorns: Christopher Newman in the Old World, David Levinsky in the New," *American Literature* 67 (December 1995): 739.

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